THE ROAD TO MULBERRY WORKSHOP

Illustrated Edition



ULRIKA MULBERRY

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An Ulrika Mulberry Novel — Illustrated Edition

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MULBERRY WORKSHOP

The Road to Mulberry Workshop
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Mulberry Workshop
Mauritius

For the one who believed
the hot-head could build.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Last Ordinary Night

The harvest moon come up fat and yellow over the village, and for one night nobody was mad at anybody.

I remember the smell first, cause smells are what stick to a kid. Woodsmoke and apple cider and wheat burning sweet on the wind. Every lantern lit, every stall hanging with gourds and dried flowers, and the punis bobbing through the crowd like round pastel balloons with faces, squeaking at the farmers like they owned the place.

Which, near as I could tell, they did.

I was five. Maybe six. Small and gold-haired and mad about everything, and I stood in the middle of the festival square with my fists on my hips, watching the whole world laugh at jokes I couldn't hear.

See, that's the thing about me and punis. Everybody else, they hear "puni puni" and they nod along like it's plain talk. Folks said the punis could gossip better than the women at the well. But me? It's noise. Just squeaks and round sounds, like trying to read a book that's been rained on. I'd stand there and watch a farmer laugh till he cried at something a puffball said, and I'd think: what in the world is so funny?

"Ulrika, you're doing the face again."

Chloe. Of course Chloe. She was there with her hands full of something sweet and her braids coming loose, same as always. She'd been my translator since before I could walk, not cause anyone asked her to, just cause she was the only one who noticed I was standing outside the conversation.

"They said your dress is real pretty," she said, and pointed at a puni the size of a watermelon, pink as a sunset, bobbing by the honey stall. "That one. He's been saying it all night. He thinks you're a flower."

I looked at the puni. The puni squeaked at me, all round and friendly.

"...He said that?"

"He's said it four times, Ulrika. I keep telling you cause you keep ignoring him."

Tch. I wasn't ignoring him. I just couldn't tell if he was saying something nice or calling me a weasel. With punis, the sound is all the same to me. The only difference is how they bounce.

That's the whole story of my childhood, right there in one market stall: the village talking, me understanding none of it. And Chloe, standing between me and the noise, telling me what the world was saying.

Pa found me later near the cider press with my arms crossed hard enough to leave marks.

"You're sulking," he said.

"I ain't."

"You're sulking in public. That's worse."

"They all understand the puffballs. I don't. It's not fair."

He wiped foam off a cup with his thumb. "Fair is a festival word. Useful is a weekday word. Which one you hunting tonight?"

I hated when he did that. Made a knot in my chest into a question I had to answer with my feet.

"Useful," I muttered.

"Then stop glaring at the honey stall and help your ma with the baskets."

I did. Grudgingly. The baskets were heavy and the night was pretty and my unfairness sat in my pocket like a stone I did not know I was about to receive for real.

The bonfire come after dark. Big as a house, and the whole village dancing around it. The old folks clapping, the young ones spinning, and me dragging Chloe into the circle whether she liked

it or not, cause if I was gonna be the only girl in the village who couldn't talk to a puffball, I was at least gonna be the best dancer. We spun till our feet hurt and our faces was red from the fire and the laughing.

Old Mag clapped off-beat and yelled that I danced like a goat with opinions. I took it as praise. A boy tried to cut in and I told him to wait his turn or grow taller. Chloe snorted, which for Chloe is public hilarity.

Between dances I watched the punis make their own circle at the edge of the light, bouncing in patterns that were clearly jokes. People laughed with them. I laughed late, catching joy on the rebound. Even then I understood timing could be a kind of language. I just hated being fluent only in leftovers.

At some point Chloe vanished and come back with her apron full of stolen sweets. Hard candy from the baker's stall, the good kind, the kind every ma in the village said would rot your teeth. We sat on the edge of the square, backs against a hay bale, eating stolen candy and watching the fire.

A blue puni rolled up and squeaked a long ribbon of sound at us. Chloe listened, nodded, and answered in the same round noise. The puni bounced delighted. I smiled on delay, the way you smile when the joke already left the room.

"He asked if you were mad," Chloe said.

"I ain't mad."

"He said your face looks mad even when you dance."

"That's just my face."

"I told him that."

The puni squeaked again, softer. Chloe hesitated.

"What."

"He said flowers get watered even if they don't speak soil."

I stared at her. "Punis don't say that."

"This one did. Or close enough. Translating is not a court transcript."

I threw a candy shell at her boot. She did not throw one back. That meant she knew the line had landed.

"Reckon the punis got a festival of their own?" I asked.

Chloe thought about it, real serious, like she always did. "They probably do. It's probably nicer than ours."

"Why's that?"

"Cause they can understand each other."

I didn't have a smart answer for that. I just ate another candy and watched the fire and thought about how it felt to be the only one who couldn't hear. And I remember thinking: one day I'm gonna understand everything. Every word, every joke, every secret. I'm gonna be so smart that nothing squeaks at me again.

I did not know yet that understanding was not the same as hearing. That lesson took a road, a shop, and a pink customer who paid in warm coins.

If somebody had told five-year-old me that the cure for being outside the joke was not learning every language but learning how to help without needing the punchline first, I would have thrown candy at them. Good. Some lessons have to arrive as mud.

That was the night before.

* * *

Morning come gray and cool, the festival over, the square swept clean like it never happened. I was out past the last field, chasing a frog or a beetle or some other reason to be outside before chores, when I found the man.

He was lying face-down in the wheat, arms out, like he'd been thrown there. Or like he was sunbathing, which is what I thought, cause I was a kid and kids think that. The sun was barely up. Nobody sunbathes at dawn. But I was small and the only thing I knew about strange old men in fields was that you didn't leave them there.

"Hey," I said. "Mister. You're gonna catch a chill."

No answer.

I poked him with my toe. "Mister."

He moved. Just a little, a groan in the dirt, and I decided right then: this man needed shade and he wasn't gonna get it by himself.

I looked back toward the village. Too far for a shout. Too early for field workers. Chloe would still be asleep with candy sugar on her mouth. Pa would say fetch an adult. Fetching an adult would take long enough for the sun to finish what it had started.

So I grabbed his arm, both arms, little kid arms around a grown man's chest, and I dragged him. All the way to the tree line. Ten minutes of hauling dead weight through wheat stubble, cussing under my breath the whole way, cause I was a lady and ladies didn't cuss out loud.

Halfway there I fell, got a mouthful of chaff, got up, and pulled again. The egg-to-be was not in the story yet. Kindness was. Stubbornness was. Those two were already enough to move a body.

I propped him against the big oak, got him a drink from my canteen, and sat back on my heels to look at him.

Old. Real old. Hair white as milk, a face like a field plowed one too many times, and he smelled like cold ash, like a fire that'd been out for years. But his eyes, when they opened, weren't old at all. They were clear and sharp and they looked at me like I was the only thing in the world worth looking at.

"You," he said, and his voice was strange. Not from around here. "You carried me."

"Nobody else was gonna do it," I said. "You was asleep in the sun. Reckon that's a good way to get et by a bear."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he laughed, and it wasn't a happy laugh. It was tired and cracked, like something that had been waiting a long time to laugh at all.

"Hm," he said, and reached into his coat. "You're a strange child. Strange and kind. They don't make those two together often."

He held out his hand. It was cold as well water.

In it was a stone. Round and pale, like an egg, but no egg I'd ever seen was that color. And it was warm. I could feel the warmth from a foot away, like it had been sitting in the sun all winter.

I almost didn't take it. Not from wisdom. From the sudden sense that accepting would split my life into before and after, and I was still sticky with festival candy. The old man's eyes did not plead. They measured. Like he was checking whether the strange-and-kind combination could carry weight.

"Take it," he said. "It's yours now."

"What is it?"

"Everything I had left."

I took it. It fit in both my hands like it'd been made for them, and the warmth went right through my fingers into my bones, and something in my chest said: oh. There you are.

When I looked up, he was gone. No sound, no tracks, nothing. Just me and the tree and the warm stone in my hands, and the wheat whispering like it knew something I didn't.

I ran home with it clutched against my dress like contraband.

Ma was at the stove. Pa was oiling a harness by the door. The festival night still hung on everybody in leftover sweetness and tired feet. I tried to walk in like a girl who had only chased a frog.

"Where you been?" Pa asked without looking up.

"Fields."

"Fields got a clock now?"

"Frog," I said, which was half true and therefore, to a five-year-old, fully legal.

Ma glanced over. "Wash before you touch bread."

I washed one-handed. The stone stayed under my skirt hem until I could bolt to the loft ladder. Upstairs I shoved it under the pillow, smoothed the quilt, and sat on the bed trying to look innocent. Innocent is hard when your heart is doing festival drums.

Chloe came up after chores without knocking, because Chloe never needed an invitation to my disasters.

"You vanished after the frog," she said. "Your ma thinks you fell in a ditch."

"I didn't."

"Your face says you did something."

"Did not."

She sat on the edge of the bed. Then she frowned and put her palm flat on the pillow.

"Ulrika."

"What."

"Your pillow is warm."

I froze.

Chloe lifted the corner. The stone glowed faint as banked coals. She stared at it, then at me, then at it again with the expression she would one day wear over contaminated samples.

"What is that?"

"A rock."

"Rocks are not ovens."

"This one is."

"Where from?"

I told her. Not all of it pretty. The dragging. The old man. The cold hand. The gone-without-tracks part. Chloe listened like a court.

"You should tell your pa."

"He'll take it."

"Maybe he should."

"No." The word came out bigger than me. "It's mine. He said so."

Chloe looked at the stone a long time. Then she put the pillow back over it carefully, as if tucking in a secret that might bite.

"If it burns the house down, I am telling," she said.

"If it burns the house down, I am already in trouble."

That night I slept crooked so my cheek stayed near the warmth. Once, half dreaming, I thought the stone pulsed when I got scared of the dark. Once I thought it cooled when Chloe's breathing evened out on the pallet we sometimes shared after fights.

Ma never found the stone that first week, though she found every other secret I had ever owned. The egg had luck, or timing, or the particular stealth of things that are waiting. Chloe visited

every dusk to check the pillow heat like a physician on rounds. We were children playing at custody of a mystery. The mystery indulged us.

In the morning Pa asked again where I had been so long in the fields.

"Frog," I said.

He looked at me the way he looked at a fence post that was already leaning.

"Don't lie bad," he said. "If you're gonna lie, at least make it sturdy."

I did not make it sturdy. I made it mine.

For ten years that stone sat warm under my pillow while I grew up around it. Ten years of Chloe translating the village and me still not understanding a word the punis said. Ten years of learning that kindness could drag a body to shade, and stubbornness could hide a miracle in bedding, and both would collect their bills later.

If I am honest, I also learned loneliness with better lighting. Festival lanterns make exclusion look golden. The egg's warmth made exclusion survivable. Between those two facts a loud girl became an alchemist without knowing the word yet.

I did not know yet what the stone was waiting for.

I only knew it was waiting with me.



CHAPTER TWO

The Stone Under the Pillow

The first lie I ever told my father was that the egg was a skipping rock.

I was six years old, muddy to both knees, and holding it behind my back at the supper table like that made it invisible.

He looked at my wet dress. Then he looked at the dry road outside. Then he looked at the part of my arm that was sticking out at an angle because I had not yet learned that hiding something behind your back only works if your back is wider than the thing.

"What have you got?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing looks heavy."

"It's a rock."

"Then put it on the table."

I did.

The egg sat between the bread and the bean pot, pale as old bone and warm enough to soften the butter in its dish. My mother reached for it. I slapped both hands over it.

"It's mine."

"I can see that," she said. "The question is what it is."

"A skipping rock."

My father turned it once with two fingers. The look on his face was the one he used when a fence post had rotted below the soil. Nothing showed aboveground, but he already knew how much work was waiting underneath.

"Girl," he said, "that rock hasn't touched water since the day you found it."

"It might've."

"It's dry."

"Water dries."

"Mud doesn't."

I did not have an answer to that. I had not thought past skipping rock.

My father pushed it back toward me. "A thing is what a thing does. A skipping rock skips. That one sits there heating my butter. Until you know what it does, you keep it out of the pantry and away from the straw."

That was all.

He did not take it. He did not ask where I found the old man, because I had not told him there was an old man. He went back to his beans while I wrapped both arms around the egg and tried not to look relieved.

My mother watched me over her cup.

"And it doesn't go under your pillow," she said.

It went under my pillow that night.

There were rules in our house, and then there were rules that could survive being tested. I considered that one tested before she finished saying it.

Chloe came through my window after moonrise.

She did not knock. Chloe never knocked when we were little. Knocking gave adults time to ask what we were doing, and the answer was usually something that sounded worse out loud.

"Move," she whispered.

"You move. This is my bed."

"Your elbow is on my hair."

"Then get your hair out from under it."

We lay on our stomachs with the blanket over our heads and the egg between us, making a little tent of warm dark. Chloe had brought a candle stub, three boiled sweets, a spoon, and a book with the cover torn off.

"What's the spoon for?" I asked.

"Testing."

"Testing what?"

"I don't know yet."

That was Chloe all over. She did not need to know what a thing was before deciding it ought to be examined with cutlery.

She tapped the egg. Ting.

We waited.

Nothing.

She tapped it twice. Ting, ting.

"Maybe it's hollow," she said.

"Don't crack it."

"I wasn't going to."

"You brought a spoon."

"Spoons don't crack eggs."

"That is the first thing spoons do to eggs."

She ignored me and opened the book. It was an old household bestiary from her father's shelf, full of bad drawings of things nobody in our village had ever seen. Griffins looked like sick chickens. Dragons looked like lizards that had been shouted at.

"It could be a cockatrice egg," Chloe said.

"What's that?"

"A chicken snake."

"That's stupid."

"It kills you by looking at you."

"Then why'd it need to be a chicken?"

She turned the page.

"Dragon."

"Too small."

"Baby dragon."

"Still too small."

"You don't know how small dragons start."

"Neither do you."

"That's why I'm reading."

The egg did nothing through cockatrice, dragon, stonebird, moon hare, and a picture of a sea serpent that looked exactly like a wet rope. I held my palm against it. The warmth had not

changed since the wheat field. It was not hot like a stove or summer dirt. It was body warm. The sort of warmth that says something was here a moment ago.

Or was still here, waiting.

"What if it's alive?" I asked.

Chloe stopped turning pages.

We put our ears against opposite sides.

I heard Chloe breathing. She heard me swallowing a sweet.

"Nothing," she said.

"Maybe it's asleep."

"For how long?"

I thought about the old man's cracked laugh. Everything I had left.

"As long as it wants."

That became the first of our experiments.

For two years we tried to wake it with everything two village girls could steal, borrow, or misunderstand.

We left it in moonlight because Chloe found a line about moonstones opening under a full moon. It sat on the windowsill all night and was exactly as closed in the morning, though my mother found it and made me wash every window in the house for leaving the latch up.

We put it near the well, but not in the well, because Chloe said warm things drink and I said that was the dumbest thing she had ever said. The water level did not change. A puni leaned over the stones and squeaked at us for ten straight minutes.

"What's it saying?" I asked.

Chloe listened.

"It says you're going to drop it."

"I ain't."

The puni squeaked again.

"Now it says you said that last time."

"There wasn't a last time."

Chloe's face stayed perfectly straight.

"Now it says you're a liar."

I looked at the puni. The puni bounced once, which could have meant anything.

"You're making that up."

"Maybe."

I tucked the egg under my arm and went home before either of them could get funnier.

We sang to it. Chloe could carry a tune, which she kept secret because the village had a choir and talent gets punished with responsibilities. I could not. The egg survived both of us.

We buried it in flour because a traveling baker told Chloe yeast woke faster near a living thing. My mother found the whole crock warm and every bit of dough climbing over the edge like it was escaping. We ate flatbread for four days and were forbidden from conducting research in the kitchen.

We introduced it to punis. That was Chloe's idea.

There was a blue one that slept behind the mill, old enough that its bounce had slowed down. Chloe set the egg in the grass and talked to it while I sat with my knees up and tried to hear meaning in the round noises passing between them.

The puni circled the egg. Sniffed it. Put its face against it.

The egg stayed still.

"Well?" I asked.

The puni spoke for a long time.

Chloe listened with her head tilted.

"It says the stone is warm."

"I know that."

More squeaking.

"It says you are loud."

"I know that too. Ask it something useful."

She did. The puni answered.

"It doesn't know what it is."

"Then why'd we come?"

"You wanted to ask something alive."

"Punis are supposed to know things."

"It knows where the miller dropped half a meat pie."

The blue puni bounced toward the weeds.

"See?" Chloe said. "Useful."

I picked up the egg and wiped grass from it harder than I needed to.

Everybody else could hear those creatures. Farmers knew when rain was coming because the field punis complained about their joints. Children asked them where lost buttons went. Chloe could sit with one for an hour and come back knowing who had kissed behind the cider shed and whose hen was laying in the blacksmith's coal box.

I had a warm mystery in both hands and no words for it. I could not even ask the roundest, simplest creature in the village whether it knew what I was carrying.

"One day," I said, "I'm gonna understand them without you."

Chloe plucked a burr from her skirt.

"Good. Then I can stop following you around."

"You follow me cause you like me."

"I follow you because unattended fires spread."

I shoved her. She shoved me back. The blue puni ate the lost meat pie and watched us roll down the bank.

The egg stayed warm through all of it.

When I was nine, winter came early enough to catch the village with half its work still outside.

The first snow started while we were bringing sheep down from the north pasture. It came sideways, small hard grains ticking against my hood, and by afternoon the lane had disappeared under white. My father and two neighbors drove the flock toward the lower barn. I walked the ditch looking for strays because I was light enough not to break through the crust.

I heard the lamb before I saw it.

One thin cry from under the hedge.

It had slipped between two stones and twisted a back leg. By the time I pulled it free, it had stopped fighting. Its wool was wet clear to the skin. I wrapped it inside my coat and shouted, but the wind took the sound and threw it toward the empty pasture.

The barn was less than a mile away. In summer that was nothing. In that snow it might as well have been the moon.

"Don't you quit," I told the lamb. "I did not crawl under a thorn hedge just so you could die rude."

Its head hung against my arm.

I started walking.

The egg was in my pocket. I carried it everywhere by then, wrapped in red cloth my mother had finally given me after she got tired of finding holes worn through my dresses.

The warmth touched my hip through two layers.

A thing is what a thing does.

I stopped behind the stone wall, out of the worst wind, and pulled the egg free. Snow hissed into the space under my coat. I pushed the warm stone against the lamb's chest and wrapped both of them in my scarf.

"You better do something," I said.

The egg did what it had always done.

It sat there.

Warm.

That was enough.

I walked bent over the lamb, one hand holding my coat shut and the other feeling ahead whenever the snow erased the wall. The cold got into my boots and stayed. Once I stepped into the ditch and went to my knee. Once I thought I heard my father, shouted back, and got nothing but wind.

The lamb did not move.

Then, halfway to the barn, it kicked me.

Not hard. One weak bump against my ribs.

"Ha," I said, breathless. "There you are."

By the time the barn lantern appeared, the lamb was making a small angry sound every few steps. My father came out of the white with a rope around his waist and murder on his face.

He grabbed my shoulders first.

"Where were you?"

"Found one."

"We were coming back for it."

"It was freezing."

"So were you."

"I'm bigger."

He opened my coat and saw the lamb bundled against the egg.

The lamb lifted its head.

My father's expression changed. Not softened. He was not a man whose face did much softening. But the anger moved aside and showed what had been underneath it.

Fear. Again.

He took the lamb with one arm and the egg with the other hand. For a second I thought he might throw it into the snow.

Instead he held it against his palm.

"Still warm," he said.

"It kept her alive."

"You kept her alive."

"We both did."

He looked from the egg to me. Snow had crusted in his eyebrows.

"Inside," he said.

The lamb lived.

That should have settled everything. In my mind it did. The stone had done something useful. My father had said a thing was what it did, and now the thing had saved a life.

But grown people can move the finish line without moving their feet.

At supper he put the egg on the table again, in the same spot between the bread and bean pot.

"You don't take it into a storm again," he said.

"What? It helped."

"You went missing because you believed it would."

"I went missing because the lamb was stuck."

"And if that stone had gone cold?"

"It never does."

"If it had?"

I crossed my arms. "Then I'd have carried her anyway."

"That's the part I am trying to put into your head."

"That don't make sense."

"It makes too much sense." He rubbed both hands over his face. "You find a warm rock and decide it means you can walk through weather that turns grown men around. One day you'll find a sharper thing and decide it means you can't be cut."

"I ain't stupid."

"No. You're worse. You're brave before you know the cost."

My chair hit the floor behind me.

"So I should've left her?"

"Sit down."

"Should I have left her there?"

"That is not what I said."

"It's what you mean."

"Ulrika," my mother said.

I snatched the egg from the table and ran.

Chloe found me in the hayloft an hour later. She knew where I went when I wanted people to search and where I went when I didn't. The loft was the second kind.

She climbed the ladder with a blanket under one arm and sat beside me without asking.

"Your father went to our house," she said.

"Traitor."

"He thought you might be there."

"I saved that lamb."

"I heard."

"He still got mad."

"I heard that too."

"He says I don't know the cost."

Chloe pulled the blanket across both our knees. The egg sat in my lap, making a warm hollow in the cold.

"You don't," she said.

I stared at her.

"Whose side are you on?"

"Mine."

"That's not one of the choices."

"It always is."

She put two fingers against the egg.

"You saved the lamb. Your father was scared. Both can be true."

"No, they can't."

"They just were."

I hated when Chloe did that. She could take two things I wanted to fight and make them sit together without killing each other. It felt like cheating.

Below us, the barn shifted and breathed. Sheep settled into straw. The rescued lamb called once and its mother answered.

"What do you reckon is in it?" I asked.

"You already know what I reckon."

"Chicken snake."

"I was six."

"Dragon."

"Maybe."

I held the egg up. In the light from the loft window, there were faint lines under the pale shell. Not cracks. Veins, maybe, or tricks of the moon. I had looked at it every day for three years and never seen them before.

Chloe saw them too.

Neither of us spoke for a while.

Then she said, "Whatever it is, it's taking its time."

"Maybe it ain't ready."

"Maybe you're not."

I elbowed her.

She elbowed me back.

We stayed there until my father called my name from the barn door. He did not apologize, and neither did I. He handed me my dry boots. I handed him the blanket Chloe had brought. That was how peace worked in our house.

The village theories got dumber before they got smarter. Old Mag suggested moonlight baths. The baker suggested flour. A boy from the creek suggested dunking it in puni-water, which Chloe refused on moral and sanitary grounds. We tried song once. My singing made the egg cool. Chloe's humming made it steady. We wrote that down like it meant something. Maybe it did.

Pa never confiscated it. That mattered more than any theory. He made me promise not to risk the household for it, then watched me break the spirit of that promise carefully for years without breaking the letter enough to force his hand.

The night he almost did confiscate it was the lamb night. An abandoned one in the late snow, ribs like fingers. I tucked the egg against its belly under my cloak and sat in the barn until dawn while its shivering slowed. Pa found us like that, breath smoking, me half frozen and furious at the idea of being sent inside.

"That thing keeping it alive?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you?"

"I'm fine."

"You're blue."

"Artistic."

He put his coat around both of us and did not take the egg. In the kitchen later he made me promise. I promised. Then I kept using the egg for every small hurt that looked at me too long. Promises with my father were like fences: real, necessary, and full of gates if you knew where to push.

After that, the egg did not go under my pillow every night.

Not because my mother had won. I kept it in a wooden box beside the bed, packed in wool so it could not roll, with three holes bored in the lid.

"Why holes?" Chloe asked.

"In case it needs air."

"You don't know if it breathes."

"You don't know if it doesn't."

She considered that and bored a fourth hole herself.

For another two years the egg sat warm in the dark while I grew around it. It warmed cold hands, proofed bread when my mother allowed it, and once kept a basket of newborn chicks alive when the hen decided motherhood was beneath her. None of that told us what it was.

Ma allowed the bread-proofing only on days she was too tired to argue and only if I washed the shell first. She never called it an egg. She called it "that rock," which was how she kept from loving it. I loved it enough for both of us, which is a dangerous distribution of affection.

Chloe measured its heat against fever, against frost, against her own palms after she had been crying. It cooled for sadness more reliably than it heated for questions. We wrote that in the back of a hymn book we were not supposed to deface. God could cope. Data could not wait.

But it told me what it did.

It waited. It gave warmth. And when something small was hurting, I reached for it.

That was enough to build a life around, though I did not know it yet.

Years later, when customers asked how I started, they wanted a thunderbolt. I gave them a pillow, a lamb, a fourth air hole, and a promise not to risk the house. Thunderbolts are rare. Warmth you can carry is a practice.



CHAPTER THREE

The Itch-Curse Summer

The summer I decided to become an alchemist started with a loaf of sweet bread and ended with Chloe's left hand turning purple.

Those things were related.

We were eleven, old enough to be given real chores and young enough to believe every chore was a personal attack. Chloe's father had sent her from the bakery with two honey loaves for the women sorting wool beside the river. I was supposed to be weeding beans. Instead I was walking with her, because beans don't notice when you leave.

Three boys came out from behind the mill.

You could tell they had planned the entrance. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, trying to fill the lane with elbows. The one in the middle was Bram Heddle, who had grown half a foot since spring and thought this made him mayor.

"Toll," Bram said.

Chloe kept walking.

"Road toll," he said louder.

"This isn't your road," she said.

"It is today."

"Then fix the mud."

I laughed. Bram did not.

He stepped in front of Chloe and pointed at the bread basket. "One loaf."

"No."

"Half."

"No."

"Then one bite."

"You got a whole mouth full of bad ideas already."

That was Chloe. Quiet all day, then one clean cut when somebody earned it.

Bram's face went red. He reached into his pocket.

I knew what he had before he pulled it out. Every village has one thing children are not supposed to make and therefore make constantly. Ours was itch curse.

Calling it a curse made it sound grander than it was. You took dried itch-herb, burr dust, red ant husks, and the gummy sap from a nettle tree. You chewed the sap if you were stupid or mashed it in a cup if you valued your tongue, mixed in the rest, and rolled the mess into a gray-green pellet. Throw it hard enough and it burst against cloth. For a week afterward, every part of you believed it had been bitten by something with a grudge.

Bram held up a pellet the size of a walnut.

"Last chance," he said.

Chloe looked at it, then at him.

"You made that too wet."

He threw it.

It hit her high on the shoulder and burst across her dress.

For one second nobody moved.

Then Chloe scratched.

Not much. One careful drag of her fingers over the cloth.

Bram grinned.

I hit him with the bread basket.

The basket was not a weapon designed by a master. It was willow, round, and had two warm loaves in it. But anger improves equipment. The rim caught Bram across the ear and turned him halfway around.

The other boys ran. Smartest thing any of them did that year.

Bram grabbed my braid. I kicked his shin. He called me something my mother would have made him wash out with lye. I bit his wrist.

Five minutes later I had him bent over the horse trough with both hands on the back of his neck.

"Lift it," I said.

"Get off!"

"Lift the curse."

"I can't!"

I pushed his face closer to the water. Not in. I wasn't trying to drown him. I was trying to make him imagine it, which is different and, I thought then, more civilized.

"You made it."

"There ain't a lifting! It wears off!"

"How long?"

"A week!"

"Wrong answer."

"Ulrika."

Chloe stood behind me with both arms held away from her body. Her face was still and pale. That scared me worse than crying would have.

I let Bram go.

He ran home wet to the eyebrows, though I had not put his face in the trough. Maybe he did that part himself for drama.

Chloe lasted until we reached the bakery.

Then the itching truly started.

By supper she had scratched both shoulders raw. Her father smeared the village salve over the marks, a thick yellow thing made of grease and crushed dock leaf. It cooled the skin for ten minutes. Then the itch came back hotter.

I sat on a flour sack in the back room while Chloe paced.

"Stop scratching," I said.

"Thank you. I hadn't considered that."

"Tie your hands."

"I'll scratch with the rope."

"I'll hold them."

"For a week?"

"If I gotta."

She looked at me. Sweat had stuck hair to her forehead.

"You can't punch this one."

"I can punch Bram again."

"It won't help."

"It'll help me."

"That's the problem."

Her father came back with more salve. Chloe turned away from the jar.

"It doesn't work."

"It's what we have," he said.

That sentence followed me home.

It was what we had. Yellow grease, cool for ten minutes. A week of skin rubbed bloody because three boys wanted bread. Everybody accepted that because the salve had always been the salve, and itch curse had always lasted a week.

I did not accept things well at eleven.

I went to the merchant camp beyond the south gate with six copper pieces, two of which were mine.

The traveling merchant was called Fen. He sold needles, lamp oil, blue glass beads, old songs written on paper, and remedies that claimed to fix every part of a person except their judgment. His cart had a red roof and a wooden moon hanging from the axle.

"Alchemy," I said.

Fen looked down at me. "Good afternoon to you too."

"I need a book about it."

"Reading or pictures?"

"The kind that works."

He rubbed his chin. "That costs more."

I put the copper on his counter.

He counted it without touching. "That buys you the cover."

"I don't need the cover."

"Smart. Covers are where books keep the lies."

He ducked into the cart and came back with a bundle of loose pages tied in string. They were stained, singed at one corner, and written by at least three different hands. Half the diagrams had no labels. One page was stuck to another with something brown.

"This ain't a book," I said.

"You said you didn't need a cover."

"I need itch medicine."

"Then you need page fourteen. Maybe page eighteen. Depends whether your patient is a person or a mule."

"Person."

"Fourteen."

"You sure?"

"For six copper, I can be certain or honest. Pick one."

I hated him immediately, which did not make him wrong.

"Honest."

"Page fourteen is for skin irritation. It might help. Page eighteen took the hair off a mule."

I gave him the copper and took the pages.

"Girl," he called as I left. "Write down what you do."

"I can remember."

"That's what everybody says right before they make smoke."

The recipe on page fourteen called for silverleaf, moon water, crushed blue shell, and cooling base.

I had dock leaves, well water, eggshell, and grease.

Close enough is a phrase that has built many coffins.

I did not know that yet.

I borrowed my mother's small iron pot after she went to bed. Borrowed means I intended to return it before she noticed. I lit a stub of candle in the shed, set the warm egg beside me for luck, and chopped dock leaves until the board was green.

The page said low heat.

Low compared to what?

I held the candle under the pot. Nothing happened. I added another candle. Then a lamp.

The grease melted. The leaves curled. The mixture turned a hopeful green.

I crushed eggshell with the back of a spoon, added a pinch, and stirred.

The pot hissed.

"Ha," I whispered. "See?"

The egg sat there.

I poured the salve into a jam jar and ran to Chloe's house before it cooled.

She was awake. Of course she was awake. Her room smelled of yellow grease and misery.

"I made something," I said through the window.

"That's never been a comforting sentence."

I held up the green jar.

She stared at it.

"What is that?"

"Better."

"That's not an ingredient."

"Dock leaf, clean water, eggshell, grease. Alchemy."

"You put eggshell on purpose?"

"Blue shell. Eggshell. Shell is shell."

"That sentence feels dangerous."

"Give me your arm."

Chloe should have refused. Years later she claimed she only agreed because the itching had damaged her judgment. I think she trusted me. That was worse.

I spread a thin line along the rash.

For three breaths, nothing happened.

Then Chloe screamed.

The salve had not cooled the itch. It had found every scratch and set up a forge.

I wiped it off with my sleeve. She kicked over the washbasin. Her father came through the door carrying a bread paddle like a sword.

There are nights in a friendship when you learn exactly how fast you can climb out a window.

I spent the next morning cleaning green salve from Chloe's floor while her father watched.

"Again," Chloe said.

I looked up.

"What?"

She sat on the bed with both arms wrapped in wet cloths. Her face was gray from not sleeping.

"Make it again. Without the burning."

Her father made a sound.

"Absolutely not."

"The village salve doesn't work," Chloe said.

"Hers works backward."

"Then she knows one thing to fix."

I stared at her.

"You still trust me?"

"No," she said. "That's why I'm watching."

We moved the work to the bakery yard where adults could smell smoke before it became a roof problem. Chloe made me lay out every ingredient.

"How much dock leaf?" she asked.

"A handful."

"Your hand or mine?"

"A normal handful."

"There is no normal hand."

"Fine. Eight leaves."

"Write it."

"On what?"

She handed me the back of one of Fen's pages.

"Not the book!"

"It isn't a book. You said so."

I wrote eight leaves.

"How much eggshell?"

"A pinch."

She looked at me.

"One spoon."

"Which spoon?"

I slammed the spoon onto the table. "This spoon. The spoon right here."

"Good. Draw it."

"I can't draw a spoon."

"Then don't lose it."

We rebuilt the first batch exactly enough to discover three things.

One, I had used too much dock leaf.

Two, eggshell was not blue shell.

Three, the lamp had made the pot much hotter than the page meant by low heat.

"So we remove the shell," I said.

"Then it isn't the recipe."

"It already wasn't."

That was the first intelligent thing I said about alchemy.

Chloe wrote it down before I could pretend I had always been intelligent. That was her other gift: catching the rare good sentence and nailing it to the page so my pride could not revise history.

We scraped the burned first batch into a failed jar and labeled it HOT WRONG in letters large enough to shame me from across the shed. I wanted to hide it. She put it on the front of the shelf.

"If you hide the burn, you'll buy it again," she said.

"I never buy the same burn twice."

"You buy cousins of it."

The second batch used fewer leaves, no shell, and a water bath so the grease could not get as hot. It came out pale green and smelled like boiled lawn.

We tested it on me.

Not because I had become cautious. Because Bram and his friends had thrown another curse pellet at my back while I crossed the square that morning. I had laughed when it burst. A fresh week of itching felt like fair payment for proper test skin.

The salve cooled the rash.

"It works," I said.

"Wait."

"For what?"

"Everything that happens after you say it works."

We waited.

My skin went numb.

Then my whole forearm went numb.

Then I knocked over the jar because my fingers had forgotten they were holding it.

Chloe watched the green smear spread across the table.

"Better than fire," she said.

"Not good enough."

We wrote it all down.

By the third night, the itch had spread across Chloe's back and down both arms. She had not slept more than an hour at a time. I had scratches of my own and three failed jars lined up on the wall like ugly children.

I went back to Fen.

His cart was packed to leave.

"Blue shell," I said.

"Good morning."

"What kind?"

"River snail."

"We got river snails. Their shells are brown."

"Blue underneath."

"How do you get underneath a shell?"

"Politely, if the snail is home."

I put my last copper on the counter.

"Tell me what cooling base means."

Fen did not take the coin.

"What did you use?"

"Grease."

"Animal?"

"Yes."

"Old?"

"Maybe."

"Salted?"

I thought of the crock in our pantry.

"Maybe."

"Salt drives itch-herb deeper. Use fresh rendered fat or wax oil."

"Why ain't that on the page?"

"Might have been on page thirteen."

I wanted to throw the bundle at him.

He looked at the scratches on my wrist.

"How many batches?"

"Three."

"How many written down?"

"All of them."

He pushed my copper back.

"Then the lesson's paid for."

We found blue under the shell of every river snail Chloe's father would let us cook. We rendered fresh fat. We washed the dock leaves instead of assuming dirt was part of nature and therefore medicinal. I measured the heat by setting a bowl of water around the pot and counting how long small bubbles took to form at the edge.

The third proper batch was not green. It was gray-blue, ugly as rainwater in a bucket.

"That's medicine?" Chloe asked.

"Maybe."

"Good answer."

We tested one spot on my arm.

No fire.

No numbness.

The itch eased.

We waited an hour. It stayed eased.

Then I put it on Chloe.

Not everywhere. One shoulder first. We watched the skin. Then the other. Then her arms. We stopped twice because she said something felt warm, and once because I thought I saw swelling that turned out to be the shape of her elbow.

By sunset, Chloe had stopped scratching.

She fell asleep sitting at the kitchen table.

Her father carried her upstairs. When he came back, he looked at the gray jar.

"What do I owe you?" he asked.

Nobody had ever asked me that before.

"Nothing."

"Ingredients cost."

"I nearly burnt her skin off."

"Then charge less."

I did not know whether he was joking. Chloe's father had the same deadpan disease she did.

He put two copper pieces on the table.

I stared at them.

"For the salve," he said. "Not the first one."

"I can't take that."

"Then don't call it work."

That sentence hurt in a new place.

I took one copper. He took the other back.

The next morning a pink puni sat outside Chloe's door with a patch of rash along its side.

It must have smelled the snail shell or heard the village talking. Punis always knew when food was free and medicine was new.

I crouched with the jar.

"Come here."

The puni squeaked.

"What's it say?" I asked.

Chloe leaned against the doorframe, still pale but no longer trying to scratch through her own bones.

"It wants to know if that's the burning one."

"How does it know about that?"

The puni squeaked again.

Chloe's mouth twitched.

"Bram told everybody."

"Bram can't talk to punis."

"No. But his little sister can."

I held out my hand. "This one doesn't burn."

The puni backed away.

"Tell it."

"I did."

"Tell it better."

Chloe spoke to the puni. It answered. She spoke again.

It looked at the salve, then at me, then bounced down the lane without treatment.

I stood up too fast.

"Fine. Let it itch."

"Ulrika."

"What? I fixed it."

"It doesn't know that."

"You told it."

"It knows you made one that hurt me first."

The copper in my pocket felt heavier than a copper had any right to feel.

I had made something that worked. I had also made something that burned, something that numbed, and a story that reached the customer before the good jar did.

"That's stupid," I said.

"No," Chloe said. "It's memory."

I hated that answer enough to remember it forever.

The puni came back two days later.

It did not come for me. It came for Chloe. She sat on the step while it spoke, then held out one hand. The puni climbed into her lap and turned its sore side toward us.

"One spot," Chloe translated. "It says you can do one spot. Then wait."

"It said all that?"

"More politely."

I spread a coin-sized patch of salve over the rash.

The puni shivered.

We waited.

It bounced once.

"What does that mean?"

"Wait."

We waited longer.

The puni bounced twice, higher.

"And that?"

Chloe smiled.

"The rest."

I treated the rest.

The puni had no coins. It paid with a smooth blue stone it produced from somewhere inside itself, because punis have pockets that exist only when they need them. I kept that stone beside the first copper for years.

That summer, villagers started bringing me small things they did not want to bother the healer with. Mosquito swelling. Cracked fingertips. A hen with mites. I did not know enough to help most of them. For the first time in my life, I learned to say that before I touched anything.

Sometimes.

I was still me.

But Chloe made me keep pages. Ingredients, amounts, heat, smell, color, what happened first, and what happened after I decided I was done watching. Every jar got a mark so we knew which failure it belonged to.

The injured puni that refused my second batch stayed in my head longer than the boys who started the curse. Chloe said it called my work "hot wrong." I could not hear the words. I saw the bounce away. That was enough to make me angrier at the wall between us than at the itch itself.

Anger made the third batch. Care made it usable. Chloe forced the care. I supplied the fire. Neither alone would have bottled anything worth keeping.

Between the second failure and the third success I slept badly and scratched until I bled. Pride wanted a miracle overnight. The pages wanted patience. I split the difference by working until dawn and calling it patience because I was upright.

Bram and the other boys came once to the shed window to laugh. Chloe dumped wash water on them with perfect aim and worse manners. They did not come twice. Research conditions improved.

At the top of the first clean page, I wrote:

ITCH SALVE. THIRD PROPER BATCH. DOES NOT BURN.

Chloe took the charcoal from me and added:

TEST ONE SPOT. WAIT.

"That's insulting," I said.

"It's instructions."

"I know how to use my own salve."

"The jar might outlive your memory."

"My memory's fine."

She looked at the row of failed jars.

I let her keep the line.

Years later I would write the same line on Bellwether labels with cleaner handwriting and the same stubborn heart. The jar taught me before the academy did.

If Al-Revis ever takes credit for making me careful, the shelf of failed cousins in that summer shed deserves a footnote larger than the school.

That was how I became an alchemist, though nobody called me one. Not with a grand synthesis. Not with a school or a Mana or a Hero Stone.

With one ugly gray-blue jar, one copper, one smooth stone, and the knowledge that making the cure does not erase making the burn.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Winter Nothing Grew

The year after the itch curse, the rain forgot us.

Spring came thin. Summer came hard. By harvest, the creek showed stones nobody remembered naming, and the wheat broke in your hand before you could cut it. Every farm in the village brought in less than it planted. We filled the grain sheds anyway, because an empty shed is a truth and a half-full one can still be argued with.

My father stopped arguing in October.

He counted the seed sacks three times, then sat on the barn step with the ledger open on one knee.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Bad enough."

"That ain't a number."

"It's the number you need."

I sat beside him. He turned the ledger so I could see. I knew figures by then because Chloe said no alchemist should trust a merchant to count for her. The column was short.

"That's all for spring?"

"That's all."

"We can buy more."

"With what?"

That ended the useful part of the conversation.

The seed had another problem. We discovered it when the first frost came. Grain from the lower field had taken damp before harvest, then dried too fast in the shed. Some kernels had gone soft. Others looked sound but smelled faintly sour when crushed.

My father spread a handful on the kitchen table.

"We plant all of it," he said, "half may wake."

"And the other half?"

"Feeds mold."

I picked up one kernel. It was light in my palm.

A thing is what a thing does.

Seed grows.

If it does not, it is only something shaped like a future.

"I can treat it," I said.

My father's jaw moved once.

"No."

"You don't even know what I mean."

"I know you mean the pot."

"I made the itch salve."

"After you made the burn."

"The good one worked."

"On skin. This is everything we put in the ground next year."

"Then give me a handful."

He looked at me.

"One handful," I said. "We test it inside. If it don't grow, we lose less than the mice eat in a night."

That was the right argument. I saw him hate it.

He pushed the grain toward me. "One handful. You mark every kernel. Nothing from that bowl goes back into the sack."

"I know."

"Say it."

"Nothing goes back."

Chloe and I set up in the shed with my loose alchemy pages, our records, four clay dishes, and Uryu's egg wrapped in wool.

We had started calling it the egg by then. Not stone. Not skipping rock. Egg. Nobody had proved it, but some names become true through use.

"What are you treating?" Chloe asked.

"Cold and mold."

"Those are two things."

"I know how numbers work."

"Do you know how mold works?"

"It hates salt."

"So do plants."

"A little salt."

She opened the record book.

"How little?"

I sighed.

We divided forty kernels into four groups of ten. The first stayed untreated. The second received a weak salt wash. The third got a steeped willow-bark rinse because Fen's pages said willow resisted rot. The fourth got both, then spent one night near the egg's warmth.

I wanted the fourth group to win. That matters. People talk about experiments as if the person doing them becomes a glass bottle with no wishes inside. I wanted the egg to be the answer because it was mine, because my father distrusted it, and because every mystery starts to feel like a promise if you carry it long enough.

We planted the kernels in trays of damp soil beside the kitchen stove.

The untreated group grew four shoots.

Salt grew three.

Willow grew six.

Willow and warmth grew eight.

I counted them until eight became a kind of music.

"It works," I said.

"It worked ten times," Chloe said.

"Eight."

"Exactly."

"That's twice the untreated seed."

"In a dish."

I carried the dishes to my father.

He crouched by the green shoots and pulled one gently from the soil. Its roots were white and fine.

"What did you use?"

I told him.

"How much seed can you treat?"

"All of it."

"That was not the question."

I hated that he and Chloe could sound alike without liking each other much.

"A sack a day. Maybe two."

"And if it goes wrong after planting?"

"It won't."

His face closed.

Wrong answer.

He stood. "You may treat one small sack. We plant it separate in spring."

I should have heard the care inside the limit. I heard a door shutting on my eight green shoots and the music I had made of them.

Chloe, later, said limits are how adults love dangerous children. I told her adults could love quieter. She said quiet love does not keep seed alive through winter.

"Spring is months away. The rest could rot by then."

"One sack."

"You saw the shoots."

"I saw eight shoots in your mother's dishes."

"You never trust anything I do."

"Trust is not the same as handing you next year's food."

I heard only handing you. Not next year's food.

That night I sat with the egg and told it we were going to prove him wrong. Chloe would have slapped the back of my head for bargaining with mystery like it was a teammate. She was not there. Pride loves an empty room.

So I treated more.

Not all of it. Even I knew better than all.

Three sacks.

I waited until my father went to help repair the mill roof.

Between sacks I talked to the egg like a co-conspirator.

"He'll see. In spring. He'll see."

The egg stayed warm. Warmth is not a yes. I know that now. At thirteen, warmth was whatever I needed it to be. Chloe was delivering bread. I carried the seed into the back shed, mixed willow water in the wash tub, and set the egg under the slatted floor where its warmth could rise through the grain without touching it.

The first sack went cleanly.

The second smelled stronger. I added more willow because the water looked weak after the first batch.

The third sack was where pride climbed into the pot.

I told myself I was being careful while doing the opposite of careful. That is the special talent of thirteen. The egg's warmth under the floor felt like approval. It was not approval. It was heat. Heat does not know your motives.

Chloe found me on the second night because the shed smelled wrong. Not willow. Not grain. A sweet-sour edge like fruit left under a bed.

"How many sacks?" she asked.

"Three."

"He said one."

"I know what he said."

She looked at the tub, the wet floor, the egg wrapped under the slats, and then at my face. No lecture yet. Worse: inventory.

"We test tomorrow," she said. "If it fails, you tell him before the sprouts do."

The egg had warmed the floor but not the grain at the top. I covered the pile with blankets to hold the heat. Then I went to fetch another bucket.

A neighbor stopped me in the lane. A cart wheel had split. By the time I returned, the inside of the covered pile was hot enough to fog the shed window.

I pulled off the blankets.

The grain smelled sweet.

Not rotten. Sweet, alive, green somehow.

Tiny white roots had broken through hundreds of kernels.

They had germinated.

Pale threads. Eager. Wrong-speed life. I laughed out loud in the shed like a fool watching a miracle, then stopped laughing when the smell turned and the threads browned at the tips as if ashamed of themselves.

In the sack.

My whole body went cold while the seed steamed.

I spread it across the floor. I opened every shutter. I told myself early growth was still growth, that we could dry it, that roots might sleep again if cooled.

By evening the little white tips had turned brown.

My father found me kneeling in three sacks of next spring.

He did not shout.

I would have preferred shouting.

He picked up one sprouted kernel, pinched the dead root away, and let both pieces fall.

"One sack," he said.

"I thought,"

"One."

"The trial worked."

"The trial told you to try more. It did not tell you to risk three."

"I can fix it."

"No."

"I can."

"You will not touch another seed."

"Then what are we gonna plant?"

His head came up.

There it was. The wound under the mistake. I had asked him for an answer as if he were the one who had emptied the sacks.

"Get out," he said.

I ran to Chloe's house.

She was at the bakery table wrapping loaves. She saw my face and put the string down.

"What happened?"

"The seed woke up."

"What seed?"

"Ours."

She went still.

"How much?"

"Three sacks."

"Your father gave you three?"

I said nothing.

Chloe closed her eyes.

"Say something," I snapped.

"I'm deciding which thing won't make you run again."

"I didn't run."

She looked toward the door I had come through.

"Fine. I ran."

"Go back."

"He told me to get out."

"Then stand outside until he changes the instruction."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Still mine."

I hated her for about twelve seconds.

Then she took off her apron.

"Come on."

We went back.

My father was still in the shed. He had separated the first two sacks from the ruined third. Some kernels in the first batch had not sprouted yet. The second was uneven. There was a chance part of it could be dried and used as feed, not seed.

He did not look at me while he worked. That was the worst part. Looking would have been a fight I understood. Not looking meant I had moved myself into the category of problems he had to manage with his hands.

I stood there useless, which is a special hell for people who think usefulness is identity. Chloe tugged my sleeve before I could fill the silence with a worse apology than silence.

He did not look at me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

It sounded tiny in that room.

He kept sorting.

"I wrote everything down," I said. "Heat, water, all of it. I can figure out which part is still good."

"You will do what I tell you with it."

"Yes."

"And you will work back the value."

"Yes."

"Not because grain can be brought back by chores. Because cost needs a shape you can see."

"Yes."

He finally looked at me.

"Do you understand what you did?"

I wanted to say I had only tried to help. I wanted that to be a shield.

Chloe stood beside the door holding the record book against her chest.

"I used more than I had permission to use," I said.

"Why?"

"Because eight grew."

"Eight out of ten."

"Yes."

"In a dish."

"Yes."

"And you wanted the answer before winter."

I swallowed. "Yes."

He nodded once.

That was not forgiveness. It was the first board laid toward it.

I worked the debt all winter.

Before dawn I fed animals, hauled wood, and cleaned the miller's grain bins for coin. In the afternoons I gathered bark and winter herbs to sell to Fen when his cart came through. At night Chloe and I tested the remaining treated grain one measured handful at a time.

The first batch, the one made exactly like the dish trial, stayed viable if spread thin and kept cool. The second had too much willow and poor heat. Most of it died. The third became chicken feed.

We learned another thing too. Warmth had not cured the seed. It had accelerated whatever the seed was already going to do. Good kernels woke. Damaged kernels rotted faster. The egg did not choose between them.

Power, I wrote in the record, is not judgment.

Chloe read the line twice.

"Keep that one," she said.

In late winter, old Mrs. Vale brought me a jar of wrinkled bean seed. It was all she had for the kitchen plot beside her cottage.

"Your father says you know how to test it," she said.

That surprised me enough that I forgot to be proud.

"I ruined ours."

"He told me that too."

"And you still came?"

"He said you know exactly how."

That surprised me more than pride could hold. Pa had told a neighbor I knew how to test after I had ruined our own seed. Trust, then, was not the same as approval. It was a sharper thing.

Winter had already become a ledger of penance by then. Frost herbs until my fingers split. Fence rails until my shoulders knew every post by bruise. Chloe kept a book of every jar I made and every hour I owed the household. She would not let me romanticize the debt into destiny.

Some afternoons I hated her for the book. Some afternoons I loved her for not letting me drown in a prettier version of myself. We fought once in the lane about whether guilt counted as payment. She said guilt was just interest. I threw a snowball at her. She threw one back with better aim and then handed me the herb basket like nothing had happened. That is marriage for people who are not married and never will be because they are busy surviving each other's growth.

"You are not a tragic genius," she said. "You are a girl who overcooked seed."

"I know."

"Say it without the heroic tone."

"I overcooked the seed."

"Better."

On the coldest nights I sat by the stove with the egg in my lap and felt it warm when the wind found the cracks in the walls. Pa watched that once and said nothing. The silence was worse than shouting. Shouting I could fight. Silence meant he was calculating how much of me to trust.

In late winter Mrs. Vale came with a cloth-wrapped packet of kitchen beans and a face that had argued with pride all the way down the lane.

"I heard what you did to your own field," she said.

"Everybody did."

"I also heard you fixed a smaller batch."

"Maybe."

"My plot is dying in the window boxes. If you ruin these, I will tell your mother you stole my best spoon when you were nine."

"I did steal that spoon."

"Then we understand each other."

I treated ten beans. No more. Six sprouted. I adjusted the willow, lowered the heat, and treated another ten. Seven sprouted. We stopped there and saved the rest for planting.

Chloe forced me to write the corrected ratios on a board and nail it above my shelf:

HEAT LOW. TIME SHORT. TEST TEN. STOP.

In spring, Mrs. Vale's kitchen plot came up green.

Our lower field came up patchy.

Both truths stood side by side all summer. Her climbing beans covered the fence. Our bare rows showed through the wheat like missing teeth. Every time I passed one, I remembered the other.

Pa walked those bare rows with me once at dusk.

"You meant well," he said.

"That don't feed seed."

"No. Meaning well is the part that makes people trust you before you earn it. Don't spend that cheap."

We walked the rest of the row without talking. Crows argued over the patchy places. I wanted him to say he still loved me in words. He handed me a fence nail that needed straightening

instead. In our family that was the same sentence in a different dialect.

He put a hand on my shoulder, heavy and brief.

"Alchemy ain't a fancy," he said. "It's a tool that bites. You want to keep using it, you keep your fingers and other people's harvest in the same count."

I nodded because if I spoke I would have cried, and at thirteen I preferred anger to water.

My father never called alchemy a fancy again.

He called it dangerous.

At thirteen I thought that meant he hated it.

Later I understood he had finally started taking it seriously.



CHAPTER FIVE

A Thing Is What It Does

By fourteen, I had a shelf.

Not a workshop. Calling it a workshop would have insulted workshops and encouraged me. It was one shelf in the corner of our tool shed, above the spare harness and below a roof leak my father claimed he was watching.

On it stood nine jars, four bottles, two bundles of dried leaves, one cracked mortar, and a board painted in Chloe's handwriting:

DO NOT DRINK ANYTHING WITHOUT ASKING.

Under that, in my handwriting:

COWARDS MAY ASK TWICE.

People came anyway.

They brought split palms, stiff hinges, chickens with bare patches, smoke in the pantry, and every little problem too embarrassing for the village healer and too stubborn for prayer. I made grip wax for tools, salve for winter cracks, bitter powder to drive grain beetles from bins, and heat stones for lambing nights.

Nobody called me an alchemist.

They called me "that Mulberry girl with the jars," which was longer and therefore felt deliberate.

I tried the word on myself in the shed when nobody was listening. Alchemist. It fit like boots two sizes forward: possible if I grew, ridiculous if I strutted. So I strutted a little and grew a little and let Chloe's records decide which days counted.

Payment came as eggs, potatoes, buttons, favors, and once a live goose that hated me on sight. My father made me write all of it down.

Lambing night put me in three barns before dawn with heat stones wrapped in wool. One ewe lived because the stone stayed warm and my hands stayed steady. One lamb did not, and I sat in the straw afterward tasting iron and failure while Chloe wrote the time of death like a law. Usefulness did not erase that line. It sat beside the live ones and refused to be edited out.

The third barn belonged to a man who did not like me and liked dying animals less. He watched every motion as if waiting for a trick. When the lamb breathed, he did not thank me. He paid in potatoes and said, "Next time come faster."

"Next time call sooner," I said.

Chloe wrote that down too. She said conversations were part of the remedy.

On the walk home under a thinning night, I asked her if useful people still got to cry in the lane.

"Yes," she said. "Then they wash their hands and check the notes."

I cried. I washed. I checked the notes. The dead lamb stayed on the page. The living ones did too. That was the whole ethics lesson in straw and ink.

By fourteen I had a reputation map in my head: who paid fair, who lied about symptoms, who would call at midnight, who would blame me if God was busy. Alchemy was never only pots. It was people, and people are unstable reagents with opinions.

The goose eventually became stew, which resolved our philosophical disagreement about payment. Pa said that was the market clearing. I said that was murder with paperwork. Chloe said both could be true and wrote "goose: converted" in the ledger with no further comment.

"A cabbage ain't coin," I said the next market day, still raw from the straw.

"It fed you."

"The goose didn't."

The goose hissed from under the table.

"Not yet," he said.

His rule was simple. If I put something in a bottle and handed it to another person, my name stayed on it after my hands let go.

That rule followed me into every barn and kitchen. When I got sloppy with a beetle powder and a bin went bitter, Pa made me replace the grain from my own earnings and stand in the market telling people what I had done wrong. Humiliation taught faster than praise. I hated him for it until I needed the same spine years later in a mill town that spit on traveling cures.

"What if they use it wrong?" I asked.

"Did you tell them how?"

"Yes."

"Did you write it?"

"Most of them can't read."

"Then mark it. One line for once a day. A sun for morning. A mouth with a cross if it's poison."

"I can't draw a mouth."

"Then learn before you sell poison."

It was unfair how often practicality sounded like wisdom in his voice.

The first person in the village to call me an alchemist was a liar.

His name was Orso Pell. He arrived in a blue wagon with brass stars on the wheels and bells tied beneath the driver's seat. He wore a green coat in midsummer, three rings on every hand, and a smile so white it looked borrowed.

He parked in the festival square and unfolded a painted sign:

MASTER PELL'S CELESTIAL RESTORATIVES

Under that, smaller:

FORMULATED BY TRUE ALCHEMICAL SCIENCE

I was standing in the crowd before the second bell stopped ringing.

Orso held up a violet bottle. "Tired blood, weak lungs, unhappy dreams, poor harvest, slow children, fast husbands. One spoon of Celestial Tonic restores the balance of body and spirit."

"How does one bottle know which problem?" I asked.

People turned.

Orso's smile widened. "Ah. A young scholar."

"I'm asking."

"The tonic awakens the body's own wisdom."

"What's in it?"

"A guarded formula."

"Then how do we know it ain't ditch water?"

Somebody laughed. Orso looked at my belt, my stained fingers, and the small green bottle clipped beside my pouch.

"You practice the art yourself?"

"Some."

"Then you understand why an alchemist protects her formula."

Her.

Alchemist.

He set those two words side by side and offered them to me like a chair at the grown table.

I should have become more suspicious.

Instead I stood taller.

"I understand labels," I said. "Dose, risks, ingredients. You ain't got any."

"A village practitioner," Orso told the crowd, warm as butter. "Sharp eye. Sharp tongue too. Good. Alchemy needs young blood."

He handed me the violet bottle.

The liquid inside shone when it moved. Not reflected light. Its own faint blue glow.

The egg at my hip went hot.

Not warm. Hot.

I nearly dropped the bottle.

"What's in this?"

Orso's eyes flicked to my pouch.

There. Gone fast, but there. Recognition.

"Rare mineral salts," he said.

"From where?"

"Farther than you've traveled."

"That don't answer me."

"It answers your experience."

The crowd made the low sound crowds make when a joke has chosen a side.

My face burned.

"Don't buy it," I said.

Orso took the bottle from me. "Professional jealousy is an excellent sign in an apprentice."

"I ain't your apprentice."

"Clearly. An apprentice learns manners."

He sold twelve bottles before sunset.

The first person fell sick that night.

Mrs. Vale's brother Thom had taken one spoon for aching joints. An hour later he was laughing at things nobody else could see. By midnight he was crying. By dawn he had locked himself in the goat pen because he believed the moon was trying to enter through his window.

The healer sent for me because Thom's wife remembered the egg heating in my pouch.

I uncorked the tonic outside his room.

The smell was sweet metal and wet stone.

"Mana residue," I said.

The healer frowned. "You know that?"

"No."

"Then don't name it."

"The egg knows it."

That sounded foolish once it had air around it.

I held the bottle near the shell. Heat climbed through the red cloth. The liquid brightened.

"Something in there answers it," I said.

Thom laughed behind the door, then screamed at the moon in full daylight.

"Can you undo it?" his wife asked.

The right answer was I don't know.

I had practiced it.

I said, "Yes."

Pride is quickest when witnesses are scared.

I ran to the shed. Chloe followed with the record book.

"What did he take?" she asked.

"One spoon."

"What is it?"

"Mana salt. Maybe."

"Maybe doesn't go in the cure column."

"I know."

The egg pulsed under my hand. Heat, cool, heat. Like a frightened heartbeat.

Fen's damaged pages had one note about mineral poisoning: bind metal with charcoal, settle the stomach with bitterroot, replace lost water slowly. It said nothing about visions.

"We make the binder," I said.

"Test it on what?"

"There ain't time."

"Ulrika."

"He's getting worse."

"That does not make you know more."

I rounded on her. "Then help or move."

Her face closed.

She moved.

I hated myself before the door finished swinging.

I made the binder from ground charcoal, bitterroot, clean water, and a pinch of salt. Measured. Recorded. No substitutions. No guessing. My hands followed the page while the rest of me wanted to run ahead.

When I returned, Thom had broken the window with a stool.

Orso was in the yard packing his wagon.

I went straight at him.

"You knew."

"The gentleman misused the dose."

"One spoon. Your dose."

"Bodies differ."

"Then your label should say that."

"Move."

"Tell me what mineral."

He climbed onto the wagon.

I grabbed the bridle.

The horse reared.

Chloe caught my shoulder and pulled me away from the hoof. It came down where my head had been.

Orso snapped the reins. The wagon lurched through the square, bells screaming. I ran after it for half the road before sense, or Chloe's grip on the back of my dress, stopped me.

"Let go!"

"Thom," she said.

One word.

The liar was leaving. The patient was still here.

I chose the patient.

The binder did not cure Thom. It gave his body somewhere to put the poison. We got half of it back up, black and violet, then kept him drinking a cup at a time while the visions burned through. I sat outside his room all day and read my own notes until every mark felt carved into me.

At sunset, the egg cooled.

Inside, Thom stopped arguing with the moon.

By morning he knew his wife's name.

Three other villagers had taken the tonic. Two had milder symptoms. One had none. We treated each by dose and reaction, not by assuming the first mixture fit every body.

Orso was gone. His bottles were not.

We collected and smashed them in the quarry. I kept one sealed sample in a padded box with a poison mark large enough for a blind man to fear.

Smashing felt good in the arms and did nothing for the people already dosed. I learned that difference while glass jumped under the hammer. Vengeance is loud. Aftercare is inventory, water, notes, and staying when the exciting part ends.

Chloe made me count every shard into a sack before we left the quarry. "If a goat cuts its mouth on your righteous anger," she said, "you will own that too."

Thom recovered. Slowly.

Nobody cheered. His wife thanked the healer, Chloe, and me in that order. Fair enough.

My father came to the shed after dark. The violet sample sat between us.

"You told them you could fix it," he said.

"I did fix it."

"That wasn't my question."

I looked at the shelf.

"I didn't know when I said it."

"Why'd you say it?"

Because Orso had called me an alchemist. Because the village had looked at me. Because I wanted the word to become true before I earned it.

"I was scared," I said.

"So was everybody."

"I wanted them to stop being scared."

"A promise you can't keep is fear wearing a clean shirt."

Tch. I hated that line. I wrote it down later.

He picked up one of my salve jars. A sun symbol, two measure marks, my crooked name.

"You did good after," he said.

"After I almost got Chloe kicked by a horse."

"Yes."

"After I lied."

"Yes."

"That don't sound like good."

"Good ain't clean. It is what you do with the dirt already on you."

He put the jar back.

The next market day, I repainted Chloe's sign.

MULBERRY REMEDIES

Below it:

INGREDIENTS, USE, AND RISK GIVEN WITH EVERY JAR

Below that, smaller:

IF I DON'T KNOW, I SAY SO.

Chloe read it.

"How long will that last?"

"Forever."

She raised one eyebrow.

"Fine. Most days."

She handed me the paintbrush and pointed to the bottom.

I added:

ASK TWICE.

Then, because Pa was watching from the doorway:

WRITE THE DOSE. KEEP THE NAME ON THE BOTTLE.

He nodded once and left before I could turn the moment into a speech.

After Thom recovered, the village treated me differently.

Not with parade warmth. With the careful respect people give a sharp tool that has already cut once and then been used properly. They still did not call me alchemist. They called me when the problem was small, ugly, and urgent. That was better.

That winter I learned the difference between being useful and being trusted. Useful gets you geese and potatoes. Trusted gets you the knock at midnight when a lamb will not breathe and somebody decides your hands are less frightening than the dark. I failed two of those nights and succeeded three. Chloe recorded all five. Pride tried to erase the failures. She would not let it.

I still replayed the Pell day when I could not sleep: the shout, the rearing horse, Chloe pulling me clear, the choice between chasing a liar and staying with a patient. Method had come after the fire spent itself. That order would take years to reverse. Writing the rules was how I meant to grow into them before the next violet bottle found our road.

Some nights I practiced saying no to imaginary easy money. It felt stupid until Bellwether made it a live exam. Childhood is just the open-book version of the tests you will one day take in public.

That spring, the letter from Al-Revis arrived.



CHAPTER SIX

The Year the Sky Came Down

The Al-Revis letter came with the first spring mud.

The post rider carried it under his coat because the envelope was older than the rain. Thick cream paper, dark red seal, my full name written in a hand that had never seen me write mine.

Ulrika Mulberry.

Not Father. Not household. Me.

I opened it at the kitchen table with a bread knife.

The school had floated in the sky once. Everybody knew that, though nobody in our village had seen it up there. Al-Revis belonged to the same category as kings and sea monsters: real enough to appear on maps, far enough away that chores remained more urgent.

Then the world's mana thinned. The academy came down.

It had not fallen all at once. The letter did not say that part. Traveling stories did. First the school lowered until clouds caught on its towers. Then it settled onto the earth with cracks through the lower walls and half its old systems dead. Enrollment fell from three years to one. Tuition replaced traditions. Some woman named Marta was cutting alchemy from the school piece by piece because it wasted money.

The letter called all of that restructuring.

At the bottom, below the fee, supply list, and date, another hand had added one line:

We are to admit one final student. The master asked for the girl from the wheat field.

The egg grew hot against my hip.

I read the line again.

Ten years vanished. I was six under the oak, the old man's hand cold as well water, his eyes clear in a ruined face.

Everything I had left.

Somebody knew.

"What is it?" my mother asked.

I passed her the letter. My father read over her shoulder until he reached the tuition.

He took the paper from her and read that number twice.

"It's a swindle," he said.

"You didn't finish."

"I finished the price."

"They asked for me."

"That is how swindles work. Nobody pays to be called ordinary."

"They know about the wheat field."

"You told somebody."

"I didn't."

He looked at Chloe, who had come through the door halfway into the argument because raised voices pulled her from across the lane.

"I didn't either," she said.

My father set the letter down as if it might stain the table.

"A real school fell out of the sky and wants coin to teach you air. Use your head."

"I been using it. In the shed. In the fields. On every person who comes asking for something this village says ain't work."

"Then keep doing work here."

"I don't know enough."

That stopped him.

It was not a thing I admitted often.

Ma set a hand on the letter without taking sides yet. The kitchen smelled like yesterday's bread and today's argument.

"The tonic," I said. "I knew enough to see it was wrong and not enough to know why. The seed, the salve, all of it. I keep learning by finding the part that hurts somebody. I need a teacher before the next part's worse."

"And this fallen school has one?"

"Yes."

"You know that?"

"No."

His mouth tightened.

"But I'll go find out," I said.

My mother picked up the letter. "The term begins in three weeks."

"Then I leave in two."

"You do not," my father said.

There are sentences that make a room smaller. That one pushed every wall toward me.

"I'm fifteen."

"Exactly."

"Old enough."

"To think so."

The heat started in my chest.

"I got my own money."

"Not that much."

"I'll sell what I made. I'll work the road. I'll pay it back."

"With remedies?"

"Yes."

"To strangers?"

"Yes."

"Three days from anybody who knows what is in those bottles?"

"I know what's in them."

"Until you don't."

He knew exactly where to cut. The violet sample in its poison box seemed to glow from the shed.

"I ain't Orso."

"I know."

"Then stop talking like I am."

"I am talking like you are my daughter."

There it was again. Fear in work clothes.

I stood so fast the bench scraped the floor.

"I been using my head my whole life in a village where the biggest thing that happens is a harvest festival. I'm going. I don't need your blessing, but it'd ride lighter with it."

The kitchen went still.

He looked at the egg on my belt, the letter, and the hands I had stained making small useful things.

"You got your mother's stubborn," he said at last. "And my coin, near as I can spare it. Don't ask me to be glad."

I did not.

The money still came up short.

For ten days, Mulberry Remedies became the busiest shelf in the village. People who had owed me cabbages discovered copper. Mrs. Vale ordered enough grip wax for every garden tool she might use before death. The miller bought beetle powder. Chloe's father paid in advance for burn salve he claimed a bakery would obviously need, though he had gone twenty years without mine.

I sold the goose.

The goose went to Bram Heddle's family, which felt like revenge with feathers.

Chloe kept the accounts. My father checked them at night and said nothing about the little pile growing in the tin box.

We were still twelve silver short when he put the rest on the table.

Not copper. Silver.

I stared.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Mine."

"I know it's yours. Where?"

"A place I kept it."

"For what?"

"Something that cost twelve silver."

My mother turned away so I would not see her face.

I pushed the coins back. "I'll earn it."

"You will."

"I mean before."

"Then you'll miss the term."

"You said it was a swindle."

"Might be."

"You said no."

"I did."

"Then why?"

He slid the coins toward me again.

"A thing is what a thing does. You've been leaving for years. Might as well do it on a road."

That was his blessing. Heavy, practical, and disguised as defeat.

I took the silver.

Chloe was the last fight.

She had helped me price stock, sew inner pockets into my traveling coat, and choose which records to carry. She did all of that while speaking as if only one of us was leaving.

Two days before departure, I found her in the bakery shaping dough.

"Your trunk's too small," I said.

"Good thing I'm not packing one."

"Quit that."

"Quit what?"

"Pretending."

She pressed both palms into the dough. "I'm not going to a school that fell out of the sky."

"It landed."

"That is what fallen means when you survive it."

"They got rooms."

"Probably holes too."

"You hate it here."

"No. You hate it enough for both of us."

That landed.

She went on before I could swing back.

"I don't want alchemy. I don't like fire. I don't like cauldrons. I don't like things that hiss when nobody touched them. My father's bakery needs me."

"Then stay."

I meant it. That was the worst part.

"Stay and mind the bakery and marry somebody kind. I'll write."

"You can't write."

"I got records."

"Those say things like 'smelled less dead after noon.'"

"Useful information."

"Ulrika." She said my name the way she said it when I had scraped a knee and was pretending I had not. "You're going to a school full of strangers and cauldrons, and you can't even hear the punis. Who's going to tell you what people are saying?"

"I'll manage."

"You'll manage yourself into a ditch."

"Then don't come."

I walked out angry enough to leave her forever.

At dawn the next day, her trunk stood beside mine.

A tag hung from the handle in her handwriting: **TRANSLATOR. NOT DISCIPLE. DO NOT GET ME KILLED FOR YOUR AMBITION.**

Chloe sat on it eating an apple.

"Your trunk's too big," I said.

"Good morning."

"You said,"

"I reconsidered."

"Why?"

"Somebody has to be there when you find out the egg is just a rock."

"It ain't."

"Then somebody should be impressed when it turns out to be a dragon."

I threw my arms around her. She endured it for three seconds.

"Heat and me still don't mix," she said into my hair.

"You can stand far from the pot."

"That is your plan?"

"It's worked so far."

"No part of our lives supports that statement."

"I'm coming," she said.

"Cause you love alchemy?"

"Because you run toward danger like it owes you money. Somebody has to bring the notes."

Before we left, I walked the village once like a person counting debts that were also gifts.

Mrs. Vale's bean fence was bare for spring, but the old vines still clung to it. The mill trough where I had held Bram's face years ago had a new crack along one side. The bakery chimney smoked. My shelf in the shed stood half empty, the poison sample locked at the back and every safe jar marked.

At the well, three punis waited.

Blue, pink, and pale yellow. The old blue one from the mill had slowed further. It spoke when I approached.

I listened to the round sounds and understood nothing.

"What's it saying?" I called.

Chloe stood by the cart fifty feet away. "You said you were walking alone."

"I changed the rule."

She came over and listened.

"It says the road is muddy."

"I can see that."

The pink puni spoke.

"It says don't eat the red berries past the split oak."

"I know that too."

The yellow one bounced twice and made a softer sound.

Chloe's face changed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"It said come back loud."

I looked at the little yellow thing.

"Tell it I will."

Chloe did.

All three punis bounced.

I could read that much.

The boys from the itch-curse summer, older now and awkward about it, handed me a packet of travel bread without meeting my eyes.

My father checked the cart wheel, the harness, my coin pouch, and the clasp holding the egg at my hip. Then he gave me the small iron measure with four lines cut into the handle.

"You know what those are for."

"Dose."

"And?"

"Not guessing."

He nodded. He turned the measure over. "Your spoon drawing was terrible," he said.

I laughed, then nearly didn't.

Ma packed salve cloths and kissed my forehead like she was sealing a jar. She put dried apples in my bag, a second pair of socks, and a note I was not allowed to read until the first lonely night on the road.

The three-day road was mud, blister, and arguments about whether the egg preferred left pouch or right. It preferred being near my heartbeat. I learned that by the second mile.

The first night, I read the note under the cart tarp while Chloe pretended to sleep. It said: *Come back knowing more, not knowing better than us.*

I still fail that instruction some days. I keep the note anyway.

At the academy gate, the towers looked cracked and proud, like teeth that refused to fall out.

Students in mismatched coats crossed the yard with the walk of people who had already survived one ending. A professor argued with a cracked fountain as if plumbing were philosophy. Somewhere a cauldron lid rang like a bell for a church that cooked.

"Ugly," Chloe said.

"Alive," I said.

"Those can both be true."

"Usually are."

The sky had come down, and somebody inside had stood up, dusted off, and opened the doors again.

If a school could do that, I figured a girl with a warm egg, a marked iron spoon, and twelve borrowed silver could do something too.

Chloe grabbed my arm at the gate.

"Last chance to turn back."

"Not a chance in the world."

She sighed. "We're going to be late on day one. I can already feel it."

We were late on day one.

I dragged her through the gates by the wrist, the egg warm against my ribs like something knocking back.

It had waited ten years.

It would not wait much longer.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Night the Cauldron Answered

Ten years, I carried that stone. Pillow to pocket to pouch, warm the whole time, like a thing waiting out a winter. When I turned fifteen I strapped it into the alchemist's pouch on my belt and took it up to Al-Revis Academy, which had floated in the sky once and didn't anymore. The school had come down the same way the world's mana had thinned out, slow and sorry, and by the time I got there they'd crammed three years of lessons into one and charged us for the privilege. I didn't care. A girl with a mana egg in her belt wasn't there for the lectures.

Chloe was the only person alive who knew the stone was real. She'd found it under my pillow when we were eight, because Chloe found every secret I ever hid the way other girls found skipping ropes, and from that day on she'd believed in it like it was scripture. "You wait," she'd say, every year, the same promise. "You wait and see what comes out of it."

The night it hatched was autumn, the academy grounds gone red and gold, and we were up against a deadline, which is the natural state of all my best mistakes.

Tony had set us an exam: Fairy's Spiritual Water, a healing brew with a pretty name, and the deadline had gone and snuck up on us. Tomorrow evening. Lose to Flay's combat students, Tony said, and we'd see hell. So there we stood, me and Chloe and Pepperoni, the fairy we'd hired fresh off his old master's porch, around the workshop cauldron at an hour of the night when even the bugs had quit buzzing.

We had the water tree fruit and the bitter grape and the water, same as Tony taught. What we didn't have was sleep.

We also didn't have a batch. That part I leave out when I tell this story to customers, because customers like a girl who succeeds by accident and not a girl who failed three times first.

Batch one went grey. Tony's method says you bring the water to the edge of a boil and hold it there, at the edge, which is a stupid instruction until you've done it, and then it's the only instruction. Water at the edge trembles without breaking. I let mine break. The fruit went to pulp instead of to liquor and the whole pot smelled like a wet cellar.

Batch two I held the edge fine and put the bitter grape in too early. The grape is what makes the thing healing instead of just wet, but it's proud about timing. Early, and it turns the fruit sour and the sour eats the healing. Chloe wrote "sour, useless" in the workshop ledger in her small neat hand, and then, because she is Chloe, she wrote "again" underneath.

Batch three was actually decent. I dropped the ladle in it.

So by the fourth pot it was somewhere past the middle of the night and I had learned two things worth keeping. One, the edge of a boil is a place you can stand if you pay attention the whole time, which is the entire art as far as I can tell. Two, my hands shake when I've been awake too long, and shaking hands are how good alchemists ruin things they already know how to make.

I say all that so you understand the pot was honest when it happened. Nobody enchanted it. Nobody blessed it. It was a fourth attempt at a school exam, held at the edge of a boil by a girl who wanted to beat a swordsman's classroom, and that is exactly the kind of ordinary that miracles seem to prefer.

"If you had muscles like mine," Pepperoni said, flexing for nobody in particular, "you could work for two weeks straight without any breaks."

"Muscle Ulrika," Chloe said. "I kind of want to see that."

"I can't," I said. "I'm getting sleepy."

"Miss, wake up!" Pepperoni wound up one big fist, all proud of himself. "I'll wake her with my loving slap. That'll be sure to put her out."

"Ugh." I pushed his hand away. "I can't do this. I need to wake up. Chloe, can you hand me that ingredient?"

She didn't move.

I looked at her. Her hands were shaking.

Here's the thing about Chloe that took me years to learn. She had believed in that egg longer and harder than I had. I only carried it. She defended it, to her mother, to the boys at the mill, to me on the nights I said out loud that it was probably a rock. Ten years is a long time to be the only person keeping somebody else's promise.

And we were one night from an exam and she had just noticed, the way you notice a stair in the dark, that the promise was about to get answered one way or the other.

"You're shaking."

"I'm fine." She lifted the bitter grape, and her hand shook so hard the thing looked like it was trying to escape. "Here. I just have to put this in and I'll be-"

Oh.

Oh no.

The stone rolled off the bench. Straight at the cauldron it went, and into the pot with a plop I can still hear. My stone. Ten years of warm, straight into the Fairy's Spiritual Water.

"Crap! My stone!"

"Don't put weird stuff in there!" Chloe yelled, like I'd thrown it on purpose. "You're gonna end up making something else!"

"It's not weird!" I was already rolling up my sleeve. "But I gotta get it out."

"Just do it really fast." Chloe's voice had gone high and thin. "So fast you won't even feel the heat."

I looked at the cauldron. The brew was rolling, honest and hot, steam coming off it in a wall.

"I can't do that."

Chloe looked at the cauldron too. The steam caught her face, and I saw the exact second she lost her nerve. Chloe never could stand the heat, not the cookfire back home, not the baker's oven, not this.

"I guess we have to wait till it cools down," she said.

"No! Why not-"

The cauldron answered for us.

It was the strangest sound a pot ever made. Not a boil, not a bubble. A pop, like a cork, then a little wet sneeze, and then something came up out of the water. Something small. Something grey.

"We were making medicine," Chloe whispered. "How do we make this creature?"

"Alchemy is a rather strange beast," Pepperoni said, real calm, like cauldrons gave birth every day.

"No, I think this is..." I leaned in. "I'm pretty sure it's a mana."

"But did it really come from this stone?" Chloe said, and I saw the belief take hold of her face.

"Ah!" Chloe's whole face lit up. "How cute! I told you! I told you that egg was real!"

She grabbed it before I could stop her.

"Get away," she yelped, "you're burning me!"

She dropped it, or tried to. It tumbled onto the bench, sat there steaming, and looked up at us with the saddest little face I ever saw. Like we'd hurt its feelings. Like being born into a pot of medicine was somehow our fault.

"Miss," Pepperoni said. "The mana looks very sad. I can't believe you would do that to a newborn mana."

"I'm sorry!" Chloe said. "Be happy!"

I looked at the sad, steaming thing. I looked at Chloe shaking out her stung fingers. And I did what any alchemist with ten years of waiting in her belt does.

I grabbed it back.

"I don't care if it's too hot."

It was too hot. Like holding a coal that had decided to be a kitten, and my arms yelled about it, but I held on. The little thing stopped steaming and looked at me with big teal eyes, and it made a sound.

My palms blistered. Both of them, in a band across the base of the fingers where he'd sat. I didn't notice for an hour, which tells you something about what pain is actually for.

What I did notice, later, sitting on the step with my hands turned up in my lap like two things somebody had handed me, was that I knew exactly what to put on them. Cold water first, long enough to be boring. Then the itch salve from my third summer, the one my father made me work off in potatoes, because burn and itch are cousins and the salve doesn't care which cousin came to visit. Then leave it alone, which is the hard part.

I'd carried an egg for ten years and got a mana out of it. I'd carried a village's worth of small remedies for six and got a pair of hands I could treat myself. On the honest accounting the second one was the bigger inheritance. It just doesn't say your name back to you.

"Uryu..." it said. "Uryu... lika?"

Chloe gasped. "It's trying to say your name!"

"So, can you talk?" I said, slow and careful, like teaching a kettle to boil. "Say, Ul-ri-ka."

"Uryu-lika!"

"He's so cute," Chloe said, and that was the first true thing anybody'd said all night.

"All right." I held him up to the lamplight. Grey and fluffy, little dark horns, ribbon wings folded wet against his back. "That's it. Your name is Uryu."

Tony showed up while we were still deciding whether to feed him or fan him. He took one look at the bench and said, "How strange. So about the exam."

"Mr. Tony," Chloe said. "Can't you act more surprised?"

"Come on," I said. "He kept saying it wasn't real all year. He's just living in denial."

"Shut up. About the exam. Straight up, what did you put in?"

"Nothing really special." I shrugged. "Is it bad? We got caught up in the moment. I wasn't really paying attention."

He tasted the brew. Tony, who in a year of teaching had never shown a single feeling, closed his eyes and said, "Well, quality is pretty average. But there's a weird healing effect in it. Like a calming effect."

"Maybe it was my calming aura," Pepperoni said.

"That word sounds so wrong coming out of Mr. Tony's mouth," I said. "And Pepperoni's."

"Are you guys even listening? It's interesting, but I can't give you a great grade."

I want to stop on that line, because it's where my trade actually started and it's dressed up as a bad mark.

Average quality. Weird healing effect. Calming.

Nothing in Tony's method makes a brew calming. The fruit softens, the grape heals, the water carries. Calm came from the thing that fell in the pot. Which means the thing that fell in the pot had an effect. Which means it was an ingredient. Which means it was mine to learn.

That is the whole ladder, and I was standing on the first rung of it with blisters on my hands and a C in my pocket.

"Crap." I could feel the punishment forming. "So does that mean we're gonna be punished?"

"Well, normally." Tony sighed. "But I'll let it slide this time. There are too many students to punish this time anyway."

"Good." Pepperoni sagged with relief. "I didn't want to get punished."

"But I kind of wanted to watch it happen," Chloe said.

"You can come watch if you want." Tony's smile went thin. "Watch carefully, and see what you'll get for getting a bad grade."

"Well, let's go. It's about time Flay gathered all the students."

"You have such twisted tastes." I scooped Uryu behind me. "I can't let my baby see that!"

And that was the first thing my mana ever did in this world. Not the hatching, not the burning, not even his name. The first thing Uryu ever touched was that brew, and his touch made it calm. Ten years he'd been waiting in a stone, and the first gift he gave was a potion that settled a man down.

Before any of that, though, there was an hour nobody else was awake for.

The others went off to watch whoever was getting punished. I said I'd catch up and then didn't. I sat on the workshop step with Uryu in the crook of my arm and my burned hands held stupidly out to the sides, and the sky over the academy went from black to the colour of dishwater to the colour of a peach.

He was heavier than he looked and lighter than he had any business being. His wings were still wet, stuck flat to his back like ribbon pulled out of a river, and every so often one would twitch and he'd startle himself. He kept doing a thing where he pushed his head under my chin and then pulled back out to check I was still there. Over and over. Like a man patting his pocket for keys he knows are in it.

"Uryu," I told him.

"Uryu-lika."

"Close enough. That's never getting fixed, is it."

It wasn't. He said my name wrong for the rest of my life and I never corrected him again after that morning.

I'd had a speech ready for this. Ten years is plenty of time to write a speech. Something about being famous. About the best workshop in the world. About every single person who ever laughed at the girl with a rock under her pillow. I'd said it to the ceiling more times than I'll admit in print.

I didn't use a word of it. What came out was, "I don't know what I'm doing with you."

He went back to sleep on that. Full trust, immediately, on the worst evidence anybody's ever been given.

And that was where the vow quit being about famous. No lightning, and I want to be plain about it, because people expect lightning and I've stopped pretending for them. It was just the

weight of the thing in my arms changing what it meant. Somebody had to get good enough at this to deserve what had walked into it. Nobody was going to hand me that. I'd have to build it, badly at first, in public, out of failed batches and burned hands.

Word got around before the sun did. By morning, Ms. Fancypants herself had drifted over.

"Oh, you're right," she said, admiring the little thing from a safe, elegant distance. "A baby should grow up looking up to someone fancy like me."

"You stay away from Uryu." I stood in front of him with my arms crossed. "Don't get in his sight if possible."

"That's horrible," Chloe agreed.

"Okay, no." I scooped him up. "Don't look at him. We're going back to the workshop now."

"Hey, miss." Pepperoni clutched his chest. "That was painful. My sensitive heart has been hurt."

"I didn't think a mana would really come out," Chloe said, walking beside me, and her voice had a wobble in it, like the calm hadn't reached her. "Oh boy. I hope nothing bad is gonna happen."

"Yup." I held him up so the morning hit him, ten years of waiting with the light on his face. "See? This is my mana."

And that's the honest truth of the first thing my workshop ever made. The cauldron's first order wasn't a customer. It was family.

The first customer came later. That's a different chapter.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Five Members or None

Somewhere with no sun, two old voices argued.

"This is going nowhere," said the light one, whose voice had an edge to it.

"Of course not. Have we ever agreed on anything before?" said the dark one, warm even now.

"True. I don't remember that ever happening, either," the light one admitted.

"Then that's it. I'll do whatever I please," Light Mana King said.

"No, you won't. That's why I'm here to negotiate," said the dark one.

"What about a bet?" said the dark one.

"A bet?" said the light one.

"Yes. It'll take a long while, but..." said the dark one.

The academy heard none of it. Neither did I. Not yet.

* * *

The trouble started with fruit.

"Now say it," I said.

Uryu's mouth worked at the word, small and serious.

"Oh, almost. But I'll let you go, 'cause you're cute," Pepperoni said.

"Hey, do you want some fruit?" I said. "I'll go get it."

Oranges, then. Uryu took one look at the orange and his little face lit up like I'd offered him the moon. He couldn't hardly chew yet, so I peeled it for him, section by section, sitting on the low

wall outside the workshop with the sun on us both. That was the moment, I think. That was when the whole school decided to have opinions about us.

From across the yard, Pepperoni watched with his whole hulking body. Chloe watched with no body language at all.

"Whoa, she's spoiling it to the max," Pepperoni said.

"It's sickening to watch. It makes me want to vomit," Chloe said.

"Chloe, you are so straightforward," Pepperoni said.

"I was actually sugarcoating that. How about you?" Chloe said.

"Well, you know those people who talk about how cute their pet is, and they love it so much they're practically obsessed?" Pepperoni said. "I'm feeling the same kind of hatred towards Ulrika as I would towards those kinds of people."

"You're pretty unforgiving," Chloe said.

"That's not true. I'm sure eighty percent of the people in the world would agree with me," Pepperoni said.

"And where are you getting this confidence from?" Chloe said.

"Anyway," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni cracked his neck. "We better make her realize it."

"Yo, Miss!" Pepperoni said.

I fed Uryu another section. "What? I'm playing with Uryu right now, so don't bother me."

"Stop playing with that thing and play with me!" Pepperoni said.

"No. You're annoying. Go away," I said.

"Whoa. That's colder than I expected," Pepperoni said. He flexed, just in case I'd missed the goods. "So why not? No matter how biased you are, I'm so much cuter."

"Okay, then go play with Chloe," I said.

"I don't like her. She carries a very dark aura," Pepperoni said.

"I can hear you," Chloe said, without looking up from her book. "So I'm getting turned down by a muscle ball? Whoa. I'm getting dissed left and right."

Pepperoni stood up and pointed one big fist at Uryu, who was asleep in my lap. "Damn it! Since you've been here, this workshop has been out of order. You made the girls go crazy. If only you weren't here..."

I was on my feet before he finished, and the crate went over with a bang.

"You do anything to him, and I'll kick you out of your own life," I said.

"Whoa," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni put his hands up. "She's serious."

"They were all over me just a while ago," he muttered, backing toward the door.

"You can't compare that mana to a creepy muscle-bound cosplayer," Chloe said, and turned a page.

"And again, this place is so noisy..," Chloe said.

The door opened and it wasn't Pepperoni's pride walking in. It was the chairwoman and the principal, and the room went still like a pond when somebody big steps in.

"Hello. Excuse us for a moment," the principal said.

The chairwoman went straight past me, straight past Chloe, straight to the bench where Uryu sat blinking awake. Her name was Marta, and she moved like the school was her house and we were borrowing the chairs.

"That's your mana?" Marta asked. She picked him up. "Let me take a look."

"Hey!" I said. I was already moving. "Be careful!"

She turned him over in her hands like checking fruit at a stall, and Uryu made a small worried sound. "Is this really a mana? Are you sure it's not a baby monster?"

"He's a mana! Give him back to me!" I said.

"Whatever," Marta said. She set him down without ceremony. "It's not like you're going to become a great alchemist with your grades."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Now, let's all calm down here," the principal said, in the voice of a man who'd spent his whole life not calming anybody down. "I'm sure she didn't mean anything. Or if she did, she did it calmly."

"Anyway," Marta said. Marta dusted her hands. "Are there only two of you in this workshop?"

"It's not just the two of them," Pepperoni said, puffing up. "There's three of us, including me."

"Well, the school rules call for at least five members for each workshop." She looked right at me when she said it. "If you can't get enough people, then just get out."

"Now, now, you don't have to be so harsh, Chairwoman," Zeppel said.

"What was all that about?" I said, once they'd gone. "She came out of nowhere and dissed us."

The principal, still standing in the doorway, looked sorry for all of us, himself included. "Yes, I'm sorry. It looks like she's in a bad mood."

"Could it be menopause?" Pepperoni said.

"I can hear you, Mr. Principal!" came from the hall.

"That was just a joke," the principal said to the empty air, then to us: "That kind of attitude will not do you well in the long run."

"I know," I said. I crossed my arms. "I know it very well."

"I think that took about ten years off my life," Zeppel said. He was almost out the door. "Oh, and..."

"So did you guys just come here for that?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. Like I said, that was half from being in a bad mood." Marta's voice floated back down the hall, not sorry at all. "But you should really consider getting more than just two people here. Otherwise this place really will be taken away from you."

"I said three."

"What? Well. Anyway, that's all," Zeppel said.

The door shut, and the three of us stood in the quiet with the count hanging over us.

"What is up with those people?" Pepperoni said. "Could they not see me because I'm so tiny and cute?"

"They were totally ignoring your existence," Chloe said.

"I guess that's what we should have done," I said. I picked Uryu up and he grabbed at my hair. "But what do we do about getting more members?"

"I don't know," Chloe said. "I don't have any friends."

"Well, I'm sure everything will work out eventually," Pepperoni said, which was the most useless sentence ever spoken in that workshop, and he said it with his chest out.

"It's not going to be that easy," I said. "We still need, like, three more people."

"Two more," Pepperoni said. "Two more people."

"We might have to count Enna in if we can't get enough," I said.

"Nice," Chloe said, turning a page.

That's when the noise started. Outside, feet, a crash, somebody yelling.

"It's noisy," I said. "I wonder if someone is fighting."

I was halfway to the door when it burst open and a boy tumbled through it, all dark hair and panic, and slammed it shut behind him with his back.

"Shut up!" he hissed at us. "Let me hide here for a while!"

"Hey, Enna, where are you?" came a girl's voice from outside, getting closer. "Enna!"

"Gotcha! I knew it! I found you, Enna!" Et said. The door flew open again and his sister stood there, hands on her hips.

"How did you smell me? Are you really human?" Enna said.

"Hey," I said. "Don't make a mess in our workshop." Then I actually looked at the girl. "Wait, aren't you Jerktown's friend?"

"Oh, Ulrika. Right. Hello," she said.

"Oh, hello," I said. "I mean, what are you doing here?"

"I was chasing my brother," Et said. She pointed at Enna like that explained everything.

"Why are you always running away from me?" Et shot back, and he groaned.

"You guys not get along?" Chloe asked.

"Oh, we do! Everyone thinks we're best friends!" Et said.

"You're the only one who thinks that. Stop being delusional!" Enna said.

"Don't use big words like that!" Et said.

"Anyway," Et said. His sister grabbed his sleeve. "Come to our workshop."

"No way! Never! Over my dead body!" Enna said.

"Jeez, you're so shy," his sister said.

"You don't have to be so embarrassed," his sister went on.

"I'm not embarrassed," Enna said.

"All right, I can't anyway." Enna pulled loose and stood up straight, and for one second he looked like a boy about to say something true. "I'm actually in these people's workshop already."

"What?" Et asked. His sister blinked at us. "When?"

"Um. Just a little while ago," I said.

"Just let it go, okay." She sighed, and then she did something with her face I didn't expect. "All right, I guess."

"So you're really gonna give up that easily?" Enna said.

"He might cause trouble, but please take care of my brother," Et said. And to him: "You can come to me whenever you feel lonely."

"Dummy. Why would I do that?" Enna asked.

"Um, Enna?" Chloe said. "Don't you like your sister?"

"Okay, you see," Enna said, "I came all the way to this school to get away from her. It's a long story. Anyway, sorry for the trouble."

The door clicked shut behind her, and the workshop was ours again, all four of us. I was already doing the math.

"Pepperoni," I said.

"You bet," Pepperoni said. He stepped out from behind the bench, all three feet of him, like a man entering a tournament.

"Whoa, who are you?" Enna asked. Enna had finally noticed him. "Dressed all weird. You're in my way. Move."

"Where are you going, my brother?" Pepperoni said. "Aren't you a member of this workshop?"

"Don't call me that! That was just to trick my stupid sis," Enna said.

"I didn't think it would be that easy," Pepperoni said, disappointed.

"I never thought... yeah, right." Enna was already at the door, and he looked back just long enough to make sure it stung. "I would never join a workshop with some creep like this."

"Nice to meet you, brother," Pepperoni said.

"Get away from me! This is all because of my stupid sis!" Enna said.

And he was gone. The count went back down to three, same as before, except now the whole school had watched a boy refuse us out loud.

Later, outside the classroom, a puni wobbled up to me. It was round and pink and had the face of a thing that wanted directions. I stared at it.

"Whoa, huh?" I said. "What is that? It looks like a puni."

"A puni," Chloe said, coming up behind me. "Don't you know what that is? A type of monster."

"Oh, they can look very scary." She considered the wobbling thing. "They're said to be weaker than stray cats."

"It's coming this way," I said.

"You should ask someone else," Chloe said to the puni, which wobbled a reply.

"He was pretty gentlemanly," Chloe reported.

"Gentlemanly? Was he really saying something?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. But that thing was just going..," Chloe said.

"What did you just say?" I asked.

"Huh? What am I wrong?" Chloe asked.

"I see," a voice said. A voice from nowhere. "You must be a sufferer of congenital puni aphasic disorder."

I about jumped out of my boots. It was a boy in some kind of eastern getup, standing there like he'd been there all day. "Ew, when did you get here?"

"Don't come to class, Goto," Chloe said. "People will start looking at us funny."

"Oh, don't say that. I sensed your danger, so I came to help."

"So what the hell is that puni-something disorder thing?" I asked.

"It's a disorder you were born with," Goto said, "in which you can't understand punis. It's common among unintelligent people."

"I see. Well, that's too bad," I said. Then I heard myself. "Why are you so convinced?"

"Oh, come on. It's not like you have to understand punis to live. You just won't be able to get puni-related jobs," Chloe said.

"I feel like such a loser," I said.

"There aren't really any puni-related jobs anyway," Chloe said.

And that was the day we learned the chairwoman meant it. Five members or none, and the school wasn't going to wait forever. We needed two people. One of them had just slammed our door and called Pepperoni a creep. The other was standing in front of me explaining why I'm too stupid to understand puffballs.

This workshop was in trouble.



CHAPTER NINE

The Fifth

Four of us, and the rule said five. I'd counted on my fingers twice, so it wasn't a math problem. It was a person problem. The fourth member, a boy named Enna, had told the whole school he'd never join a workshop with a creep like ours in it, and then kept not leaving.

"Wait," I said. The thought bit me right in the middle of the afternoon. "I totally forgot about one thing."

"Huh? What?" Pepperoni said.

"Don't we still need one more person?" I asked.

Chloe turned a page without looking up. "Oh, that's right."

"Well, I'm sure everything worked out," I said.

"You really need to live more seriously," Chloe said.

"I wouldn't mind if this workshop disappeared," Enna said, from his crate by the door.

"You don't need to worry about that," Pepperoni said, in the voice of a fairy who had already made plans.

"Oh?" I said. "Do you have an idea?"

"Yep," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni leaned out the window, chest puffed. "My friend is coming to visit me soon. And I figured he could join our workshop."

"Your friend? So is he like you too?" I said.

"Well, he is a close competitor to me when it comes to cuteness," Pepperoni said.

"So that person will make it five." I liked the sound of it the second I said it. "Problem solved."

"Why is she so accepting of this situation?" Enna said.

"She can only see Uryu right now," Chloe said.

"Uryu-lika," Uryu agreed, from my shoulder, in the tone of a creature who has understood everything and commented on none of it.

"I seriously want to quit this workshop," Enna said.

"I won't let you escape alone," Chloe said, not looking up from her book.

"So. What should we do today?" I said.

"Hey, wait," I said. I spotted movement at the edge of the yard. "Oh, Mr. Tony. What is it?"

Mr. Tony stood there with a face like he'd been sent by a committee.

"Have you been paying attention at all in class?" Tony asked.

"Of course. Why do you ask?" I asked.

"Your grades are horrible. You might be put on academic probation. And then I'll get blamed for it. Do you understand that?" Tony asked.

"Sure I do. Isn't the final coming up soon? I'll do good on that," I said.

"Huh? You mean tomorrow, right?" Mr. Tony said.

"But if you say so, I'll be counting on you," Tony said. He pointed at me, turned, and walked off. "You better not disappoint me, or..."

"He looked pretty mad," Enna said, from his crate.

"I wonder if I'll make it if I start studying now," I said.

"Miss is in danger!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni cracked his knuckles, all four of them. "I need to do something for her."

"What are you thinking of doing?" Chloe asked.

"First, I'll tie that teacher up and beat him until he loses his memory," I said.

"That's not a very smart thing to do," Chloe said.

"Then what else?" I asked.

What else had a name, and the name arrived that afternoon rolling down the lane.

"Hey, you! You're finally here!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni waved at a red ball bouncing toward our workshop.

"It's been a while, huh?" said the ball, in a voice like warm syrup. "Should I call you Pepperoni?"

"Or you can call me, Pekkyun, to be more friendly," Pepperoni said.

"I think I'll stick with Pepperoni anyway," said the ball.

"You've changed a lot," said the ball.

"True. The last time we saw each other was before I became a fairy," Pepperoni said.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well as a fairy. The looks, and the way you talk... you're making me blush," said the ball.

"So, is that young lady the reason you called me?"

"Yep. I'm working for her right now," Pepperoni said.

"Hmm," Goto said. The ball gave me a long, appraising roll. "Well, she's still young, but I bet in two or three years she'll grow up to be a beautiful lady."

"Hey, don't try to get with her!" Pepperoni said.

"I'm not gonna initiate anything, unless, uh..," Goto said. A smug little bounce. "Of course, she's interested."

"Ugh," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni waved a hand. "It could happen. You're handsome and dandy."

I decided to be insulted later, and mostly I just wanted to know how a ball smirks, because this one was doing it.

"Well, let's worry about that later," Pepperoni said. "We need to do something about the current problem. Are you gonna help me?"

"Of course. I need to make sure there won't be any bloodshed," Goto said.

"Anyway, the details are..," Goto said.

"Anyway," said a voice behind us, and we all froze, "I need to put together their grades before the finals. What a pain."

Mr. Tony, walking past with a stack of papers, complaining to the sky. He didn't even look at us.

And that is how we ended up behind the hedge with a potion.

It was Pepperoni's friend's potion, a small corked bottle the color of sunset, and the friend was there in the hedge with us, round and red and somehow smug.

"Just relax," I told the back of Mr. Tony's head. "Stay calm, and we won't hurt you."

"Let's see," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni cracked his knuckles. "First, I'll punch them and knock them out."

"No, Pepperoni," Goto said. The ball rolled forward. "We need to do this the smart way."

"Hey, you just told him my name!"

"Oops, my bad," Goto said. A shrug, which for a ball is the whole body. "Oh, but don't worry. They'll forget it anyway. I won't do anything painful. Just sniff this potion."

The little bottle emptied under Mr. Tony's nose, and the ball's voice went soft as a lullaby.

"There you go. You're coming down now," Goto said.

Mr. Tony blinked at the sky and smiled like a man who had just remembered his childhood dog.

I did not sleep that night. The final started today, and I'd ended up playing with Uryu all evening instead of studying, escaping from reality. First of all, it's impossible to catch up on everything in one day. I didn't have a choice, I told myself. Then Uryu squeaked, and I told myself the other thing.

"Stop making those comments," I said. "But you keep making excuses before you even try. Honestly, it's annoying."

He squeaked again, softer.

"I mean, you're right. I have to at least try. Even if I might fail," I said.

"Uryu-lika," he said, and fell asleep on my notes.

The classroom smelled like chalk and, somehow, like victory. Mr. Tony stood at the front with a smile so wide it looked stapled on.

"Oh, good morning, my darling students! It's such a great day today," Tony said.

"Huh? What?" Chloe said.

"Seems so down," Tony said. Tony tilted his head at us. "Oh, I see. I bet you're nervous about the exam. But don't you worry, I believe in you guys."

"What's wrong with him?" Enna whispered. "He's being creepy."

"Maybe he ate some bad... something bad," I said.

"Huh, that's kind of true," Pepperoni said, and I kicked his ankle under the desk.

It was a very strange potion. Anyway, it seemed to work pretty well.

"That should last about two weeks," Goto murmured from somewhere near my feet, where he was pretending to be a cushion. "I was keeping it to use on a girl who might be hard to get, but, uh..."

"You're always undermining the law," Pepperoni said.

"First!" Mr. Tony clapped his hands, and the room snapped to attention. "Let me announce the top student of the class before the exams. The current top grade holder is... Miss Ulrika! Congratulations! Ah, let's have a round of applause."

I sat there while the class clapped like they'd been told to, which they had. Across the room, Lily stood up so fast her chair scraped.

"What? What is this?" She looked at me the way you look at a rat that won a contest. "I lost to that country bumpkin? Miss Lily is the worst! You have to try hard for this exam!"

"Were you going to get put on academic probation?" Tony said, still beaming.

"You know what?" Lily said. "What kind of grading standard are you using? Miss Lily on probation? How am I supposed to explain that to the master?"

"Don't take it seriously. This must be a mistake," Mr. Tony said.

"What kind of cheating technique did you use?" Lily asked. Lily pointed at me across two rows.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

"Now, now, don't fight," Tony said. Tony spread his hands. "I'm about to announce the details of the exam."

The details of the exam were these: we needed a puni ball.

"This is perfect," Pepperoni said, afterward, to the cushion. "Now let's get back to the workshop. I need to introduce you to my friends."

"Hmm. Can we put that off a little bit?" Goto asked.

"Huh? Why?" I asked.

"I'm still waiting for my new body. I can't show myself to the ladies like this," Goto said.

"Oh, you are so high maintenance when it comes to girls," Pepperoni said.

"Uh, I'm just high class, that's all. Anyway, I'll see you later," Goto said.

That night, Chloe stood over me with a stack of notes and her arms crossed.

"So, about the finals. Why do I have to help you with your exam?" Goto asked.

"I need you to keep me sane," I said.

"True. It must be hard for you," Goto said.

"I was thinking, I have the highest grade, so I don't really have to try hard, right?" Chloe asked.

"Yes, you do, Miss," Pepperoni said.

"That potion only lasts for two weeks," said the red ball, rolling out from under the table.

"Potion!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni clapped a hand over his own mouth. "Two weeks! Oops, that was supposed to be a secret."

"Sounds like you're hiding something," Chloe said.

"Ah, please! I'm not hiding anything!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni flailed. "But, you know, you should take it seriously anyway, and make me proud."

"What do you say?" Goto asked. The ball turned to me.

"I don't care about making you proud!" I said.

"But if you say so," Goto said. A bounce. "Great! That's my girl."

"Students are supposed to take exams seriously." Chloe looked me up and down. "I'm kind of impressed by how cocky she is."

"Enough about that," I said. I grabbed my bag. "So, I need a puni ball."

"What the hell is a puni ball?" Enna said.

"Well, it sounds like a part of a puni or something," Chloe said.

"There's a girl in our class who rides a puni," I said. "Should we get her?"

"Well, that sounds too much like..." Chloe said.

"Hmm," I said. "Let's try to negotiate peacefully with her first. She might let us have it."

"You're right," Chloe said. Chloe cracked her knuckles once, which for Chloe is a war cry. "But if she doesn't, then I'll be the bad guy."

"I mean, one puni would be nothing before me," Pepperoni said.

"Don't say that," Chloe said. Chloe gave him a long look. "You don't sound like you're joking."

We found her in the yard, a girl with a puni, and the puni saw us coming and started talking, and every word of it was weather to me.

"Funny phony pony pony," the puni said, or that was what it sounded like to me.

"Crap," I said. I stopped short. "I don't know what they're saying."

"That's right. Then you can just stay back," Chloe said. Chloe stepped past me. "You're only gonna get in the way."

"This is degrading. Just because I don't understand them," I said.

"Cheer up," Uryu seemed to say, in the way only I could hear. "You can talk to me instead."

The girl's name was Puniyo. She listened to Chloe, then tilted her head.

"I see. So basically, you just want a puni ball." She looked at her puni. "What is a puni ball, anyway?"

There are two kinds of puni balls that humans talk about, her puni explained, through Chloe. One is the tears of a puni. Sounds kind of poetic. The other kind is the fresh liver of a living puni. This is the most common one.

"Fresh liver sounds great," Pepperoni said.

"You have a weird sense too." Chloe sighed. "Anyway, we can't take his liver."

"Well, one or two livers won't kill us," the puni said, through Chloe, "but it'll hurt a lot."

"Enna has been very kind to my puni," Puniyo said. "So if you'd like, take one of mine."

"How do we take it out?" Pepperoni asked. Pepperoni leaned in. "Stick our hands in your mouth, or..."

"Hold it," said a voice we knew.

"I thought something was going on," Ms. Fancypants said. "Don't give them your puni ball."

We all turned. Ms. Fancypants stood at the edge of the yard with her maid, and she looked at Puniyo the way she'd looked at me, like losing was a smell we carried.

"Huh? Why not?" Puniyo said.

"For whatever reason, she has a better grade than I do. I can't have her do well in this exam," Lily said. A sniff. "Complete jealousy. How unsightly."

"Shut up! Yoon! Take these two away!" Lily said. She flicked her hair.

"Understood," Yun said.

"Please don't be violent!" I started forward. "Hey, hold on!"

The maid stepped into my path, fast, and strong, and not in a mood to negotiate either. She took Puniyo and the puni both, one under each arm like groceries.

"If you want to start, I won't go easy on you, young man," she said, to Pepperoni.

"I will not let you have that puni ball!" Pepperoni said, which made him so mad he forgot to be scared.

"Miss Lily, you're completely the villain here," I said. "It suits you well, though."

"Be quiet!" she snapped. "Now let's go." And they were gone.

"They took her away," Chloe said. Chloe stared after them. "What do we do?"

"Of course we're gonna go after them," I said.

"You're more worried about Puniyo, aren't you?" Chloe said.

"Don't be stupid. Don't just assume that," I said.

"Okay, okay," Chloe said.

"It's not funny," Enna said. Enna threw his hands up. "I feel like I'm being completely forgotten about. Just like an extra."

"Main character?" I said. "No way."

"Hey, don't leave me here!" Enna said.

"Did they really come this way?" I said.

"Yeah. There's still puni moisture on the ground," Chloe said. "Let's go."

We followed the puni moisture, which is a sentence I hope to never say again, and the woods threw punis at us twice. Wild ones, feral and round. We fought. We won. And when the second one dissolved, something small and bright rolled out of it and stopped at my boot.

"Hmm," Chloe said. Chloe picked it up. "So this is a puni ball."

"Now let's go back and work on the exam," I said.

"Can we go now?" Enna said.

"No," I said. I pointed up the trail. "First, her."

We caught up to them in a clearing. Puniyo sat on a stump looking less scared than annoyed, her puni in her lap, and Lily's maid stood beside her like a polite wall.

"My apologies," Lily's maid said. The maid bowed. "Please bear with Miss Lily's selfishness for just a little longer."

"Whose selfishness?" Lily asked. Lily stepped out from behind a tree. "This is a grand scheme!"

"You lost once, so now you're freaking out," the maid said.

"You always say one phrase too many!" Lily said.

"Ouch," the maid said.

"Well," Lily said. Lily turned, and something shifted at the edge of the trees, black on black. "I'll leave this place to you."

"Understood," said the man in black.

Lily left with the maid, Puniyo, and the puni, and the man in black stayed, and he was alone.

"He's alone." Enna said it like a kid counting treasure. "This is our chance. So we're going to gang up on him?"

"Don't say it like that," I said.

"Don't worry," Yun said. The man in black turned around slow, like he'd been waiting for us to finish the sentence. "Four still isn't enough."

"Oh no," Chloe said. Chloe took a step back. "When did you..."

"You should be more quiet when you're discussing secrets. Anyway, this is an order for my owner. So don't take it personally," Yun said.

"Wait, we're not ready for this!" I said.

He was already on us. And I want to tell you we held our own, but the man in black fought like the exams, like everything in that first week, and four of us wasn't enough. He was right. He'd said so.

"Don't you think it's unfair to start attacking like this?" I said, from the ground.

"You are the ones who were planning to gang up on me," Yun said.

"Uh oh. This might be dangerous," Yun said. He was smiling down at us, taking his time. "You look like you're still taking it easy. What are you scheming about?"

"Nothing. I'm not like that." I looked up at the sky, which is what you do when you're losing and want it to stop. "But I was thinking, maybe a hero would come save us or something."

"Ah! A hero! Me! I'm a.," Pepperoni said.

We all looked. Rolling out of the brush at full speed, red and round and somehow smug, came Pepperoni's friend.

"The hell are you?" I said. "A talking ball?"

"Oh, come on, you should have gotten that. I even gave you a perfect setup," Goto said.

"Well, he gets the credit for having great reflexes," Pepperoni said.

"Do you guys know each other?" I asked.

"Yep. We've been best friends for decades," Goto said. The ball bounced once, for emphasis. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Goto. People call me the Wandering Love Hunter."

"Love hunter? You're just a red ball," I said.

"This is my disguise. Sometimes I'm a red ball, and sometimes I'm a crimson ball," Goto said.

"That's the same thing," I said.

"And my real form is..," Goto said. The ball began to glow, and the glow got bigger, and the voice got deeper. "Come, my body! A beautiful white beast, Goto is my name!"

What came out of the light was not a ball. It was white, and it had teeth, and it stood between us and the man in black like it had been born for exactly this minute.

"Oh, that's so cool!" Enna said.

"Stunned?" Goto asked. Goto struck a pose. "Oh man, I love the attention."

"It'll be a long relationship," Goto said. He turned to me and, I swear, winked. "Young lady."

"What? Long relationship?" I asked.

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's a favor for Pepperoni. He and I would make an invincible couple. Our workshop will soon rule the world," Goto said.

"Can I really quit this workshop now?" Enna said.

"Don't you dare go alone," Chloe said.

"Are you done with your chit chat now?" Yun asked. The man in black had drawn up to his full height.

"Oh, sorry to keep you waiting," Goto said.

"You and that man." He looked Goto over, then Pepperoni. "Are you guys trying to hide your power with your stupid appearance?"

"Hide? No way. I'm just in the form which I think is most beautiful, and the cutest, for me," Goto said.

"You are strange. Whatever. Just one more wouldn't hurt," Yun said.

"I'm kind of over this," I said.

"Honestly, this ruined everything," Goto said.

"I know where you're coming from. But let's just try it," I said.

"Pepperoni, let's get our combination play going!" I said.

"I'm ready anytime," Pepperoni said.

I won't describe the fight. You've seen fights. But I will tell you that a white beast and a fairy who used to be something else can do a combination attack that looks like a wedding and ends like a landslide, and the man in black, who'd said four wasn't enough, found out what five was.

"It's over," he said, on one knee.

"I guess that was too much to handle," Goto said.

"Ah, you're pretty good," Yun said. The man in black stood, slow. "If it was one-on-one, it would have been different."

"I guess my cuteness deceived you," Goto said.

"I don't know about your cuteness, but I admit I did underestimate you." He looked at each of us like he was memorizing us for later. "But it won't be the same next time."

"He was serious till the end," Chloe said, when he was gone.

"Yeah. I kind of feel bad for him," I said.

"I'm exhausted," Goto said. Goto was a ball again, small and round. "Oh well. Let me go save the puni now."

"Then we should head back to the workshop," I said.

"I need to have a talk with the young lady," Goto said. Goto rolled into my path, somehow blocking it completely for a ball.

"What? I don't have anything to talk to you about," I said.

"I'll work on our final, so you can take your time," Chloe said.

"Then let's hurry back," I said.

"Let's go talk about each other here," Goto said.

"What? No! Let go!" I said.

"Huh? Where did she go?" Pepperoni said, to the empty trail.

"She's being sacrificed," Chloe said.

"Chloe! You remember this!" I said.

And then, somehow, it was evening at the workshop, and Chloe was waiting at the door.

"I'm back," Chloe said. She held up a slip of paper. "I turned in our exam."

"Oh, nice. How's it over here?" Goto said.

"Just a little more to go," I said.

"Yeah, so it's not like we need more help," Goto said. Goto rolled to the middle of the room and turned a slow circle, taking in the place. "But we're gonna have this place taken away if we don't have five people."

"Are you just trying not to bother me?" I said.

"Oh, you're so modest. I like you even more," Goto said.

"No, I mean, I was looking for a more normal person," Pepperoni said.

"Haha! That's great," Goto said. Goto rolled forward, which for him is a bow. "You won't find anyone more normal than me out there."

"Miss, you're kind of abnormal," Pepperoni said. "So he will help keep you straight."

"Oh, okay. So I'm the abnormal one, compared to you guys," Pepperoni said.

"I guess only time will tell," Goto said.

And that was that. The fifth member was a white beast in the shape of a red ball who called himself the Wandering Love Hunter and kept a potion in his back pocket for girls who were hard to get. The chairwoman's rule was met.

"We're just a bunch of weirdos," I said, later, with my feet up on the bench and Uryu asleep in Chloe's lap.

"I'm sure we'll get used to it fast," Chloe said.

"Uryu-lika," Uryu said, without waking up, and it sounded like he agreed with everybody.



CHAPTER TEN

The Lady in Black

Break came, and the academy went quiet the way a pot does when you lift it off the flame. I liked it for half a day, then I missed the noise.

Somewhere with no sun, the two old kings found each other again. The dark one and the light one, and only one of them had ever had a warm word for the other.

"It's been a while," said the dark one, warm as an old stove. "It looks like the mana is finally born."

The light one said nothing. His face did the talking, and it was bitter.

"Oh? What's with the bitter look?" Dark Mana King asked.

"This is my normal look. If you're just here to brag, then go back," Light Mana King said.

"I will. I just came to see your angry face."

"Have a nice day," the dark one called, already going, and he meant it, which is the part that stings.

"What an unpleasant mana, as usual," said the light one, to the dark one's back.

The academy heard none of it. Neither did I. Not yet.

Uryu chirped from my shoulder. Every book says a human can't raise a mana. Every teacher says it too. But the books never met Uryu. So I should make sure anyway.

That night I sat him on the windowsill and we practiced.

"Good morning," I said, slow. "Goo-oood mor-ning."

He watched my mouth like it was doing a trick.

"Now say it," I said.

And he did. It came out round and wrong and entirely him, two syllables bumping into each other like eggs in a basket. "Goo-mor."

"Okay," I said. I had to admit it. "That was pretty good."

"Now. My name. Ul-ri-ka," I said.

He tilted his head and thought about it for a whole minute. Then, very proud: "Uryu-lika."

"Not yet, huh." I laughed. "Well, you'll get it soon."

His name first, mine later. I didn't know then how much later.

* * *

The workshop was not quiet even in break, because Goto had gotten his hands on an animal suit and was holding court in it. Ears, tail, everything. He'd put himself in the one beam of sunlight like he'd arranged the sun.

"The problem," Pepperoni said, "is that she hasn't even realized how cute I am."

"It comes down to two theories," Goto said. "One: she's so used to your cuteness," he pointed at Pepperoni, who preened, "that she takes mine for granted."

"Oh! I never thought about that," Pepperoni said.

"The other... I don't know if I should say this," Goto said.

"Say it," Pepperoni said.

"That young lady might have some strange fetish," Goto said. He paused, genuinely troubled. "No, do you think it's safe for us to work under that kind of person?"

I set down the pot I was carrying. It made the sound that got their attention. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Nothing," Chloe said, not looking up from her book. "These two were just calling you a pervert."

"WHAT," I said.

"It was a mistake," Goto said. "We were just trying to understand your special taste."

"That's right," Pepperoni said. "We were just concerned for our own safety."

"What kind of a mistake is that?" I looked at Enna, who was studying the wall, and Goto, who was studying his own feet. "Oh, that's it. You're both dead."

"Don't encourage her," Enna whispered.

"I didn't mean it that way!" I said.

Enna sighed, long-suffering. "So I'm the only normal one here."

"No, I'm not," Goto said, with a look I did not trust. "I've been thinking, and I realize your mana hasn't been useful at all."

"That's not true!" I said. "See, he's so cute, and well..."

"Cuteness isn't really all that useful," Enna said.

"He's right," Pepperoni said. "That's why I'm cute and strong."

"I'm cute, pretty, and adorable," Goto put in.

"Those are all the same," Enna said.

"So what?" Chloe asked. Chloe turned a page, not looking up. "He's just a newborn."

"You were talking about earning a wealthy living once you got a mana," Goto said to me, sweet as a knife.

"I don't remember that," I said.

"You're probably not gonna be a good alchemist even after you graduate. You're just gonna keep taking care of that cute mana forever," Chloe said.

I opened my mouth and nothing came out, because somewhere under the joke it landed. Then I said it, quiet, before I could stop myself: "No. I don't want to be poor."

"Do you have something against being poor?" Chloe said, and the page stopped turning.

"She lived through hell to save up enough money to come to this school," Chloe said.

The room went still the way rooms do when a true thing gets said out loud. Goto studied his feet again, for a different reason.

"Then I must train him," I said. "Special training."

Uryu blinked on my shoulder, unaware that he was the subject of anything.

"I won't let anyone call you useless ever again. Just wait," I said. I set the pot down harder than it needed, which in an alchemy workshop is punctuation. "I'm gonna come up with a

training plan."

* * *

The training plan took me all over campus, which is how I walked in on the argument by the old well.

A woman in black, head to toe, stood over a boy I knew. Sharp-faced, always in a hurry, and I'd earned the name I had for him fair: Jerktown.

"Don't change my name like that!" Reicher was saying.

"Who cares? Your name is hard to say. And you can call me Sally," Sasalina said.

"So what do you want, Sasalina?" Reicher asked.

"I'm kind of busy," Reicher said.

"What do you mean, what do I want? What happened to the ring? Why did you give it to someone?" Sasalina asked. Her voice went up a full ladder with each question. "I thought you were gonna give it to me. As an engagement ring."

"I don't remember promising anything like that," Reicher said.

"Who did you give it to? Was it a girl?" Sasalina asked. She pressed both hands to her chest. "You're horrible. You were just playing with my heart!"

"Yeah, sure, that's what you want to think," Reicher said.

"Why don't you at least make up an excuse?" Sasalina asked.

"An excuse?" Reicher asked. He thought about it. "Well then. I gave it to a boy."

"A boy?" Sasalina asked.

"Why are you so..." Sasalina spluttered. "My mother was right about you."

"Yep, that's absolutely correct. Bye now," Reicher said.

"Don't just walk away!" Sasalina said. She stood there after he did, black from hat to boots, breathing like a bellows. Then, quieter, to nobody: "Get it back from him. And I'm sure you'll change your mind eventually."

I stayed behind the corner of the dormitory until she left, because a woman who talks to nobody is having a conversation with somebody, and I didn't want it to be me. But I kept the name

she'd handed him like a gift. Sally.

It would have been smarter to keep my eyes on her. I know that now. At the time I only thought: she dresses like a funeral, and she'd do anything for that jerk. Two things that were going to matter later, and I filed them under neither.

* * *

Back at the workshop I called a meeting at the table. Everyone came, which should have told me something about how boring the break was.

"I need ideas," I said. "Training ideas. For him." Uryu sat on the table in front of me, a gray puff with wings, blinking around the circle like it was his birthday. "I don't have any. So I thought about getting your advice."

"Where's Enna?" Pepperoni said.

"He said he's busy with something else," Goto said. "Plus, he wouldn't want to show up on his day off."

"What a slacker," I said. "He has no motivation."

"I don't think you should talk about motivation," Enna said, from the crate by the door, where he had been the whole time.

"I did a lot of training under my master," Goto said, warming to the subject. "I also have some experience in training."

"So what did you guys do first?" I asked.

"Prepare a pile of broken glass," Goto said. "Then lie on it and have people step all over you. If you lose your concentration for a second, you'll end up with holes in your back."

"Idea accepted," I said.

"No, that's just gonna hurt him," Enna said.

"Don't worry, I didn't get a single cut from it," Goto said, wounded.

"That's because you're in a suit," Enna said.

"So what about you, Pepperoni?" I asked.

"Let's see," Pepperoni said. Pepperoni cracked his knuckles, all four of them. "All we need is a giant rock. Tie that to his body and drop him into the middle of the lake. It's kind of like a dead or die situation."

"That's it. No way," I said.

"He died either way. Don't worry, I'm still alive," Pepperoni said. He shrugged, which is the whole body for him. "Oh, but don't try it at home."

"Then don't even bring it up!" I said.

"I knew they weren't gonna be good ideas," Enna said, from his crate.

"You're asking the wrong people in the first place," Chloe said.

"Then I guess I should just go ask the teachers," I said.

"I don't know if that's a good idea either," Goto said.

Mr. Flay appeared in the doorway at the exact moment the conversation needed a rescue, and said, "I thought I was gonna die when I got pushed under a two-hundred-foot waterfall."

"Oh, my master was mixing small amounts of poison into my food every day," Goto added, not to be outdone.

"But now I'm not a picky eater," he said.

"Enough. I'm leaving you guys," I said.

"You should have just left without saying anything," Enna said.

* * *

I took Chloe with me to the principal's office, for moral support and because she knows the building.

"Excuse us, Mr. Principal. Crap. The chairwoman," I said.

"What a greeting," the chairwoman said. "Am I troubling you about something?"

"No, you just scared me. Anyway, I wanted to talk to the principal," I said.

"Me? Oh, how great. Students rarely come to me," the principal said.

"I can see why," I said.

"Well, you shouldn't," the principal said. "So, what do you need?"

"I wanted to train him, but I can't think of a way," I said. I held up Uryu, who yawned. "Training a mana."

"Training a mana? How foolish." The chairwoman looked at me over her glasses like I'd asked her for a loan. "Shouldn't you train yourself before you train your mana?"

"She got you good, miss," Chloe whispered.

"I'm interested in seeing how she'll turn things around from here," the chairwoman went on, to the principal, like I'd left the room. "There have been many students who have slacked off during the break and got put on probation. Well, it would be better to have a student like you gone altogether."

"Shut up!" I said. "Shut up! Enough about me! I'm talking about my mana right now!"

"Whoa, she just flipped," Chloe said.

"That's the worst way to go," Zeppel murmured to nobody. "I don't mind an emotional girl, but..."

"Anyway," I said. I turned to him, all business. "Principal. Training."

"Well, I wouldn't know. See, I don't have a mana," Zeppel said.

"You don't, but you're the principal!" I said.

"Now don't get me wrong. There's a story behind it," Zeppel said.

Outside, on the steps, I stood still and let the whole thing settle. "You're in the top position here. I can't believe this. Why is he the principal?"

"Maybe he's just someone's tool," Chloe said. "He doesn't seem to have a good reputation either."

"What a waste of time, and I got insulted by the chairwoman on top of it. This sucks. Let's just go," I said.

"Wait, hold on," I said. "Right."

I turned. The chairwoman had followed us out, and there, in front of her, bowing so low his animal-suit ears nearly swept the step, was Goto.

"I'd never forgive myself if I didn't stop to talk to someone as beautiful as you," he said. "My name is Goto. It would be my honor if you would keep my name in the back of your mind."

"Mr. Goto," Chloe said faintly. "Chairwoman."

"Your face is turning girl-like," I told him, because it was.

"You really have a broad range of tastes," Chloe said.

"It's not my fault. It's because all women in this world are beautiful," Flay said.

"I don't get it," I said.

"That's because you're still a kid," Goto said. Goto straightened his ears. "Now let's hurry. We've got a teacher to see."

* * *

Mr. Tony's room was full of books, and Mr. Flay was already in it, which he explained by saying he had a lot of books on twisted ideas, which got him called twisted, which he accepted with the air of a man collecting titles.

"Training a mana, huh?" Tony asked. Mr. Tony leaned back. "So this is one of your impulsive ideas."

"It's not impulsive. I thought really long and hard," I said.

"You must have a really simple mind if Mr. Tony can read you," Mr. Flay said.

"Is that an insult towards Ulrika or me?" Mr. Tony said.

"Come on, training is a good thing," I said.

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Training always happens in the mountains. So just go there," Tony said.

"And what do I do there?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm sure you'll figure it out once you're there," Mr. Tony said.

"He's so half-assed," Mr. Flay said.

"Oh, then can you get some radishes while you're in the mountains? I need them for the class after break," Mr. Tony said.

"I'm not going there to run errands," I said.

"Who cares? Gathering is a part of training," Mr. Tony said.

"Well, I'm coming," Mr. Flay said, and I saw my quiet mountain trip folding itself into a parade.

"Man, I'm kind of over this training thing," Enna said, when I told the workshop.

"If you're quitting, then I'm going now," I said.

"It's not like I'll get in trouble for not gathering," Enna said.

"Yeah," Pepperoni said to Enna, nodding. "If Mr. Tony gets mad, just say that Ulrika told you not to do it."

"What are you telling him?" I said.

"No. This is a team responsibility. We're all going," I said.

"Fine," Enna said. Enna closed his book. "I was gonna do the training anyway."

I should have looked behind us when we left. I didn't. But if I had, I would have seen the corner of the girls' dormitory shift, and a woman in black step out of it, and she would have been smiling the smile of a person who has been waiting for exactly this. "Looks like they're going off campus," she said, to herself. "This is my chance."

* * *

The mountains behind the academy start green and get serious. By the second hour we were walking single file through trees old enough to have opinions, and Uryu had decided the trip was one long excellent game.

Mr. Flay stopped in front of a tree the size of a house and laid a hand on it, almost tender.

"It brings back memories," he said. "I used to spar against a big tree just like this."

"Yeah? You want to try it?" I said.

"It's not even shaking," I added. "Don't go too hard, or you might get hurt."

"All right then. I'll show you an example," Flay said.

He didn't wind up. He just hit it, once, open palm, and the whole tree shuddered from root to crown and something dropped out of it and hit the ground with a sound I will remember whenever anyone says the word fruit.

"Did something just fall?" Chloe said.

"It was probably a fruit or something," Mr. Flay said. "It sounded like smashing flesh."

"Can't you think of something more girly?" I said.

"He didn't just do that on purpose, did he?" Enna said.

"Uryu-lika," Uryu said, with feeling.

Then the brush at the top of the slope began to move, and it kept moving, and the movement resolved into shapes, and the shapes kept coming.

"There are so many," Pepperoni said.

"All right, this is your training. Go fight them alone," Mr. Flay said.

"Don't make him! Why don't you do it?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but even all of us wouldn't stand a chance," Flay said.

"All right," Flay said. Mr. Flay rolled his shoulders once. "I'll take care of this myself. Go hide somewhere."

So he's good for something at least, I thought, from behind the rock where I was hiding with everyone else. What a convenient guy.

He fought the horde the way the sea fights the shore, and afterward he stood at the top of the slope stretching, and when he stretched, his body made sounds.

"Did you hear that?" Enna said.

"I only heard the monster's footsteps," Pepperoni said.

"It sounded more like someone dying," Chloe said.

"Your examples are so creepy," Enna said.

"Oh, sorry to keep you waiting." Mr. Flay came down the slope. "Let's go."

* * *

We found the radish patch in a clearing with light all over it, and I found that gathering radishes is exactly as thrilling as it sounds, which Mr. Tony knew, which is probably why he'd asked.

"There's that radish," Chloe said. "What's wrong, Ulrika? You don't look too enthusiastic."

"Well, it was supposed to be training, but it ended pretty easily," I said.

"We tried to train, but you're the one who interrupted us," Mr. Flay said.

"You guys are way too extreme. Whatever, let's just start the training after we gather," I said.

"Why are you getting all fired up?" Enna said to me, because I was up to my elbows in dirt and having, I'll admit, a good time.

"Let's just do this instead of talking," Chloe said. "Especially Ulrika and Mr. Flay."

"I don't want to be compared with him," I said.

"Back at you," Mr. Flay said.

That was when Puniyo's puni came bouncing out of the trees with Puniyo on top of it, and Goto made a noise like a man watching his own crown get measured for somebody else's head.

"A girl on a puni," he said. "She might be above us on the cuteness scale. My spot as the mascot character will be..."

"Wait. I think I just thought of something incredible," Goto said. He turned to Mr. Flay, ears up. "Don't you think we would look extremely cute if I got on top of you?"

"What? But wouldn't it be better if I was on top of you?" Mr. Flay said.

"Oh, so you think you can handle riding me?" Goto asked.

"I guess there might come a day when we will have a battle to settle this," Mr. Flay said, and I believed him, and so did the trees.

"What a disappointment. I never wanted to fight you," Goto said.

"Puniyo, are you tired?" her puni said. "Let's go home."

I turned to see Puniyo already walking, her puni drooping.

"Don't try to leave like that!" Mr. Flay called after her. "Where did your motivation go, puny girl?"

"If you want to train so badly," Mr. Flay said, turning from her to me, "then why don't you do it yourself? Plus, you haven't even thought about any training ideas."

"Of course not. If I did, I would be doing it right now," I said.

"She admitted it," Enna said. "Oh boy."

"Well, why don't I teach him some martial arts?" Goto said. "You're right. Training is basically building your physique."

"That's the first normal idea you came up with," I said.

"And the two crazed jealous men will pretend to train and kill you," Enna said.

"Is that what this is all about?" I said.

"Of course not! Don't make up a story like that!" Goto said.

And that was when the woman in black walked out of the trees, and the radish I was holding fell back into the dirt, and the day stopped being a comedy.

"Finally," she said. "How dare you beat me."

"Who are you? Don't bother us," I said.

"Do you guys know her?" Chloe said.

"Nope," I said.

"I don't know her," Goto said. Goto, though, took a step toward her anyway, because he is incapable of not. "Did you fall in love with me at first sight and follow me?"

"No," Sasalina said. She considered him. "Oh, but you are pretty handsome."

"No, don't. I already have someone dear to me in my heart," Goto said.

"You understand my attractiveness," Sasalina said. She nodded once, satisfied. "You must not be a bad person."

"Wake up, me," I said, and slapped my own cheeks so the story would remember whose it was. "Don't let this good-looking guy fool you, all right."

"No. Quit your jibber-jabber and give me that mana," Sasalina said.

"Huh? Why do you demand that all of a sudden?" I asked.

"You cheated your way past me till now, but I won't lose to you face to face," Sasalina said.

"I don't think I did anything this time," I said.

"No more excuses. This is all for my love now," Sasalina said. She drew herself up, and the black seemed to pull in around her. "Brace yourselves."

"I don't get this," I said. "Let's go."

She fought like a storm in a dress, and we beat her anyway, because there were five of us and because Uryu, from my shoulder, let out a small sound I'd never heard before, and her next swing went wide of everything.

She sat down hard in the dirt, and then, to the general horror of everyone present, she started to cry.

"I lost," she said. "No. I don't want to postpone my marriage."

"What does your marriage have to do with Uryu?" I said.

"Judging from hearing what you're saying, are you going through menopause?" Chloe said.

"No, no! I'm not that old!" Sasalina said.

"Lady in black, it's not nice to make a girl cry," Goto said, gently, as if she were the victim.

"She started it! Plus she's so weak," I said.

"I'm not weak. I was just tired. I wouldn't have lost if I wasn't," Sasalina said.

"Enough," I said. "So what are we gonna do with her?"

"Why don't you cheer her up?" Chloe said to Goto.

"I would love to, but I'm not good with tears," Goto said.

"Geez, I don't really want to get too involved with her," I said.

She was on her feet then, and fast, and I found out a crying woman can close distance faster than a falling pot. "What do you want?" I said, hand up.

"Are you angry?" she said. "Those cute eyes don't scare me."

She stared at me a long moment, eyes wet and burning. Then she laughed, once, like a dropped coin.

"I'll let you go this time," she said. "But don't you forget about this."

And she was gone into the trees, and the trees swallowed the sound of her.

"Whoa, she's quick," Chloe said. "We should have heard her more if she still had that much energy."

"You're so scary," Pepperoni said to Chloe. "I don't want you as my enemy."

Chloe stared at him, then let it pass.

"Hey, that was dangerous," Chloe said. Chloe was looking at me. "But why did she come after you?"

"How would I know?" I asked.

"Let's just go back for now," Enna said. Enna picked up the dropped radish and handed it to me. "She really ruined everything."

"Ulrika, you don't really look good with a serious face," Chloe said.

"Shut up. Come on, let's go," I said.

* * *

"I wonder if that lady has something to do with your concern," Enna said, when we were back on the road and I'd been quiet long enough to be noticed.

"Who knows. Well, we should keep our eyes peeled," Chloe said.

"Then I'll protect her in her bed during the night," Goto said, indicating Chloe, who did not look protected.

"You'd be putting your own life at risk if you did that," Chloe said.

We got home after dark, and I sent everyone to their rooms and sat on my own windowsill, Uryu in my lap, going over the fight in my head the way you pick at a scab.

"I'm coming in," said a voice, and the door opened, and it was Mr. Reicher, and he was in a bad mood that pre-dated the doorway.

"You again," I said. "Well, you're in a bad mood today."

"And you should have an idea why," Reicher said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I heard that the mana was attacked by another human. Fighting over a mana. Humans love war, is that it?" He looked at me the way you look at a student who has already been told once. "Let me just say this. If you go too far, I will have to take action too."

"Oh, wait. I have a question," Reicher said.

"What?" I said.

"That mana," Reicher said. He nodded at Uryu, asleep in my lap, dreaming whatever newborn things dream. "What kind of mana is it? I'm just curious."

"What kind?" I said. "I'm not telling you."

"You didn't give it up not knowing, did you?" Reicher asked.

I didn't answer. I laughed, and I don't know why, and his face went strange for half a second before he closed the door, and the laugh followed me to bed like a question I'd asked myself.

* * *

The next morning the festival rumor found me before breakfast.

"Who was she in the end?" Chloe asked, because Chloe files things.

"What are you moaning about?" I said. "Are you constipated?"

"You should never say that to a girl," she said.

"Uh oh, that's not good. Would a puni ball help?" Goto said, appearing in the door with a radish, of all things, like a man delivering a verdict.

"No, thanks. I was just contemplating," Chloe said.

"Speaking of constipation, it's almost time for the school festival!" Goto said.

"What do those have to do with each other?" Chloe said.

"What's a school festival?" I said.

Two faces looked at me like I'd asked what a spoon was.

"It's a festival," Chloe said, slow, "at the school. The students run their own booths to present things."

"I heard there'll be a huge event too," Goto said, "but it's gonna be a secret until the day of."

"Oh, I had no idea," I said. I was already standing. "I'm getting excited now! I'm gonna go gather up some information."

And I went, and behind me I heard Goto say, "She's so simple-minded as usual. Ulrika only knows how to think about one thing at a time."

"But she cheered up," Chloe said. "I like her sad face. But a woman should always have a smile."

"I kind of liked her being quiet," Goto said.

That night Uryu sat on the windowsill and said, without being asked, "Goo-mor."

"Good morning," I said. "Soon. I promise."

He tilted his head and tried my name again, and got closer this time, close enough that I almost heard it under his own.

The festival was coming. Somewhere in the black trees, so was she.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Festival War

The war started in Mr. Tony's alchemy class, with me on the ground and Uryu floating over me looking concerned, which is his only expression.

"I'm not really up for this," I said, from the floor.

"Uh, we're going to win," Pepperoni said, which was optimistic of him.

"Okay, that's it," Mr. Tony said. Then, like a man remembering he'd left the stove on: "Oh wait. I have an announcement to make about the school festival."

"Ah, finally!" I said, and sat up.

"The festival this year has been canceled," Tony said.

"That's it? Huh? What?!" I said.

"Okay, you guys can go now," Tony said.

"Wait, why was it canceled?" I asked.

"I guess we don't have enough money. Plus, you guys should study instead of fooling around," Tony said.

"No!" I said, and sat down in the middle of the room, because standing felt like agreeing with him. "I've been looking forward to this for months!"

"Well, it's already been decided, so just give up," Tony said.

"No," I said.

"Fun, fun!" said a voice from somewhere above my head, and Mr. Flay was suddenly in the room without having used the door, which is how he always is.

"Stop being all upset already," Chloe said. "So annoying. Plus, she's in the middle of the room. She probably just wants attention."

"Sad or happy, she's in trouble either way," Pepperoni said.

"Why aren't you guys trying to cheer me up?" I said from the floor.

"This is sad," Mr. Flay said, and he was looking at me. "You're just sitting there and crying about the situation."

"He came out of nowhere again," Enna said.

"I thought you were better than this," Flay said. "I guess I was wrong."

Uryu floated down and sat on my stomach, which did not help my dignity.

"Are you going to get what you want by crying and yelling at your friends?" Flay looked down at me the way you look at a dropped egg. "No, you're not. A man should fight to get what he wants."

"Ulrika is actually a woman, biologically speaking," Chloe said.

"That's all I have to say. Sorry to interrupt," Flay said. And he was gone, the way Flay leaves a room once he's lit the fuse.

I lay there a second, then stood up so fast Uryu had to grab a fistful of my hair.

"I get it," I said. "He's right. I can just fight to get the school festival."

"Whoa, she's getting fired up," Chloe said. "She's so dumb."

"Okay, I have to go gather some people!" I said. I was already at the door. "Let's go!"

"And she's gone," Chloe said, to the room I'd left.

"That teacher is pretty passionate," Enna said, watching Mr. Flay, who had gone from pouting to plotting without any middle step.

"I feel a war coming," Goto said from somewhere, the way he says everything, like he'd written it down first. "I guess it's time to show my power."

"If you say so," Enna said. "I can't just sit back either."

"They're totally up for it too," Pepperoni said.

"It's too late for us to back out," Chloe said.

* * *

I didn't think so many people would gather.

"I guess they all wanted to have the festival," Pepperoni said, surveying the yard, which had gone from empty to festival-sized in under an hour.

"A school full of dummies," Chloe said.

"Look, everyone is waiting for you, Miss!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni pushed me forward. "Tell them something!"

"Right. Okay." I climbed onto the bench and looked at the faces looking back. "Um, first of all, I'd like to thank everyone for gathering here today. We will demand that the chairwoman open the school festival."

A murmur.

"If that doesn't work, we'll resort to violence," I said.

The murmur stopped.

"No, on second thought, let's start with that," I said.

The yard went up like a lit pot, and I stood on the bench and let it boil around me. "There will be no point if we lose, so let's keep fighting till we win!"

* * *

Somewhere above the crowd, Mr. Flay watched with his hands in his pockets, and beside him Goto watched with his arms crossed, two men admiring different fireworks.

"What great leadership," Mr. Flay said. "I don't have to worry about this side. Now I just have to think of a good ending."

"Ah, so that's why you need me," Flay said.

"Don't you think it's perfect for you?" Flay asked.

"I guess I am the only person who can handle it," Goto said, which is a sentence only Goto can say and mean it.

"Your turn isn't up till the end, so just act normal till then," Flay said.

"Is that any way to ask a favor from someone you just met yesterday?" Goto said. "All right, I'll do what you say."

* * *

"Okay," I said, back in the workshop, my knuckles on the table. "We have to think of a game plan."

"Can I butt in?" Enna said. "Someone gave me something to use."

"Something to use? What is this?" I asked.

"It's a long-distance voice receiving device. Like a radio," Goto said.

"I guess we'll be getting orders from here if something happens," Pepperoni said.

"Orders? Who did you get this from?" I asked.

"Ah, I can't reveal the name." Enna looked at the ceiling. "Let's just call that person... G."

"I think I might know who it is," Goto said.

"What a coincidence," Chloe said. "Me too."

"Whoa, it's ringing!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni was holding it like a hot bun. "Do I press here?"

And then the voice came through, low and performing, and it said: "Hello? Um, testing, testing. This is Flagonar. Do you hear me?"

"He just told us who he is," I said.

"What?!" I said.

"Huh? Mr. Flay? Oh, crap." The voice scrambled. "No, I am not Flay! I'm... well, you can call me Mr. X."

"The animal suit guy told us to call you G," I said.

"What? What a stupid name. Fine, call me G then," Flay said.

"This is so stupid," Chloe said.

"So, what do you want from us?" I said.

"I've got bad news. Some students joined the chairwoman and are acting as vigilantes to fight us. Lily and her workshop members are in the center of it," Flay said.

"Them again?!" I said. "They're always trying to get in my way!"

"Calm down. You can't win by losing control of yourself like that," Flay said.

"You're right. Then what should we do?" I asked.

"You must take action before they do. First, invade the auditorium. That place can hold a large group of people. It's a perfect place to act as our base," Flay said.

"I see," I said. I was already standing again. "Pepperoni, gather everyone! We will invade the auditorium!"

"Roger that! I will lead the team!" Pepperoni said.

The radio went quiet, and somewhere on the other end of it, G set it down and said, to no one in particular, "She's completely being manipulated. There's no one easier to manipulate than Ulrika."

Which would have bothered me if I'd heard it. I was busy winning.

* * *

The auditorium was full of students. Pepperoni pointed.

"Look, Miss! The enemies are all letting their guards down!" Pepperoni said.

"No," Chloe said. "I'm pretty sure they're completely unrelated to this."

"Don't let this chance slide!" I said. "Everyone, attack!"

"Whoa, what the hell?!" somebody yelled, from under a lunch tray.

We took the hall in under a minute. It turns out people eating lunch surrender fast.

"Well, that was that," I said.

"That was easy, of course," Chloe said.

"Everyone! We now have control of this place!" I said.

The hall cheered with its mouth full. That was the last easy thing that happened for three days.

* * *

"The vigilantes are here," Chloe said, at the doors. "I guess this isn't going to be so easy."

"Everyone, let's go!" I said.

"They're also fired up," Enna said, watching them pour in. "I don't think we fit in."

"They're pretty good. What's our current situation?" I asked.

"There have been some injuries," Chloe said. "I'll take care of the rescue team."

The fighting moved like weather. And in the middle of it, Pepperoni came dragging a squirming prisoner by the collar, proud as a cat.

"Let go! Let me go!" Et said.

"Huh? What's going on?" I asked.

"Miss, I captured one of our enemies!" Pepperoni said.

"Let go! I'm not with them!" Et said.

"I thought she sounded familiar," Enna said. "It's my stupid sis."

"Hey, Enna! Tell this guy that I'm not the bad guy! Hey, Pepperoni!" Et said.

"Are you sure I can do that, young man?" Pepperoni said, because Pepperoni processes a crisis by mishearing it.

"What are you talking about? I don't like how that sounded," Enna said.

"It's all a mistake!" Et said. "I'm here to join your team!"

"Join our team?" I asked.

"I want to have the school festival too. Believe me!" Et said.

"Pepperoni, let her go," I said.

"If you say so, man. I thought I could do that," Pepperoni said.

"Oh boy, that was scary. Thanks, Ulrika!" Et said.

"Don't worry. As long as we want the same thing, we're a team," I said.

"That was my only chance to kill my stupid sis," Enna said.

"Enna, you're pretty messed up inside," Chloe said.

"I really don't want you to say that to me," Enna said.

* * *

They went quiet after that, which should have scared me more than it did.

"They've quieted down," I said. "We need to hurry, or we won't have time to have the school festival."

"Maybe they're trying to irritate us like this," Enna said.

"I'm not done messing around yet," I said.

"Whoa, here?" Pepperoni said. "Calm down. I'm sure they don't want to do this any longer either."

"But why aren't they coming?" Chloe asked.

The answer arrived at a dead run. "Emergency! Our troops in the auditorium have been attacked by vigilantes!"

"Here they come!" I said. "Let's hurry to their rescue!"

"That time was too perfect," Chloe said, at my shoulder. "Almost like it was planned by someone."

She was right, and I found out how right at the wrong moment.

* * *

The radio crackled while we ran.

"This is just as I planned," G said. "I knew it."

"So what do I do now?" I asked.

"I'll come get you when it's time. Just make sure you don't get beat by them, all right?" Flay asked.

"I've come this far, so I guess I'll keep doing this," I said.

"Of course you will. You can't just pack out now." He paused. "Oh, make sure you clean yourself up beforehand."

We came back to the auditorium to find it a field hospital.

"Wow, so many injured people," I said.

"Everyone, I'm here to help! Miss Ulrika!" Pepperoni waved both arms, in case the injured couldn't see him.

"Miss Ulrika is here!" a student shouted. Somebody else took it up. "All right, now we should win!"

"Let's turn this thing around!" I said.

"Okay, let's go!" I said.

And we did, for about half an hour. We were starting to gain the advantage. I was starting to believe it.

"Now, throw the tear bomb!" a vigilante voice said.

"What is this?" I asked.

"The enemies are weakened! Take them now!" I said.

"This is bad! I can't see at all!" Chloe said.

"Ah, my eyes! My eyes!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni went down, and went down loud.

"You better run for now," said a voice I knew, out of the smoke, sweet as a bruise. Ms. Fancypants.

We ran.

* * *

The call came while we were catching our breath in a stairwell.

"It's an emergency!" Pepperoni said.

"What is it now?" I asked.

"Our base is under attack! We don't have much time till it falls!" Pepperoni said.

"What?! Fine, I'm coming now!" I said.

We got there to find the street empty and the door open, which is the oldest trap in the world, and I walked into it at a run.

"We're the enemies! Prepare yourselves!" someone shouted, for form.

"No one is here..." I said, into the empty room. "Could this be...?"

"That's right." She stepped out of the shadows with her vigilantes behind her, and the door we'd come through filled up with more. "You guys are trapped."

"They're just a bunch of fools," Ms. Fancypants said. "I just have to get rid of the head, and this will be all over."

"Do you think you can take all of us?" Lily asked.

"That's right! We're gonna beat you up!" Pepperoni said.

We fought. We lost. She was better prepared than us, and meaner about it.

"They were too weak," one of her people said.

"You guys are stronger than last time," Ms. Fancypants said, walking between us like a landlord. "I guess I underestimated you." She stopped in front of me. "I did get a little serious this time."

"Take him hostage!" she said, pointing at one of our boys. "And torture him! I can't wait."

"She really will do it!" Chloe said. "This is your only chance to run!"

"I guess I should run right now, but..." the boy said, and then he ran, and it was the smartest thing any of us did that day.

"They can't go back empty-handed!" her flunky wailed.

"Hey! Don't interrupt me! Wait..." Ms. Fancypants turned, because something had stumbled in through the door behind her. "What happened to you?"

He was one of ours, and he was not going to make it. He said it anyway: "All our allies were captured, and the enemies are coming this way! Please, live through this!"

"Our hope for the festival!" I said. "No! Wake up!"

"I'd better get my full-power CPR going," Goto said.

"What do you mean, full power?" Enna said.

"Huh," I said, looking at the day we'd had. "Looks like our defeat is at hand."

* * *

The radio again. I'd forgotten I was carrying it.

"Wait, I forgot about this," I said, into it. "Hello?"

"You're having a tough time," G said. "Are you giving up now?"

"What are you talking about? I'll never give up!" I said.

"That's right. Then go hide in the underground sewer. I will take care of the rest," Flay said.

"The underground sewer." I turned to the others. "And is the animal suit guy there?"

"Oh yeah, Goto?" G said. "He wants you."

Goto took the radio from me the way you take a phone from a child. "Okay, okay. Yeah. Uh-huh. Okay, bye."

"What did he want?" I asked.

"Oh, just a quick errand," Goto said.

"Shouldn't you all hurry, though?" Flay asked.

"All right, everyone, let's run!" I said.

"So we're running away after all," Pepperoni said.

"I wonder what's gonna happen now," Enna said.

"At least an expulsion... I better blame this all on Ulrika," Pepperoni said, because Pepperoni has a plan for everything.

"Aren't you going?" I said, because Goto had peeled off at the corner.

"I told you, I've got a quick errand to run."

"I'll leave it to you." I looked at him. "Hmm, I feel like you're going to get the best part of this."

"Just bear with it. This is how much this generation needs me," Goto said. And he went, into the dark, on his errand.

The sewer hid us. We fought our way in, and when the last pursuer stopped following, we stood in a corridor that didn't know what year it was.

"Looks like we barely made it out," I said.

"I wonder when Mr. Flay made this place," Enna said.

"Why, Mr. Flay?" I asked.

"Let's just rest for now," Chloe said. "I don't even want to explain this to her."

* * *

We rested, which is to say we sat in a row against a wall and listened to the water.

"So it's just us after all," I said. "I guess it was an impossible idea from the start."

"It's not impossible," Enna said. "As long as we're alive, we haven't lost yet."

"If only Ulrika got killed, then we'd be free," Chloe said.

"What should we do now? There haven't been any orders since," Chloe said.

Pepperoni, on watch, answered by tripping over a bucket. "Enemy attack! Enemy attack!"

"The enemies are here!" Pepperoni said.

"They're so persistent!" I said, up and reaching.

"Quiet down, or they'll find us here too," Chloe said.

"Oh, sorry," Pepperoni said.

"There's nowhere to run," Chloe said, and turned to Pepperoni with the calm of a doctor announcing a splinter. "You take responsibility by going to the enemies and getting sliced up."

"What?! I have to get sliced up?" Pepperoni said.

"And as we waste our time with this stupid conversation..," Lily said.

"We finally got you, country pumpkin," Lily said.

She was at the end of the corridor, Ms. Fancypants, with her people fanned out behind her, and there, tucked behind her skirt with the face of a hostage, was Puniyo.

"Oh, huh?" I said. "Hey, what are you doing on their side?"

"Uh, sorry," Puniyo said, "but I'm super scared of Lily."

"Oh, I thought I was being very generous by forgiving you," Ms. Fancypants said, without turning. "But this is how you return my favor?"

"Oh, I was just kidding! I'm sorry! You're like an angel from heaven!" Pepperoni said.

"Miss Lily, we should worry about that later," the flunky said.

"Oh, that's right. I will take care of you right now," Lily said.

"And so will I," the flunky said.

"We're not gonna lose to you!" I said.

We didn't. It took everything, and Uryu, from my shoulder, held steady the way he holds, and at the end of it Ms. Fancypants was on one knee with her hand over her mouth.

"No way... I will never lose to you!" I said.

"What's wrong? You look so scary," Lily said.

She looked up, and the look was wrong. Too calm. A person losing doesn't smile like that.

"You said it took you ten years to get that mana, right?"

"Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?" I said, and Uryu pressed into my neck. "Oh, are you jealous?"

"Yeah, right. I just thought about how important it must be to you," I said.

"Of course. He's so cute too," I said.

"I wonder what that mana thinks of you," she said, soft, and the corridor got quiet the way a room gets quiet before a pot breaks.

"What, Raze? What's the matter?" Puniyo said, because Jerktown had gone still beside her, looking at Uryu the way you look at a locked door.

"You're acting weird," Chloe said.

"Nothing," Jerktown said. "I just thought about this, but... wouldn't she just shut up if we got rid of that mana?"

"What did you say?!" Lily said.

"Mr. Raze, are you serious?" Lily asked.

"Of course not. I'm just joking," Raze said.

"That's not a good joke," I said, and I heard my own voice from outside my body, flat and ready. "Hey, there are some things that you should never joke about, you know."

The sound came from the corridor wall, a scrape and a hiss. "What was that noise?" I said. "Well, oh, what now?"

* * *

We followed the noise, because we are who we are, and the noise led us past a grate and down a service passage to a room with a low light in it, and voices.

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting," Goto's voice said. "Are you mad at me, Marta?"

"Of course not," Marta said. That voice I knew better than I wanted to. The chairwoman. "This is our only chance to be alone here."

Chloe and I went still against the wall like two bricks, which is what you do when the chairwoman of your academy is using a first name on someone in a sewer.

"That voice..." I breathed. "Is that the animal suit guy? And the chairwoman?"

"But is this a good idea?" the chairwoman said. "The students are fighting each other as we speak."

"Who cares? They're useless to me after they've paid their tuition," Marta said.

"Is that right? I heard about a student who funds you with a large budget," Goto said.

"Oh, she's very easy to manipulate. She pays money and will work hard if I suck up to her. She's such a convenient girl," Marta said.

"You're such a bad person," Goto said, warmly.

"Did you trick the guys like you tricked the students here?" the chairwoman said.

"Oh, I'm the one who's being tricked, in your eyes. It's my honor. But I'm just another worker in some student's workshop," Goto said.

"She finds out about this..." the chairwoman said.

"Don't worry. She'll be expelled after this incident, as the patsy for this entire mess," Marta said.

I felt Chloe's hand close on my arm, because "she" was me.

"And you will be mine," Goto said.

"So are you gonna take care of me forever?" Goto asked.

"Of course," Goto said.

"Next year the alchemy class will be discontinued, and our profits will keep rising," Marta said.

"I just want you to stay by me," Goto said, and his voice was a warm room with a locked door.

"I see," Marta said. The chairwoman's voice had gone soft in a way I'd never heard, which is how I knew it was real, the worst thing I'd heard all week. "I guess that's what I needed to hear."

"What was that?" she said, sharp. "Ah, nothing. I'm just talking to myself."

"So, won't you let me see your face already?" Marta asked.

"Oh, uh, I want to, but... uh, I can't reach the zipper on my back," Goto said.

"Then I'll go ahead and take care of that. Here, come closer," Marta said.

Chloe's hand tightened and she pulled me back down the passage, and I went, because she's stronger than she looks and meaner about it.

"Hey, why did you cut it off?" I whispered. "I thought it was just getting interesting."

"We shouldn't listen to them any further," Chloe said.

"That was a very interesting conversation," I said, when we were clear.

"I guess I was fighting the wrong person," I said.

* * *

The chairwoman's office smelled like paper and money. Ms. Fancypants was already in it, standing over the desk like a clerk at the end of a war.

"Chairwoman, the buildings were destroyed during this incident," Lily said.

"I know. How much budget do we need to fix them?" Marta asked.

"This is just my estimation..," Lily said. She slid a paper across the desk. "This much."

"I didn't think this could cause so much damage. The students were doing pretty well." The chairwoman looked at the number the way you look at a bill you know you'll pay. "I guess it would have been cheaper to just have the school festival to begin with."

"What did you say?" Marta asked.

"Oh, nothing." She folded her hands. "Anyway, it was worth every penny, as long as I can kick out that annoying student."

"Excuse me," I said, from the door, with Chloe at my shoulder.

"Oh! Miss Lily, what's the matter?" Marta asked. The chairwoman's face did something quick. Ms. Fancypants had gone the color of old snow at the sight of us.

"What are you doing here with her?" Ms. Fancypants said. "What's going on?"

"I just heard a weird rumor, so I wanted to speak with you." I walked in like the floor was mine, which is a trick that works until it doesn't. "I heard that you're discontinuing the alchemy class."

"What?! Who told you that? The principal?!" The chairwoman was half out of her chair. "No way! I don't know anything! I swear!"

"Oh well, it's not good to spread rumors like that," Ms. Fancypants said.

"Oh yes, I know. It's horrible," Marta said.

"My father only funds this academy because of the alchemy department," Lily said.

"Sucks for you that they were raking in your money and making you work on top of it," I said.

"Oh well, it sucks for you too." She smiled, and it was the smile she'd worn in the corridor. "I hear that after raking in your entry fee tuition, you're getting expelled."

"What?! What?!" The chairwoman came around the desk. "Were you girls listening in on that conversation?!"

"It's just a rumor," I said. "Although rumors don't start without a reason."

"I wonder what would happen if this rumor leaked to all the students and sponsors of the academy," Chloe said, studying the ceiling.

"Now hold on." The chairwoman held up both hands, like a person stopping traffic. "What are your demands?"

"Oh, you're making it sound like we're threatening you," Lily said.

"We're just here seeking the truth," Chloe said.

"Uh, of course it's not true! The alchemy class will continue! And we would never expel you!" Marta said.

"Well, that's a relief," I said.

"For me too," Ms. Fancypants said. "Now I won't have to break the bad news to my father."

"Well, I'm happy for you too. So if you're done with your questions..," Marta said.

"Oh, and one more thing," I said.

"You have more?" Marta asked.

"Isn't the school festival starting soon? I heard that it was canceled, but that doesn't sound right," I said.

"Oh, you're right. I'm sure many of the students won't be happy about that," Lily said.

"Ugh, how obvious," I said, under my breath.

"Oh, did you say something?" Marta asked.

"Oh, nothing," I said.

"Yes, I would never want to take the fun out of the students' lives. School festival, that sounds great! Let's do it!" Marta said.

"Really? You're serious?" I asked.

"Yes," Marta said.

"Well, now that we have good news to tell everyone, pardon us," I said. "Sorry for interrupting you."

And we went out into the day that had just stopped being a war.

* * *

Goto was waiting on the steps, arms crossed, like the ending was his to direct, which it was.

"Looks like everything went well," he said.

"It was all because of your help. Thanks. We should have done this from the start, and avoided all that chaos. What do you say?" I asked.

"A school festival should be earned, not given," he said.

"Well, that applies to everything, I guess," Chloe said.

"I'm sure the school festival will be greater than it has ever been," Goto said.

"Oh my," the chairwoman said, from the doorway behind us, watching him with a look I'd seen once tonight already. "I would never want to be on the side opposing him."

She stepped to the top of the steps and raised her voice to the yard. "With that said, we will be having the school festival!"

The yard came apart, and for once it was a good coming apart. I stood in the middle of it and let it wash over me, and then I noticed that nobody from my own workshop was celebrating.

"Whoa! Congratulations, Miss!" Pepperoni said, at least trying.

"Congrats. Well, that's good," Enna said.

"What kind of comments are those?" I said. "Can't you act happier?"

"I don't really care about the school festival," Chloe said.

"We're exhausted from being dragged into trouble," Enna said.

"Hmm, really? Me neither. I'm getting tired," Pepperoni said.

"Whoa," I said, watching them all sag in place like wet flags.

"You should get some rest now. I'll go let the rest of our troops know," Pepperoni said.

"Oh, I'll come," I said.

"Wait, I had something to ask..." I said. "Oh well, maybe tomorrow. Okay, so we can go now, right?"

"I'm going back to my room," Chloe said.

"Me too," Enna said.

"I would be in an extremely bad mood if someone woke me up today," Chloe said.

"I guess I will too," Enna said. "Man, I don't even want to go back to the room."

So we went home from the war we'd won, too tired to notice we'd won it.

* * *

I was asleep before the lamp was out, Uryu a warm puff on the pillow beside me, and the room went down to the sound of our breathing.

Which is why neither of us heard the window.

"An unexpected chance," she said, black from hood to boots, standing over my bed. Sally.

"So defenseless." She looked down at me, and even in the dark I'd have known the smile. "Did she think I would just give up?"

And then Uryu was awake, which is the only way to say it, because one second the pillow was calm and the next it was not, and he was between her and me, small and gray and perfectly still, looking up at her.

"Hey," she said. "Be quiet."

"Good boy," Sasalina said. Her voice went soft and terrible. "I won't do anything if you just stay calm. Now, if I just take you back to Reicher..."

"Oops, I'm drooling. Anyway, come over here," Sasalina said.

"What's your problem?" she said, and the soft went out of it. "Your cute stare doesn't scare me at all."

"Come on! I said don't stare at me!"

"I can't..," Sasalina said. She took a step back, and then another, her hand coming up as if the moonlight hurt. "I can't look at your eyes."

"Hmm?" she said, to herself, to the room, to nobody. "What's going on?"

And the window, which had let her in, let her back out, and the room settled, and Uryu turned once in the dark and put his head back down on my pillow like nothing at all had almost happened.

I slept through the whole thing. I wouldn't have believed it happened, except that in the morning there was a single black thread caught on the window latch, and my Mana was sitting on the sill watching the sunrise like a small gray door that had decided not to open.

The festival was coming. So was something else.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Thing Inside the Calm

The calm lasted three whole days, which at Al-Revis is basically a dynasty. The war was over, the campus got scrubbed back to looking like a school instead of a battlefield, and the only smoke left in the air was from the kitchens testing festival food.

I was coming up the faculty hallway carrying a jar of something that had gone purple overnight, when through Mr. Tony's half-open door I heard him say, "Do you remember what kind of mana that thing is?"

"What?" Mr. Flay said. "How can I remember something I never knew? Get serious."

"How could you not? Won't it matter, anyway? I'm just making sure. I'll have someone research it," Tony said.

"You're so worried. Whose fault do you think that is?" Flay asked.

"Tch. What a pain. I hate having class," Mr. Tony said.

"Man, you're so not motivated," Flay said.

"Of course not," Tony said.

I kept walking and did not knock, because I know better than to walk in on two rival teachers agreeing about something. Uryu floated at my shoulder the whole way, quiet as a held breath, which was not new. What was new was the way the hallway went quiet back, like the walls were listening to him.

* * *

In class, Mr. Tony looked at me the way a man looks at a bill he has already paid once.

"You made such a mess," he said. "How much do you think it took to clean it up?"

"Oh, come on. It's all over now. Who cares?" Flay asked.

"It's half your fault. And just when the cleaning was done, we have to prepare for the festival," Tony said.

"Look, don't ever become a teacher," he went on, and he meant it for the whole room, which sat there blinking. "You do so much work for so little, and you gotta care about stuff. It's not worth it. Anyway, the school festival is soon, but don't think you can go easy on your studies."

"Okay, okay," he said over our noise, which was a wave of relief. "Use the day to study on your own. I'm gonna go take a nap."

He put his head down on the desk and inside of a minute he was asleep, which is what a teacher's nap looks like: a man finally at peace with the paperwork.

"He looks exhausted," Chloe said. "And all because of Ulrika."

"We need to have fun," I said, "to make up for all his hard work."

"That's a deal for you," Chloe said. "But not for him."

* * *

On the way to the grounds I felt it, the prickle between my shoulder blades that means somebody's eyes are on me and they are not friendly ones.

"Can you stop following me around like that?" I said to the air.

The air flinched, and Sasalina stepped out from behind a tree with all her teeth showing.

"Mana's eyes," she said. "Why can't I get them out of my head?"

"Just wait. Next time I'll..," Sasalina said. She didn't finish. She just smiled wider and walked off, the way people walk off when they think they've already won.

"Her ridiculous energy was her only strength," I said to Uryu, watching her go. "But now that she doesn't even have that... oh well. At least it's quiet now."

Then her voice drifted back through the trees, too low for her to know it was still carrying: "I need to thank that man for this."

She was already gone.

I stood there a second, and then I shook it off the way you shake off rain. My energy was fine. My energy was great. I had a festival to enjoy, and no creepy archer with a crush on her travel buddy was going to get inside my head.

* * *

The festival opened the way Al-Revis opens anything: a banner, a speech, and the strong smell of fried things nobody could name. Lanterns hung from the Learning Bridge, and the grounds had that festival electricity where even the teachers walk faster.

"So what do we do now?" Goto said. "Can I take off alone?"

"How suspicious," Pepperoni said, squinting at him. "Are you planning to get with a girl, huh?"

"No way," I said.

"Ugh, what a blatant reaction," Goto said.

"Well, if you really want to," I said.

"No, I don't care either way. It's... it's not like I had a girl in mind. Nope. Not at all," Goto said.

"Okay, then why don't we go around together?" I asked.

"I don't really want to go out in public with these people," Chloe said.

"Hey," Pepperoni said, and pointed with his chin. "She is obviously looking at us."

Across the grounds, a girl in a first-year uniform was staring at our group with her whole face gone pink. She looked away so fast she nearly fell off the bench.

"She's just embarrassed. She's still, uh, a shy girl," Enna said, like a professor explaining a hard chapter.

"What are you worried about now?" I said to Goto. "Come on, let's go!"

* * *

"Can everybody hear me?" said the voice from everywhere at once. "Hmm. This is Mr. Flay."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Enna said.

"I'm glad that everybody is enjoying this event. I'm glad that my work is paying off," Flay said. Mr. Flay had appeared on the festival stage without anybody seeing him climb it, because that's his whole personality. "Anyway, this year's school festival has much more in store. The main event will be starting just about now."

"Main event, huh?" Goto said, arms crossed. "I knew he was preparing for this."

"Main event? Do you know anything about this?" I said.

"No, I had no idea. I hope he's not doing anything radical," Enna said.

"I'm sure it will be!" I said.

"It is being hosted by Flay," Mr. Flay said, third person, the way kings do. "The main event is... yes! A battle royale amongst the students! It is mandatory for all you students to participate in this bloody battle against each other!"

"See? Pretty radical. I told you so," I said to Enna.

Near the stage, Principal Zeppel had gone the color of old paper. "What are you smiling about?!" he hissed at Mr. Tony. "Go stop him now!"

"And miss this?" Mr. Tony said, and he did not even try to hide the grin. "Not a chance."

"You will team up with one other student to fight with," Mr. Flay went on. "But if you prefer to fight alone, you may do so as well. Fight ten battles within the time limit, and the team with the best record wins the whole contest!"

"Again with his crazy ideas," Mr. Tony said, with some respect.

"Give me a break. I should just hide somewhere until it's over," Zeppel said.

"Even if you do hide," Mr. Flay said, pointing straight at him through the whole crowd, "you will be found and defeated. By me."

"By you?!" Zeppel said.

"A battle royale!" I said, and the fire was already in my hands. "I'm all fired up!"

"Pepperoni and I'll team up as the golden couple!" Pepperoni announced, throwing his arm around the air.

"Only the students of this school have the right to participate. No stray manas, fairies, or suit wearers may participate in this event," Marta said.

"What?" Goto said.

"Whoa. He was pretty specific," Enna said.

"Hello!" yelled somebody's kid brother from the crowd. "My sister is asking about her brothers too!"

"I don't think he can hear you from there," Enna said, without turning around.

"In case anyone is wondering," Mr. Flay said, "I will go ahead and let those punies slide this time."

"Maybe he did hear us," Enna said.

"The winners will earn the title of best fighters in the academy, and will also receive a prize from me! I will not accept any complaints. That's it for me. Now begin!" Flay said.

* * *

"Battle royale, huh?" Goto said, still staring at the stage. "Man, I am so jealous. It's not fair that you guys get to have all the fun. I wish we could trade spots."

"This could be really fun," Enna said. "Well, I guess I'll just take it easy."

"You're not into this either, right?" I said to Chloe.

"I'm doing this. It's part of the festival," she said.

"I gotta have fun!" I said.

"That's a good way of thinking," Goto said. "It's always good to stay positive."

"Now, who should I choose?" I said, and looked from Enna to Chloe and back. "Chloe. You're with me."

"I figured," Chloe said, which from her is a love letter.

"I'm going to do so well!" I said. "We're gonna win!"

* * *

The combat wing came first: two big boys in red and blue who had been waiting for this all year.

"Oh, they look tough," Chloe said.

"Yeah," I said. "Here I go! I'll show you the real deal!"

"Don't rely on me," Chloe said, and then poisoned both of them, which is what relying on Chloe looks like.

"Take this!" I yelled, and the first one went down. "This is my time to shine!" and the second one went down. Chloe said, "Sweet dreams," and the second one stayed down.

The alchemy wing was next: two girls in purple and green who had heard about my festival war and wanted a piece of it. They got it. It was over fast, and they took it better than the boys had.

General studies was the strange one. Enna and Et stood on the other side of the room, and Enna waved at me the way you wave when the teacher assigns you a group project.

"Oh boy, I don't have a choice," Enna said.

Et came at me with the sweet smile she saves for her little brother, which is somehow worse than the bow she keeps on her back.

"I'm ready, I guess," Enna said, and did fight, in the way a person fights a friend, which is mostly apologetically. It still counted. We won.

"I'm not really up for this," Enna said to nobody, after, like the fight had been a long errand and not a tournament.

At Raze's workshop, Lily was waiting with her arms crossed like she owned the building, which, if you believe the rumors about her father, she sort of did.

"They should know their place," she said.

"Ms. Fancypants!" I said. "You can't beat me!"

"Go to hell," Lily said, by way of opening.

It was a good fight. It was a real fight. She fought like somebody who had never been told she could lose, and I beat her anyway, and when it was over she fixed her hair and said nothing, which from Lily is the worst review you can get.

At Mr. Flay's room, he waved us in, looked us over like a man judging a horse, and said, "You can fight me or not. Either way it counts."

"Not," Chloe said, before I could answer.

"Ha! I'll count it. Go," Flay said. He leaned back. "I have a good feeling about this ending."

* * *

"Was that about five battles?" I said, counting on my fingers as we came out into the afternoon. "We're halfway there. I'm kind of tired. Can we take a break?"

"Sure. Oh, I'm gonna get something to drink. So you can go on ahead of me," Chloe said, and peeled off toward the stalls.

So I walked on alone, just me and Uryu, and the festival noise went soft behind us the way the ocean does when you walk inland.

Uryu tugged at my sleeve, urgent, and I said, "Huh? What's wrong? This... oh, the string is loose. Oopsie. So you were trying to warn me, huh? Good boy." I tied it. "There, that should be... oh no, wait."

Uryu looked pleased, which for him is a quarter inch of tail rise.

* * *

"Finally, some peace and quiet. I should go back to the workshop," said a voice from the path ahead.

It was Raze, alone, talking to the stone in his hands the way I talk to Uryu, which is a thing I did not know about him until that exact second. "Oh, there's my stone. I'm sorry, I won't drop you again."

He tucked it into his coat, took one step, and went down hard in a tangle of legs. My pouch string, the one I'd just tied, had left Uryu swinging low on his cords, and Raze had walked straight into him.

"Hey! Oh, Jerktown!" I said. "What are you doing lying there?"

"I fell because of your stone. Again," Raze said. He was glaring up at me from the ground, which was not an improvement on his standing face.

"Jeez, you're so clumsy," I said.

"Whose fault do you think it is?" Raze asked.

I reached down to pull him up, and he flinched. "Don't touch me!"

"Hey, don't be so mean," I said, and put my hands on my hips, which is my version of standing my ground.

"What do you want? To do this? Because I'll take you on anytime," he said, getting up with his own legs, thank you very much.

"Yeah, all right!" I said. "This is my chance. I have a lot to say to you anyway."

"That's what I was gonna say. I'll beat you so you can never say any more mean things," I said.

"I'm getting serious now!" I said, and I was.

It was the best fight of the whole royale, and I will write that down because it is true. He was fast, and he was strong, and he fought like he had the same fire I do, pointed the other direction. But I had Uryu, and I had the war behind me, and I had the high ground on account of he'd just tripped.

"Ha!" I said when he hit the grass. "Yeah! I won!"

"Damn..." he said.

"See? That's what you get," I said.

"Don't flatter yourself. It was only because of that mana," Raze said.

"What was I thinking..." he muttered, getting up slow.

"So what? You want some more of this? Give up already. You lost," I said.

"If only that mana didn't exist," he said, quiet, and it was not the kind of quiet you let go.

"Hey!" I said, and Uryu swung on the cords as I stepped between them. "I will seriously get so pissed if you touch him!"

And Uryu looked at Raze. Just looked. That was all. But it was not all, because Raze went still the way a deer goes still, and then he said, "Don't look at me like that."

"Damn it," Raze said, and left, and he did not walk like himself leaving. He walked like somebody else wearing him.

"He was acting strange," I said, to Uryu, who was still staring after him with those teal eyes I have known since they opened.

"Oh, sorry. Were you scared? Don't worry. Let's just go back," I said, and gathered Uryu up against me, and we went.

* * *

"Found you," Sasalina said.

I knew the voice before I turned. It was the prickle from the morning, made flesh.

"Whoa!" I said, because she was closer than voices have a right to be.

"I found you. I finally found you," Sasalina said.

"You again? Can't you come back later? I'm so tired," I said.

"That mana," she said, and her eyes never left him, not once. "I will get it this time."

"Take this!" I said, and the fight was on.

It was not like the royale fights. The royale fights had rules and referees and somebody to hand you water after. This one had a woman trying to snatch Uryu out of the air with her bare hands while I tried to keep her teeth out of me, which is the least fun combination of things I have done all year.

"Those eyes again!" she shrieked, mid-fight, and that was when I knew she was not all the way there, because Uryu was behind me, not in front of her, and the eyes she was afraid of were the ones she'd brought with her.

"Hey! You're pissing me off!" I yelled, and hit her with the flat of the star staff, and she went down in a heap of bows and bad intentions.

"They were nothing," I said, breathing hard.

Sasalina sat there in the grass, and she looked at Uryu, and then she said, in a voice much smaller than the one she'd arrived with, "You're creepy. I'm going now."

And she ran. The stalker ran from us. I watched her go until she was gone, and then I said, "Huh. That's a first."

"I'll return it one hundred times over!" floated back over the hill, thin and wobbly, and I decided that was a problem for Future Ulrika.

* * *

The dormitory entrance was the trap, and I should have guessed. Flay had not excluded suit wearers by accident, and Goto had not crossed his arms and stayed excluded. He was in the archway with his coat tails doing the dramatic thing they do, and Pepperoni was bouncing beside him like the fight had already started.

"It's almost my turn," Goto said.

"Miss! Miss!" Pepperoni said. Pepperoni waved from beside him, bouncing. "Is it my turn yet? Ultimate hidden skills!"

"They're nothing to me," Goto said, which was aimed at the situation in general.

"As I expected," Chloe said, which from her means she had, in fact, expected exactly this.

It was the strangest fight of the festival. Pepperoni apologized mid-swing. Goto narrated his own attacks. Yun, Raze's little shadow, mostly tried to be somewhere else. And in the middle of it Pepperoni stopped and looked at me with actual pride, which made me hit a little softer than I meant to, which Chloe noticed, which she will hold over me forever.

We won. Goto accepted defeat like a man accepting a medal, Pepperoni demanded a rematch someday, and Yun said nothing, which was the most normal thing that happened all afternoon.

The campus grounds were next, and waiting there was Puniyo, who is a puni, which means I could not understand a single word of the speech she gave me before the fight.

"Puni puni puni!" she said, or something close.

Chloe translated: "She says you can't beat her."

"I can't understand her, but I can still beat her," I said, and did.

"That was rude," Chloe said to the puni, on my behalf, which I assume was accurate.

The auditorium was last, and it went the way auditorium fights always go, which is loud and then over. Somebody's team of three fell to us in about a minute, and the whole festival seemed to hold its breath, and then let it out.

"Ah, it's over," I said.

"Wow," Chloe said.

* * *

"Nicely done. Those were some great battles. I'm very satisfied," Mr. Flay said from the stage, and his voice carried the way a cat's purr carries.

"He was enjoying watching us fight each other," I said.

"How twisted," Chloe said.

"However, every battle must have winners and losers. I will praise the winners with great honor, but I have nothing to give to the losers. Now, I will present this year's winners. Oh, it looks like it's Ulrika from the alchemy class and her partner," Flay said.

"We won!" I said.

"He doesn't sound enthusiastic at all," Chloe said.

"I didn't even get my name called," Chloe said.

"The battles were entertaining, but I'm very disappointed with the results," Mr. Flay said, and his gaze swept over his own battle students like a disappointed father of forty. "I can't believe my combat students lost to these kids."

"Hey!" Mr. Tony yelled from the crowd, and I could hear the grin in it. "Get serious and introduce us to everyone! We worked hard for this!"

"I guess I'll have to train them even harder," Mr. Flay went on, ignoring him. "Fortunately, winter break is coming up soon."

"Hey, are you listening?! Be quiet... just hurry on up here! We can't even start the ceremony!" Mr. Tony said.

"I'll complain to him later," Mr. Flay muttered.

"Good job, you guys," Mr. Flay said to us, suddenly warm. "You are the two strongest in this academy at this point. Now stand proud and answer to the crowd."

"Oh, okay. I'm kind of embarrassed," I said.

"I'm not comfortable being in front of so many people," Chloe said.

"And now, the moment we've all been waiting for. This is the prize you get from me. It's a check!" Flay said. He produced it from his coat with a flourish. "Five hundred fifty thousand."

"What? Five hundred thousand?" I said. "Are you sure? Is this some kind of dirty money?"

"Wait. Let's calm down," Chloe said.

"What's this? The currency says GP," I said.

"It stands for Canar Points," Mr. Flay said, beaming. "You can use that in any of my future stores that I plan to open all over the world."

"So basically, this is just trash!" I said.

"Oh, what the hell? You tricked us!" Mr. Tony yelled.

"I'm glad you're happy," Mr. Flay said to him.

"I'm not happy! In fact, I'm angry! Hey, are you listening?!" Mr. Tony said.

"That's it for the award ceremony. Everyone, enjoy the rest of the festival," Mr. Flay said to the crowd.

"I said, listen to me!" Mr. Tony said.

* * *

"Ugh, I'm so tired," I said to the sky, which had gone that deep festival blue. "But the school festival was so much fun! You had fun too, right? Good."

Uryu bobbed at my shoulder, which is his yes.

We were walking back across the quiet end of the grounds when Chloe stopped, and I nearly walked through her. "Oops, sorry," I said.

"I wonder what was wrong with those two," she said, and nodded across the way. "They look so creepy."

Two figures stood at the edge of the lantern light, too far to make out, standing exactly still, like they'd been planted there. Watching. And Uryu pressed himself into my chest so suddenly I almost dropped him.

"It's nothing," I said, mostly to him. "Don't worry. I'll protect you no matter what."

We did not look at them again. We walked, and the festival glow followed us like a friendly dog all the way to the dorms, and at the door Chloe said good night in her one-word way, and I climbed the stairs with Uryu in my arms.

"Man, but I'm so tired," I said. "I'm getting so sleepy."

I was asleep before I finished saying it, which is a thing that happens when you've fought half a school in one day.

* * *

I woke up to a stranger's voice, very close, very soft.

"What a defenseless owner," it said.

Uryu was awake on the pillow beside me, sitting up straight, and in the window, half in the moonlight, there was a figure. I could not see it right. I could see that it was small, and that its voice came from the shadow part of it.

"There's no need to fear," it said, and it was talking to Uryu, not to me. "I'm just here to observe."

Uryu stared.

"Observe, observe. Do you understand me? It's not a difficult word. Don't get upset. You must not have been educated enough yet," Tetri said.

Uryu did not blink.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Tetri," Tetri said. A pause, like a little bow. "Nice to meet you, meet you."

A small pale hand came out of the shadow and reached toward Uryu, and Uryu let it, which stopped my heart, because Uryu lets nobody.

"Oh, you're pretty well mannered. Good boy. Let me pet you," Tetri said. The hand patted Uryu's head, gently, the way you'd pat a sleeping thing. "Oh, you're so fluffy! I meant to make you feel

better, but now I feel better too."

"Be quiet," the voice said, and for one horrible second I thought it meant me, but it was still facing Uryu. "Are you awake? It's not very impressive to fall asleep with an infant mana."

"Hmm... when?" I asked. I sat up so fast my head swam. "Who are you?! What are you doing to him?!"

"We were getting to know each other," Tetri said. "He looks very intelligent."

"Of course he is. He is! I mean, don't you touch him!" I said.

"Hmm. He got taken away," Tetri said, and the hand drew back into the shadow. "But he felt so fluffy and good."

"Don't worry," Tetri said to Uryu, ignoring my whole body language. "I told that mana too, but I'm just here to observe. Observe: it means to watch with caution." A beat. "No wonder that mana didn't know the meaning."

"I know what it means!" I said. "What I'm asking is..."

"I was able to confirm that mana, so I'm excusing myself for today," Tetri said. "Bye now."

"Hey, wait! I have a question!" I said. I was already half out of bed with my boots in my hand, which is a posture I do not recommend for interrogations.

"Unfortunately, I can't answer you. I've been ordered to stay neutral at this point," Tetri said. The figure in the window was already less there than it had been. "But that mana is growing up fine, for now. I guess the other side has the advantage."

"Huh? What do you mean? Hey! Don't just leave me here hanging!" I said.

The window was empty. The room was quiet. The moonlight lay on the floor where the shadow had been, and there was nothing in it, not even a footprint, not even dust.

* * *

"And you!" I said to Uryu, and it came out louder than I meant it. "You're not supposed to be talking to strangers!"

Uryu's ears went down. He didn't cry, because he never cries, but his tail stopped, and that is worse.

"I mean..," I said. I sat down on the bed, suddenly heavy. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I'm just... I'm getting so short-tempered. It's not like me."

It's not like me, I said again, inside, where nobody could hear it.

Outside, the calm went on being calm, and I lay back down with Uryu against my shoulder, and neither of us slept for a long time. Something was turning over, in me or in him or in the both of us together, the way a coal turns over in a banked fire, slow, while the room stays warm and everybody pretends it's still.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Night He Wasn't Ours

Somewhere with no sun and no seasons, the cold was not weather. It was just how the place was, the way the bottom of a well is dark.

The dark king came to visit, and his footsteps did not warm the floor.

"Did you find out what kind of mana it is?" the light one asked, without turning around.

"I just started researching."

"You're so slow," Light Mana King said.

"Look who's talking," Dark Mana King said.

"Calm down," the light king said, which is a strange thing for the bitter one to say. "I guess I'll just relax and wait."

"Anyway, I wanted to ask you something. Why are you so serious? It's just a theory," Dark Mana King said.

"There's very little chance, but just in case. That mana has incredible power. I wanted to make a battle plan," Light Mana King said.

"Huh," Dark Mana King said. The dark king smiled, the warm kind of smile that makes a cold room colder. "Well, I guess a human wouldn't be able to handle it, then."

"You started this whole thing. I intend to win this bet."

"Wait a second. That's not fair," Dark Mana King said.

"That's why I'm talking to you right now. What would you do?" Light Mana King asked.

The light king had no answer. The dark king left him there, cold the way he had found him, and the room went back to being just a room with a bitter man in it.

* * *

The cold reached the academy too. Not the king kind of cold. The ordinary kind, early winter moving in like an uninvited relative, the kind you feel through your boots.

"It's so cold," I said to Uryu.

He looked up at me with his big teal eyes, and I saw him make a decision.

"Come closer," he said.

"Ah, so warm." I pulled him against my shoulder, and he was, like a little stove that chirps. "Is it too cold for you? Our home village is warm all year round."

"Oh, the girl in black looks fine, unlike Ulrika," Pepperoni said.

"I wear enough clothes to cover my body," Chloe said.

She did. Lately Chloe had been dressing darker and darker, all black from her collar down, until she looked like a shadow that got tired of waiting. I had asked her once if it was a phase, and she had said no, it was practical, and that I wouldn't understand, and she'd been right, I didn't.

"Oh, it's not good for a girl to be shivering alone," Pepperoni said to me, sidling over. "Let me warm you up."

"I'm going to die from boredom. Let's go play outside," I said.

"Wait, you two," Chloe said.

"What is it, lady in black?" Pepperoni said. "Are you jealous?"

"Shut up, animal suit," Chloe said, and that was for Goto, who had opened his mouth and not yet said anything.

"I'm sorry. I went too far," Goto said, in the same voice he'd have used to accept an award.

"I only get peaceful moments of rest when Ulrika is quiet," Chloe said. "I may get a little mad if you guys ruined that."

"When a lady says no, she often means yes," Goto said.

"This could be a life-threatening challenge," he added, to the room at large.

"I'm getting excited, Enna!" Pepperoni said, which meant the two scrub monsters had wandered up to the window like salesmen.

"I can get rid of them, right?" Enna said.

"Just go easy on them," Chloe said.

So Enna went out and got rid of them, politely. Then Goto went out too, and I watched through the window as he opened his arms to the second one like an old friend. "Hug," he said, and then, as the thing thrashed and turned colors: "Oops, sorry. Can you breathe? Good, 'cause I'm not letting you go."

That is how Goto fights. I have stopped asking questions about it, which I think is the point.

And then, because the morning was already ruined, the two tough ones showed up. Not scrub monsters. The kind with shoulders, and opinions about the door.

"Ugh," I said. "They look tough."

"Go to hell!" I added, to be clear, and the fight was on.

"Don't rely on me," Chloe said, from inside it, which means she was already winning it.

"This is my time to shine!" Pepperoni shouted.

"Show you the real deal!" he shouted, because he had more shout than plan.

We won. It took longer than it should have, and the yard looked like a pot someone had dropped, and Goto stood in the middle of the wreckage looking satisfied the way a man does when a meal ends well.

"Well, that was that," he said.

* * *

I lay down after, because fighting in the cold makes a person heavy, and Uryu sat on my chest like a cat deciding whether I'd make a bed. I must have slept, because the next thing I heard was voices on the other side of my own dreams.

"Are you still lying around?" somebody said, far off. "She might wake up soon."

"I should run. I'm coming in," Goto said, which made no sense until I heard the door.

"Oh, how unusual," Chloe said, at the door. "Hello. Long time no see. What's the occasion?"

"I got a break, so I thought you might want to drink with me," said a woman's voice, and I knew that voice. It belonged to the chairman of the academy, which meant I opened my eyes, which meant the dream was over.

Marta stood in our doorway like the tax office had come in person, and she was looking at Goto the way a person looks at the last cake in the window.

"Well, that's great," Goto said. "But what are your plans after getting me drunk?"

"I wouldn't mind ripping that suit off you," Sasalina said.

"So you're the aggressive type, huh?" Goto asked.

"So you guys are like that," Pepperoni said, with his whole face.

"I'm convinced. Don't take it seriously," Enna said.

"When did you guys become friends?" I said, from the floor.

"During the school festival," Goto said. "We have a lot in common."

"I thought he was better than that," Chloe said.

"I feel like people look at us funny when I'm with you guys," Marta said, which from the chairman of the academy meant: I have noticed, and I have decided not to care, and that is the whole favor.

"Oh, don't worry about what people think," Goto said. "Everyone has their own way to show their love."

"I'm bored," I said, sitting up.

"Whoa, oh, she's up!" Pepperoni said.

"I'm tired of lying around. Let's do something. Let's go out," I said.

"This is a bad time, Miss," Pepperoni said. "We already have a visitor."

"You can bring your friend along," Marta said, generous like a landlord. "More people equals more fun."

"Well, I guess I'll take that offer," Goto said.

* * *

"So what are we doing?" I said. "Anything. Anything that'll kill time."

"Homework, then," Chloe said.

"Anything but that!" Enna said.

"You're not done with that?" Chloe asked.

Before I could lie about it, Uryu raised one little paw.

"My owner finished hers on the first day," he said.

The whole workshop went still. Not because it was strange. Because it was new. Uryu had always talked in chirps and half-words, the way a sparrow talks. Now he had put a whole sentence together, with a subject and an owner and everything, and the sentence was a betrayal.

"She has been lying around since the first day," Uryu added, in case anyone had missed the point.

"Uryu!" I said.

"I see," Marta said. "Sounds like trouble."

"I've been forgotten, but I'm still a fairy," Pepperoni said, to no one. "I wanna do something."

"Then I guess we'll work on our homework today," Enna said. "As a favor for Pepperoni."

"What? Pepperoni?" Pepperoni said.

"He's the one who's helping us anyway," Chloe said.

"What was the homework about?" Pepperoni said, which told you everything about his.

"Gathering and observing the ubana fruit found on Fruitful Hill," Enna said, reading from memory like he'd written it.

"What was it?" I said. "That boring."

"That doesn't sound like something Mr. Tony would come up with," Pepperoni said.

"Basically, we just have to get the ingredient," Enna said.

"Oh, I see. Well, Ulrika has already done this, so..." Chloe said.

"I'm sure it'll be easy," I said.

"I hope so," Enna said.

* * *

It was not entirely easy.

The road to Fruitful Hill had opinions about us. We fought through the first patch of scrub monsters before the hill was even a rumor on the horizon.

"All right, we got the first track!" Pepperoni shouted, which is what he calls winning.

Then the road got quiet, and Enna held up a hand.

"They were napping. They haven't noticed us. Hurry," he whispered, and we went by on our toes like five people and a chairman sneaking out of a bill.

Then the dragon.

"Dragon!" I said, because there is no other thing to say.

"We're gonna win!" Pepperoni said.

"They should know their place," Goto said, and unbuttoned one cuff, and the dragon found out that place was face down in the brush.

And then, because the world enjoys a joke exactly once, the two tough ones from our yard came shambling out of the treeline with their shoulders and their opinions, looking like they'd walked all this way to file a complaint.

"Ugh," I said. "They look tough."

We beat them again, faster this time, and left them stacked against a tree like firewood with a grudge.

* * *

We were still catching our breath when the road went strange again, and a man stepped out of the treeline like he'd been waiting to be introduced.

"There you are," I said, because you say something.

"Long time no see," Goto said, and the way he said it, it had a history in it. "What's going on?"

"Is this about work?" the man said. "I'm just passing by today."

Reicher. I knew him the way you know a fever you had once. Cold hands, cold eyes, and behind him, half-hidden in the green, the shape I should have been watching for.

"What in the world happened to your partner?" Goto said.

"Oh, that," Reicher said.

And from the green came the answer, in a voice with no door on it: "Ring... marriage... if I steal the mana... get married... that girl..."

"The last time I saw her, she was more energetic," Goto said.

"She's just throwing a fit because I gave a ring to someone else," Reicher said.

"I've heard how emotional a female human can get," Goto said. "But it's this bad, huh?"

"She's always been somewhat emotionally unstable," Tetri said.

"Is that so," Reicher said.

"Anyway, I'll be going now," Reicher said. "I'll be back to talk to you soon."

"Just passing by, huh," I said, to his back.

"She might find out soon," Enna said, low, and he meant the shape in the green, and what it would do when it found out.

"The girl's mana... here," the green whispered, and then it didn't, and the road was just a road again.

"Where are you going?" Goto called after Reicher, for reasons of his own.

"It's near the manor," Reicher said, without turning.

"She might be reaching her limit," Enna said.

"Oh boy, what should we do?" Pepperoni said.

Nobody had an answer that fit in a pocket, so we walked, and the hill got closer, and I kept Uryu on the far side of me from the trees.

* * *

Fruitful Hill is not a hill so much as a bowl full of light, and the ubana fruit hung in it like little lanterns that hadn't decided to be lit yet.

"We're here," I said. "Oh, that was easy."

"It's all because of my help," Marta said.

Raze's workshop was already up in the bowl, working the rows beside ours, and Yun was with them, doing the assignment like somebody who'd read ahead.

"I didn't know a single normal person would make this much difference," Goto said, looking at Enna.

"We got the two bad ones," Enna said, counting on his fingers, because he counts everything, and by "the two bad ones" he meant the monsters from our yard, still lying stacked back down the road.

"The only reason he's helping is because he's attracted to me," Marta said, about Goto, about nothing, about everything.

"You should thank me," she added, to the group.

"And I invited you to the workshop in the first place," Goto said.

"This is so stupid," Chloe said.

"Hey, why don't you just stay with us now?" Marta said to Goto, and it came out like a job offer, because with her everything comes out like a job offer.

"If you would pay me more than my current owner does, I might consider it," Goto said.

"Uh, you charge for services?" I said to Yun, because if Goto had a price, maybe the reliable one did too, and it never hurts to shop around.

"How about if we trade those two?" I said, and by "those two" I did not mean the monsters. I meant Goto and Pepperoni, for Yun, because anyone with eyes could see which workshop was reliable and which one was us, and my mouth was doing arithmetic my heart hadn't signed off on.

"You can talk to my owner about that, though I doubt she would say yes," Yun said, calm as a receipt, and she didn't even look up from her tree.

She meant Lily. What she meant under that was: no owner would say yes. Not Lily, not anyone, because the freaks were ours to keep whether we liked it or not, and the reliable ones were

never on the table. The half-second where I'd actually meant the trade was right there on my face, and I went red, because she'd answered for me before my pride could.

"Hey, why don't you just stay with us now?" I said to Marta, before my face could get ahead of me. "We're fun. We have a fairy."

"If you would pay me more than my current owner does, I might consider it," Marta said, and it took me a second to realize she was quoting him, and it was the first joke I'd ever heard her make. "Enough talk. Why don't we get this over with?"

"Oh, you're right," I said.

Enna had us sorted into rows in under a minute. Marta supervised, which she did the way other people breathe.

"Are we almost done?" I said.

"Looks like we'll finish early," Enna said.

"Should we do something else here?" Chloe asked.

"I'm tired, and I want to go back," I said.

"Same here. I'll hang out with you," Pepperoni said.

"I will too," Marta said. "How about some games? For adults."

"I guess I should head back," she said, before anyone could answer, and she was gone between one tree and the next, the way she'd come, like she'd only ever been visiting the idea of us.

"Huh? What's up with you guys?" I said. "Fine, let's go back."

"Um, did she completely ignore us?" Pepperoni said.

"Did I come on too strong?" Goto said, to the empty road. "She doesn't need to be embarrassed now."

* * *

We were halfway down the hill road when the light changed. Not the sun. The air. It got the way it gets before a pot boils over.

"I found you," said a voice from the trees, and it was not a tree voice.

"Whoa, stalker woman!" Pepperoni said.

Sasalina came out of the green like she'd been planted there and had finally grown wrong enough to walk. She didn't look at any of us. She looked at Uryu, the way a starving person looks at a

locked kitchen.

"Do you know her?" Marta's absence answered, so Enna did: "It's some crazy lady who's been targeting Uryu."

"I can't believe she's everywhere," I said.

"Hmm, she sure doesn't look normal," Goto said.

"Mana... marriage... mana," Sasalina said, to herself, to the trees, to nobody. "If I steal the mana... get married... that girl..."

"Wasn't she more normal before?" Enna said.

"Yeah," I said, and then, because somebody had to, and because I am somebody: "Hey, are you okay? You don't look so well."

"Miss, don't get too close. You might get bitten," Pepperoni said.

"Oh, come on. She's not like a stray dog or anything," I said.

And that's how Ulrika's thoughtfulness always messes up her life, Chloe did not say out loud, but I could feel her not saying it from ten feet away.

"Give that to me!" Sasalina shrieked, and she moved faster than a starving person should be able to, and her hands closed around Uryu.

"See, I told you," Pepperoni said.

"Just stand there, help me!" I said.

"Oops, that's right. I'm coming," Sasalina said.

"What a day off," Goto said, and then, in a different voice, the one he saves for things that matter: "I'll protect you."

The fight was not like the others. The others had been exercise. This one had her hands, and her hands had a purpose, and the purpose was my Uryu, and I hit her the way you hit a burning thing, to put it out.

"Go to hell!" I shouted, and meant it properly this time.

She went down. She didn't get up. She lay there with her eyes open, and the hill went quiet around us like it was holding its breath.

"She's not moving," Enna said. "She might be playing dead."

"Mr. Fairy, finish her off!" I said.

"Oh, no way. I can't even kill a bug," Pepperoni said, and that was the first time I'd ever been glad he's the way he is.

"Whoa, what now? I lost," Pepperoni said, because she had gotten up, sort of, not to fight but to crawl, and there is something worse about a person who crawls than a person who swings.

"You don't have to crawl like that," I said, and my voice came out wrong, too soft.

"Oh, hey, she's gone," Pepperoni said, and she was, into the green, leaving a path in the grass like a snake's good intentions.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Enna said.

"I doubt it," Goto said.

"I shouldn't let this slide anymore," I said, and it came out hard, because if it came out any other way I was going to have to think about her hands. "I better let Mr. Tony know."

"Shouldn't you have done that in the first place?" Chloe said.

"But our teachers are like..." I said.

"You're right," Chloe said. "Our teachers are like that."

"Well, if you know what to do, then I'll be leaving now," Goto said.

"I'm sorry for this. You came to visit us on your day off," I said.

"Don't worry. Just be careful with that mana," Goto said.

"I know. You don't have to tell me," Reicher said.

He went down the road the way Marta had, and the two of them gone made the hill emptier than it had been, which is a trick I'm still trying to work out.

"We made a girl cry again," Enna said. "I don't like how that feels."

"We should go cheer her up later," Chloe said.

"Then you should let me go alone," he said.

"Hey, are you trying to leave me out?" Pepperoni asked.

"That's not what I meant. And you might be too busy by then," Chloe said.

"You're right," I said. "I really hope nothing happens."

* * *

It was evening when we got back, and the academy sat in its cold like a kettle off the flame. I took the long way toward the faculty wing, because some conversations need the walk first, and

because I had told myself I was going to tell Mr. Tony.

Uryu sat on my shoulder being heavier than usual, which is what he does when I talk too low. I was halfway to the wing when I heard voices under the trees and stopped, because one of them was the man who travels with the woman who crawls, and the other was quieter than that, gray and careful, the way a report sounds before it gets written down.

I did not walk into it. I have walked into enough for one book. I stood in the dark with Uryu and listened.

"Man, she might be done," Reicher said from behind the tree. "She doesn't look right at all."

"Oh, were you watching?" Tetri said. "You should have said something."

"Huh. You knew I was here from the start," Reicher said.

"You also knew what was happening to that woman. When did this start?" Tetri asked.

"Since she started attacking that mana. Every time she comes back, she's worse."

"That's a long time ago. Why didn't you report it?" Tetri asked.

"I didn't see that as being part of my job description," Reicher said.

A pause. The kind of pause people put in when they want the other person to do the work.

"Hmm, that's true," Reicher said, finally, in a smaller voice. "I should have done the research. Sorry."

"Anyway, aren't you supposed to be taking care of that woman? Are you going to do anything?" Tetri asked.

"Hmm. She's always been a handful. What should I do?" Reicher asked.

"You're a cold man," Tetri said, and she said it the way she says everything: soft, and exact, and already halfway to a report of her own.

"We have a pretty dry relationship. I'll see when she calms down," Reicher said.

"Fine then, I'll excuse myself first," Reicher said, because he always gets the last word without earning it. "I need to make some reports."

He went off under the trees, and the dark took him. Tetri stayed a moment longer, the Light Mana King's messenger standing where the watcher had been, and then she was gone too, and I stood there in the cold with Uryu, and the night came down over the academy like a lid.

* * *

The night he wasn't ours.

That's the night I mean. The one that should have had Goto's drink and Marta's one joke and Pepperoni's homework and a girl in black laughing at all of it. Sasalina took it, crawling, and Reicher let her, watching from a tree and telling Tetri how much worse she got after every grab at Uryu, and the cold just kept on being cold.

I went back to the workshop and I did not sleep. I sat with Uryu and watched the window, and after a while Chloe came and sat beside me in her black clothes without saying why, which is her way of saying why.

"He talked today," I said. "Uryu. A whole sentence. It was about my homework, and it was the best thing that's happened all week."

"I know," Chloe said. "I was there."

We watched the window together. The moon came up white as a coin, and I thought about the woman who wanted to buy my Uryu with a stolen ring, and the man in the cold room who wanted to make a battle plan, and I pulled my Mana a little closer, and I did not let go all night, and neither of us said anything else, and that was the whole of the night he wasn't ours, except for the part where he was.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Graduation

Somewhere with no sun, both kings were waiting.

"A human went mad after fighting that mana," Tetri said. She stood where the cold was worst, and she said it the way you report a crack in a dam. "The condition worsens every time. The more she comes back, the less of her comes back. It's proof. The thing is what you feared."

"A human's mind, huh?" The Dark Mana King said it soft, like a man tasting a word he'd hoped not to need. Warm voice. The same careless warmth that once put an egg in a girl's hands and walked away.

"I highly doubt it," the Light Mana King said. He turned from him like the idea itself offended. "But you can't completely deny it now. We must act quickly."

"We have no choice," the Dark Mana King said.

"Then it's settled," the Light Mana King said. His voice filled the room the way cold fills a cellar. "Go and collect that mana immediately. Don't be too rough with it. And keep it quiet."

"I'll do my best," Tetri said.

She bowed. The room kept both of them: the warm one who had already given too much away, and the bitter one who did not wish her luck. He didn't believe in luck. He believed in what he had already seen, which was what the world did to manas who trusted humans.

* * *

The academy rolled toward Parents Day the way a full cart rolls downhill, all noise and no brakes.

Three or four times now, somebody had come sniffing around Uryu. Not Sasalina, the hungry one who had to be peeled off him. Somebody new, at the edge of things, there and gone. I'd caught her twice watching from across the yard, a woman in gray with a face like a closed ledger.

"Your parents are going to see you get hurt, and then what?" Mr. Tony said, which is what passes for caring from a man who'd rather be grading.

"Oh, yeah. Isn't it almost Parents Day?" Pepperoni said, and then he said "Parents Day?" in the exact voice I'd just used, because he's a little echo when he wants to be.

"You really don't listen, do you," Chloe said to me, not looking up from her book.

"What's wrong? You have such a serious look on your face. It doesn't suit you," Pepperoni said to Goto.

"Huh? Oh, I was just wondering if my master would come see me, too," Goto said quietly.

"Well, you're not even a student here," we all said, more or less at once, and Goto took it like the wound he didn't have.

Chloe's father came, and the day went crooked early.

He arrived before the first bell, tall and tidy, with Chloe's same straight spine, and the first thing he said to her was, "It's been so long. I wanted to see you before class, so I came early."

The second thing he said was to nobody at all, while looking right past me: "It looks so different after a year. You've grown so much."

"I haven't changed at all," Chloe said. "Actually, I might even be smaller."

"Is this place so hard that you lost weight?" Goto's master asked. He shook his head at the grounds, the towers, the air. "How horrible. Just because some rat dragged you to this place."

"Hello," I said. "I'm being completely ignored. Um, excuse me."

"Huh?" Goto's master asked. He looked at me then, and the look could have stripped paint.

A woman appeared out of the hedges with a map held upside down. "Um. Is Enna... Have you seen my son?"

"Are you Enna's mom?" Chloe's father asked.

"Oh, you know him? Great! I've been lost on campus since last night. I was just about to go see him. Do you want to come with me?" Enna's mother asked.

"How generous of you. I will never forget your kindness," he said, in the voice of a man who will forget everything about a person except the inconvenience, and she took him by the arm and towed him away like a boat. Chloe watched them go with no expression at all, which for Chloe is an expression.

"Enna. Enna, I'm so glad. I never thought I was going to see you!" we heard, from around the corner.

"Whoa. Stop crying and get off me. Did you get lost again?" we heard, which was Enna.

"Hello. I'm Pepperoni and I'm a cute little fairy," Pepperoni said.

"Oh, hello. Well, I'm glad a strong looking guy is helping my daughter." Enna's mother beamed up at Goto.

"My name is Goto. Nice to meet you, father," Goto said.

"Father?" Enna's mother asked. Her beam did not waver, which meant she'd decided to simply not hear it. "Chloe, are you even... Well, I would want a human partner for my daughter."

"Don't worry. Chloe is pretty picky when it comes to boys," I said.

"He's ignoring me again," Pepperoni said. "I was trying to blend in with the conversation, too."

"Is that Enna your friend, too?" Enna's mother asked me.

"Yeah. He's one of the few normal ones," I said, and Enna looked at me like I'd handed him a medal and a cold at the same time.

Then the chairwoman stood up at the front of the assembled parents and opened her mouth, and that's when Mr. Flay opened his.

"Stop with this nonsense," he said, pushing through the crowd with both arms out like a man clearing brush. "Be joyful. Once again, I've prepared a special class for you students."

"Oh, man. Again?" Enna said. "Pops is here."

"Aren't you letting him go way too far?" somebody said to the principal.

"But I'm not strong enough to stop him," the principal whispered, which is the most honest thing he'd said all year.

"I thought about different things," Flay announced to the parents, "but I didn't think you'd want anything violent. So today's assignment is... attack of the giant monster!"

"What are you talking about?" I said, along with half the yard.

"Basically, I prepared a monster for this day. It's so ridiculously tough that you won't be able to beat it with one or two attacks. And it is on the way to the school right now. If you stop it, you win. If you fail, it destroys the academy. What do you think? Doesn't that sound like an exciting class?" Flay asked.

"Stop this right now!" the chairwoman shrieked.

"Well, I made it tough, but I didn't make it very intelligent. I can't control it anymore. The only way to stop it is to defeat it," Flay said.

"So... if we don't defeat it..." Mr. Tony said, very carefully.

"I already told you. This school will be in pieces."

That's how the whole academy ended up standing in a field, both workshops and every student with a weapon, waiting for a mountain to walk out of the trees. Lily's crew was there, because their parents were at the school too, and so the bickering started before the monster did.

"Wait, should we work together here?" somebody said.

"Oh, that's a great idea," Raze said.

"I guess you and us would make a great team," I said.

"I can't deny help to someone who needs it," Raze said.

"Listen, I'm not tagging along with my stupid sis," Enna said.

"That's right. I would never want to tag up with Jerktown and Ms. Fancypants," I said. "Please. That would never work."

"But your parents are all at the school, right?" Lily asked.

"My parents aren't here, so it doesn't matter to me," Lily said.

"Yeah. And you wouldn't even change your facial expression if your friend's parents died," someone said.

"That's just horrible and so immoral," Lily said.

"Don't make me look bad like that. Fine. I'll work together just this once," I said.

"Anyway, all of you will be operating under my orders from now on," Lily said.

"What? Why? We're supposed to be working together," I said.

"It'll be safer and more efficient to follow what I say. Stop complaining and just say yes," Lily said.

"No," I said. "No way."

"Mr. Raze, don't just stand there. Stop them," Lily said.

"Oh, yeah. Finally," Jerktown said, which meant he'd already checked out of the conversation and was looking at the treeline, where something enormous was on the move.

I won't pretend the battle was pretty. It wasn't. The monster was fast for its size and dumb as a hammer, and we threw everything we had at it while the parents screamed behind us and the chairwoman ran in small circles and the principal held the line by holding onto a fence. The monster must have been male, because Lily announced it hadn't noticed her attractiveness, and then she hit it in the face, which was the most honest either of them got all day. Somewhere in the middle, both workshops stopped fighting each other's orders and started fighting the monster, because that's what a school does when the sky is full of teeth.

What I remember clearest is Chloe. Black from collar to boots, standing on a rock with the wind off the mountain trying to unspool her, talking the students up the slope like she was reading a recipe. Cool and clipped, one line at a time, and every line landed like a charm.

"Man, that lady in black is so good at motivating people," somebody from Jerktown's crew said, and nobody argued, because the line had us all moving before we'd finished hating how right it was.

We stopped it. Barely, ugly, all of us together. And the parents, who had watched their children almost die for a man's idea of a good time, did what parents do: they got loud.

"How dare you put my child in danger! Bring out whoever is in charge of this!" a parent said.

"I wrapped it up all nice and clean," Flay said, dusting his hands. "But what are we going to do? This is going to be... I'm not interested anymore. You can handle it from now on."

"What? Me?" said the principal.

"Aren't you the principal? Do something. Do something now," the chairwoman hissed.

"I had nothing to do with this," Zeppel said.

"Well, you did let him loose. Good luck," Flay said.

"No, don't leave me. Hey," Zeppel said.

And the principal stood there with nobody to talk to, which was, when I thought about it, the first time I'd ever seen him get what he deserved.

The crowd thinned toward evening, parents departing in clouds of complaint, and I was walking the long way back to the workshop, Uryu asleep on my shoulder, when the woman in gray stepped out from between two buildings and stood in my path like a toll gate.

"Hey," I said. "You're that lady from the festival. I've been seeing you around."

"I'm glad I found you. I've been looking for you," Tetri said.

"Looking for me? I don't like how that sounds," I said.

"Let me be blunt. I want you to give me that mana," Tetri said.

"No," I said.

"That was fast," Tetri said.

"Just when I thought that other woman was gone. This is enough," I said.

"Let me at least explain the situation. It's not that I want him because he's so fluffy," Tetri said.

"Shut up. Shut up. Don't ever come near us. Okay," I said.

She looked at me for a long, patient moment, the way you look at weather you can't stop. "So, she doesn't even want to listen. I'll just try later."

She stepped back into the shadow between the buildings, and the shadow kept her, and Uryu slept on my shoulder through all of it, warm and small and wanted by too many people.

* * *

"So you just came back to report empty-handed," the Light Mana King said. "Hey, fool. Why didn't you just force it?"

"I was told not to use violence," Tetri said.

"You're so difficult. Go back there. I don't care how. Just get that mana, no matter what," the Light Mana King said.

"Then I might have to hurt that girl. Or the mana itself," Tetri said.

"That might be too..." Tetri said.

"I don't care. Just get it done," the Light Mana King said.

"...Understood," Tetri said.

* * *

"A month," Mr. Tony said, "and you'll be graduating."

"Yeah. I guess it's already been a year," I said. "It went by so fast."

"Hey, don't act like it's already over. You have the final exam coming up. Anyone that gets a bad grade won't graduate, so make sure you're prepared," Tony said.

"So what's it on?" I asked.

"Well... I can't tell you that yet. I bet you haven't even thought about it," Tony said.

"We can't study for it if we don't know what it'll be on," Chloe said.

"Yeah, you're right. Um. Well," Tony said. He regrouped the way he always does, with his shoulders. "You know, studying is good, but you guys should enjoy your last month here with your friends."

"He's totally contradicting himself," Pepperoni whispered.

"That was so not what Mr. Tony would say," Enna said.

"Shut up. Anyway, as soon as I come up with the... I mean, when it's closer to the exam date, I will announce the assignment. That's it. Break," Tony said.

He left, and the workshop sat in the quiet of a year ending.

"It's almost graduation," Chloe said. "We're almost free from this prison called school."

"Sounds like you've got a lot of hatred," I said.

"Oh, come on. We had a lot of fun. Like when we met Pepperoni," I said.

"That's right! Wasn't this year with me super awesome?" Pepperoni asked.

"Sorry, I guess it wasn't that fun," Goto said.

"What, are you gonna start saying stuff like that too?" Pepperoni said.

"And after that we met an unfriendly brat and a creepy animal suit guy," I said.

"Sorry that I'm not so friendly," Chloe said.

"What is with this negative vibe? I'm starting to feel like this year was horrible," Pepperoni said.

"Oh, but I got him," Goto said, meaning Uryu, who was currently asleep in my hood.

"Speaking of which, we haven't seen that lady who was after Uryu in a long time," Pepperoni said.

"Yeah, but then this other one... she was kind of weird, too," Chloe said.

"Another one? Well, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. We're gonna be out of here in a month, anyway," I said.

Somebody should have told the month.

The announcement came the next week. Mr. Tony stood at the front of the room looking like a man who'd lost a fight with his own pillow.

"Sorry to take so long. I finally came up with an idea," Tony said.

"Finally? So you didn't have one before?" I said.

"Oh, uh. That. Yeah, that's right. Took me till last night. Is that a problem?" Tony asked.

"No, it's not," Chloe said.

"Then don't interrupt me. I'm in a bad mood from not getting enough sleep," Tony said. He cleared his throat. "The assignment for the exam is: go make whatever you want."

"...Huh? Can you repeat that?" I asked.

"I said, go make whatever you want. Anything. You guys have been doing alchemy for a year now. Shouldn't you be able to come up with an idea? To make something on your own is what Flay said."

"So it was Mr. Flay's idea," Chloe said.

"How bad," I said.

"You guys are pretty loud today, I see. So you don't want to graduate that bad?" Tony asked.

"We will do our best at this," I said, fast.

"Just say that from the beginning. Now make something nice and I'll grade you. Don't try to make anything so hard that you can't handle," Tony said.

"Jeez, what kind of half-assed place is this?" I said, outside, to the sky.

"I wonder whose idea was to come here," Chloe said.

"Who cares about the past? Let's just be positive," Pepperoni said.

"So what are you thinking about making?" Enna asked me.

"If we put our power together, we could make something pretty nice. Yeah. I'm gonna try to get a good grade on this last exam," I said.

"Great," Chloe said. "It's not like you were studying at all this last year."

"Shut up. I'm pretty sure I'm more skilled than some other normal alchemists," I said.

"Who are these some other normal alchemists?" Chloe asked.

"Um, like the principal. Or Mr. Tony," I said.

"You shouldn't try to standardize them," Chloe said.

"I know. Then I'll make that thing and prove my ability to you," I said.

"What thing?" Chloe asked.

"The final goal of any alchemist. The Hero Stone," I said.

"Miss, you should be more realistic here," Pepperoni said.

"Girls always like to dream, no matter how old they are," Goto said.

"Whoa, what did you guys just say? You said you can make pretty much everything!"

"It's not like Ulrika's delusion started today," Chloe said.

"I was thinking about making Dark Water," she added, turning a page, as if she'd just remembered to be her.

"That sounds like a perfect item for you," I said.

"Where can you find the ingredients for it?" Enna asked.

"I think I can find them on Windy Field," I said.

"Should we just leave her?" Enna said.

"Yeah, let's leave her alone. She's a poor girl," Chloe said.

"Who's a poor girl? Wait, I'm coming too!" I said.

* * *

Windy Field in late spring. The grass bent all one way, like the whole world was leaning to hear something, and Chloe filled her pouch with the black-eyed flowers that only grow where the wind lives.

"So, is this it?" I said.

"Yeah, I think so," Chloe said.

"All right, let's get a bag full," Pepperoni said.

"I don't need that much. I only need two or three," I said.

"Okay, we're done," I said.

"What about me? When do I get to show off?" Pepperoni said.

"Never," Chloe said.

"That just means your time is over," Chloe said.

"What? Stop getting all excited. Let's go back now," I said.

"Wait. I can't let you go back," said the woman in gray, and the wind stopped bending the grass and started bending around her.

"You again. I told you never to come near us."

"Do you know her?" Enna said.

"She's stalker number two," Chloe said. "She's after... um."

"Another one?" Pepperoni said. "He must be popular. I'm almost jealous of his popularity."

"I don't like the term stalker being applied to me. You're just misunderstanding me," Tetri said.

"Misunderstanding? So you're not here for Uryu?" I asked.

"Well... I'm here to ask you to give it to me," Tetri said.

"Then there's no misunderstanding," I said.

"There's a critical situation! Ulrika, I need you to let me explain this to you," Tetri said.

"No way. I don't want to hear it. I'm going back," I said.

"Come on, why don't we at least hear her out?" Goto said.

"No matter what she says, I'm not giving him up. So whatever she says will be a waste of time," I said.

"Then just decide after you hear this. It'll be a long story, but fine... I'll listen," Chloe said. She waited until the wind settled, like even it wanted the story straight. "You know about the decrease in the number of manas in this world, right?"

"Sure. I think I heard about it in class," I said.

"Do you know the reason for that? It's because of a child who was born from a human and a mana," Tetri said.

"Is that even possible?" I asked.

"It was the first time in the long history between humans and manas. It was very shocking to us, too. The mana who gave birth had all of her power stripped away by the child. So she vanished. And that child grew up as neither a mana nor a human," Tetri said.

"Then what happened?" I said, quieter than I meant to.

"The light mana, one of the mana kings, decided to cut off all ties between manas and humans. He figured that if manas kept giving birth, it would lead to their extinction. However, the other king, the Dark Mana King, strongly opposed that idea. Because manas need humans to possess feelings and emotions. If they were cut off from humans, new manas wouldn't be born," Tetri said.

"Are you following so far?" she said.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. Just keep going," I said.

"I apologize. The two ideas never merged, and they never reached a solution. Then the Dark Mana King came up with the idea to make a wager to end this dilemma. They bet on whether a human would be able to raise a newborn mana or not," Tetri said.

Chloe looked at me. I looked at Uryu, asleep in my hood with one wing over his nose.

"And that's Ulrika's mana," Chloe said, flat.

"Just one thing. How do you know this?" I said. "It's beyond human knowledge."

"That's because... I'm a mana. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Tetri. I serve the Light Mana King," Tetri said.

"Well, that sounds very strange, but I guess I'll have to believe you," I said.

"Getting back to the story. The two kings decided to take a break until the wager was settled. But the Light Mana King... well, he's not very fair. He sent humans to carry out his work. He granted his power to humans and made them hunt manas," Tetri said.

"So that woman..." I said, and I didn't need to finish, because we'd all watched Sasalina crawl.

"If that's true, why are they trying to take Uryu away? Isn't the bet about whether I can raise him or not?" I asked.

"That's true. So you're just trying to trick us," Pepperoni said.

"Just listen. There was a mistake on our side. The dark mana who gave you that mana egg... well, he's very careless. He didn't even confirm what kind of mana it was before he gave it to you," Tetri said.

"Now that you mention it, what kind of mana is he?" I said. "I never really thought about it."

The old man in the wheat field. The tired, cracked laugh. "Everything I had left." Ten years warm under my pillow. I thought about him while she said the rest, and the wind in the grass sounded like the wheat that morning, like it had known something I didn't.

"This is only our theory, but that mana could be a Soul Mana, which dwells in all emotions. He could be as powerful as the Light or Dark Mana Kings," Tetri said.

"So... so you're that powerful?" I said to the sleeping thing in my hood.

"Yep, I see," Goto said. "So you used your power to become so popular."

"I can't believe you're making jokes at a time like this!" I said.

"That mana is too powerful to be in the hands of a human. That's why the Light and Dark Mana Kings have decided to cancel the bet and collect that mana. Do you understand now?" Tetri asked.

"What are you gonna do, Miss?" Pepperoni said.

"No," I said.

"What?" Tetri asked.

"I thought I broke everything down, but I guess it was still too complicated. I understand what you're saying. But I don't want to. That's all your own business. It has nothing to do with me. He doesn't like it either," I said.

"Stop being difficult. Don't you remember what happened to that woman who was after your mana?" Tetri asked.

"Oh, I get it. That's why she went crazy," I said.

"That mana doesn't know his own power. Just one mistake could lead to chaos," Tetri said.

"Then I'll make sure I take good care of him. I won't let anything happen. Is there a problem with that?" I asked.

"What kind of reasons do you have to back that up?" Tetri asked.

"Please understand this. If you completely refuse, then I'll have to use force," Tetri said.

"Fine. I'm not gonna lose to you," I said.

"What should we do?" Enna said. "I don't like how she's being so forceful."

"We don't even know if she's telling the truth," Chloe said.

"You already know what to do, right?" Goto asked.

"Of course. I'll always be on her side," Goto said.

"There's always trouble around Ulrika," Goto sighed. "Oh well."

"I see now," Tetri said, and the gray around her went sharp. "Then I'll do what I have to do. I can't go easy on you. I'm sorry."

She was fast. Faster than anything with a closed-ledger face has a right to be, and she hit like a falling bell. We went at her five ways, Chloe's charms stitching the air, Pepperoni's fists, Enna's wires, Goto a blur of white, and me in the middle of it with my falcros and no plan except the one I was born with, which is that when somebody reaches for what's mine, my body goes first and my brains catch up.

"Honestly, I'm surprised. I didn't think I would lose to humans," she said, on one knee in the flattened grass.

"Just give up and go home. I'm not giving up my mana," I said.

"I already told you, that's not an option. I didn't expect to lose. But if this goes as planned, then there shouldn't be a problem."

"What are you saying? Are you trying to..," I said.

"Now!" she said. "Please. Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'm just doing my job."

"What are you doing? You..," I said.

"Can you yell at her and not me? I'm just doing my job," said a voice from the treeline, and Reicher stepped out with a sword already drawn, and the sword was not pointed at me.

"Don't! He didn't kill it. Reicher's sword will only return the mana to the world it came from," Tetri said.

"No. You're lying." I said it with my whole body between them.

"It's not disappearing. Plus... does anyone else sense something weird?" Tetri asked.

"This can't be. Is that mana too powerful for the sword?" Tetri asked.

"What? Hey, what the hell is..," I said.

"Look out! Step back! You..," Tetri said.

The wind came apart. The field went white and loud, and when I could see again the man was gone, Tetri was gone, and the hood on my back was empty.

Uryu was gone.

* * *

I stood in the flattened grass and said his name until it stopped sounding like a word.

The others were calling from somewhere behind me. The wind came back slow, sorry, pushing the grass all one way again. And the girl who was going to make the Hero Stone stood in the middle of Windy Field holding a handful of nothing, with a month left until graduation and a deadline she was about to learn was the least of what she'd miss.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shop at the End of the Road

There is a kind of silence that comes after an explosion, and it is not empty. It is full of everything that used to be there.

The man with the sword had left a cut in the world, and the world was still deciding whether to bleed. Tetri knelt at the edge of the burn, and for the first time her face was not a closed ledger. It was open, and what was in it was fear.

"I apologize. I was wrong. I didn't know that mana possessed so much power," Tetri said.

"That's not the point," I said.

"So he went that way, right? Wait," Tetri said.

I was already running. Chloe's voice followed me from somewhere behind, sharp and tired at once:

"You really should listen until someone is done talking. She didn't even see us. Ulrika doesn't know how to think about two things at once. Good or bad. She's so simple," Chloe said.

"So, Pepperoni... Oh, he's gone too. And I guess I should do what I can," Chloe said.

"Hey, wait. I can't move yet," Goto said. Then, quieter: "Well. I'll be doing something secret by myself. I might be a little late, so could you relay a message to the young lady for me?"

I ran until the trees closed over me and the academy was a rumor. The night came down fast and wrong. And somewhere in the dark, somebody new started talking to himself, and his voice was the worst thing I'd ever heard on two legs.

"This... this is the power of the soul mana," Reicher said, to no one, to the dark, to the thing that had gotten into him. "I feel so much better now. I can't believe I was thinking so hard about this. All I have to do is just kill anyone I don't like. Any weak being. Then only the strongest will survive. I can fight against the strongest..."

I kept running. The voice followed for a while, then it didn't, and the silence after it was worse.

Behind me, Tetri was still on his trail.

"Stop following me," Reicher said.

"I can't help it, since we both have the same destination," Tetri said. "I haven't finished my job yet."

"You just give up already. What are you going to do anyway? It's dangerous to get close to him right now," Reicher said.

"I don't care. He's my baby, so I'm going to take care of him," I said, when she caught the edge of my path and tried the discussion one more time.

"I was expecting more of a legitimate answer, but I get that you're not going to give up," Tetri said. "I don't have anything to talk about. I'll be going now."

"Wait," Tetri said.

"Hey, that's not fair," she muttered, already falling behind. "Ugh. I can't catch up with her. Oh yeah. This might be really bad. And I don't even have, "

* * *

She found me at the foot of the ridge. Not Tetri. The other one. The girl who'd crawled for him. She was talking to herself when I came up on her, the way people talk when the only person left who will listen is their own shadow.

"It's tough going around alone, physically and mentally," Sasalina said. "No, don't you give up. Ulrika is waiting for you."

"Who's there?" she said, spinning. "Oh, it's you. Don't scare me like that. I can't believe I ran into you here."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time to talk," I said.

"Hey, wait. It's an emergency for me, too," Sasalina said.

"Emergency? You want to hurt Uryu? No. And that's why it's an emergency. I'm only gonna listen. That's all," I said.

"Okay, well, where should I start?" Sasalina asked.

"Make it quick. I might go crazy again," she said.

"Huh? What?" I asked.

"Nothing. Now talk," I said.

She talked. And what she told me put the last week together like a pot fitting a lid.

"Okay, well, there's light mana and there's dark mana," Sasalina said. "Who are mana kings. Okay, that's kind of random. The light mana was trying to make all the manas in this world go back to their own mana world. But the dark mana opposed the idea, and, oh yeah, it challenged the light mana to a bet. If a human girl could raise a baby mana, then the light mana was gonna stop its plan. And that baby mana was your mana."

"Yeah. You're good at this," I said.

"So until that bet was gonna end, they weren't gonna do anything. But the light mana has secretly lent a human its power to hunt manas," Sasalina said.

"Hunt manas? A human?" I asked.

"My baby got attacked several times, but I always fought them away. Then she started saying that my mana is really powerful, so she wanted to get it back, and whatnot. Oh, I'm getting pissed again," Sasalina said.

"We'll do that later. Your mana doesn't seem that powerful, though," I said.

"I guess he's a mana of soul. That controls people's minds or something," Sasalina said.

"Hey. Explain that. What?" I asked.

"I don't really know much about it. But that woman who came to get Uryu kept getting crazier," Sasalina said.

"Huh. So that's what was happening. It wasn't the ring. Did he know?" I asked.

"And just now, some guy came out and cut Uryu with his sword. And there was a big explosion. And Uryu was gone. And I've been wandering around. I guess it all makes sense now, but

wait, are you listening?" Sasalina asked.

"Sure I am," I said.

"Hey. Do you think I'm lying or something? Your eyes look pretty doubtful," Sasalina said.

"I mean, I know it's a ridiculous story, but it's all true," Sasalina said.

"My eyes look like this all the time. I believe what you said. That mana made me like this. I guess this is all related."

"What? What do you mean, this ring?" I said, because I'd finally looked at her hand.

"I guess it gives humans the power to hunt manas. I didn't know anything. I know there's no excuse for what I did," Sasalina said.

"I don't get it. What's going on? That guy who attacked your mana..." I said.

"I got tricked into this by him. He told me that this ring won't come off until I hunt a mana. And if I don't... I'll go crazy," Sasalina said.

I looked at the ring, and the ring looked back, the way a thing looks back when it's been waiting for you to notice.

"I need to ask that old fart for more details," she said.

"Where do you think you're going?" I said.

"My grandpa is missing. I have to find him," Sasalina said.

"Missing? So you don't know where he is?" I asked.

"No. I guess I'll just have to look everywhere, then. You should help me, too. While you're at it, you might find Uryu on the way," Sasalina said.

"Why should I help you?" I asked.

"Are you gonna leave a girl like me in a place that's full of monsters? Why don't you get your friends?" Sasalina asked.

"It'll still be dangerous until I find them. And I have to find Uryu," I said.

"Weren't you listening to me? I'm your enemy, who has the power to hunt manas," Sasalina said.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure it'll be fine. You don't look that evil, anyway," I said.

"Don't judge me like that, please. You're the only person I can ask for help now. Please," Sasalina said.

"...Fine," I said.

"Really? Yes! Thank you. But only till I find my grandpa," Sasalina said.

"All right, then. Let's get going," I said. "Just hold on, Uryu. I'm on my way."

"Hey. Jeez. Calm down," she muttered behind me. "But I guess I feel more calm after talking to her. What a strange chick."

* * *

Somewhere else on the hill, Chloe and Enna were looking for me the way you look for a fire you can still smell.

"Ah. Where the hell did she go? Enna, you're walking too fast," Chloe said.

"Why aren't you freaked out? Aren't you worried about Ulrika?" Enna asked.

"I am worried, but..." Chloe said.

"But what?" Enna asked.

"I'm more worried about this situation where I'm just with you," Chloe said.

"Oh, sure. Fine. We don't have a choice now that Pepperoni or Goto aren't here. You're more unreliable than them," Enna said.

"Shut up. If you have a problem, then leave," Chloe said.

Raze's crew cut across their path looking for their own missing piece.

"Hey, Enna. Good timing," somebody from Jerktown's side called.

"Yeah. Good timing not. I don't have time to mess around with you right now," Enna said.

"Um. Have you guys seen Raze's Puniyo? She just bolted out from our workshop. We're looking for her right now," one of Raze's crew said.

"That guy, too?" Enna asked.

"Two, then. Our Ulrika is on the run," Chloe said.

"Looks like they're similar in a weird way. Maybe they're together now," one of Raze's crew said.

"Yeah, right," Enna said. "My sister says, either way, we don't have time to just talk right now."

"You're right. Let's find him," Enna said.

"Okay then. We're going to. I'm sure you guys will be fine, but be careful," one of Raze's crew said.

"We're probably not gonna be fine," Chloe said.

"Shut up. Let's go," Chloe said.

* * *

We found the old man the way you find a knife in the dark: by the wrong quiet around him.

"Oh ho. You," Reicher said. "So you found us."

"Where's the old fart?" Sasalina whispered.

"Old fart? Oh, that man. I think he's still sleeping over there," Reicher said.

"Okay, then get out of my way. I'll let you fight me later," Sasalina said.

"Let me? You mean I will let you. I mean... you're kind of weak," Reicher said.

"What?" she said, and I watched the color leave her voice.

"No matter how hard I try, you just stay weak. I thought you might get a little stronger. What a disappointment you turned out to be," Reicher said.

"What the hell? He's kind of creepy," she said, stepping back. "He wasn't this bad last time I saw him."

"Really? Maybe Uryu did this to him, too," I said.

"Oh, man. I'm really getting frustrated," she said.

"You're too weak. That man is just getting weaker. I wanted to fight him at his peak. I even got rid of that mana that was in the way. And when I got rid of his mana, he just got weaker," Reicher said.

"Got rid of the mana? You..." Sasalina said.

"Oh, didn't you know? Oh, yeah. I guess not. I mean, you hated manas all this time because of it," Reicher said.

"Hey. Step back," I said, and put myself between them, because that's where I live.

"No way. I told you I'd only help until I found my grandpa," she said.

"He attacked Uryu with his sword. I've got something to say to him, too. This matter isn't that low level," I said.

"Do you mean low level? I'll take both of you on. I don't have much time, anyway. So let's make this quick. Plus... he's pissing me off. I really want to hit him," Sasalina said.

"Just don't get in my way," I said.

"Too slow," Reicher said.

He moved like a man who'd spent a lifetime not being hit. We went at him from two sides and he was between both of them, always, and every swing of his sword said the same thing in steel: weak, weak, weak.

"Hey. Be careful," Sasalina said.

"Too slow," Reicher said.

"Ow, what is he..." Sasalina said.

"So weak," Reicher said. "So weak that it's no fun. I'll finish you off, starting with you."

The sword came up, and then a small shape hit him in the side of the head like a thrown apple with opinions.

"Man, that was close, Miss!" Pepperoni said, landing in front of us with his fists up.

"Pepperoni, what..." I said.

"Who are you? You're going to get in my way," Reicher said.

"Here. Leave this to me for now, and run," Pepperoni said.

"You can't handle them all by yourself!" I said.

"Are you saying that I, the strongest and cutest fairy in all the world, will lose?" Pepperoni asked.

"I'm pretty sure you will," I said.

"You didn't have to be so sure about it! Well, at least I can buy you some time. Now go!" Pepperoni said.

"Hurry. Okay. Thanks," I said.

"What's wrong? You should go," Pepperoni said.

"I have to save my grandpa," Sasalina said.

"You're not gonna go back and fight him again, are you?" Pepperoni asked.

"I'm not that dumb," Sasalina said.

"Okay. Finally. Be careful," Pepperoni said.

"You, too. Pepperoni, make sure you come back safely," I said.

"I didn't think you'd just let them go like that," Reicher said.

"Well, you're stronger than they are, right? It's not fun to fight weak people," Pepperoni said. "You're pretty good, seeing how strong I am before we've even fought. Hurry up and start. I'm really excited and frustrated right now."

"You don't have to tell me," Reicher said. "This will end instantly if I cut you with my sword."

"Don't worry. I'm not a human or a mana. I'm a fairy," Pepperoni said.

"Oh? Then should I test it out? Don't disappoint me now," Reicher said.

We ran. We ran with the sounds of it behind us, and I did not look back, because Pepperoni is a lot of things and one of them is fast, and I told myself that with every step until the hill ate the sound.

"I came pretty far, but Pepperoni. I hope he's okay," I said.

"I don't think he would die even if I killed him," Sasalina said, which was not comforting and somehow was.

* * *

I found Chloe and Enna farther down, both of them tired enough to sit and too stubborn to.

"Ulrika. Finally," Chloe said.

"Chloe. Enna. I'm so tired," I said.

"Don't worry us like this," Enna said. "Listen. Pepperoni is fighting by himself, and we need to go help him. The animal suit guy told me not to help the fairy if he's fighting alone."

"Huh? Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know. But he looked pretty serious about it," Enna said.

"...Fine. Then let's get Uryu. We need to hurry," I said.

"Or, do you even know where he went?" Chloe said.

"Of course. If we just... can't walk in eventually..." I said.

"You're so irrational," Chloe said.

"Goto is searching for him right now," Chloe said. "He told us to go back to the workshop once we found you."

"Go back to the workshop? Now?" I asked.

"I know. But there's nothing else we can do," Chloe said.

"If you're gonna be difficult, I'm really gonna get mad at you," Chloe said.

"...Fine," I said.

"Good girl. Now let's go," Chloe said.

* * *

Somewhere in the trees, Tetri had found what was left of the small one.

"There you are. You don't need to hide like that," Tetri said. "Don't look so scared. You're offending me."

"I'm scared. Go away," Uryu said.

"Don't be so difficult. I need to take you back," Tetri said.

"Are you going to be mean? Are you going to hurt me?" Uryu asked.

"I don't want to. But if you're going to force me..." Tetri said.

The small one would not come. Tetri's voice went thin.

"Just calm down," Tetri said.

"I can't calm down," Uryu said.

"Ugh. We're just sitting here. Hope we didn't get caught. I hope they're not hurting him," somebody whispered from cover.

"She's not gonna listen. How annoying. I guess I'll have to use force," Tetri said.

I did not see that part. I only heard later that Tetri had failed the soft way and almost tried the hard way, and that the world had other plans for all of us that night.

* * *

The workshop was dark and warm and wrong without him.

We sat there waiting for news the way you wait for a fever to break. Chloe read her book without turning pages. Enna kept count of things on his fingers. Sasalina sat as far from the cauldron as the room allowed and flinched every time the fire popped.

The door opened.

"Hey. Sorry to keep you waiting," Pepperoni said.

"Pepperoni! You're late," I said.

"What? You look fine. Annoyingly fine," Enna said.

"I shouldn't have worried," Chloe said.

"I'm not as welcome as I expected," Pepperoni said.

"So what happened to that guy?" I said.

"Of course I knocked him out. He started crying and begging for mercy," Pepperoni said.

"That sounds like a lie," Enna said.

"That's got to be a lie," I said.

"You better not be lying," Enna said.

"I'm sorry. I barely escaped with my life. I don't think I can beat him," Pepperoni said.

"Then say that. But I'm glad you're safe. You saved us," I said.

"I was just doing what I can. I'm a good fairy, aren't I?" Pepperoni asked.

"Now we just have to wait for Goto," Chloe said. "Let's get ready."

"Huh? Why are you all ignoring me?" said a voice from the floor.

The door had let something else in with Pepperoni: a small round red thing, rolling like it owned the place.

"There, there. I'd like to give you a hug, but I'm like this, so..." Goto said, from inside the ball.

"Speaking of, you're back!" I said. "We were waiting for you. Did you find Uryu?"

"I don't care if you're just a red ball. I need hugs," Sasalina said, and lunged for it.

"Then you don't need to hesitate. Come here," Goto said.

"Ugh, this is not the time to be fooling around," Enna said.

"Where's, did you find him?" I said.

"Ah, what's the hurry? Let me go back to my body and... uh. Where's my body?" Goto asked.

"We left it there. Of course. We couldn't carry it around," Chloe said.

"It smelled bad, so I didn't want to touch it," Enna said.

"It smelled bad? Ah. You must not have liked my cologne," Goto said.

"He took it the wrong way," Enna said. "How annoying."

"Stop it already, or I'll really get angry," Chloe said.

"Oops, sorry. I was just trying to calm everyone down. So. It looks like your mana went into a place called the Deep Ruins," Goto said.

"Sounds familiar. Where is it?" I asked.

"I'll show you the way, so don't worry. But before that, what?" Goto asked.

"I need to get my body. I like this ball, but... that makes me dizzy," Goto said.

"You have five minutes," Chloe said.

"Don't be ridiculous. Well, I'll try my best," Goto said.

"When are we ever gonna leave?" Sasalina said, and for one second the room almost laughed, the way it used to.

* * *

The Deep Ruins were not deep the way a well is deep. They were deep the way a wound is deep, and everything in them was old and listening.

We went down with Goto's body stitched back onto his soul, complaining about the cold, and Sasalina behind us, and Tetri walking a little to the left of the group like she'd joined by accident and couldn't remember the way back. She had appeared at the gate with her hands up and no weapons, and nobody had told her to go away, which says something about all of us.

Then we found him, and I will write this part slowly, because it is the part I never want to write fast.

He was enormous. He was the size of the night, black and white and wrong, wings torn wide, horns grown tall, and his eyes, which I would know in the dark of the bottom of the sea, were not his eyes.

"Uryu," I said, and the ruins repeated it back to me all the way down.

"Who are you?" he said, and his voice was a landslide, and the worst thing about it was that it was his voice, the one that says Uryu-lika, the one that says my owner finished hers on the first day, coming out of that mountain.

"You're crying," Tetri said. "Did you do this to him?"

"I won't deny it. But can't you just calm down a little? Don't worry. Now, come. What's wrong? Come here," Tetri said.

"No. That's scary," Uryu said.

"What? It's me. I'm not scary," I said.

"Miss, you shouldn't get near him like that," Tetri said. "He's not able to control his power right now. Don't do anything to, "

"Shut up. Just shut up," I said, and the ruin listened to that, too.

"I was just being nice, but you won't even give me a chance to talk," Tetri said. "Now he's more scared. What are we gonna do?"

"Isn't this pretty bad? If he freaks out again, we might all get blown up," Pepperoni said.

"I know. But he's just scared," Goto said. "Young lady."

"What?" I asked.

"He's hurt from being betrayed by humans. Your kindness is the only thing that can heal that wound. Just talk to him with all your love, and he should understand you. You can do it, Miss. You're his mom, aren't you?" Goto asked.

"...Okay. I'll give it a shot," I said.

"Don't be scared. Don't worry. I'll protect you," I said, soft as I know how, which is not very soft.

"Don't lose your patience," Chloe said. "Don't scare him away. Just be gentle."

"Okay," I said.

"Who are you?" he said again.

"No, don't worry. Trust me," I said.

"Please. No. Scary," Uryu said.

"What's wrong? Come here," I said.

"No! That's scary!" Uryu said.

"Stop it!" I said. "Stop throwing a fit already!"

"Oh, no. She did it. She sure did," Pepperoni said.

"Stop whining, or I'll really get mad. Here, let's go back now," I said.

"No! No!" Uryu said.

"Hey! What did you do to Uryu?!" Pepperoni said.

"That was your fault. You can't blame me for that," I said. "I didn't do anything! I was just telling them to behave!"

"Oh boy. This is gonna be interesting," Pepperoni said.

"It depends. Ulrika never thinks before she acts," Chloe said. "Only she can perform this life-threatening challenge without hesitation."

"I think we need to get more serious," Enna said.

"I guess this is just how we are," Goto said.

"Stop talking and help me! I'm gonna time up and take him!" I yelled.

The black around Chloe came up like weather, and she started speaking, and the words were not words, they were the old shapes of her incantations, and the air went cold and sour around her, and I understood, finally, why some people call a girl like her a witch.

Enna was already on the left flank, quiet and exact, the only one of us whose hands didn't shake, because Enna is the only normal one, and normal is what you want when the world comes apart. Pepperoni hit him with everything a small body can bring, and Goto moved through the dark like the dark owed him money.

I won't pretend it was a battle. It was a fight against the thing that lived inside my baby, and the only weapon that worked on it was me. Not my falcros. Me. I climbed the ruin and I talked, and I screamed, and I held on, and somewhere in the middle of it the thing that was not him looked at me with his eyes, the real ones, teal as ever, and went very still.

"I can't believe this. Her power beat his," Tetri said.

"You idiot. I don't think that's the most important thing right now," said Sasalina, who had learned a few things about what matters.

"Not to brag, but my body is pretty much done," Goto said. "I probably look pretty bad inside this suit, too."

"Are you going to apologize?" I said, and I meant it gently and it came out like a threat, which is a thing that happens to me. "Can you say sorry?"

"Sorry," Uryu said, his first whole word to me in the dark.

"Good. Just don't ever do that again. Here, let's go back," I said.

"What are you still whining about?" I asked.

"Something... are you mad?" Uryu asked.

"I'm not mad anymore. Here," I said.

"Whoa, what's wrong with you? You cry too much. There, there." I pulled him against my chest and he burrowed in like he was trying to get back inside the egg, and I stood there in the Deep Ruins holding my whole world in two hands, and I did not let go.

"You look like you're so surprised that you're speechless," Pepperoni said to Tetri.

"Of course I'm surprised. I didn't think a human girl could possess such power. I guess I don't understand the situation," Tetri said.

"That mana was born from a human soul, right?" Chloe said. "Maybe that's why he understood the young lady's heart."

"A human's heart does some crazy stuff sometimes," Goto said. "People from the mana world like you might not understand it."

"I see. Non-humans like you two aren't convincing at all when you're talking about human hearts," Tetri said.

"There are things that you don't see until you're in a different position," said Sasalina, which is the most grown-up thing I ever heard her say.

"Well, I'm actually a human, but I guess my power surpasses humans," Pepperoni said.

"Oh. Are you going back?" Chloe asked Tetri.

"I need to report back about this. That the mana will be safer in that girl's hands," Tetri said.

"Yep. Thanks," I said.

"So that's it, right?" Pepperoni asked.

"You could say that. The major problem is over," Chloe said.

"This would have been impossible without us," Pepperoni said.

"I just got dragged around everywhere," Sasalina muttered.

"Huh? Where did Ulrika go?" Pepperoni asked.

"What are you guys doing? Let's go," I called from ahead.

"Hey! Don't just leave us. We don't deserve this," Pepperoni said.

"Wait up. We look fine, but we're actually really tired," Goto said.

"Are you doing, lady in black?" Goto said to Chloe. "If you're tired, I don't mind carrying you."

"Absolutely not," Chloe said.

"You're shy as usual," Goto said.

* * *

"Uryu," I said, on the walk home, with him on my shoulder like always. "Hug. Can't. It. Please. Crazy, but I'm glad you can talk a little bit now."

"Call me mom, and I'll let you go," I said.

"No," Uryu said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I am embarrassed," Uryu said.

"Oh, how cute. Don't be embarrassed," I said.

"And she's back to that," Enna said.

"A man shouldn't get jealous," Chloe said.

"I'm not jealous. I was being disgusted," Goto said.

"Young man, looks like we have something in common," Pepperoni said.

"My chest was about to burst from jealousy!" Pepperoni said.

"I said, I'm not jealous."

"You guys sound like you're having fun," said Tetri, and we all turned, and there she was at the garden wall with her hands folded, looking like a letter you forgot you sent.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"I have permission. I appreciate you showing me the way," Tetri said.

"Yeah, don't worry. I was coming here anyway," Chloe said. "Hey. You guys shouldn't make friends with so many strangers."

"Are you talking about me? Well, I guess I look a little strange to humans," Tetri said.

"Hey. I'm asking you why you're here," I said.

"I came to apologize. I'm sorry for all the trouble the other day," Tetri said.

"Huh? Um... no, I don't know what to say," I said.

"The light and dark manas admitted their mistake, and they both agreed not to bother this world for a while. I know it's strange for me to say this, but I hope you all will live peaceful lives," Tetri said.

"Oh, um, thank you. Ulrika is acting all understanding now," Chloe said. "She's not good with honest and modest people like Tetri."

"You should have told us that a year ago," I said.

"I must have scared you so much. I'm so sorry. Are you still scared of me? I know I deserve this, but it kind of makes me sad," Tetri said.

"Why don't you just forgive her? She looks like she's sorry," Goto said.

"Will you forgive me?" Tetri asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Then... I know I'm asking for too much, but I have one favor to ask," Tetri said.

"Oh, well. Um," I said.

"I want to pet your head. Just one more time," Tetri said.

"Really? Thank you. Oh... you're really fluffy," Tetri said.

"All right, I'm done. Well, excuse me now. Bye bye," Tetri said.

"Yeah. I'll see you again," I said.

"She didn't look like a bad person," Enna said, watching her go.

"Well, good and evil only depends on where you stand," Goto said.

* * *

"Hey, are you done? I've been waiting here," Chloe said.

I turned. She stood in the workshop doorway with her arms crossed, black from collar to boots, and the look on her face was the look she gets when she has been keeping a secret the size of a house.

"Whoa, I didn't know you were still here," I said.

"I told you I was coming here to tell you something. Since you seemed to have forgotten. Forgotten me. What is it? The deadline for the final exam assignment passed a long time ago," Chloe said.

"I guess you don't get to graduate. How hopeless," Chloe said.

"Wait, wait, I'll do it right now!" I said.

"That would look interesting on your resume," Chloe said.

"No way... You didn't turn yours in either, did you? Why are you so calm?" I asked.

"She turned hers in," Enna said.

"What?" I asked.

"I'll win the day after all that trouble," Chloe said. "I snuck it in."

"Why did you sneak it in? Why didn't you tell me? I completely forgot," I said.

"You're right. You're lying," she said, but the corner of her mouth did the thing it does, and I understood, all at once, what she'd done. She'd turned in my exam for me. Chloe, who had stood between me and the punis all my life, had stood between me and the deadline, and then she'd come to gloat about it, because she would not let me fail and she would not let me skip the losing either.

"Stop complaining and go make it. As a favor to you, I'll wait till this evening," Chloe said.

"Really?" I asked.

"You don't have that much time, anyway. I have to hurry," Chloe said.

"Well, we're back to our normal lives," Enna said.

"That's great. Isn't this what you wanted?" Goto said.

"Yeah. I don't like seeing people fighting about mana and human stuff," I said.

"This is all your work. Let's just enjoy and watch this situation for a while," Goto said.

"That's a really good idea," Enna said.

"Right there. Wipe those creepy smiles off your faces and help me," I said.

"Just two more hours until sundown," Chloe said. "Well, hopefully you can finish."

I worked. The pot came up to heat, and the room filled with the smell of a year, and I worked with my whole body the way I always do, and Uryu sat on the bench beside the cauldron and watched me the way he always does, and the light went gold and long across the floor.

Two hours to sundown, and a synthesis to finish.

I will not tell you what I made that evening, because the exam was graded on it and Chloe would say it's rude to spoil the ending. I will tell you it was not the Hero Stone. The Hero Stone was a girl's dream of being the best. What I made that evening was the first thing I ever made for the person I'd become, and it came out of the cauldron warm as a skipping rock, and Chloe watched it cool and said "not bad," which from Chloe is a trophy.

* * *

We graduated. All of us. Even the ones who never thought they would, and the ones whose parents came, and the ones whose parents didn't, and the man in the animal suit, who cried beautifully and denied it.

And when it was over, I did the thing the girl from the wheat field had always meant to do. I took my diploma and my Mana and my pride, and I walked until the road ran out, and there I built it.

The shop at the end of the road.

It was not grand. It was mine. I put my name on the door and my whole savings on the counter, plus money I had to borrow from people whose handwriting I now know by heart, and I stocked the shelves with everything a year of fighting and brewing had taught me to make. Salves and flash-charges and the little bright things that make a house feel lived in. Uryu took the shelf above the register and claimed it as his kingdom, and I let him, because it was.

And then I opened the doors, and waited.

The countryside is quiet about failure. It doesn't knock. It just sits on the road like weather, and the days went by, and the door stayed shut, and the customers did not come. I dusted the shelves until the dust got tired of being dusted. I counted the borrowed money the way you count your own pulse.

It was not going well.

One evening I stood at the counter with the lamp lit and the road empty all the way to the hill, and I let myself feel it, the whole weight of it, one honest minute of being afraid that the loud girl had finally found the thing she couldn't punch her way through.

And then I said the words that have run my whole life like a seam, out loud, to the empty road and the empty shop and the small warm thing on the shelf above the register:

"If they won't come to me, I'll go to them," I said.

"Best workshop in the universe," Uryu said, from his shelf, in his small new voice, and I laughed with my whole chest, and I started packing the cart.

Tomorrow, we would go find our first customer.

That's what I thought.

What I didn't know yet was that the first customer was already on the road, in the dark past the hill, on his way to us, and that everything I'd ever been, from the wheat field to the Deep Ruins, had been walking toward the moment he walked in.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The First Customer

Morning came rose-colored over the shop at the end of the road.

I had been awake since dark.

There are nights when a person makes a decision and sleeps better for it. This was not one of them. I spent half the night packing the cart and the other half unpacking things I had no business carrying.

"Candle molds," I said, holding them up. "People need candles."

Uryu sat on the counter with one wing over his face.

"Heavy," he said.

"They're tin."

"Heavy tin."

"Fine."

I put them back.

Five minutes later I packed the portable distiller.

"Heavy," Uryu said.

"This one could save a life."

"Heavy life."

"Whose side are you on?"

He lowered the wing. "Cart's."

I left the distiller.

By sunrise we had salves, flash-charges, household heat stones, two smoke pellets, needle thread, clean cloth, six empty sample bottles, the small iron measure my father gave me, and enough food for three days if Uryu did not discover the cheese.

I counted the salves twice. Six green. Two gray-blue. One charcoal pouch that still smelled of the kiln. Not enough for a town that actually wanted me. Enough for a morning of proving I existed.

I almost packed a display banner. Mulberry Workshop, Best in the Universe, or some other noise. Uryu sat on it until I put it back on the hook.

"Heavy," he said.

"It's cloth."

"Heavy lie."

He was getting too good at that. Truth from a creature who used to be an egg is harder to argue with than truth from Chloe. Chloe at least lets you fight.

I put the ledger in the box beneath the seat.

The first page had our name at the top.

MULBERRY WORKSHOP

Below it, nothing.

No orders. No payments. No debts repaid. The emptiness of that page had become louder every morning the shop stayed open. I had cleaned the windows so many times the glass squeaked in apology. Dust is honest. Empty ledgers are honest. I was tired of honesty that did not feed us.

Under the blank page sat the loan note. Chloe had folded the corner so I could not pretend I lost it. The numbers were not cruel. They were patient. Patient numbers are worse. They wait while you invent reasons to stay behind a counter nobody visits.

I had counted the days on the back of the note until Chloe caught me and took the charcoal. "Days don't change interest," she said. "Work does." She was right. Being right about money is one of her least charming talents.

I had tried the loud way already. Sign in the window. Best workshop talk. Standing in the doorway like a challenge. Town walked past like I was weather. One woman asked if I sold soap. When I said salves, she nodded like that settled something and

kept walking. A boy pressed his face to the glass, saw Uryu, and ran. Nobody crossed the threshold. The bell over the door stayed a decoration.

So the cart.

If the shop would not pull them in, I would haul the shop to wherever hurt was honest enough to stop me.

Uryu climbed onto the highest crate and spread his ribbon wings.

"Best workshop in the universe," he said.

It had become his second-favorite sentence. His first was no, especially when I asked him to call me mom.

"If they won't come to us, we'll go to them," I said.

I locked the shop, checked it twice, then went back to check the stove.

"Cold," Uryu said from outside.

"I know."

"Checked three times."

"I know."

"Chloe said,"

"Chloe ain't here."

He smiled. That was the trouble with teaching a quiet creature to talk. He saved every word until he found the sharp place.

We set out.

The road to town ran past the hill and along an old fence silvered by weather. Morning light came through the trees in long gold bars, the way it had come through the wheat when I found the old man. Some roads you walk twice without knowing it.

The cart squeaked on the left wheel.

I had greased it.

It squeaked anyway.

"Professional," Uryu said.

"One more word and you're walking."

He looked down from the mountain of stock. His feet did not reach the edge.

"Cruel owner."

"You got wings."

"Delicate."

"Tch."

We had gone a mile when I saw the puni.

It came toward us along the center of the road, pink and round, about the size of a good melon. One side of it sagged. Every third bounce failed halfway, and it had to rock forward to keep moving.

The cart squeaked.

The puni stopped.

It looked at me, then at Uryu.

It made a low round sound.

I understood none of it.

That still struck the same sore place it had when I was six. The difference was that now I had learned not to let the sore place answer first.

I watched the bounce pattern before I moved. Third bounce short. Left side lagging. Head tilted toward the ditch side of the road, not toward town. Hurt animals look for cover. This one had chosen the open road instead. That meant either desperation or purpose, and both of those ask different things of a craft.

"It's hurt," Uryu said.

"I see that."

"Scared."

"Of us?"

He squinted. "Of staying. Of leaving. Both."

The puni turned as if to leave. Its weak side folded. It hit the dirt, bounced once by accident, and stayed there.

I dropped the cart handles.

No sudden steps. No reaching over its head. Pa's rule for skittish goats worked on pink customers too: make yourself smaller than the problem before you try to own it.

"Easy," I said, crouching a few feet away. "I ain't gonna grab you."

The puni squeaked.

"I can't understand. Show me."

It watched my hands.

I held them out empty, palms up, fingers soft. Chloe used to tell me my hands looked like fists even when I meant peace. I uncurled them on purpose.

Slowly, it rolled upright and turned its left side toward me.

A thorn stuck from the pink skin below the curve of its face.

Not a little burr. A black thorn as long as my smallest finger, buried nearly to the base. The skin around it had darkened from pink to bruised plum. Thin blue-black fluid shone along the shaft.

"That ain't blackberry sap," I said.

Uryu floated down beside me. The puni trembled.

"Back up," I told him.

"Likes me."

"Maybe. But it looked at you when it got scared. Give it room."

He moved behind my shoulder.

I opened the field kit on the road. Cloth, forceps, clean water, gray-blue salve, green wound salve, charcoal powder. The small iron measure lay in its slot, four lines cut into the handle.

My father's voice came back as clearly as if he were squatting beside me.

A thing is what a thing does.

A customer is not the person who pays. A customer is the person who trusts you with the part that hurts.

He had never said that second part. I had learned it later.

Standing in the road with forceps in my hand, I understood why the empty ledger had felt so loud. It was not only unpaid debt. It was unused trust. A shop can survive a quiet week. A craft dies if nobody ever hands you the hurting part.

I checked the kit once more before I touched anything. Forceps clean. Cloth folded with the unused side out. Water clear. Gray-blue for shock and shaking. Green for open wound. Charcoal if the residue wanted to climb. The iron measure sat where my thumb could find the four lines without looking. Father's rule again: if you need to hunt for the tool, you already waited too long.

"This is gonna pinch," I said.

The puni squeaked.

"I know. Everything useful does."

I cleaned the skin around the thorn first. The blue-black residue came away oily and left a metallic smell on the cloth. Wet stone and something sweet.

I froze.

Master Pell's Celestial Tonic had smelled like that.

For a second I was fourteen again in a goat-pen doorway while Thom screamed at daylight moons. The road under my knees became quarry glass. Then Uryu's wing brushed my cheek and the present returned with mud in it.

"Same family," I muttered. "Not same bottle."

Not exactly. That had been sharper, trapped in violet glass. But the same wrong sweetness lived under it.

I held the cloth to the light. Ordinary plant sap dulls as it dries. This one stayed glossy, then crawled a hair's width toward the warmer edge of the cloth, like it preferred heat. I moved the cloth nearer Uryu. The stain brightened. I moved it away. It dulled.

"Mana salt," I said.

"Bad?" Uryu asked.

"Depends what it rode in on."

I sniffed again, slower. Under the sweet-metal sat a second note, flatter, like dye vat water after the color has been pulled out. Mill work. Mordant. The kind of ordinary chemistry that keeps cloth bright and should never wake up next to unstable mana.

Two wrongs sharing one thorn.

"Uryu. Bottle."

He brought an empty sample bottle from the kit. I wiped residue from the thorn into it, labeled the cork with charcoal — PUNI / ROAD / THORN — and sealed it.

The puni made a questioning noise.

"Evidence," I said. "Don't worry. That's the part I charge extra for."

It did not laugh. Punis may have excellent gossip and no appreciation for timing.

I checked the wound edge again before I touched the forceps. Heat under the bruise. Pulse uneven. No green rot yet. That meant I still had a clean window, not a rescue from sepsis. Good. Clean windows are where craft lives. Panic is where craft dies.

I set the forceps around the thorn.

"Hold still."

The puni squeezed itself low to the ground.

I pulled in one straight motion.

The thorn came free with a wet snap.

The puni shot three feet into the air.

"Sorry!"

It landed, wobbled, and made a sound loud enough to frighten birds out of the hedge.

"I said it would pinch."

Uryu leaned close to my ear. "Says liar."

I turned. "You understand it?"

"Feel it."

"That ain't the same."

"Very liar feeling."

"Fine. Tell it the worst is over."

Uryu looked at the puni. His expression tightened with concentration.

"Worst over," he said aloud.

The puni stared at him.

"I could've done that."

"You did."

Tch.

The wound bled clear gel with a line of pink through it. I let it drain, washed it twice, then put one small patch of green salve along the edge.

One spot. Wait.

Chloe had written that beside my first successful remedy. I had carried the rule farther than I had carried half my clothes.

The puni shifted.

No swelling. No color change. The trembling slowed.

I treated the rest and covered it with a flexible leaf dressing that could stretch when the creature bounced.

"Now stay still."

The puni bounced.

The dressing held.

It bounced again, higher.

"I said still."

The third bounce cleared my head.

I fell backward into the dust. The puni came down beside the cart, compressed nearly flat, and launched again with all the joy it had been storing while hurt. It circled us in pink blurs.

Every bounce said exactly what it meant. I did not need a syllable.

Uryu clapped his little hands.

"Better."

"Yeah," I said, laughing in spite of the dirt in my mouth. "Much."

The puni stopped in front of me and spoke for a long time.

The sounds passed my ears as they always did. Round, bright, impossible.

Then it reached into itself somehow and produced three coins.

Puni coins. Small, round, golden-pink, and slightly warm. Chloe once told me nobody knew where punis kept things. I believed her. The coins appeared from a part of the creature that had not existed until payment became necessary.

It placed them in my palm one at a time.

Warm. Warmer than sunlight. Not hot.

The ledger waited in the cart.

My throat closed.

"Payment?" I asked.

The puni bounced once.

I looked at Uryu.

"One customer," he said.

I laughed with my whole chest, right there in the road. I ruffled his head, then held the coins up to the morning.

"The first one."

I went to the cart for the ledger before the joy could talk me out of paperwork. Chloe's ghost would haunt me either way, so I chose the haunting that kept the shop honest.

Date. Road east of town. One pink puni. Thorn extraction. Green salve, leaf dressing. Sample retained. Payment: three warm coins.

My hand shook on the last line. Not from fear. From the ridiculous fact that a blank page had finally taken ink.

I wrote the dose too. One patch, wait, then the rest. Leaf dressing checked after three bounces. Residue bottled and labeled. If Chloe ever audited this page, she would find nothing to strike through except my handwriting, and she always struck through that.

"Write owner," Uryu said.

"I am the owner."

"Write name."

I added it. Ulrika Mulberry. Small. Clear. No Best in the Universe nonsense beside it.

For a breath I almost wrote the old sign line underneath. Habit. Pride. The noise that had kept the doorway empty. I left the space blank instead. One clean entry. That was enough noise for a first morning.

The puni bounced toward town.

Halfway to the bend, it stopped.

It looked back.

Then it bounced toward us again, passed the cart, and continued west, away from town.

At the blackberry hedge it turned and called.

"What now?" I asked.

It bounced west twice. Then came back three body lengths and waited.

"Wants us," Uryu said.

"You feel that?"

"Worry. More hurt."

The coin warmth changed in my hand.

A faint blue line appeared across the top coin, then vanished.

I looked at the sample bottle. The residue inside clung to the glass against gravity.

Our stock was meant for town. Every jar I used before selling was one less chance to repay the borrowed money. The shop sat locked behind us, empty. The ledger had one customer and three coins. That should have been enough for one morning.

Enough for a story. Not enough for a craft.

Town had people who could pay in ordinary silver. Town had a square, a pump, a baker who might need heat stones, a carpenter whose hands cracked in cold weather. The loud way had failed at the doorway, but the cart way might still work on the street. Three warm coins proved somebody would stop for help. Logic said turn east, find more of that, put real numbers under MULBERRY WORKSHOP before the loan note finished being patient.

The seed winter rose in my memory like a bruise under old cloth. I had pushed a good small result too far once and paid for it in ruined rows. The opposite sin sat in front of me now: a good small result finished clean, and a road asking whether I would stop at the pretty ending.

Father would have counted stock and walked to town. Chloe would have written the entry, closed the book, and asked what the residue meant before she moved. I was neither of them. I was the girl who packed candle molds she did not need and then followed a pink bounce because the coins were still warm in my hand and the sample bottle was still clinging wrong.

The puni called again.

I put the coins in my pocket. I did not close the ledger. An open book is a promise you can still keep.

"West?"

It bounced.

Uryu eyed the town road, then the puni. "Shop money that way."

"People that way too," I said. "Hurt this way."

"Both true."

"Yeah."

"Fine. But if this is a scenic tour, I'm charging for the wheel."

We followed.

The blackberry hedge ran beside the road for half a mile, thick with leaves and white blossoms. Too many blossoms. Summer berries hung black on some branches while new flowers opened beside them. Green fruit, ripe fruit, flowers, and dead brown leaves shared the same stems.

I stopped the cart.

"That's wrong."

Uryu touched one blossom. It folded shut around his finger, then opened again.

The puni squealed.

He jerked away.

"Scared," he said.

"Good instinct."

I cut a stem with my knife and held it over cloth. The sap came out clear, then darkened blue at the air.

The thorn from the puni lay in my kit. Same black bark. Same oily shine.

But ordinary blackberry thorns did not carry mana-tainted residue, and bushes did not flower through their own rot.

I checked three more stems along the hedge line. The blue darkening got stronger as we moved west. Toward town, weaker. Toward the ditch, louder. Contamination has a direction if you bother to walk it instead of inventing a villain from the first bad jar.

I tore a clean strip of cloth and pressed it to a cut stem for a count of ten, then to another farther west, then to one nearer the road. Three stains. Three strengths. I labeled them with charcoal ticks: one, two, three. The third tick looked almost black in the morning light. Not a feeling. A gradient. Gradients are what you take to a village that does not want to hear the word poison yet.

"Map," I told Uryu.

He blinked. "No map."

"In your head. Warm places. Scared places. Where it thickens."

He closed his eyes. Opened them toward the west ditch.

"There. Pulling."

"On the plants?"

"On the worry."

That was worse. Plants do not worry. Things that feed on worry do.

I wrote one more line in the open ledger while the cart still stood on solid road. Hedge wrong west of town. Sap darkens blue. Strength rises toward ditch. Sample ticks 1-2-3 retained on cloth. Then I shut the charcoal stub between the pages so it would not roll. Paperwork is not courage. It is how courage survives an argument later.

Farther west, a drainage ditch met the road. Water moved through it in a thin shining ribbon. Too thin for the recent rain marks on the bank. Something upstream was taking a share.

The puni left the road and bounced down the bank.

I almost turned back there. Town had people with coin and complaints I understood. The ditch had a language of wrongness and a customer who paid in warmth instead of silver. The vow in my mouth felt suddenly less like a banner and more like a rope.

Uryu watched my hands on the cart handles.

"Afraid," he said.

"Of debt."

"Of being needed."

"...Both."

"Still go?"

I looked at the puni's weak-side bounce, now healed and purposeful.

"Still go."

I counted stock before I left the cart. Six green salves. Two gray-blue. One charcoal pouch. Clean cloth enough for maybe eight dressings if I tore smart. Sample bottles empty except the thorn residue. That was not a clinic. That was a first-aid kit pretending to be courage.

"If this is more than eight," I told Uryu, "we stabilize the worst and I walk for help."

"Chloe?"

"If I can find her. If not, anybody with clean water and sense."

"You hate asking."

"I hate dying patients more."

He nodded like that counted as growth. Maybe it did.

"Wait," I said.

It did not.

I tied the cart to a fence post, packed the field kit, and followed with Uryu at my shoulder. Mud pulled at my boots. The ditch smelled of wet iron and overripe fruit.

Every ten yards we found another wrong thing.

A patch of grass silver at the tips. Beetles lying alive on their backs, legs moving. A frog with blue stains around its mouth. Blackberry roots swollen above the mud like knuckles.

I stopped at the frog long enough to tip it upright and wipe its mouth with a damp cloth. It blinked, then hopped three crooked hops and sat watching us like a witness. Not a cure. A refusal to walk past something I could still touch.

The puni slowed ahead of us.

The ditch widened into a hollow hidden by willow scrub.

Pink shapes moved in the shade.

Not one.

Dozens.

Punis lay along the bank and in the shallow water. Blue, green, pink, yellow. Some had thorn wounds. One shook without being cold. Another bounced in place over and over as if it had forgotten how to stop. A small blue puni pressed against a larger one that did not move.

Their voices rose when they saw us.

I could not understand a word.

I understood everything.

The hollow smelled like the thorn cloth, multiplied. Sweet-metal and dye-flat water. A broken violet glass shard winked under willow roots. Mill mark on a half-sunk crate. The road had not lied. The first customer had not lied. My empty shop had been the lie, pretending the world would line up at a counter while the wrongness ran west.

Uryu made a sound deep in his chest. The air around him tightened.

I caught him before his wings spread.

"Stay with me."

"Hurts. All."

"I know. Don't reach."

His Soul Mana had changed hearts before he understood what changing meant. Fear moved through the hollow in waves, and I felt him wanting to answer it the way the egg had answered cold, by giving whatever warmth he had.

"Look at me," I said.

His teal eyes found mine.

"We help with our hands first. One at a time."

The first customer bounced beside my boot.

It had not come to find treatment for itself.

It had come to bring the workshop.

I set down the kit and opened every bottle I had. Green first for open wounds. Gray-blue for the shaking ones. Cloth torn into marked strips. Forceps clean. Iron measure where I could see the four lines. No Hero Stone. No Best in the Universe speech. Just work.

The first customer bounced once against my boot, then went still, watching my hands the way it had on the road. Trust, reused. That was the part no academy exam ever graded.

"All right," I said to the hollow. "Show me who is worst."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He Brought Friends

The trouble with asking a crowd of punis to show you who is worst is that punis answer as a crowd.

The hollow erupted.

Every creature squeaked, bounced, rolled, pointed with its whole body, or tried to climb over another one. I stood in the center with my kit open and understood no words at all.

"Stop! One at a time!"

They got louder.

Uryu clung to my shoulder. "Too much."

"Yeah."

His fur had lifted. Not fear of the punis. Fear of their fear. Soul Mana answers what it hears, and the hollow was screaming in a language I could not hear and he could not refuse. I put my hand over his chest the way I used to cup the egg when thunderstorms rolled over the wheat.

"Hands first," I said. "Not hearts. Not yet."

He nodded too hard. That meant he had already reached once and pulled back.

The first customer bounced onto the field kit and made one sharp call.

The others quieted.

Not silent. Punis do not appear to have that setting. But the noise lowered enough to think.

"Thank you," I told it.

It bounced once.

I scanned before I chose. Academy habit, village habit, both. Who is bleeding. Who is shaking. Who is quiet when quiet is wrong. The loud ones still had enough fight to complain. The quiet ones were already spending what they had left.

I pointed at the blue puni pressed against the one that did not move.

"That one first."

The crowd opened a path.

The still puni was pale green, nearly gray along the bottom. No thorn. No burn. Its surface felt cool and loose under my fingers. I put my ear close. Punis did not breathe like humans, but something moved inside them with a soft liquid rhythm.

Too slow.

"Uryu, what do you feel?"

He closed his eyes.

"Far away."

"From us?"

"From itself."

That was not a diagnosis I could measure. It was still information.

I checked the mouth. Blue-black grit coated the inner edge. The same metallic sweetness rose from it.

"It drank the ditch water."

The small blue puni beside it squeaked.

"I know you want to help. Bring clean water. Clean." I pointed uphill, then at my canteen. "Not ditch."

It stared.

The first customer made a sound. The blue one bounced away.

I mixed charcoal in the smallest measure, thinner than the binder I had used for Thom years ago. A puni was not a human. That obvious fact was the entire limit of my knowledge. Dosage by hope is how you kill a patient with good intentions. Dosage by fear is how you kill them faster.

Test one spot. Wait.

There was no spot to test when the treatment went inside.

"Half first," I said.

I fed the gray-green puni drops along the edge of its mouth. Most rolled off. Some disappeared. I counted under my breath the way Chloe counted ingredients when my hands wanted to rush. Three. Four. Stop.

We waited.

The rhythm inside it quickened, then stumbled.

I stopped.

"No more."

Uryu's wing twitched toward the patient. Warmth leaked from him without permission.

"No," I said, sharper than I meant. "If you push and it wakes wrong, we don't know what we woke."

He pulled the warmth back. It cost him. I saw it in the way his horns dipped.

The small blue puni returned pushing a broad leaf folded into a cup. Clean spring water sloshed over the sides. I rinsed the patient's mouth and gave three small measures.

Color moved faintly back into its lower half.

Not cured. Less far away.

"Keep giving one of these." I held up the iron measure. "Slow."

The blue puni wrapped itself around the handle.

"Not all at once."

It stared.

I demonstrated. Dip, lift, wait. Dip, lift, wait.

It copied me with painful seriousness. Authority without language. That was the whole workshop in miniature.

Then came the wounded ones.

Seven thorn punctures. Four chemical burns. Two cracked surfaces from frantic bouncing. One yellow puni had swallowed something that made it hiccup sparks. I put it at the far end of the bank and told everybody not to stand in front of it.

The thorns matched the road sample. Same black bark. Same oily shine. Same wrong sweetness when the cloth took residue. I did not need a second mystery. I needed proof the first one had a source.

Burns were harder. No clean edge. Skin dulled and sticky where the ditch water had pooled against them. I rinsed, waited, rinsed again. Gray-blue on the shaking ones first, because shock kills before pride finishes a pretty bandage. Green only after the trembling slowed. Chloe's rule, written beside my first successful remedy and still living in my hands: one spot, wait, then the rest.

The cracked ones got leaf wraps and quiet. Bounce is medicine for a healed puni. Bounce is damage for a cracked one. I had to sit on a pink patient once to make that point. It squeaked. Uryu translated: rude owner. Fair.

By noon, my green salve was half gone.

By midafternoon, gone.

Clean cloth, gone.

Charcoal, almost gone.

I started cutting dressings from my own spare shirt. Vanity is fabric. Fabric is medicine when the kit runs dry. The red bustier stayed on. Pride has limits; so does exposure. I tore the spare along the seams so the pieces came clean and square. Chloe would have approved the geometry and hated the reason.

Uryu offered a wing feather with great ceremony. I declined, then used two anyway as soft ties for the smallest blue puni because dignity is also medicine and he needed to give something.

"Hero feather," he whispered.

"Don't tell Goto. He'll write an opera."

Between patients I washed my hands in spring water until the blue film left my knuckles. Contaminated hands turn a clinic into a second ditch. Father's kitchen rule, applied to pink customers: clean before you touch, clean after you touch, clean when you only think you touched.

The first customer stayed at my elbow through every binding. Not helping. Supervising. Every time I reached for the wrong bottle it bounced once against my wrist. I began to trust the bounce more than my own hurry.

The ledger in the cart held three warm coins. I had spent more stock than those coins could buy three times over.

Math like that would have broken academy-me. Road-me wrote it as tuition paid forward. If Bellwether spit us out, the hollow still had living punis and I still had a craft. If Bellwether let us work, the coins would have bought a door. Either way the spending was not a mistake. It was a wager with my name on the bottle.

I still wrote the cost. Six green used. Two gray-blue used. Charcoal nearly gone. Cloth gone. Shirt sacrificed. Three warm coins received. Balance: absurd. Chloe would underline absurd twice and then refuse to let me throw the page away. Good. Absurd is still a number you can learn from.

I looked at the hollow.

A green puni with a treated thorn wound bounced without pain. The gray one had begun moving on its own. The sparking yellow puni now hiccupped smoke, which I counted as progress.

Progress is a mean word. It means better than dying and worse than finished.

"We need more," I said.

Uryu sat in the grass, exhausted. "Shop."

"Too far to leave them."

The first customer bounced toward the far bank, where a broken crate lay half sunk in mud.

I had noticed it and ignored it because sick bodies came before rubbish. Now I crossed the ditch and pulled it free.

Violet glass rattled inside.

My skin went cold.

Not bottles. Broken panes or vessel walls, thick and curved. Each piece had a cloudy blue vein through it. The wood carried a burned mark: a bell inside a circle, crossed by three lines like water.

Under the glass lay coarse white mineral grit.

I touched one grain with the wet tip of my knife.

It dissolved and flashed blue.

The egg would have heated. Uryu's fur lifted instead.

"Bad," he said.

"Yeah."

A drainage channel entered the hollow from the west. The contamination had not started with the blackberry hedge. It had traveled here.

I sealed glass, grit, thorn, water, and mud in separate sample bottles. Separate mattered. Mixing evidence because it came from the same place was how you made one mystery look like another.

Chloe had beaten that into me with the itch-salve records. One contaminated note turns a shelf into fiction. I wrote the mill mark twice, once in the ledger and once on the bottle scrap, because hands shake and copies save stubborn girls from their own haste.

The grit smelled like the dye-flat note under the thorn sweetness. Ordinary mill chemistry. The glass carried the wrong half. Mana salt trapped in violet walls, the same family as Master Pell's Celestial Tonic and not the same bottle. Two wrongs again. One from work. One from something buried under work.

I held a shard near Uryu. His fur lifted. I moved it away. Settled. Near. Lifted.

"Same family as the thorn," I said.

"Worse," he said.

"Because there's more of it?"

"Because it wants."

Wanting is a terrible property for a mineral.

A wooden slat on the crate still had part of an address painted beneath the mud.

...LLWETHER DYE & MILL

"Bellwether," I said.

I knew the name. A village west of town, built along the old millpond. An hour by cart if the road was kind. Half if you drove like Flay had designed the lesson. Traveling sellers went there when town got tired of them. Some came back with coin. Some came back with stories about doors shut in their faces. One never came back at all, which the baker told as weather and Chloe told as a warning.

A dye mill means mordant in the water whether anybody admits it. A millpond means whatever sinks stays. Put unstable mana salt under that and you get a village that coughs, dreams

wrong, and paints signs about traveling cures.

The first customer bounced.

"You came from there?"

It turned west.

The other punis began making the same low sound.

Uryu pressed both hands over his ears. "Fear there."

"People?"

"Everything."

The hollow had become a field clinic and I had nearly nothing left to treat with. Town still sat east with ordinary silver and ordinary complaints. West sat with a mill mark, violet glass, and a patient list that already owned more of my stock than the ledger could repay.

I looked at the first customer.

"You knew when you paid me," I said.

It bounced once. Not apology. Confirmation.

Ha. Best workshop in the universe, hired by a melon with a plan.

I counted patients again. Count first, panic after.

Twenty-three punis. Six stable enough to move. Five needed watching through the night. One might still die.

Numbers are kinder than faces until you have to carry the faces.

"We can't take the cart through this mud," I said.

Uryu looked at the punis. "They take us."

"Where?"

The first customer bounced uphill, then stopped beside a narrow track hidden under the willow branches.

Punis knew every path that did not look like one.

We moved the clinic.

I left the cart tied at the fence line with the sample box lashed shut and a note under the seat in case some helpful idiot found it: Mulberry Workshop. Do not drink ditch water. Do not mix bottles. If I am dead, give the ledger to Chloe.

Practical romance.

The healthier creatures carried leaves of water and bundles of clean grass. I took the gray-green patient against my chest. It was cool and heavier than it looked. Every few steps its rhythm stumbled and I stopped until it found itself again. Uryu floated beside us, speaking simple feelings when I needed them.

"Pain."

"Which?"

He pointed.

"Scared."

"Everybody."

"More scared."

That helped. Not translation. Triage. The difference between hearing words and knowing who is about to tip.

The hidden track climbed to an abandoned charcoal burner's hut less than half a mile away. Roof intact. Dry floor. Stone hearth. Better than the hollow.

The hut smelled of old smoke and dry earth. I swept once, not for pride, for infection. Uryu floated the lantern while I sorted patients into three rows: thorn, burn, and the ones with nothing visible that worried me most. Invisible injuries make loud mistakes if you treat what you hope instead of what you see.

I chalked three marks on the floorboards with a burned stick from the hearth. Thorn. Burn. Quiet. The first customer inspected each mark, then bounced the patients into the right rows without being asked. I still understood no words. I understood management.

The first customer posted itself at the door like a steward. Every time a healthier puni tried to leave too early, it bounced them back until I checked. Authority without a diploma. I recognized the posture. I had worn it in the academy doorway when Tony asked for five members and I had four.

Uryu sat on the windowsill and shook.

"Still hearing them?"

"All night," he said. "Even when quiet. Quiet is loud."

"Can you put it down?"

He looked at me like I had asked him to put down breathing.

"Then hold only mine," I said. "One heart. Not the room."

He crawled into the crook of my arm and pressed his forehead to my collarbone. The shaking slowed. Not gone. Contained. That was enough to keep working.

By dark, the patients lay in rows on clean bracken. I made fresh charcoal from the burner's old stock, boiled spring water, and stretched the last salve with wax oil. Stretching medicine is dangerous because scarcity makes every compromise sound wise. I marked the new mixture STRETCHED / TEST and put one spot on a healed thorn edge before I touched anybody who still needed help. No swelling. No color change. Then, and only then, the rest.

The yellow puni hiccupped one final spark and fell asleep.

"Alive?" Uryu asked.

I listened.

"Annoyingly."

He smiled.

Outside the hut, the ditch still flashed when the moon caught it. Inside, the air smelled of boiled water, wax, and the metallic sweetness I could not scrub out of the cloths. I hung the dirty ones on a line away from the clean row and told Uryu if he touched the wrong line I would make him wash them with his face.

"Cruel," he said.

"Alive," I said.

We ate bread beside the door. The cheese was missing.

"Uryu."

"Stress."

"You ate all of it from stress?"

"Medical stress."

"That's not a thing."

He looked toward the rows of sleeping punis.

"Is now."

I let him have that one.

Before midnight I walked the rows again with a lantern hooded low. Count. Color. Rhythm. The yellow puni hiccupped smoke in its sleep and I moved a water pail farther from its mouth. The green one with the treated thorn wound bounced once in dream and settled. Chloe would have demanded a chart. I had order sheets and stubbornness.

Near midnight, the gray-green patient began to move.

Its surface rippled. The little blue puni woke and wrapped around it. I reached for the diluted binder, then stopped.

The rhythm had quickened too far.

Not fading now. Racing.

My first instinct was more charcoal. Finish the job. Force the toxin down. That instinct had a winter and three ruined seed sacks behind it, and it still stood up like it owned the room.

"Uryu?"

He jerked awake. "Too much inside."

The charcoal had bound something. Maybe now the body could not move it out.

Old seed-winter panic tried to stand up in my throat. I shoved it down and used my hands.

I rolled the patient gently, pressed along its lower curve, and dark liquid spilled from its mouth onto the cloth. Blue-black, then clear.

The rhythm settled.

I sat back shaking.

If I had poured more binder because fear told me to finish the job fast, I would have finished the patient instead.

Seed winter. Always seed winter when my hands want to finish. The lesson never arrives polite. It arrives as dark liquid on a cloth and a rhythm that almost did not come back.

I wrote it down before my pride could edit it. Gray-green: charcoal half-dose slowed rhythm; more would have bound too hard; press-and-drain cleared residue; patient stabilized after purge. Failure narrowly avoided by stopping. Put that in the ledger under Customer One's referral list so future-me could not pretend I had been brilliant.

The first customer watched from the doorway.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I told it.

It bounced once.

"Don't agree so fast."

It bounced again.

Then it came close and placed one side against my boot.

Uryu, half-asleep, murmured, "Trust."

"I heard."

"Also tired."

"That one's for both of us."

Trust is not the same as certainty. My father had tried to teach me that with three sacks of seed. It had taken years to reach my head.

At dawn, twelve punis were well enough to leave. They did not go west. They scattered east and south, carrying warning in a language I could not hear.

The gray-green one stayed alive.

I wrote every treatment and reaction on the backs of old order sheets. No orders needed them.

Then I opened the ledger to the first page.

Under **MULBERRY WORKSHOP**, I wrote:

Customer One: pink puni. Thorn extraction and wound salve. Paid three puni coins.

Below it:

Referred twenty-two others. Payment pending, probably forever.

I stared at that line and laughed once, sharp. Academy me would have called it failure. Road me called it inventory of responsibility. The coins from Customer One were still warm in my pocket. Warmth is not the same as solvency. It is still a kind of wealth.

I added the samples list on the facing page so Chloe could not accuse me of romance without paperwork. Thorn. Grit. Glass. Water. Mud. Tree scrape. Mill mark copied twice. Bellwether one mile west. Sign refuses traveling cures. Approach with consent, not a banner.

Uryu peered at the facing page.

"Boring," he said.

"That's how shops live."

Uryu peered over my arm.

"Bad business."

"Terrible."

"Best workshop?"

I looked at the rows of living creatures, the violet glass, the mill mark, and the western path.

"Not yet."

We left the stable punis in the care of the first customer and two others that seemed to have authority, though for all I knew they were simply loud.

Before the cart wheels turned I knelt and showed the first customer the sample bottles one by one: thorn, grit, glass, water, mud. Separated. Labeled. It bounced at each as if taking inventory for a court I could not hear. Then it bumped my knee hard enough to mean go.

I left half the stretched salve and the last clean cloth strips in a covered tin by the hearth. Not generosity. Continuity. A clinic without a nurse is a story that ends when the alchemist gets bored. I was not bored. I was going to the place that made the thorns.

"If they worsen," I told the hollow that was no longer a hollow, "send someone loud to Bellwether. I'll be the stubborn one by the mill."

Uryu translated the feeling that came back. "Trust. Hurry. Fear west."

"Working on all three."

The first customer did not follow the cart. That surprised me more than anything. It stayed in the doorway of the hut with the gray-green patient behind it and the blue one wrapped around the iron measure like a promise. Customer One had hired the workshop and then stayed to run the field office.

"Best employee I never paid," I told Uryu.

"You paid," he said. "Stock."

"Don't do math."

"Already did."

I loaded the samples and remaining supplies onto the cart. Checked the stove of the hut one last time even though there was no stove fire left to check. Habit. Uryu did not tease me for it. Progress.

The road west climbed through blackberry fields where summer and spring had become tangled together. Blue shone in the ditch whenever sunlight touched it.

Around noon we passed the first dead tree.

Its leaves were green.

Its trunk had split from the inside, and violet crystal filled the crack.

I stopped long enough to sketch it in the ledger margin. Chloe later said my sketch looked like a scream with bark. She was not wrong. Uryu refused to touch it. The coins went hot, then hotter, then settled into a sullen warmth when I stepped back to the cart.

I took one scraping from the crystal edge into a fresh bottle and labeled it TREE / WEST ROAD / VIOLET. Separate from the crate glass. Same family, maybe. Same bottle, never assume.

"Under," Uryu said again.

"I believe you."

"Deep under."

"How deep?"

He thought. "Mill deep. Pond deep. Fear deep."

Three depths. None of them measured in feet. All of them measured in how hard a village would fight before it admitted the water was wrong.

Beyond it, a sign leaned beside the road.

BELLWETHER. ONE MILE.

Somebody had painted another line underneath.

WE DO NOT BUY TRAVELING CURES.

I stopped the cart.

Uryu read slowly. "Do not buy."

"I see it."

"Go home?"

Home was an empty ledger and a vow I had already spent once this morning. Home would still be there if we turned west for one ugly mile and learned what the coins had paid for.

The sign was not wrong about traveling cures. Master Pell's Celestial Tonic had taught me that. Seed winter had taught me that. A village that paints the warning has already paid for the lesson. Walking in loud with Best in the Universe on my tongue would make me the next seller they shut the door on.

So I would not sell first.

I would show samples. Ask consent. Take the no if it came and still leave the filtration notes where somebody stubborn could find them later. Craft without consent is just another tonic with a prettier story.

The ditch flashed blue.

From beyond the hill came a mill bell, then a second sound. Somebody coughing hard enough to fold.

I checked the sample bottles, the last stretched salve, the iron measure with Pa's four lines. The three warm coins sat in my pocket like a receipt and a warning at once.

"No," I said. "We introduce ourselves."

Uryu climbed to the cart rail and faced the hill.

"Best workshop?"

"Not yet," I said. "Working on it."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Village That Does Not Need an Alchemist

Bellwether smelled of wet dye and boiled cabbage.

The road dipped past the leaning sign and opened onto a millpond the color of old pewter. A long timber mill sat on the far bank with its wheel turning slow and wrong, as if the water had thickened overnight. Houses climbed the slope in uneven rows. Smoke rose from chimneys. Laundry hung. A dog barked once and thought better of it.

Ordinary.

Except the laundry had blue stains at the hems that washing had not taken out. Except the dog's bark broke into a cough. Except nobody stood at the pump in the square, and the pump was the kind of place a village always put somebody.

A man on a bench scratched his forearms until the skin shone raw and pretended he was only waking up. A woman in a doorway pressed a wet cloth to a child's forehead and pulled him back when he reached toward the trough. Somewhere behind a shutter somebody moaned in a sleep that did not sound like rest. Fever. Rash. Bad dreams with the windows closed. The village wore its sickness the way it wore its work clothes: out in the open and daring you to name it.

Uryu sat on the cart rail with his wings folded tight.

"Afraid," he said.

"Of us?"

"Of water."

I stopped the cart at the edge of the square.

A woman in a gray apron was sweeping her stoop with the kind of violence reserved for dirt that would not leave. She looked up, saw the cart, saw the jars, and went back to sweeping harder.

"Afternoon," I called.

She did not answer.

Two men by the millpond fence turned their backs. A girl of about ten stared at Uryu until her mother yanked her indoors and shut the shutters with a bang that said the conversation was over.

"Friendly," I muttered.

"Do not buy," Uryu reminded me.

"I read the sign."

"Read again."

"Tch."

I tied the cart to a post that already had three other ropes on it, which meant either hospitality or a habit of strangers leaving in a hurry. Then I walked to the pump with my hands empty and my kit left behind, because the last time I had opened bottles first a village had decided I was selling before I had even said hello.

The pump handle was damp. The trough beneath it held a finger of water with a faint blue sheen where the light hit.

I did not touch it.

"Looking for the inn," I said to nobody in particular.

A voice answered from the doorway of the largest house facing the square.

"Then you found it. And you can keep walking."

The woman in the doorway was broad-shouldered, dark-haired, maybe forty, with a face that had learned to say no without raising its voice. An innkeeper's face. The kind that counted rooms and debts and how many times a stranger had promised a miracle.

"Mara Venn?" I asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "Who wants her?"

"Ulrika Mulberry. Mulberry Workshop. I ain't selling. I came because your ditch is poisoning the punis west of here, and your pump looks like it learned the same trick."

Silence moved across the square.

Mara stepped down onto the stone. Up close she smelled of woodsmoke and vinegar. There was a rash along the inside of her left wrist, carefully hidden by a rolled cuff that had slipped.

"We had a man last winter," she said. "Violet bottles. Said the millpond fever was mana-rot and he had the only cure between here and the capital. Half the village bought. My brother drank first because he always does when somebody sounds sure."

She stopped.

I waited.

"He lived," she said. "That is the kindest thing I can say about it. He has not slept a clean night since. When strangers with jars arrive now, I close the door."

"Good," I said.

She blinked. "What?"

"Closing the door was right. That man was a fraud. I smelled his kind of work on a thorn this morning."

Mara's mouth tightened. "Then you understand why you are leaving."

"I understand why you don't trust me. That ain't the same as me leaving."

Uryu floated to my shoulder. Mara's eyes flicked to him and stayed there a second longer than people usually managed.

"Mana," she said.

"Mine," I said. "He don't sell tonics."

"What does he do?"

"Keeps me from setting the wrong things on fire."

A ghost of something that might have been humor crossed her face and left.

"My brother is upstairs," she said. "You will not see him. You will not dose him. You will not stand in my common room and tell other people their water is cursed so they panic and buy whatever you packed."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were going to do something. People with carts always are."

She was not wrong. I had come into Bellwether already half shouting in my head, already lining up the speech about Contaminated Ditch and Unstable Mana Salt and How Dare You Ignore This. The speech felt righteous. That was the danger of it.

I looked at the pump again.

"Can I take a sample of the water?" I asked. "No treatment. No speech. Just a bottle."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because last winter started with a free sample."

I closed my mouth on the next argument. It tasted like the seed winter. Being right and being allowed were not the same measure.

"All right," I said.

Uryu whispered, "Push."

"No," I whispered back.

Mara heard neither word and saw both of us anyway. Her eyes said: good. Or maybe: for now.

Mara waited for the fight. When it did not come, suspicion deepened instead of easing. That was fair too.

"There is a mill road around the pond," she said. "Use it if you are leaving west. Do not cut through the yard. Do not talk to the children."

"And if I am staying?"

"Then find somewhere that wants an alchemist. This village does not."

She went inside. The door shut with the same finality as the shutters.

Through the upper window I heard a man's voice, thin and wrong, asking what time it was. Not once. Three times. Then a softer answer. Mara. Then quiet again.

Brother. Upstairs. Not mine to reach.

Uryu exhaled against my neck.

"Mean?"

"Scared," I said. "Same clothes sometimes."

I almost opened my kit right there on her stoop. Free demonstration. Clean hands. One jar of charcoal binder held up like a flag so the square could see I was not last winter's violet man. The itch to prove myself was so loud my fingers found the latch before my brain caught them.

Uryu pecked my knuckle.

"Do not buy," he said.

"That was their sign."

"Your hands too."

Tch. He was right. A free show on a closed door is still a show. I left the latch alone.

We walked the cart along the mill road because standing in the square after that felt like loitering on purpose. The mill loomed larger as we came around the pond. Its wheel slapped water that left blue lace on the paddles. Men moved inside the open bay with the stiff care of people working near something they had decided not to name.

A woman met us at the gate before I could pretend I was only passing.

Tall. Greying blond hair tied back hard. Ink stains on both forearms and a key ring at her belt heavy enough to count as a weapon. She looked at the cart the way Mara had, only colder.

"Edra Holt," she said. "I own the mill. You are the girl from the square."

News traveled faster than carts in places like this.

"Ulrika Mulberry."

"I heard. Mara does not like you. That already puts you ahead of last winter's man, who she liked for three profitable days." Edra folded her arms. "State your business."

"Your runoff is carrying unstable mana salt mixed with dye mordant into the western ditches. Punis are sick from it. Your pump water shows the same sheen. I came to find the source and stop it."

Edra laughed once, short. "Seasonal rot. Happens after heavy rain when the old pond weeds die off. Smells worse than it is. We have lived with it longer than you have been alive."

"Seasonal rot does not put violet crystal in tree trunks."

"Show me."

I had left the dead tree a mile back. By the time I hauled her there and hauled her back, the light would be gone and she would have decided the crystal was mineral bloom or a child's prank.

"I can show you samples," I said.

"Of what? Broken glass and mud? Every mill town has broken glass and mud."

"Of residue that flashes blue when it dissolves. Of thorn sap that should be clear and isn't. Of puni patients who drank from your ditch and nearly left their own bodies."

Edra's jaw worked. "Punis."

"Yes."

"We do not set village policy by what bounces into the scrub."

Heat climbed my neck.

"They got hurt by your water," I said. "That makes them your problem whether you write them into the ledger or not."

"Careful."

"I am being careful. Careful looks like this. Loud looks like me yesterday."

Uryu made a tiny warning sound. I ignored it. That was always a mistake.

Edra stepped closer. "This mill employs forty-one people. If I shut the wheel for a traveling scare, those forty-one stop eating. If I admit contamination I did not cause, or cannot prove, buyers cancel contracts. You want me to burn my village to clean a ditch you met this morning?"

Behind her, through the open bay, I could see the work: vats, drying racks, a boy no older than Enna hauling buckets with both hands. Forty-one mouths. Forty-one reasons to call the blue lace on the paddles weather.

"I want you to test the water."

"I have. It is hard. It is mineral. It is unpleasant. It is not your story."

"Then let me test it my way."

"No."

The word landed the same as Mara's door.

I saw, too late, how I looked from her side of the gate: another young stranger with jars and certainty, arriving in a bad season, asking the person with the most to lose to trust a method she had never watched. Master Pell's Celestial Tonic had worn a nicer smile. Seed winter had worn my own.

My mouth opened on the righteous speech anyway. Contaminated Ditch. Unstable Mana Salt. How Dare You. The words stacked behind my teeth like a charge waiting for a fuse.

Uryu tugged my ear hard enough to hurt.

I swallowed the speech. It went down like gravel.

"I can leave a written method," I said, forcing my voice down. "You do it. Or Mara. Or anybody who ain't me."

"And when your method says what you need it to say?"

"Then we talk about treatment. Consent first. Price second. No forced bottles."

"We," Edra repeated. "There is no we. There is Bellwether, and there is the road."

She pointed back the way we had come.

I did not move. Pride wanted a win. Craft wanted a sample. Only one of those would keep anybody breathing.

For a long second we stood in the mill smell and the wrong water sound, two stubborn animals deciding who would blink. Uryu's fur brushed my cheek. He was trembling the smallest amount.

"Fear," he whispered.

"Whose?"

"Hers. Yours. Mill."

Helpful.

Edra's eyes flicked to him again. "Keep that creature out of my yard. Last thing I need is a mana incident on top of gossip."

"He stays with me."

"Then you both stay out."

She turned on her heel and went into the mill. Somebody inside slid a bolt.

I stood there with my hands empty and my pride loud enough to hear over the wheel.

"Tch."

"Go?" Uryu asked.

"Not yet."

We made camp above the village on the lee side of a stone wall that had once been part of something prouder. From there I could see the pond, the mill, the inn, and the pump nobody used. I boiled spring water from a seepage above the road, far from the blue ditches, and cooked the last of the bread into a soup that tasted like stubbornness.

A woman carried laundry past the foot of the wall road and spat when she saw the cart. Not at me exactly. At the category of me. I let her. Categories are armor. I would need a specific person before I earned a specific spit.

Later a boy from the mill path slowed when he saw Uryu, then sped up when he saw the jars. He did not spit. He just looked at the pump downslope and then at me, like he was doing math he was not allowed to speak. I raised an empty hand. He did not come closer. That was still better than a slammed shutter.

I checked Pa's iron measure against the spring canteen and marked a fifth line for Bellwether water I did not yet have permission to take. Blank lines are also craft. They keep you honest about what you do not own.

Uryu ate three dried apples and pretended they were cheese.

I laid out the samples on a flat stone.

Thorn residue. Ditch water. Violet glass grit. Mill-mark charcoal rubbing. Puni coin, still faintly warm.

When I held the coin near the grit, a hairline of blue light crawled across the metal and faded. When I held it near clean spring water, nothing. When I held it near the boiled kettle water from above the road, nothing.

I split the ditch water into three shallow dishes. Dish one plain. Dish two with a pinch of willow charcoal. Dish three with a drop of starch binder. The coin went blue-hot near dish one, cooler near dish two, almost quiet near dish three. Not a cure. A direction.

"Reactive," I said.

Uryu poked the coin. "Hungry."

"Don't eat evidence."

"Wasn't."

"You were thinking it."

He looked away with great innocence.

I crushed a second charcoal pinch finer and timed how long the blue lace took to dull in dish two. Counted under my breath the way Chloe forced me to after the itch-curse summer. Thirty heartbeats. Forty. At fifty the sheen thinned but did not die. Charcoal alone was a brake, not a stop. Binder without charcoal smeared the color without killing it. Together they argued with the poison. Neither won clean.

That was fine. Clean wins are for people who already have consent.

I wrote notes until the light failed. Not conclusions. Observations. Ratio. Time. Heat. What the coin did and did not forgive. Chloe would have approved of the distinction and hated my handwriting.

On a second page I drafted the method I had offered Edra: spring water only, charcoal first, binder second, external contact before any mouth dose, stop at the first racing pulse, burn the batch if the nightmare smell rises. I did not sign it Best Workshop in the Universe. I signed it Mulberry Workshop, Ulrika Mulberry, and left a blank line for whoever in Bellwether was brave enough to watch a clock.

After dark, Bellwether put itself to bed early. Shutters closed. Lamps low. The mill wheel kept turning because mill wheels did not care about fear.

Near the second hour, a child screamed.

Not a play scream. The kind that punches through walls.

I was on my feet before I decided to be. Uryu hit my shoulder as I ran.

The scream came from the square.

A boy of seven or eight lay by the pump, limbs jerking, mouth open on a sound that had stopped being words. A woman knelt over him tearing at his collar. Two neighbors held lamps. Mara came out of the inn at a run with her apron half on.

"Don't give him pond water," somebody shouted.

"I'm not," the mother sobbed. "He only rinsed his hands. He only—"

Blue shone faintly at the boy's lips. Not much. Enough.

I pushed through.

"Move."

"Who—"

"Move or help. Those are the options."

Mara grabbed my arm. "I told you—"

"He is seizing from contact poison. You can throw me out after he breathes."

Her fingers dug in. Then she looked at the boy and let go.

"Do not dose him with a mystery," she said.

"I won't."

I meant it. The failed seed treatment still lived in my wrists. So did the gray-green puni's racing rhythm after too much binder.

I rolled the boy onto his side. Cleared his mouth with a clean cloth. The blue was residue, thin as oil. I wiped, rinsed my own hands with the spring canteen, wiped again. His limbs still jerked, but the worst clench eased when his airway opened.

No internal dose. Not even a drop on the tongue. Seed winter lived in that rule. So did the gray-green puni's racing heart after I pushed binder too far at the hollow. Stabilize first. Prove the outside touch. Earn the inside later, if at all.

"Blanket. Soft under his head. Nobody put well water near him."

People moved. Fear makes obedience easier than trust does. I hated needing that, and used it anyway.

Uryu hovered close, eyes squeezed shut.

"Don't," I told him softly.

"Can help."

"Not like that. Tell me where it hurts him."

He shuddered. "Mouth. Then chest. Then everywhere scared."

Contact first. Panic second. Whatever lived under the pond was learning to eat fear the way fire eats air.

I took one drop of the diluted charcoal binder on a fresh cloth and touched it to the corner of the boy's mouth, outside, not in. Test one spot. Wait.

The blue stain lightened.

No racing pulse at the throat. No sudden stillness.

"Again," I said to myself. Another touch. Wait.

The seizure loosened into shivers.

"Water from my canteen only," I told the mother. "Small sips when he asks. If he sleeps, let him. If his lips go blue again, you come find me on the upper wall road. Not the mill. Not the pond."

She nodded without looking at my face, only at her son.

Mara watched every motion.

When the boy finally dragged in a raw human breath and cried, the square exhaled with him.

I sat back on my heels.

My hands were shaking.

"What did you use?" Mara asked.

"Charcoal binder. Dilute. Outside the mouth only. Same family of treatment I used on poisoned animals and one very stupid teenage patient named me."

"Name the ingredients."

"Willow charcoal, boiled spring water, a binding starch from dried root. No violet glass. No mana salt. No secret."

"Why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't yet," I said. "You should watch him. If he worsens, blame me out loud in the square. If he holds, then tomorrow you let me take the water sample I asked for."

Mara looked at the boy, at the pump, at my empty hands.

A man in the crowd muttered that I had cursed the boy by touching him. Another muttered that I had saved him. Both looked at Mara for a verdict she refused to give in the open square.

I cleaned my hands again. Spring water only. The ritual mattered as much as the chemistry. People needed to see the difference between secret violet bottles and a process they could watch.

"You stabilized him," she said.

"Yes."

"That does not make him yours."

"I know."

The words came out quieter than I meant. They were the whole lesson of the chapter I was living. Being right did not hand me the latch to anybody else's door. Not Mara's brother. Not this boy. Not Bellwether.

A woman in the crowd asked if I would dose the rest of them now that I had proved myself. Another asked if I had a bottle for the night-screams. A third wanted to know my price. The old Ulrika would have opened the kit and started naming cures before the questions finished. This Ulrika kept her hands empty and her voice flat.

"No bottles in the dark," I said. "No dosing a whole square from one seizure. You want help, you ask in daylight where everybody can watch the work. Consent. One patient at a time. Or I stay on the wall road and you keep your pride."

Somebody swore. Somebody else nodded like the words hurt and still fit. Mara's look said she was measuring both reactions and filing them under Tomorrow.

Mara helped the mother lift the child. At the inn threshold she paused.

"You sleep on the upper wall road tonight," she said. "If you come into my rooms without being asked, I will set the dog on you. If the boy turns bad, I will send for you."

"And the sample?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe."

She almost closed the door, then added, low enough for me alone: "My brother will not be on the list. Not until I say. Not if you beg. Not if you are right."

"I won't beg," I said. "I'll wait."

Waiting tasted worse than shouting. I swallowed it anyway.

She shut the door.

The neighbors dispersed with the lamps. Edra Holt stood at the far end of the square near the mill fence. I did not know how long she had been there. She said nothing. She looked at the pump, then at me, then went back into the dark of her own gate.

Uryu climbed into my collar and hid his face.

"Did good," he mumbled.

"Did less harm," I said. "That is the rung I can stand on tonight."

Less harm is an ugly banner. It does not sell. It keeps people breathing long enough for better banners to become honest.

We walked back to the wall road. The cart was where I left it. The samples were undisturbed. The three warm coins in my pocket had gone cool, then warm again against my leg as if they were thinking.

I wrote the night into the ledger by lantern light.

Before that I walked a slow circle around the cart and checked every bottle seal twice. Busywork for shaking hands. Uryu pretended to sleep and failed. Below us Bellwether made the small noises of a place trying not to admit it was waiting for morning.

A dog barked once and stopped. The mill wheel kept its wrong slap. Somewhere near the inn a shutter opened and closed as if a person had looked for the loud girl on the wall road and decided not to call her yet.

I copied the daylight method onto a clean sheet, folded it small, and weighted it under a stone at the foot of the wall road where any villager walking to the mill would see it. No jars attached. No free sample. Just the steps and the blank line for a witness name. If Edra tore it up, that was still information. If somebody kept it, that was consent starting without my face in the way.

Bellwether. Child at pump. Contact seizure. Stabilized with dilute external charcoal binder. No internal dose. Consent not granted for further treatment. Sample rights pending Mara Venn. Brother excluded by keeper. Method left unsigned by village.

Then, because the page looked too clean, I added:

I almost shouted the village into a riot this afternoon. Did not. Still want to. Must not.

Being right did not buy the latch. Empty hands first. Or I am last winter with better hair.

Uryu peeked at the lines.

"Proud?"

"Of which part?"

"Did not."

I huffed a breath that was almost a laugh.

"Yeah," I said. "Of that part."

Sleep came late and thin. Every time the mill wheel slapped, I saw blue lace on wood. Every time a dog barked, I waited for another scream. Once I sat up convinced the boy had turned bad and nobody had come. The road was empty. The coins in my pocket had gone cool. I lay back down and hated how much I wanted to be needed.

Near dawn I dreamed the wheat field. The old man put the egg in my hands and said nothing about consent, because dying men do not have time for the whole lecture. I woke with the answer he had not given.

A workshop that forces its help is just another fraud with better intentions.

I said it aloud to the waking road so the stones could witness. Uryu mumbled agreement into my collar. Below us, footsteps kept coming. Consent, then. Or exile. Either way I would meet it with empty hands first.

The sky went pale. Smoke rose from Mara's chimney. Somewhere below, a door opened, and footsteps started up the wall road.

I stood with my empty hands in plain sight and waited to learn whether Bellwether would let me work, or only let me watch.

Uryu climbed to my shoulder and faced the path like a tiny gate guard.

"Best workshop?" he whispered.

"Not if I kick the door," I said. "Working on it."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Three Warm Coins

Mara Venn came up the wall road carrying a covered pail and a face that had argued with itself all night.

"Boy held," she said without greeting. "Slept. Woke asking for bread. Lips clean."

"Good."

"That is not permission for my brother."

"Didn't ask for your brother."

She set the pail down between us. Inside, pump water moved against the tin. In daylight the blue sheen was unmistakable, a skin of wrong color that gathered toward the edges whenever the pail tilted.

"One bottle," Mara said. "You fill it where I can see. You do not drink it. You do not tip it into anybody. You bring me every result in plain speech before you tell another soul in this village."

"Agreed."

I rinsed my sample bottle with spring water from the wall seep, emptied it twice, then filled it from her pail while she watched my hands the way Chloe watched a synthesis. No flourishes. No speech. Cap. Seal. Label written in block letters she could read upside down if she wanted.

Bellwether pump. Morning after contact seizure. Witness: Mara Venn. Spring rinse ×2. No mouth contact.

"What do you need from me?" she asked.

"A table, clean cloth, boiled water that never touched the pond, and an hour without an audience."

She hesitated. Pride and fear took turns in her eyes.

"Use the back scullery," she said. "Door off the kitchen yard. If anybody asks, you are scrubbing pans for board. If you try my brother's door, I will break your jars myself."

"Fair."

Uryu rode my shoulder down into Bellwether like a guilty secret. A few shutters cracked. Nobody called out. The boy from the pump sat on the inn steps wrapped in a blanket, chewing bread with fierce concentration. He looked at me once and looked away. That was enough thanks for one morning.

The scullery was stone, cool, and smelled of lye. Mara laid out cloth, a kettle, and two clay bowls, then stood in the doorway with her arms folded.

"Stay," I said. "Witnessing is part of the work."

She stayed.

I set the three warm coins in a row on the cloth.

They had gone cool overnight. When I set them near the sealed pump sample, heat returned first to the middle coin, then the others, as if they were remembering a conversation. I did not touch them with bare fingers yet. Temperature lies if your own hands are already warm from walking.

"What are those?" Mara asked.

"Payment from my first customer."

"Puni money."

"Yes."

"And they heat for poisoned water."

"They heat for the part that ain't ordinary dye."

I warmed a clean spoon over the kettle steam until the metal fogged, then cooled it one heartbeat against the air so I was not cooking the sample. Spoon to the first coin. Spoon to a single drop of pump water on the cloth.

Blue hairline. Faint. Real.

I did the same with ditch water from yesterday. Stronger line.

Thorn residue. Stronger still.

Clean spring water from the wall seep. Nothing.

Boiled kettle water that had never seen the pond. Nothing.

I repeated the whole chain twice because once is a story and twice is a method. On the second pass I timed the fade with my pulse the way Chloe had drilled into me after the itch-curse summer: thirty beats, forty, fifty. Pump water held a ghost of blue past forty. Ditch water past fifty. Thorn residue stained the cloth and did not apologize. Spring and kettle stayed dull both times.

Mara's eyes tracked every motion. When the second spring-water control stayed dull, her shoulders dropped a fraction. Not trust yet. Relief that the world still contained at least one clean thing.

"So the pump is dirty."

"The pump is carrying two things," I said. "Watch."

I separated a pinch of the violet-glass grit into one bowl and a smear of dried mill-pond scum into the other. Ordinary dye mordant lived in the scum: metallic, sharp, the smell every cloth worker knew from wet racks and failed rinses. The grit was different. When dampened with a drop of spring water, it flashed that sweet wrong note Master Pell's tonic had worn like perfume. Not the same bottle. Same family of lie.

I labeled the bowls in chalk on the stone lip so nobody could claim later I had switched them.

Bowl A: mill scum / mordant. Bowl B: violet grit / unstable salt. Do not combine without a witness.

"Mordant alone makes rashes and hard water," I said. "Unpleasant. Manageable. This salt is unstable mana residue. Separately, bad. Together, after they sit in roots and old stone, worse."

"How much worse?"

"Enough to seize a child who only rinsed his hands. Enough to send a puni halfway out of its own body."

Uryu pointed at the coins. "Under."

"Under what?" Mara asked.

He looked at me for the word.

"There's old work under your pond," I said. "Not your mill. Older. The mixture becomes dangerous after it passes through roots over a buried alchemical ruin. The coins react hardest

when the two contaminants meet that third condition."

I did not say *I think*. I said it like a measurement. Then I wrote the third condition on the cloth edge in pencil so it had to survive being wrong in public:

Condition 3: root / tannin / buried work. Unproven until dig. Do not announce as fact in the common room.

Mara stared at the pail as if it might confess.

"Edra will say you invented a ruin to scare her into shutdown."

"Then Edra can dig a test pit with me and be annoyed in person."

A knock hit the yard door.

Mara opened it a handspan. A thin man in a patched coat stood there with a ledger under his arm and rain already deciding to start on his shoulders.

"Mistress Venn. Is the traveling alchemist on your premises?"

"Who's asking?" I said from behind her.

He peered past her shoulder and smiled with too many teeth for the hour. "Brann. I hold the paper on Mulberry Workshop's opening loan. Interest compounds whether you are saving villages or not. I was told you left the shop."

My stomach dropped, then steadied. Of course news of an empty shop traveled. Lenders had better ears than mill bells.

"I'm working," I said.

"Good. Work pays. Your first repayment is due in seven days. I came early because empty shelves make me sentimental." His eyes flicked to my samples, to Uryu, to Mara, to the chalk labels on the stone. "If you are rendering services here, wonderful. Get a signature. Get coin. Do not get noble."

Noble. The word landed like a dare. The old speech stacked behind my teeth: Contaminated Ditch, Unstable Salt, How Dare You Talk Money While a Child—

I swallowed it. Brann was not Edra and not Mara. Righteousness spent on a lender buys nothing but a story he can sell later.

"Seven days," I said. "You'll get the payment or you'll get an honest delay request in writing. Not a performance."

"Even better." Brann tipped two fingers off his brow. "Or we discuss seizure of portable assets. Carts count. Jars count. Coins that glow count twice."

His gaze snagged on the three warm coins.

I put my palm over them without snatching. Snatching is how you tell a lender something is worth taking.

"Get out of my yard," Mara said.

"Of course." He left whistling.

Mara shut the door harder than necessary.

"You borrowed to open."

"Yes."

"And you are here giving away charcoal on children."

"Yes."

She looked at me for a long time. "You are either honest or simple."

"Both," Uryu said helpfully.

"Tch. Whose side—"

"Truth."

I rubbed my face. The coins had cooled again under my hand. When I stacked them, warmth built between the metal faces and climbed into my palm. Evidence first. Debt second. Both real.

"I need one more witness," I said.

"Edra will not come."

"Not Edra. Somebody who can tell me what the punis are saying about the water."

Mara frowned. "We do not keep a puni translator on staff."

"I do," I said. "Her name is Chloe. She is two days east if the road is kind, and she hates house calls."

"Then why would she come?"

"Because I will ask badly, and she will come to criticize my method."

Mara almost smiled. Almost.

I wrote a short letter on the back of an old inventory sheet, then copied it once so I kept a record of what I had actually asked for.

Chloe. Bellwether millpond. Contaminated. Need your ears, not your pity. Bring Enna if she can be spared. Do not bring Pepperoni unless you want the inn condemned. —U

Copy retained. Sent by east-road post boy. Paid one ordinary copper. Puni coins not used for postage.

I paid the boy with the copper and watched him run. The puni coins stayed in my pocket. They were evidence now as much as payment. Watching him go, I felt the old hunger to chase results at a sprint. Letters take time. Digging takes consent. Contaminants do not care about my preferred tempo.

I went back to scrubbing pans because labor keeps pride from chewing the furniture.

Scrubbing was not only board. Between pans I laid out a dig kit on a dry shelf Mara pretended not to see: twine, clean stakes, two sample jars rinsed and waiting, a measuring strip marked in thumb-widths, charcoal sticks, a spare cloth, and a blank witness sheet with lines for name, time, and what the shovel hit. I did not pack a speech. I packed a method that would still work if my mouth got me thrown out of the yard.

Uryu stole nothing, which meant he was either growing or plotting.

I did not expect a same-day answer. Two days east was two days east. If Chloe came at all, she would come complaining about the mud and my handwriting.

By noon the rain had settled into a steady argument with the pond. Edra Holt arrived at the scullery door herself, soaked to the knees, jaw locked.

"Mara sent for me," she said. "She said you made the pump water confess."

"I made it react," I said. "Confession is your department."

I walked her through every step again. Coin. Cloth. Mordant. Salt. Spring control. Kettle control. She repeated two of the tests with her own hands while Mara watched. I kept my mouth shut while she worked. Helping too fast turns a witness into an audience, and audiences get defensive.

The blue line did not care who held the spoon.

Edra was quiet for a full minute after.

"Seasonal rot," she said finally, and the words had less iron in them.

"Part of it may be," I said. "The rest is older and meaner."

"You want to dig under my mill."

"I want a controlled opening at the pond edge where the drainage leaves your yard. Small. Documented. If we find ordinary silt, I pack my cart and you can throw me a goodbye rock."

"And if you find your ruin?"

"Then we stop pretending the wheel's innocence is the same thing as the village's safety."

The righteous speech tried to stand up again. Forty-one jobs. Contaminated contracts. How Dare You. I swallowed it for the second time that day and pointed at the blank witness sheet instead.

"Your men dig. My hands stay off the foundation timbers unless you put them there. Every scoop gets a line. If the line says silt, I eat the cost of the day."

Edra looked at Mara. "If this panics the floor crew—"

"Then we tell them the truth in pieces instead of letting another child teach it all at once," Mara said.

Edra hated that answer. She accepted it anyway.

"Dawn tomorrow," she said. "My men dig. You do not touch the foundation timbers. Your Mana stays back from the waterline."

"His name is Uryu."

"I do not care if his name is the chancellor. Back from the waterline."

She left wet footprints across the clean scullery stone.

Mara handed me a dry cloth. "You have your sample. You have your maybe. Do not sleep in my common room."

"Wasn't planning to."

"Good. Board for the scullery use is three copper, or labor. You look short on copper."

"I can scrub pans."

"I know," she said. "That is why I offered it."

We worked the afternoon in companionable hostility. I scrubbed. She counted casks. Between counts she read my chalk labels twice and did not smudge them.

Two days later the rain still had not decided to finish. I had scrubbed enough pans to qualify as furniture. Edra's men had marked the dig line at the pond edge and then refused to put a shovel in until the weather "looked less like an omen," which was mill-worker for we are afraid and will not say so.

I used the delay. I mapped the drainage mouth from the wall road with Enna's kind of angles even before Enna arrived: pond outlet, ditch cut, pump line, the place where laundry water and mill runoff could meet without anyone meaning them to. Bad maps make brave digs stupid. I wanted a stupid dig less than I wanted a fast one.

On the second rain day I walked the marked dig line with empty hands and counted paces out loud so anybody watching from the mill bay could hear I was measuring, not casting. A boy on the drying racks watched me the whole way. When I finished I left the unsigned method sheet under a clean stone at the line's end, same as I had on the wall road. No jars. No free sample. If Edra tore it up, that was still information. If a shovel man kept it in his pocket overnight, that was consent starting without my face in the way.

Uryu hated the waiting. He paced the cart rail, then the scullery sill, then my collar.

"Dig now," he muttered.

"Dig when they put the shovel in," I said. "Or we dig alone and become the next violet story."

He huffed. The coins in my pocket warmed once, as if agreeing with neither of us and both.

Near evening a cart rattled into the yard with a familiar silhouette under a rain cloak.

Chloe pushed her hood back and looked at the millpond, the scullery, me, and the rash of unfinished work with the same flat expression she used on failed syntheses.

"Your letter found me at the east ford," she said. "I was already west of the academy for reagent stock. That is the only reason I am here before next week. Do not make a habit of emergencies on my route."

"You wrote 'not your pity,'" she added. "That was wise. I brought none."

Enna climbed down after her, smaller, steadier, already scanning the water like a problem set.

"Hi," Enna said. "Your letter spelled Bellwether right. That scared me more than the contamination."

"Oi," I said, and hugged Chloe before she could dodge. She endured it for one full second, then tapped my spine twice like a judge dismissing court.

"Show me the patients who still speak," Chloe said. "And do not narrate. Narrating makes you invent."

We went to the willow hollow first, rain be damned. The first customer met us on the track as if it had been posted there. Several recovered punis bounced around Chloe at once. I watched their bodies the way I always had to: ears, bounce height, whether they flinched from the ditch smell. I still could not hear a word. Congenital. Permanent. Chloe was the bridge, not a cure for me.

She listened with her head tilted, mouth thin.

"They say the bad taste comes from below the turning water," she translated. "Not from the painted house. From under. They say it gets louder when people shout. They say the pink one paid you and you followed, which they find statistically unlikely for humans."

"Hey."

"I am quoting."

Enna crouched by the drainage mouth with a notebook. "If fear amplifies it, then crowd panic is fuel. That matches the seizure pattern."

Uryu nodded hard. "Fuel."

Chloe glanced at him. "And you. No heart-changing. If I find out you smoothed a villager into agreeing, I will put you on inventory and label you a hazard."

"Won't," Uryu said.

"See that you don't."

On the ride back, Chloe read my notes by lantern under the cart canopy. She corrected three spellings, one measurement, and the sentence where I had called Edra "mill tyrant" instead of "mill owner with bad incentives."

"Your analysis holds," she said. "The coins were the break. Without them you had smell and stubbornness. With them you have a reaction other people can watch."

Enna held up her chart. "And now we can aim a shovel instead of a rumor."

"Shovels still scare people," I said.

"Less than nightmares," Chloe said. "Barely."

"So I was right."

"You were methodical. Do not confuse the two, even when they overlap."

Enna had filled three pages with drainage angles. "The millpond outlet and the village pump share a lower channel," she said. "If the ruin sits under the pond, both get fed. Digging only at the mill edge tells you presence. It does not tell you how far the roots have carried it."

"Then we dig and we map," I said.

"And we do not announce a curse in the common room," Chloe said. "Fear is fuel. You already wrote that. Try reading your own notes before you collect a mob."

"I wasn't going to collect a mob."

"You were thinking about it. Your shoulders do a specific thing."

Uryu nodded traitorously.

Back in the scullery I ran the coin tests again with Chloe timing and Enna recording. Steam. Cloth. Control water. Pump water. Ditch water. Grit. Scum. Then combinations in the order a ditch would invent them: mordant first, salt second, root tannin third.

I crushed a thumb of dried root bark from the willow hollow for the third condition, dampened it separately, and refused to rush the sequence even when my hands wanted to skip to the part that proved me right. Method before victory. Chloe's eyebrow said she noticed.

The blue line stayed shy until the third condition entered. Then it crawled like a living vein across the middle coin and left a faint dark print on the cloth that did not wipe clean.

"There," Enna whispered.

Chloe did not whisper. "Document the print before you celebrate it."

I did. Time. Order. Which coin. Which cloth square. Who watched. I hated that she was right and loved her for it in the same breath.

Triple condition confirmed under witness. Mordant + salt alone = weak. + root tannin = persistent print. Print retained as evidence. Do not wash.

Mara watched from the doorway, arms folded so hard her sleeves creased.

"My brother drank a violet tonic last winter," she said. "If this salt is kin to that, I want the name of every bottle still on a shelf in this village."

"Tomorrow," I said. "After the dig. If we start a bottle hunt tonight, people will pour things into the pond out of panic and feed whatever is under it."

Mara hated that answer too. She accepted it the same way Edra had: like swallowing medicine.

That was when the ugly idea arrived.

Uryu had gone quiet on the window ledge, staring toward the mill. The village fear pressed on him in waves I could almost see. If he reached—just a little—he could ease Mara. Ease Edra. Soften the men who would not dig in rain. Make tomorrow easier.

He looked at me.

I knew that look. It was the egg heating in my hands when I was cold and desperate. Give. Warm. Fix.

"No," I said.

Chloe's head snapped up. "No what?"

"He can change hearts. Not forever. Not clean. Enough to make people agree."

Silence filled the scullery.

Enna set down her pencil. "That would be faster."

"It would be Master Pell with better fur," I said. "I won't."

Uryu's ears lowered. "Could help."

"You help by telling me where the fear is thick. Not by erasing it so I get my way."

Chloe watched me for a long second. Then she nodded once, the smallest unit of approval she owned.

"Write that rule in the ledger," she said. "Before you get tired enough to forget it."

I wrote it.

Uryu is not a tool for consent. If I need forced trust, I have already failed the work.

Mara read it a second time, slower.

"Last winter," she said, "I would have paid anybody who could make my brother want to get well."

"I know."

"And now you are telling me the better kindness is slower."

"I'm telling you the faster kindness can be a second poison."

She looked at Uryu. He tried to look unstealable and mostly succeeded.

"Keep him out of my brother's room," she said. "Keep yourself honest. If both those hold, you may keep using my scullery."

That was Bellwether's version of a welcome mat.

Mara read the line upside down and said nothing. Her eyes had gone complicated.

That night she allowed Chloe and Enna a room because Chloe paid in advance and looked like someone who would inventory the towels. I returned to the wall road with Uryu and the coins.

Before sleep I laid the dig kit out again in lantern light and checked every seal. Twine dry. Stakes unwarped. Witness sheet blank and ready. I copied Brann's five-day line into the ledger

under the customer entry so the debt and the evidence shared a page on purpose. Hiding the loan from myself would not make the cart safer.

Loan note: first repayment due in seven days. Portable assets named. Coins are evidence before they are currency. Do not spend the proof.

Then I set all three coins on the ledger page and warmed them in my closed hands.

Blue light ran thin as thread from coin to coin, then down toward the inked words:

Customer One: pink puni. Paid three puni coins.

The light did not erase the debt line waiting seven days away.

It did not have to.

Payment from the first customer had become the evidence that opened Bellwether's door by a crack. Not wide. Not safe. Enough to put a shovel in the ground at dawn.

"Tomorrow we dig," I told Uryu.

He yawned. "Careful dig."

"The only kind that counts."

Rain thickened on the stone wall. Below us the mill wheel kept turning through poisoned water, and somewhere under the pond something old listened to the fear it was teaching the village to make.

I left the coins on the ledger all night.

They stayed warm until morning.

Warmth is not safety. It is a clue that survived the night. In the morning we would dig toward whatever had been teaching Bellwether to fear its own water, and the coins would come with us like tiny stubborn witnesses.



CHAPTER TWENTY

The Remedy That Failed

Dawn came the color of wet iron.

Edra's men dug at the pond edge with the stiff faces of people obeying an order they disliked. Chloe timed the cuts. Enna mapped every bucket of silt. I stayed back from the waterline with Uryu on a short mental leash and my hands full of sample bottles.

At the third foot down, the shovel rang.

Not on stone. On worked brick.

The men stopped.

Edra came forward, rain in her hair, and looked into the hole as if it had personally insulted her contracts.

"That is not seasonal rot," Chloe said.

Nobody argued.

Under the brick, when they pried a broken course free, violet crystal clung in the mortar like frost that had learned to shine. The coins in my pocket went hot enough to hurt. I did not pull them out for a show. Heat was already evidence. Making a spectacle of it would only feed the fear the ruin liked to eat.

"Seal it," I said. "Cloth, board, mark. Nobody dumps waste here. Nobody cheers. We treat what is already loose first."

Edra nodded once. It looked expensive on her.

We spent the morning building a temporary dam of sandbags and clean fill so the open seam could not drink more fear from the square. I marked each bag with chalk and a time. Children were kept indoors. The pump got a painted board:

DO NOT RINSE. SPRING WATER ONLY. ASK MARA.

Before I left the dig I wrote a second board for the shovel crew and nailed it crooked on purpose so nobody could pretend they missed it:

WORKED BRICK AT 3 FT. VIOLET IN MORTAR. SEALED. NO DUMPING. NO SOUVENIRS.

A mill hand reached toward a loose crystal flake. Chloe's voice cut flat across the hole.

"That goes in a labeled jar or it goes nowhere. Luck charms made of poison are still poison."

He put his hand back in his pocket.

Enna bagged three flakes under witness and wrote the depth on each label before the rain could argue the numbers away. I took one jar for the scullery bench and left two with Edra under lock. Split evidence is harder to lose to a single fire or a single liar.

Uryu refused to look into the hole. His fur stood wrong along his spine.

"Old," he said. "Hungry old."

"I know. Back from the waterline. That was the deal."

He climbed higher on my shoulder and made himself small, which was how he obeyed when obedience cost him.

Then I went back to the scullery and made the thing I had come to make.

A neutralizing tonic.

Not a Hero Stone. Not a miracle. Charcoal, blackberry root boiled hard, a measured pinch of the reactive warmth drawn carefully across the puni coins without dissolving them, and corrected ratios from every binder I had ever gotten half right.

I talked while I worked because silence made my hands stupid.

"Charcoal first. Not the pretty restaurant kind. Willow, burned clean, crushed finer than pride. Sieve twice. If grit stays on your teeth when you test a pinch on the lip of the bowl, crush again. Blackberry root past the red into the bitter. If it smells like jam, you stopped too early. Coin warmth last. Kiss, not pour. If the coins go into the pot I will personally throw myself into the pond."

"Please do not," Enna said without looking up.

I weighed the charcoal on Pa's iron measure and wrote the number where Chloe could see it. Then I boiled the root until the steam stopped smelling friendly and started smelling like medicine that had argued with a hedge. The coins stayed in a dry dish at the edge of the table. Warmth only. No metal in the pot. No shortcuts dressed up as daring.

Chloe checked my arithmetic twice. Enna checked my labels three times. Uryu sat on the high shelf and said "careful" every time my hands sped up.

Before the first dish test I made myself write the kill conditions on a scrap and pin it above the pot:

Stop if sweet perfume rises. Stop if coins go into solution. Stop if fever falls faster than breath steadies. Stop if anyone's eyes go glass before the minute mark.

Kill conditions are craft. Hope is not.

The first small dish test cleared a streak of pump-water blue on cloth and left the cloth smelling like wet iron and boiled leaves. No flash. No sweet perfume. I should have been suspicious of how pretty that felt.

I timed the clear anyway. Thirty beats. Forty. At fifty the cloth stayed honest. That was when pride put its boots on.

"Ratio holds on cloth," Enna said.

"Cloth is not a mouth," Chloe said.

I knew that. I still heard the cloth answer as if it were already a cure.

"Small trial," Mara said from the doorway. "Observed. My brother is still not in it."

"Your brother is not in it," I agreed. "Three adults who already have the rash and the bad dreams. Volunteers only. Full explanation first. Written consent if they can write. Spoken consent with a witness if they can't."

We found them in the common room after Mara spoke plain.

A weaver with blue-stained wrists. A mill hand whose sleep had become a parade of drowning. A grandmother who said she had lived through worse and would like to live through this too.

I told them everything.

Ingredients. Risks. The failed seed winter. Thom and the moon. The gray-green puni that raced after too much binder. The chance this would do nothing. The chance it would do harm. I said the dig had found worked brick and violet in the mortar so nobody could claim later I had hidden the size of the problem to get yeses.

"If you say no, that is the right answer until you say yes," I said. "I do not get a vote in your mouth."

All three said yes.

The weaver made her mark on Enna's sheet. The mill hand spat on his thumb and pressed it beside his name like a man sealing a bad bet on purpose. The grandmother wrote in a careful hand that shook only once.

Before the spoons left the tray I made them repeat the stop rules back to me. Not because I doubted their ears. Because a person who can say the danger out loud is harder for a hopeful alchemist to steamroll later.

"If dreams get worse, you say stop."

"Stop," the weaver said, already annoyed at the lesson and taking it anyway.

"If your chest races, you say stop."

"Stop," the mill hand grunted.

"If you want your money's worth of bravery instead of your body's worth of safety, you still say stop."

The grandmother eyed me. "You are a strange salesman."

"I am a bad one on purpose today."

We dosed at noon in the scullery with Mara, Chloe, Enna, and Edra present. One measure each. Wait.

I watched the weaver's face more than the clock. Skin first. Breath second. Eyes third. The old rules from Chloe's childhood recordkeeping still fit better than any academy chart. Enna called the minutes. Chloe wrote the numbers without commentary, which meant she was worried and refusing to decorate it.

Fever dropped first.

The weaver laughed in surprise when her skin cooled. The mill hand slept sitting up without twitching. The grandmother asked for broth and drank it like a dare.

Enna whispered, "It works."

"Don't," Chloe said.

I should have listened.

For one bright hour, I was brilliant. I walked the yard. I checked the dig. I let myself imagine Brann paid, shelves restocked, Mara's brother downstairs by week's end, the cart no longer a fleeing animal. Uryu hummed on my shoulder. Even the rain seemed to back off.

I almost wrote SUCCESS on the wall in charcoal. My hand got as far as the S before Chloe's silence stopped me. I wiped the mark with a wet cloth and hated how much I wanted the word anyway.

Then the nightmares came back louder.

The mill hand woke screaming that the pond was inside his lungs. The weaver clawed at her wrists until Chloe wrapped them. The grandmother went rigid and whispered apologies to people who were not in the room.

"Stop the batch," I said.

My voice sounded like someone else's.

I named it out loud before anyone else could invent a kinder story.

There is a particular silence that arrives when people realize the clever girl is not magic. It filled the scullery thicker than steam. I let it. If I filled it with excuses, the ruin under the pond would learn my voice as seasoning.

"I freed the mana salt too fast. The tonic pulled the mordant bind and left the unstable part moving. Fever fell because the body stopped fighting the wrong enemy. The dreams worsened because I handed the real one a clear road."

I pointed at the pot.

"That family of tonic is done. No second cups. No 'maybe a half measure.' We treat the rebound first."

Mara's face had gone white.

Edra looked at the sealed dig and then at me. "You said observed trial."

"It was. This is the observation. Nobody dies today if we treat the consequence. Help me."

We worked.

Diluted binder for the weaver's contact rash. Cool cloths. Spring water only. No internal dose from the failed family. Chloe translated a cluster of punis that had gathered at the yard fence and confirmed the same spike: bad taste rising, fear rising, something under the turning water pleased.

Uryu shook on my shoulder.

"Hungry below," he whispered.

"I know. Stay with me. Do not reach."

"Want to."

"I know that too."

I kept them in the scullery through the afternoon because sending them into the square mid-spiral would have painted my failure across every shutter in Bellwether. Chloe took pulse and breath counts like a machine that hated drama. Enna boiled cloths. Mara brought broth and refused to look soft while doing it. Edra posted two mill hands at the door with orders to keep spectators out and panic in.

Twice I almost reached for a fresh internal dose out of habit, the old academy reflex that said if the first measure failed you climb the ladder instead of admitting the ladder was wrong. Both times Chloe's pencil tapped the kill-condition scrap without looking up. Both times I put the spoon down and used cloth, water, time. Habit is also a contaminant. You rinse it or it rides every batch.

On the second near-miss Enna slid the spoiled spoon into the disposal basin herself and wrote:

Impulse dose blocked. Tool removed from reach. Operator still in room.

"That is rude," I said.

"That is documentation," she said. "Rude is when we pretend it did not happen."

Between patients I destroyed the remaining tonic in the yard where witnesses could see the steam. Not after. Not in private. Mid-crisis, on purpose. Chloe held the ledger while the pot emptied. No secret bottles. No "maybe later." I tipped the last measure myself so nobody could claim later that a mill hand or an inn girl had "accidentally" saved a cup. Steam went up gray and bitter. The coins in my pocket cooled a fraction, as if disappointed in me and still unwilling to leave.

A boy from the square tried to scoop the steamed residue into a jar for luck. Mara took the jar, emptied it back into the safe disposal pit, and boxed his ears with the practical affection of an innkeeper who had seen superstition kill people.

"If you want luck," she told him, "carry spring water. Not soup from a failed pot."

Edra's door guards turned two more scoopers away before the steam finished. Panic makes collectors. Collectors make second accidents.

The mill hand's nightmares had a shape. He kept pointing at the floor and saying the turning water had learned his name. I rinsed his mouth, cooled his wrists, and gave him nothing from the destroyed family of tonic except spring water and time. When he could hear me, I told him exactly what I had done wrong until the words bored the terror down into anger.

Anger I could work with.

"You used us," he said.

"I asked. You said yes. I still failed you. Both things are true."

He spat into the basin. Missed me on purpose.

"Write both," Chloe said.

I wrote both.

The weaver's wrists bloomed raw where she had clawed. Contact reaction on top of freed salt. I used the dilute external binder the way I had on the boy at the pump, one spot, wait, then the rest. She watched my hands like they might steal something.

"If this scars," she said, "you owe me a season of thread."

"If it scars, I owe you more than thread."

"Good. Write that down too."

I did. Debt to a patient is still debt. Brann did not get to be the only name in that column.

The grandmother recovered quietest and hardest. When the whispers left her, she asked for a slate and wrote the names of the people she had been apologizing to. Dead husband. Dead sister. A child lost to fever twenty years back. She underlined the child twice.

I sat with her while she underlined. Not fixing. Sitting. The academy had drills for synthesis failure. Nobody drilled me on the etiquette of opening a door in an old woman's chest by accident. Chloe brought tea and did not translate the silence into advice. Enna cried one tear, wiped it, and added a line to the incident log:

Emotional rebound possible even when body stabilizes.

"Your tonic opened a door I keep shut," she said. "Next time you open doors, warn an old woman so she can sit down first."

"There will be a next time only if I earn it," I said.

"Then earn it. Do not vanish into shame. Shame is lazy."

By dusk the three volunteers were stable enough to hate me in ordinary human ways. The mill hand called me a curse with good handwriting. The weaver asked for her money back and then remembered she had paid nothing and looked angrier about that. The grandmother patted my hand once and told me to write the failure bigger than the hope.

I finished the ledger page while they watched. Every reaction. Every time mark. Every arrogant hour I had spent feeling brilliant. Then I copied the same ugly summary onto a clean sheet and nailed it beside the pump board so the square could read the failure without needing my face attached.

NOON TRIAL FAILED. FEVER FELL. DREAMS WORSENED. BATCH DESTROYED IN YARD. NO STOCK HIDDEN. CORRECTED WORK CONTINUES.

A man from the dye racks read it twice, spat, and said loud enough for the porch to hear that traveling girls should stick to love charms. A woman behind him told him to shut up and haul

spring water if he had spit left. Neither looked at me. That was fine. The board was doing the work my mouth would have turned into a fight.

Brann arrived before the ink dried, as if failure had a forwarding address.

"Miss Mulberry," he said cheerfully from the scullery door. "I heard there was excitement. Excitement is expensive."

"Get out," Mara said.

"In a moment. Her repayment is now four days away, and public failure is a credit event." He smiled at me. "Seven became four the hard way. I can extend the note. Simple terms. You resell the remaining stock of whatever you just poured out under a quieter label. Traveling remedy. Limited batch. I know buyers who do not ask for witnesses."

The room went very still.

The easy exit stood there smiling with too many teeth. Extend the note. Quiet label. No witnesses. The cart safe. The shop breathing. Mara's brother maybe tomorrow if money made courage cheaper.

Uryu's claws pricked through my sleeve.

"No," I said.

"You did not let me finish the interest rate."

"No."

Edra spoke without looking at him. "And if I pay you for a signed statement that my mill is clean?"

That one landed harder.

Money for silence. Money that would cover Brann and the cart and the empty shop at the end of the road. Money that would make Bellwether's fear my private problem again. I saw the statement in my head already: neat handwriting, my name under a lie, violet crystal sealed under three feet of brick while I cashed the quiet.

"No," I said again. "I will not clear a mill that still bleeds salt into a ruin. And I will not sell a tonic I just watched turn dreams into weapons."

Chloe did not look up from the ledger. "For the minutes, the answer is no twice."

Brann's eyes flicked to the three warm coins on the cloth where I had set them after the disposal. Evidence again. Currency if I got desperate enough to forget what they had already bought me.

"Those would cover a partial," he offered lightly. "Exotic tender. Collectors pay for stories."

"They are not for sale."

"Everything is for sale after a public failure."

"Not those."

He sighed like a man disappointed by weather. "Idealism is a lovely way to lose a cart."

"Then take the cart when the day comes," I said. "Until then, get out of the scullery before Mara decides you are a stain."

He left. He whistled less.

The coins stayed where they were. Warm. Unspent. Still doing the only honest work money had done for me since the pink puni pressed them into my palm.

I stood with both refusals in my hands and felt poorer and cleaner at the same time. Debt still existed. The shop still needed coin. The correct batch still needed making. None of that turned a lie into inventory.

I wrote the refusals under the patient debts before I could romanticize them:

Refused Brann: no quiet-label resale of failed tonic. Refused Edra's first offer: no signed clean-mill statement for pay. Cart remains at risk. Conscience remains usable.

Edra stayed.

"You just refused the two clean exits," she said.

"They weren't clean."

"No," she agreed, surprising me. "They were easy."

She put a hand on the table near my notes, not touching them. "I hid two spill reports last autumn. Dye concentrate. I told myself the pond would dilute it. I told myself buyers mattered more than

a bad smell. If your ruin woke harder because of that, then my silence is in the hole with the brick."

Chloe's pencil stopped.

Enna looked up.

I waited for the part where Edra asked me to soften the truth.

It did not come.

"I will fund filtration and a proper opening under inspection," Edra said. "Not a statement. Work. You will not own my mill with your guilt, and I will not buy your mouth with mine."

That was the better kind of money. It did not ask my handwriting to lie. It asked my hands to keep working.

I wrote her offer under the refusals so the ledger held both kinds of coin:

Edra funds filtration + inspected opening. Not silence. Work. Accepted.

Mara let out a breath she might have been holding since last winter.

"My brother stays upstairs until you have a corrected batch and a smaller trial," she said to me. "But you stay. Scrub pans. Sleep on the wall road. Write every ugly thing. If you run now, I will tell the square you ran."

"I'm not running."

"Good. Because the village still does not need an alchemist." Her mouth twitched. "It needs this one to finish what she broke."

Before night fully settled, I walked the sealed dig with Edra and a lantern. The sandbags held. The marked boards held. Fear did not. Villagers watched from windows. Somebody had painted a clumsy blue eye on the mill fence and then scratched it out.

"If they riot," Edra said, "your method becomes a story about outsiders again."

"Then we give them work instead of a speech," I said. "Filtration crews. Clean water runs. Somebody at the pump who knows not to rinse children in blue sheen. No curse talk in the common room. Fear is fuel. We already wrote that."

"You talk like a foreman."

"I talk like a girl who burned seed once and learned the bill comes due whether you meant well or not."

She almost smiled. It looked like a crack in winter ice.

We counted sandbags again by lantern. One had slumped. We restacked it. Boring work. Boring work is how sealed things stay sealed while clever people argue about blame. Edra did not ask me to thank her for the confession. I did not ask her to kneel for it. The hole had both our silences in it now. That was enough shared inventory for one night.

On the way back I checked the disposal pit where the failed tonic had gone. No jar thieves. No blue lace climbing the dirt. The coins in my pocket had gone from hurt-hot to a low steady warmth, like witnesses who had decided to stay for the next hearing.

At the pump a woman I did not know was filling a jug from a covered spring cask Mara had dragged down from the wall road. She looked at me, then at the failure board, then filled the jug anyway. Not trust. Not forgiveness. Practical thirst that had read the ugly writing and still chosen the clean spout. I would take that over applause.

Night settled wrong. People shut themselves in early. The mill wheel turned slower under Edra's order. In the scullery I started the corrected ratios from zero while Chloe watched for speed and pride the way other people watched for fire.

The new batch had to bind the mana salt without snapping its tether all at once. That meant slower charcoal, colder infusion, blackberry root pushed past the pretty red into the bitter dark, and the coin warmth introduced as a catalyst kiss instead of a flood.

I rebuilt the workstation from empty bowls up. Fresh cloth. Fresh spring water. Fresh labels. The noon failure stayed on the wall where I could see it while I measured. Chloe made me say the noon error before every new test like a prayer that hated poetry:

"Fast bind freed the salt. Fever lied. Dreams told the truth."

"Again."

"Fast bind freed the salt. Fever lied. Dreams told the truth."

I ruined two small tests and recorded both. First test: charcoal too fine, clung, threw a faint sweet note at the rim. Dumped. Second test: root not bitter enough, jam-smell at the edge, dumped before the coins even warmed. The third held on cloth. The fourth held in a dish of contaminated pump water without throwing blue flash into the air.

Between the fourth and fifth I almost added a second coin-kiss because the dulling looked shy and pride hates shy results. Uryu pecked the back of my hand hard enough to leave a mark.

"Kiss," he said. "Not flood."

"I heard myself earlier."

"Hear again."

On the fifth test I invited the weaver back as witness, wrists still wrapped. She watched like a creditor.

"If this one dreams me open again," she said, "I will take your cart wheel."

"Fair."

We did not put it in a mouth. We put a drop on cloth with pump water and waited while rain hammered the yard. No sweet perfume. No racing blue. A dulling, like ink watered on purpose.

The weaver leaned in until her wrapped wrists touched the table edge.

"That is quieter than noon," she said.

"Quieter is not safe," I said. "Quieter is only quieter."

"Provisional," Chloe said, because she loved the word more than my optimism.

"Say the rest," she added.

"Provisional. Not vindicated. Not for mouths yet. Not for Mara's brother. Not for sale. Not for Brann."

"Acceptable."

Enna added a warning line to the label in writing smaller than conscience:

If dreams intensify, stop. If fever falls too fast, stop. If the coins go cold for no reason, stop and find Ulrika.

I made a second label for the wall under the charcoal failure line so the corrected work could not hide behind the shame:

CORRECTED BATCH: CLOTH + DISH ONLY TONIGHT. NO MOUTHS. NO STOCK. WITNESS REQUIRED FOR ANY NEXT STEP.

I wrote the failed noon batch on the wall in charcoal big enough for Brann to read if he leaned in:

FAST BIND = FREED SALT = WORSE DREAMS. DO NOT SELL. DO NOT HIDE.

Mara saw it and left it there.

Uryu fell asleep against the flour jar.

Mara came once more before full dark, set a heel of bread beside my notes, and said, "The boy from the pump asked if the loud girl was still here. I said yes. Do not make me a liar."

"I won't."

After she left I ate the bread over the ledger and wrote one more line before my eyes gave out.

Workshop foundation: refuse the easy lie even when the shop dies for it. Remake the batch. Stay for the consequences.

Then, because the page still looked too clean for the day we had lived, I added the names:

Weaver: wrists raw, owed more than thread if scars. Mill hand: anger usable, nightmares shaped like named water. Grandmother: opened door, underlined a dead child twice. All three alive. All three allowed to hate me. That is part of the work.

Four days to Brann. Cart still named in the note. Coins still evidence. Filtration money accepted. Silence money refused. Corrected batch provisional on cloth only.

I touched the charcoal letters on the wall before I slept. FAST BIND = FREED SALT. The wall did not forgive me. Walls are honest that way. People can be, if you let them watch you fail and stay.

Shame wanted me to sleep facing the corner. Craft made me sleep facing the wall text so morning would start with the error, not with a prettier story about intention.

Uryu mumbled against the flour jar without waking. "Stay."

"Yeah," I told him. "That's the whole method tonight."

Before the lantern died I set the three warm coins on the failure ledger one last time. They heated. Not with the noon pride-heat. With the slower warmth of something that had survived being used wrong and was still willing to be used right. Payment from the first customer. Evidence. Not inventory for Brann. Not a charm for scoopers. Just three stubborn witnesses that refused to cool until the work was honest again.

Outside, somebody nailed a second board beside the pump notice:

LOUD GIRL STILL HERE. BRING SPRING WATER.

I did not write it. I slept under it anyway.

Outside, rain found the sealed dig and tried to pry it open.

I listened to it fail, and failed with more honesty than I had managed at noon, and called that the first real success of the day.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

What Uryu Heard

The day after the failed tonic, Bellwether did not riot.

It did something worse.

It held its breath.

People moved through the square like the ground might answer if they stepped too hard. The pump board stayed up. The sealed dig stayed sealed. Children were kept home. The mill ran at half wheel under Edra's order, and every worker watched the pond between tasks as if it might climb out.

I woke facing the wall text the way craft had made me sleep: FAST BIND = FREED SALT = WORSE DREAMS. The charcoal had smudged overnight where humidity found it, but the letters still held. Beside them, the corrected-batch warning stayed provisional and ugly. LOUD GIRL STILL HERE. BRING SPRING WATER waited outside like a dare I had not written and still had to answer.

The three warm coins sat on the failure ledger where I had left them. Low steady heat. Witnesses, not charms. Three days to Brann. Cart still named in the note. Filtration money accepted. Silence money refused. Cloth-only corrected work. No mouths yet. The ledger did not let any of that hide behind a prettier morning.

Uryu stopped eating.

Not dramatically. He just left the dried apple halves untouched and sat on the scullery window ledge with his wings tight and his teal eyes aimed at nothing I could see.

"Talk," I said.

"Loud."

"The village?"

"Under. And village. And you."

"Me?"

"Guilty loud."

"Tch. Everybody's a critic."

He did not smile.

I checked his pulse the way Chloe had drilled me after noon yesterday: base of wing, count, wait, count again. Fast. Not fever-fast. Saturated-fast. Soul Mana work has a body even when the gift looks like weather.

Chloe noticed before noon. She always did.

"He is saturated," she said. "Soul Mana does not get the luxury of earplugs. If you keep him in the square, he will either break or reach."

"He already wanted to reach yesterday."

"And you said no. Good. Saying no once is not a personality. It is a beginning."

Enna made him a nest of clean towels behind the flour sacks, as far from the pond-facing wall as the room allowed. She marked the distance on her chart like a measurement that mattered. He went because I asked. He hated it because he could still hear everything through the walls.

I sat with him and practiced the only useful version of his power I would allow.

Before we started I wrote the rules on a scrap and pinned them above the nest the way I had pinned kill-conditions above the pot:

Map. Do not mend. Name direction, not desire. Spring water every quarter hour. Fixed nail after every spike. Stop if wings droop past the towel rim. Stop if he offers calm as a gift. Stop if I ask for calm as a tool.

Chloe read it, tapped once, and left the scrap alone. Enna copied the stop lines into the incident log under yesterday's impulse-dose block so the two refusals lived on the same page.

"Where is it worst?" I asked.

He pointed through stone and timber, eyes closed.

"Mill gate. Men angry at Edra and scared of hole. Inn upstairs. Brother dreaming. Square corner where boy fell. Dig. Dig is smiling."

"Smiling?"

"Pleased. Not mouth. Shape."

"Can you tell when it feeds?"

He nodded, small. "When people push fear at each other. Gets thicker. Tastes like... old pot left on."

"Burnt?"

"Burnt and sweet."

Master Pell again. The perfume under the poison. I wrote it down with the time and the direction, not with poetry.

We did this for an hour. Map of feeling instead of map of brick. Every spike got a mark: place, thickness, whether it rose when voices rose. Enna copied his points onto her drainage chart and swore under her breath when they lined up with the shared channel under the mill bay. Fear had plumbing. The ruin had learned the pipes.

Every few minutes I made him drink spring water and look at a fixed nail in the wall. Soul Mana work is still work. Bodies forget that when the gift looks like magic. His wings drooped. I rubbed the base of his horns the way he liked when he was small enough to fit in a teapot, which he denies ever happened.

"Hate nail," he muttered.

"Nail doesn't feed the pond."

"Still hate."

"Good. Hate is yours. Keep it."

I logged the session the way Enna logged silt:

Sensor online. Operator present. No rewrite attempted. Three spike clusters align with shared channel. Dig pleased when rumor travels faster than water.

Chloe glanced at the line and did not soften it.

Every time a shutter slammed in the square, Uryu flinched. Every time somebody raised a voice near the mill gate, he named the direction before the echo finished. It was ugly work. Useful

work. The kind that does not look like heroism and saves more lives than speeches.

At one point he mapped a spike to Mara's upstairs and then to Edra's office and then to my own sternum.

"Me again?"

"Planning anger."

"That's just personality."

"Loud personality. Dig likes it."

I went outside and split kindling until planning anger became ordinary tiredness. If the ruin wanted gourmet fear, it could choke on chore-soreness. The coins in my pocket cooled a fraction while I worked, as if even they preferred boredom to spectacle.

Edra found me at the woodpile with mud on her boots and the look of a woman who had already counted sandbags twice.

"Walk the dig with me," she said. "If your Mana is a sensor, I want the sensor where the hole can hear how boring we are."

We walked. Uryu rode my collar under a dry scrap of cloak and named nothing dramatic. Low hum. Waiting hum. The boards still held. One sandbag had slumped overnight where rain found a soft corner. We restacked it in silence. Enna's depth sticks still read honest. A mill hand on early watch tipped his hat at Edra and not at me, which I preferred to false friendliness.

"If it smiles when we panic," Edra said, "then we give it payroll and schedules instead."

"And sealed numbers," I said. "And no speeches in the square."

She almost smiled. It looked like a tool being cleaned.

"Your wall text is still up."

"It stays up."

"Good. Liars hate walls that remember."

We checked the disposal pit where yesterday's failed tonic had gone. No jar thieves. No blue lace. The soil smelled like wet earth and old charcoal, not perfume. Uryu whispered, "Quiet here. Dig not interested in dead batch."

"Because dead batch does not feed it," I said. "Live fear does."

Edra posted the dig-watch wage board herself before we left, hammering the nail hard enough to make the fence complain. Work named. Pay named. Panic demoted.

When I came back sweaty and quieter, Chloe was waiting with the drainage chart spread on the table.

"It's not just leaking," she said. "It's learning the village's weather."

"Then we change the weather," I said. "Not with magic. With rota and clean barrels and fewer people feeding it free panic."

Chloe arched an eyebrow. "Listen to you. Almost practical."

"Don't get used to it."

I meant it as a joke. It landed as a vow. Enna wrote **weather change = logistics, not charm** in the margin without asking permission.

Mara came down from upstairs with shadows under her eyes.

"My brother said a name in his sleep," she said. "Not a person I know. Sounded like a work order. Like somebody calling for measure and heat."

Uryu whimpered.

"Enough," I told him. "Nest."

"Can quiet them," he whispered.

There it was again. The ugly door.

I felt the shape of the yes I could give. Soft village. Soft Mara. Soft dig crew. Soft road to the corrected batch in every mouth by morning. Soft, soft, soft, and rotten underneath. The egg under my childhood pillow had never asked me to steal a will. Heat is a gift. Theft wears heat sometimes to look kind.

The room heard it. Chloe's face went flat. Mara went still. Enna looked at her notes as if numbers could save us from the question.

I crouched so Uryu and I were eye to eye.

"Listen to me. If you change their hearts, they will trust me. They will drink what I hand them. They will dig where I point. And every good result after that will be poisoned by the way we got it. You would not be my partner. You would be my violet bottle."

His ears shook.

"I carried your egg ten years," I said. "I did not do it so I could turn you into a shortcut."

"Want help."

"Then help like this. Tell me where the fear piles up. Tell me when the thing under the pond gets pleased. Stay yourself."

He cried without sound. Mana tears were warm. I wiped them with my thumb and let him hide in my collar until the shaking slowed.

I wrote the refusal before anyone could rephrase it into mercy:

Uryu offered calm. Operator refused. Calm without consent = theft wearing care. Sensor stays sensor.

Mara spoke roughly. "If he can ease my brother's dreams—"

"He can," I said. "And I am still saying no. I will treat your brother with medicine he can refuse, not with a changed will he cannot see."

She stared at me for a long time. Then she nodded once, furious and grateful in the same motion.

"Hard girl," she said.

"Learning."

Chloe exhaled through her nose. "For the record, if you had said yes, I would have put both of you in separate jars."

"I know."

"Good. Knowing is cheaper than grief."

Enna closed her notebook hard enough to make a point. "Also, from a systems view, forced calm would hide the spike map. We would lose the only sensor that is not lying to us."

Uryu peeped, offended and slightly flattered.

Around midday a rumor reached the scullery ahead of the person carrying it: the loud alchemist kept a mind-changing monster and had already used it on Mara. The person carrying it was a mill boy with more mouth than sense. Chloe met him at the yard gate, asked three precise questions, and sent him away with the look she reserved for contaminated samples.

"They will keep saying it," she told me.

"I know."

"If Uryu ever does it, even once to save a life, the rumor becomes history and you never wash it off."

"I know that too."

Uryu sank lower in the towel nest. "Hate rumor."

"Join the club," I said.

I did not go into the square to argue. Arguments feed the same pipe the dig likes. Instead I posted a second scrap under the pump notice beside LOUD GIRL STILL HERE:

Mana maps fear. Mana does not rewrite it. Ask the innkeeper. Ask the mill. Ask the girl who failed yesterday in public.

Edra saw it on her way past and left it. That was endorsement enough for one hour.

We spent the early afternoon on unromantic work. I rebuilt the corrected tonic in a half-batch no larger than honesty. Fresh bowls. Fresh spring water. Fresh labels. The noon failure stayed on the wall where I could see it while I measured.

Before the first weigh I said the error aloud the way Chloe had made me say it after every ruined test:

"Fast bind freed the salt. Dreams worsened. Batch destroyed in the yard. No secret cup. Cloth only until witnessed trial after weather."

Then charcoal. Willow, burned clean, crushed finer than pride but not so fine it clung. Sieve twice. Blackberry root past the red into the bitter. If it smelled like jam, dump. Coin warmth last, kiss not pour. Coins stayed in the dry dish. No metal in the pot. Stop if sweet perfume rises. Stop if fever-logic starts writing SUCCESS before the cloth holds.

I ruined one small test when my hand rushed the root because the west sky was darkening and pride hates waiting for weather. Sweet edge at the rim. Dumped. Logged.

Rush under storm-pressure = jam-smell contaminant. Operator corrected by dump, not by hope.

The second half-batch held on cloth. The third held in a dish of contaminated pump water without throwing blue flash. Chloe locked the finished vials in Mara's spice chest and kept the key. I

did not argue for pocket storage. Pockets are where shortcuts hide.

Before the mill hands took the spring lines, I walked the consequence list from yesterday with my own feet.

The weaver sat in Mara's side room with her wrists wrapped and a basket of mending she refused to ignore. She looked at my hands first, then my face.

"Still raw," she said. "Not scarring yet. You still owe me if they do."

"Debt stays written," I said. "External binder only today. No internal anything from me until the storm trial is designed in public."

She grunted. "Hard girl keeps being hard. Good. Soft girls write pretty labels and leave town."

I checked the wrap, re-wet the cloth with spring water, and left the debt line untouched in the ledger so she could see it if she asked. Uryu mapped her spike as sharp protect, not panic. Dig got nothing gourmet from her.

The mill hand from the noon trial was in the yard splitting the same anger he had spat into the basin. When he saw me he did not spit again. He also did not smile.

"Nightmares still know my name?" I asked.

"Less," he said. "Still there. Turning water. Quieter if I work."

"Work then. Edra is posting dig watch pay. Boredom is medicine today."

He jerked his chin at Uryu. "That thing going to fix my head?"

"No," I said. "That thing is going to tell me if the hole likes your fear. You get to keep your head even when it is ugly."

He went back to the axe. Anger usable. Names fading. I logged both.

The grandmother had taken a chair by the spring cask and was underlining names on her slate again, slower now. She did not want tonic. She wanted witnesses for the dead. I sat three minutes, said nothing clever, and left a covered cup of spring water where she could reach it without asking. Chloe translated a

small cluster of punis at the fence: bad taste under the pond, less sweet than yesterday, still pleased when shutters slammed. Information. Not a cure.

Enna and two mill hands ran clean spring lines to marked barrels in the square. Edra posted wages for dig watch and filtration crew so fear would not be the only currency on offer. Money for work. Not money for silence. The ledger liked that better than my speeches ever had.

Mara's brother cried out once upstairs. Every head in the kitchen lifted. Uryu's wings snapped open before he could stop them. The air tightened.

"No," I said.

The tightness broke. He made a hurt sound and clawed the towels.

I put my palm over the stop-scrap above the nest until he looked at it with me.

"Map," I said.

"Fear. Shame. Old work calling measure. Heat. More fear."

"Good. Keep telling. Don't touch."

Mara appeared on the stairs, pale. "He is dreaming the pond again."

"Spring cloths. Cool room. No tonic until after the storm trial design is written in front of witnesses," I said. "I can sit outside his door. I will not go in without you."

She let me sit. Through the wood I heard a man fighting water in his sleep. Uryu trembled in my collar and recited feelings like a rosary he hated.

"Hate this," he whispered.

"I know."

When the crying stopped, Mara opened the door herself, checked her brother, and shut it again.

"Still himself," she said.

"Good."

"If the storm kills us, I will be annoyed that I respected your line."

"If the storm kills us, you can haunt me about it."

I wrote that exchange under the refusal line so later-me could not pretend the cost had been theoretical.

That afternoon the first storm line showed in the west, a dark wall over the blackberry fields. Edra called a short meeting in the mill bay: filtration plan, clean-water rota, who watched the dig through the night. I stood at the edge and spoke only when asked about the corrected batch.

"Provisional," I said. "Cloth and dish tests hold. No mouths until a smaller observed trial after the weather passes. If the storm floods the seam, we stabilize people first and chemistry second."

"And the Mana?" a worker asked, eyeing Uryu in my collar.

"Stays out of your heads," I said. "On my life."

Uryu peeped agreement. It sounded like a vow because it was one.

Joss chewed straw at the back and did not clap. Good. Clapping would have been a different kind of lie.

Afterward Edra stopped me by the gear wall.

"If the storm comes and people die because you would not use him—"

"Then I will carry that," I said. "If I use him and people live as puppets, I will carry something worse. I already chose which weight I can lift."

She studied me like a cracked axle. "You are either principled or young."

"Both. Watch me stay both through weather."

She did not bless it. She assigned dig watch slots and filtration wages in the same breath, which was closer to blessing than praise ever gets in a mill.

A woman caught my sleeve as the bay emptied. "If your Mana can make my husband sleep, and you won't use him, then what good is either of you?"

"The good kind that doesn't steal a yes," I said.

She left angry. Anger was cleaner than enchanted agreement. I could live with her anger overnight. Uryu whispered the direction of her spike as she went, and I wrote it without chasing

her to fix it.

Named refusal accepted as cost. Dig fed less by her anger than it would have by false calm.

Brann did not enter the bay. He stood under the eaves across the yard with his collar up and his smile ready, counting the storm line the way other men count unpaid notes. Three days. Cart named. He raised two fingers when he caught me looking, as if we were already negotiating the shape of my failure.

I did not cross the yard. Crossing would have turned the afternoon into his scene. I turned my back and wrote the storm trial design on the mill board in letters large enough for scoopers and skeptics both:

AFTER WEATHER. SMALL OBSERVED TRIAL. CLOTH FIRST. MOUTHS ONLY WITH WITNESSES. NO MANA IN HEADS. FAILED NOON BATCH DESTROYED. CORRECTED BATCH LOCKED. ASK EDRA. ASK MARA. ASK THE WALL.

Edra read it, nodded once, and initialed the corner. Mara initialed under her. Chloe added a tiny C that somehow looked like a threat. Brann's smile thinned. The dig, according to Uryu, did not care about boards. It cared about whether people believed the boards enough to stop feeding it theater.

After the meeting I walked him up the wall road where the wind was cleaner. From there Bellwether looked small enough to hold in two hands and complicated enough to break them. The sealed dig was a dark coin in the mud. The pump board was a white tooth. The scullery chimney put up honest smoke.

"What do you hear now?" I asked.

He listened.

"Mara: sharp protect. Edra: shame under iron. Chloe: watch Ulrika for pride. Enna: numbers against dread. Mill men: hunger and rumor. Dig: waiting for rain. Rain: coming."

"And you?"

"Want to be brave without becoming tool."

"Yeah," I said. "That one is mine too."

We stayed until the first cold drops found us. Then we went down to scrub pans, boil cloth, and prepare the scullery for casualties we hoped not to earn. I set out external binder, spring cloths, cool-water basins, and the locked-chest key schedule so nobody had to invent a method in the dark. Chloe checked the layout once and moved one basin two handspans left without explaining. I left it where she put it. Pride loses races to people who have already measured the room.

In the hour before second bell I rewrote the corrected-batch warning labels until my hand cramped. Dosage blank on purpose. Mouth route blank on purpose. Cloth route named. Stop conditions copied from the wall. Chloe checked them. Enna checked the rota. Mara checked that my brother-rule still held. The village was becoming a machine for not feeding the pond, and machines need boring maintenance more than speeches.

Second bell put me on dig watch with Joss, who chewed straw until it became a philosophy. He did not like me. He liked less the idea of the pond crawling sideways in the dark.

Rain thickened on the boards. Sandbags held their shape. The marked depth sticks Enna had planted still read honest numbers by lantern. Boring. Good.

"If that hole sings," Joss said, "I am running."

"If that hole sings, you grab the nearest person slower than you and then run," I said. "Leaving people for it is how it gets bigger."

He chewed. "You talk like you met one before."

"I met the habit it uses. Fear. Shortcuts. Pretty bottles."

Uryu, tucked dry under my cloak, whispered, "Not singing yet. Listening."

"To what?" Joss asked, spooked.

"Us," I said. "So keep your voice boring."

We lasted the watch without poetry. Once a shutter banged across the square and Uryu flinched hard enough to scratch my collarbone. I made him look at the lantern glass until the spike

passed. Map. Nail. Water. No mend. Joss watched the ritual like it was either holiness or nonsense and decided, for one night, not to decide.

At relief bell Chloe appeared with tea that tasted like boiled discipline and a look that asked whether I had broken my own rule yet.

"No," I said.

"Keep winning the boring way," she said, and took the next watch without drama.

I handed her the spike log. Three rises during our slot, all rumor-shaped, none dig-song. She initialed the page. Enna would want the initials more than my memory.

Before sleep I added one line beneath yesterday's foundation rule:

What Uryu heard is information. What Uryu changes is theft. We survive on the first.

I read both foundation lines aloud to him until his eyes drooped.

"Partner," he mumbled.

"Partner," I said.

Not tool. Not shortcut. Not secret weapon for nights when consent is slow. Partner.

Thunder walked closer. Dig watch would need bodies again before morning. I tied my boots for the handoff and left the ledger open to the foundation lines so anybody who snuck a look would know what kind of shop they were dealing with before the rain tried to renegotiate our ethics.

Chloe read it on her way back through, snorted once, and wrote underneath in her tiny script:

Inspected and reluctantly approved. —C

Enna added:

Storm rota starts at second bell. Dig watch double-staffed. Spike map aligned to shared channel. —E

Mara did not write. She set a second heel of bread on the ledger and said, "Still here," which was signature enough.

Uryu added nothing written. He pressed his forehead to the page and left a faint warm smudge over the word *partner*. Close enough.

I touched the three coins before I lay down. Still warm. Still unspent. Still evidence. Three days to Brann. Cloth-only vials locked. Brother still himself upstairs. Filtration wages posted. Rumor still ugly and unanswered by magic. The wall text still facing the bed so morning could not rewrite noon.

Outside, thunder walked the blackberry west.

Under the pond, something old turned toward the sound of a village holding its breath, and smiled without a mouth.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Mill Under Rain

The storm did not knock.

It arrived like a debt.

Rain hit Bellwether in sheets hard enough to erase the square. The millpond rose in an hour. The sealed dig drank despite sandbags. Blue lace crawled over the boards, then through them, then into the runoff channels Enna had mapped and prayed would hold.

Second bell had barely finished when the well belched.

Not water first. Smell. Burnt sugar and wet iron. Master Pell's perfume wearing the village's face.

Then the screaming started in three places at once.

I was in the scullery with the provisional vials still locked when Mara kicked the door. The wall text from yesterday still faced the bed: FAST BIND = FREED SALT. The foundation lines still waited open on the ledger. What Uryu heard is information. What Uryu changes is theft. The storm had not asked permission to test either sentence.

"Pump's overflowing. Two down in the square. My brother's singing in a language he does not know."

Uryu convulsed on the shelf.

"Now," he gasped. "Feeding. Loud."

"Chloe!"

"Already moving," Chloe said, cloak on, kit in hand. Enna had the drainage chart stuffed under her arm like a battle flag.

I grabbed the spice-chest key schedule off the nail, then forced myself not to unlock yet. Mouths second. Channel first. The storm trial board in the mill bay had said it in letters large enough for Brann. Tonight I had to mean it with wet hands.

Edra met us in the yard soaked to the bone, shouting orders that almost sounded like courage.

"Evac the pond-side houses. Nobody near the dig. Spring barrels only. If you fall, fall uphill."

"Filtration crew to the east channel," I shouted back. "Not the mill outlet. East. If you go west you walk into its mouth."

Joss and three others ran. Straw gone. Faces older already.

The square was a mess of rain and panic. The boy from the pump was not among the fallen; his mother had kept him upstairs. A woman lay near the trough with blue at her lips. A man crawled in circles laughing at nothing. Fear thickened the air until even I could feel the pressure without Uryu's gift.

Uryu clung to me, shaking hard enough to hurt.

"Can stop them," he wept. "Can make calm."

"No."

"People dying."

"Then we work faster. You tell me where it spikes. You do not rewrite them."

His claws drew blood through my sleeve. He nodded against my neck like a creature breaking his own heart on purpose.

I said the nest scrap aloud into his fur so the rule had weather on it:

"Map. Do not mend. Name direction, not desire."

"Left of pump. Dig. Mill bay. Upstairs inn. Spike. Spike. Spike."

"Chloe, pump. Enna, find Edra a live channel that is not smiling. Mara, with me to your brother after the square is breathing."

We split.

I hit my knees in the rain beside the woman at the trough, cleared her mouth, external binder on the blue, spring water on cloth, one spot, wait, next. She shuddered and cried. Alive. The

laughing man took longer. Panic had him. Uryu whispered "thick here" and I almost told him to push it back. Almost.

I bit the word until it bled.

"Name three true things," I told the man instead. "Your name. Today's rain. The fact that I am annoying."

He choked on a laugh that became a sob. "Tomas. Rain. Annoying."

"Good. Stay annoying with me."

A second woman went down near the barrels, not from blue lips but from pure terror. Fear alone was becoming injury. I put her head between her knees, made her count stones in the wall, and had Joss's cousin stand over her with a boring voice and a dry blanket.

"Do not pray loud," I told the gathering edge of watchers. "Pray quiet if you must. Loud fear is free food."

Somebody cursed me. Somebody else listened. Both were useful information.

I almost reached for an internal dose out of the academy reflex that says if the square is falling you climb the ladder. Chloe was not beside me to tap a kill-condition scrap. So I tapped my own wrist hard enough to bruise and kept the spoon out of my kit. Habit is a contaminant in rain too. You rinse it or it rides every rescue.

The boy from the pump's mother shouted from an upstairs window that the covered spring cask on the wall road was still clean. I pointed two runners at it and made them say the rule back before they moved: covered spout, no pond scoop, no luck jars from steam. One of them was the scoop-boy Mara had boxed yesterday. He looked ashamed and useful in the same face. Good. Shame that works is better than courage that steals.

A brace near the trough started to lean. I did not have Goto yet. I had a mill wife with blue lips and a post that wanted to become a second patient. Triage is arithmetic with guilt attached. I finished the cloth on the woman, put Tomas's hand on her

shoulder with orders to keep naming rain, and only then threw my weight into the brace until Joss's cousin arrived. Uryu whimpered the whole count.

"Your fear smells like math," he said.

"Math keeps people breathing," I said. "Poetry can wait."

Goto arrived mid-square in time to catch a collapsing brace post with one shoulder and a complaint about mud versus destiny. Pepperoni tried to offer the fallen man a fairy blessing and got redirected into barrel hauling by Enna's finger alone.

"Miss, this is not the festival kind of crisis," Pepperoni protested.

"Correct," Enna said. "Move."

Uryu's whole body was a struck drum against my collar. Every spike he named I answered with hands, cloth, water, words. No heart-changing. The discipline hurt worse than the rain.

By the time the square's first wave stabilized, the dig boards blew outward.

Not explosion. Pressure. A column of pond water and blue light punched up like a throat clearing. Workers scattered. Edra did not. She stood in the wash of it with her key ring clenched like a weapon and screamed for poles, rope, bodies who could hold a line.

I ran to her.

"It's using the flood to open," I shouted. "If we only block, we feed the panic. We need the neutralizer in the channel, not in mouths first."

"You said no mouths."

"Channel. Boards. Root line. Then people. Corrected batch is small. We use it where the mixture meets the ruin breath."

"If you guess wrong—" Edra began.

"Then I guess in front of you and we correct in public," I said. "No secret second bottle. No pretty lie when this one stinks."

My hands were already moving through the checklist I had rewritten after noon yesterday: bind salt without snapping tether, keep mordant from rebounding, do not offer my own panic as garnish. Father's voice rode under the storm.

A thing is what a thing does.

Tonight the thing I needed to be was not famous. It was specific.

For one ugly heartbeat the academy girl in me reached for a prettier story: a Hero Stone, a named miracle, something that would look good in a Grow Book and make Brann wait forever. I did not have a Hero Stone. I had willow charcoal, bitter root, three warm coins, and ratios corrected because I had failed in public yesterday. That was the inventory. Working with less than legend is still work.

Chloe appeared at my elbow, glasses streaked, deadpan intact under disaster.

"Goto would call this theatrical," she said. "Pepperoni would try to punch the pond. Fortunately you have us."

"Where is Goto?"

"Still east with the cart of clean barrels. Pepperoni is not invited to geology."

Enna skidded into us with mud to her knees. "East overflow can take a controlled dose if we cut the sandbag notch on my mark. If we miss, we perfume the whole lower street."

"Then we do not miss," I said.

I ducked into the scullery long enough to take the spice-chest key from Chloe's wet fist, unlock the provisional vials, and dump my remaining field charcoal into Enna's staged drum. No elegance. Ratios shouted over rain. The failure wall watched me do it. Good. I wanted the noon error in the room while I built the night's answer.

"Charcoal first. Not restaurant pretty. Crush finer than pride. If grit stays on your teeth, crush again. Root past the red into the bitter. If it smells like jam, we dump and start over. Coin warmth last. Kiss, not pour. If the coins go into the pot I throw myself in after them."

I weighed on Pa's iron measure even with water on the scale. Number spoken. Number written on a scrap Chloe held flat against the drum. Then root boiled in a travel pot until the steam

stopped smelling friendly. The coins stayed in a dry dish at the rim. Warmth only. No metal in the mix. No shortcuts dressed as daring because the square was screaming.

Enna repeated the stop lines without romance. Chloe watched my hands for speed-pride the way she had watched them after noon. Uryu counted spikes between my shoulder blades like a second pulse.

"If this fails," Edra said at my ear, "the square will say you poisoned the flood on purpose."

"If this fails, I'll say it first," I said. "Then I'll stay and clean what I broke. Again."

Before the notch cut I made Edra watch me empty one vial into a sample dish of floodwater under lantern. Cloth first, even here. The dish dulled without throwing perfume. The second dish, uncut flood with no slurry, stayed sweet and wrong. Witness chemistry. Not theater. Edra's mouth went thin.

"Write both," she said.

"Already," Enna said, pencil moving in the rain like it had a grudge against weather.

We moved like a bad orchestra that refused to stop playing.

Joss and the filtration crew cut the notch. I uncorked three provisional vials and poured them into the notch mix of charcoal slurry and blackberry leach Enna had staged in a covered drum. The coins in my pocket screamed heat. I pressed them to the drum rim one by one without letting them fall in, catalyst kiss, then sealed and rolled the drum's contents into the cut.

Blue light met bitter dark.

For a second the floodwater cleared in a ribbon.

Then the ribbon screamed.

Not with a mouth. With every frightened mind in range. Uryu convulsed so hard I went to my knees with him.

"Hungry angry," he cried. "Wants fear. Wants you."

"Take my fear then," I snarled at the pond. "Leave them alone."

Bad bargain. Old habit. The ruin leaned toward it like a customer hearing a sale.

Chloe slapped the back of my head.

"Do not offer yourself as seasoning. Finish the work."

Right. Seasoning is still a gift the wrong thing can eat. I swallowed the bargain and put both palms on the next drum so the work had somewhere honest to go.

Second drum. I almost rushed the root because the ribbon's scream made my pride want a faster miracle. Sweet edge rose at the rim for half a breath. Chloe's hand closed on my wrist.

"Dump," she said.

I dumped. Logged later would say:

Rush under scream = jam-smell contaminant. Corrected by dump in rain, not by hope.

Third drum. Slower. Bitter dark. Coin kiss. No metal in the mix. Edra's men braced boards with their shoulders. Mara dragged her brother to the scullery wrapped in blankets, eyes open and not home. I could not go to him yet. The channel still pulsed. Brother-rule still held: medicine he can refuse, not a changed will. The rule did not get a storm exemption.

Pepperoni arrived anyway, of course, green gloves bright in the rain, yelling about fairy duty and unjust weather. Goto came behind him in dramatic white that was instantly ruined, suppressing aura hard enough that even the panic stuttered around him.

"Beautiful White Beast reports for unbeautiful labor," Goto declared, and then shut up and held a brace post because Enna pointed.

"Miss Ulrika!" Pepperoni shouted. "The puddles are being extremely rude!"

"Then be ruder back without drinking them," I said. "Move clean barrels. No heroics in blue water."

He saluted and became useful by accident.

The ruin pushed again. A wave of borrowed terror rolled out of the dig and knocked two men flat. Uryu sobbed.

"Now?" he begged.

"No. Point."

He pointed. Not at the dig. At a submerged grate under the mill bay where the old stonework met Edra's newer timber.

"Mouth," he said. "True mouth."

Edra heard him. Her face cracked.

"That grate was sealed in my grandmother's time," she said. "We were told it was dead intake."

"It is not dead," I said. "Help me open it controlled, or it opens us."

We opened it.

What came up was not a monster with shoulders. It was a boil of water, root, violet crystal, and emotion so dense my teeth hurt. The corrected slurry we dumped into that throat did not look like legend. It looked like ugly soup. Charcoal black. Root bitter. Coin-warmed and practical.

The boil shuddered.

People in the square fell quiet in a wave that was not Uryu. It was absence. The feeding stopped mid-gulp.

Uryu gasped like a diver breaking surface.

"Smaller," he whispered. "Smaller. Hurt. Not dead. Smaller."

"Again," Chloe said.

We hit it again. Enna called ratios. Edra held the line with her body. Mara, somehow back from the scullery, slammed a final sandbag where the blue tried to snake toward the pump. Goto's suppressed aura made a pocket of less-panic big enough to work in. Pepperoni slipped, cursed, and kept moving barrels.

Between pours I had to choose who got hands and who got waiting. A mill wife with blue lips. A boy shaking from fear alone. A brace post about to take Goto's shoulder the wrong way. Alchemy in a flood is triage with better vocabulary. I kept saying the steps out loud so anybody near me could steal them if I went down.

"Airway. Cloth. Spring only. One spot. Wait. If he names three true things, he's coming back."

Joss repeated it to somebody behind him. That was the first moment Bellwether started treating my method as common property instead of stranger witchcraft.

Uryu hiccupped a spike map through chattering teeth. "Grate. Then left brace. Then upstairs. Then you."

"Me?"

"Your fear smells loud."

"Then I'll be boring on purpose."

I made my face flat like Chloe's and poured.

The boil fought like a customer who had been promised gourmet fear and been handed chores instead. Violet flecks tried to climb the grate lip. I scraped them back with a board edge and fed them slurry until they dulled. No speech. No naming. If I gave it a myth title it would wear the title like a better mouth.

"Ratio," Enna snapped.

"Same as drum three. No second coin kiss. Warmth is already in the mix."

"Confirm stop."

"Stop if sweet. Stop if coins leave my hand. Stop if anybody starts singing work orders in a language they do not own."

A mill wife on the line started humming without words. Uryu jerked.

"Not song yet," he said. "Almost."

Mara put a spring cloth to the woman's mouth, made her spit, made her count stones with Joss's cousin. The hum broke. Dig lost a snack. We kept pouring.

Once, mid-pour, Brann's smile crossed my mind like a debt collector leaning into weather he did not earn. Two days. Cart named. If this slurry failed, he would call the night proof that loud girls break villages. I did not look for him in the eaves. Looking would have made him a character in the work. The grate got the pour. He could keep the eaves.

Between the third drum and the last vials I had to stop a runner from tipping channel slurry into a drinking barrel "just in case the clean ones run out." I took the ladle out of his hand hard enough to sting.

"Channel batch is not mouth batch," I said. "Say it."

"Channel batch is not mouth batch."

"Again."

He said it again. Enna wrote his name beside the near-miss so later courage could not erase the almost. The ruin likes almosts that become secret cups. We do not.

I poured the last of the provisional batch into the grate and felt the coins go from scream to fever to warm.

For a breath I thought it would not be enough. The boil surged. Edra's line bowed. Goto planted his feet and became a statue that refused drama. Pepperoni, soaked and furious, screamed a fairy insult so specific the ruin seemed briefly confused.

Chloe dumped a final bucket of bitter root leach on my mark.

"Now," she said.

The light in the water broke into dull flecks and sank.

A pressure left the square so suddenly people staggered, not from force but from the missing weight. Uryu went limp and then breathed. Real breath. Not stolen calm. Exhausted life.

Rain kept falling.

The pond kept being a pond.

Nobody cheered. Cheering would have been another kind of fuel. We stood in the mud and listened to ordinary storm sounds come back like shy animals.

I counted living people the way I had counted punis in the hollow. Names if I had them. Hair color if I didn't. The academy taught synthesis trees. The road taught census under rain.

Pepperoni tried to turn the census into a roll call with fairy titles. Enna shut that down with one look. Goto attempted to stand somewhere photogenic and ended up holding another brace because the pond did not care about angles. Useful friends are the ones who let the work rearrange them.

Edra's voice cracked once giving orders and then came back iron. Mara's apron was pink with diluted blue where she had wiped a child's mouth. Chloe's braid had come half undone and she looked more dangerous for it. Enna was crying without noticing, pencil still moving. Goto had mud on his myth. Pepperoni had lost a glove and gained a purpose.

"Status," Chloe said to me.

"Ruin smaller. Batch gone. People breathing. Me upright. No hearts rewritten."

"Acceptable for now."

I laughed once, raw, and then got back on my knees because a man near the trough still had blue at the corner of his mouth and miracles are not a care plan.

The academy part of my brain kept hunting for a victory condition I could write in a Grow Book. Boss defeated. Route cleared. Credits. The road part of my brain counted cloths left, spring barrels unbroken, and whether Tomas was still naming rain to the woman at the trough. The road part won because the man under my hands still needed an airway more than I needed a title.

Goto, mud to the thighs, muttered, "This ending lacks composition."

"Good," Chloe said. "Composition can wait until nobody is blue."

Pepperoni tried to plant a fairy marker in the sludge for "moral victory." Enna took the marker away and handed him a bucket. He looked betrayed and then, to his credit, scooped.

Then the work after the work began.

We pulled the fallen out of wet. We checked lips for blue. We used external binder and spring cloth and boring sentences. I finally reached Mara's brother in the scullery. He was himself enough to be ashamed of the singing. I gave him nothing from the emergency channel batch. Channel chemistry is not mouth chemistry, and I would not launder one into the other because the night had been hard. I gave him water, a hand on his shoulder, and the truth that the thing under the mill had used his fear because it was nearby and loud, not because he was weak.

"Still himself?" Mara asked from the doorway.

"Still himself," I said. "Still allowed to hate the pond. Still allowed to hate me if that helps."

She nodded once, the same furious grateful motion from yesterday, and went to find dry blankets.

"I want it out of my mill," Edra said later, voice raw. "Not hidden. Out. Inspectors. Breakers. I will pay. I will not buy silence again."

She looked at the ruined grate like a person looking at a relative who had committed a crime.

"I knew the intake was old," she said. "I told myself sealed meant finished. When the concentrate spilled last autumn, I chose contracts over digging. If this thing fattened on that choice, then my name belongs on the cleanup bill."

I wrote it in the wet ledger before comfort could sand it down:

Edra confession under lantern: autumn spill hidden for contracts. Grate known old, treated as dead. Cleanup bill accepted. Silence money still refused.

"Good," I said. "Because I still will not sell you a clearing statement. I will sell you filtration chemistry, labels, and time. At a fair price."

She barked one exhausted laugh. "Listen to you. A shopkeeper in a flood."

"That was the idea of the road."

We worked until our hands stopped looking like hands.

I taught two mill workers the external binder method so I was not the only pair of wrists in town. Chloe drilled them without kindness and therefore with love. One of them was the mill hand from the failed noon trial. He learned the cloth rhythm like a man collecting a debt from fear itself.

"One spot," Chloe said. "Wait. If you chase blue across the whole mouth at once you waste binder and feed panic. Your hands are tools. Tools do not perform."

He scowled and did it right. The second worker was younger and wanted to be praised. I gave her corrections instead. Praise is a contaminant when the lesson is still wet.

Enna remarked the safe wells and crossed the unsafe ones in paint that would survive rain. At the pump she nailed a third board under my earlier scraps:

POND WATER IS NOT MEDICINE. CHANNEL SLURRY IS NOT MEDICINE. SPRING ONLY. ASK BEFORE YOU SCOOP.

Edra drafted a notice by lantern: spill history, grate truth, wages for cleanup, penalties for dumping. She signed her own name large enough to be read from the road. When a council cousin tried to soften the autumn-spill line, Edra took the quill back and underlined her confession twice.

"If we lie now," she said, "the hole learns we are still food."

I liked her better wet and honest than dry and contractual.

Mara's common room became a triage bay. The grandmother from the failed trial arrived with spare blankets and a look that said failure had not excused her from usefulness. The weaver came too, wrists bandaged, and took inventory of cloth like vengeance.

"You still owe me thread if I scar," she told me, passing.

"I still agree," I said. "Debt stays written even when the pond screams."

The grandmother set her slate on the triage table and started a column of living names beside the dead ones she had underlined yesterday. Not poetry. Inventory. When a child asked why, she said, "So the hole does not get to decide who counts."

I borrowed that line for the ledger.

Goto found a dry corner and attempted to restore his coat by sheer narrative force. It failed. He remained. That mattered more. When a brace needed a second shoulder, he left the dry corner without a speech. Mud took the last of the white. He looked, for once, like a person instead of a composition.

Pepperoni fell asleep under the table after declaring the storm personally rude to fairykind. Before he dropped, he had moved eleven barrels and only tried to bless two of them. Enna confiscated the second blessing and replaced it with a lid. Uryu stole the fairy declaration and mumbled it in his sleep in a smaller voice.

Between patients I inventoried what the night had spent. Provisional vials: empty. Field charcoal: gone. Blackberry leach: scraped. Coin warmth: still present, lower, honest. Spice-chest reserve: three vials Chloe had refused to release for the channel,

labeled harder than law, still cloth-route only. I wanted to hate her for the thrift. I thanked her instead. Shops that empty every bottle into the first emergency do not open tomorrow.

"Reserve stays reserve," Chloe said, reading my face. "You can be a hero after breakfast."

"Tch."

"Partner," Uryu mumbled from my lap, half in the argument, half in sleep.

"Partner," I said.

I forced the ugly numbers onto a dry scrap before exhaustion could turn them into legend:

Emergency channel slurry: spent. Mouth doses from channel: zero. Hearts rewritten: zero. Near-miss ladle: intercepted. Rush dump: one. People upright at last count: all named or hair-marked. Ruin: smaller, hurt, watched.

Enna initialed. Chloe initialed. Edra initialed without being asked. That page was worth more than a clearing statement.

By the grey hours before dawn, Bellwether was wrecked and alive. The dig was a crater of spent crystal and charcoal sludge. The grate mouth was packed, marked, and under triple watch. The corrected emergency slurry was gone. The foundation lines on the ledger had survived the wet because Enna had weighted the page with a mug.

Chloe sat against the scullery wall and closed her eyes for exactly four minutes, then opened them and demanded a full incident log.

Enna's chart was soaked and still readable. She had written across the worst smear:

Practical compound beat legendary panic. Do not forget.

Pepperoni was snoring under a table. Goto stood in the doorway trying to wring dignity from a ruined coat and failing beautifully.

Before tea, before breath, I walked the grate once more with Enna and a lantern. Spent crystal. Charcoal sludge. No blue lace climbing the boards. Uryu, half-asleep, whispered "smaller" like a prayer he did not trust yet.

"Mark it thrice," I told the watch. "If the smell comes back sweet, you wake me even if I threaten you."

Joss nodded, face older than the night. "Airway. Cloth. Spring only. One spot. Wait."

"You remembered."

"Hard not to when you yelled it at the weather."

We checked the depth sticks one more time. Numbers ugly. Numbers honest. Enna painted a fourth mark on the grate pack: a plain black bar that meant *do not invent a better story by morning*.

On the way back through the yard I passed the woodpile where I had dumped planning anger yesterday. The kindling was soaked. So was my pride. Both could be dried and used again if I did not lie about the water.

Mara set a cup beside me.

"Tea," she said. "Not pond."

"Thanks."

"My brother is sleeping. Real sleeping."

"Good."

She hesitated. "When the square can hear without screaming, I am writing the first human order in your ledger. Fair price. Named ingredients. No romance."

My throat closed around the tea.

"I will charge you," I said.

"You had better."

Chloe took the cup out of my hand before I dropped it. "Sleep one hour. Then incident log. Then corrected stock inventory. In that order."

"Bossy."

"Alive," she said. "Keep matching me."

Before the hour, I made myself write the method where a stranger could steal it:

Neutralizer used tonight: willow charcoal crushed fine, blackberry root past jam into bitter, coin warmth as catalyst kiss only, corrected ratios from destroyed noon batch. Applied to channel/grate, not mouths. No Mana rewrite. Stop if sweet perfume returns. Wake Ulrika.

Not a Hero Stone recipe. A working page. I pinned it under Edra's notice so cleanup crews would inherit craft instead of rumor.

Outside, the rain softened from debt to weather.

Under the mill, something old stayed hurt and small and watched by people who finally admitted it was there.

Before I let sleep take the edge off, I rewrote the storm trial board in the mill bay so dawn could not pretend the night had been magic:

CHANNEL SLURRY USED. MOUTHS NOT. HEARTS NOT. GRATE OPENED CONTROLLED. EDRA SPILL ON RECORD. RESERVE VIALS LOCKED. FAIR PRICE STILL OWED TO THE LIVING.

Edra initialed again. So did Mara. So did Joss, which surprised him into standing straighter. Brann, if he was still under the eaves, could read it when the light came. I hoped he did. Debt collectors should know what kind of shop they are circling.

I looked at my muddy hands, at Uryu, at the ugly empty drums that had saved more than any Hero Stone in my head.

The compound had no secret name. Charcoal. Blackberry root past jam into bitter. Coin warmth as catalyst kiss. Corrected ratios from a noon failure I had destroyed in public. Local materials. Local witnesses. Local breath afterward. That was the whole miracle, and it was not a miracle. It was a working alchemist's night.

The academy girl in me had wanted a named miracle. The village girl in me recognized a working compound by the way people breathed afterward.

Between those girls stood the road girl with mud in her teeth, and she was the one who finally fit the work. Not prettier. Truer.

I touched the three warm coins before I let my eyes close. Payment from the first customer. Catalyst in a flood. Still unspent as money. Still spent as craft. Brann could come in two days for a cart. He could not come for this night. This night was already paid in charcoal and refusal and breath.

Uryu twitched once in my lap, then settled.

"Smaller," he said again, checking.

"Smaller," I agreed. "And watched."

"Partner not tool."

"Partner not tool."

Chloe, without opening her eyes, added from the wall, "And operator not seasoning. Write that one too before you sleep."

I did.

"Best workshop in the universe?" Uryu mumbled without opening his eyes.

"Not yet," I said. "But tonight we earned the road."

I meant it. Not as a slogan for a banner Uryu would sit on until I put it away. As a fact you can hang coins on.

Dawn would ask for labels, wages, inspectors, and a fair price. Night had asked whether I would steal a village's will to save my pride. I had answered. The road could work with that answer.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

If They Won't Come

Bellwether smelled of wet charcoal and boiled cabbage again.

That was how I knew we had won enough to do the dull part.

The first day was triage and sleep in shifts. The second was digging under inspection while tempers rose and fell. The third was the day people wanted a villain simple enough to hang.

Some pointed at Edra. Some pointed at me. Some pointed at punis, which was stupid enough that Chloe shut it down with one sentence about evidence and collective embarrassment.

I spent those three days on unromantic maintenance. Checked lips for leftover blue. Rewrote labels that rain had smeared. Watched the grate pack with Joss until boredom became a skill again. Taught the external binder method twice more because once is a demonstration and twice is a habit trying to stick. Uryu mapped spikes that kept getting smaller and meaner, like a customer denied gourmet fear and left with chores.

On the second morning a council cousin tried to cover the storm board with a prettier notice about "seasonal flooding managed by local diligence." Edra took the prettier notice down herself and put the ugly board back up with a fresh nail.

"If we start lying for comfort," she told him, "the hole gets a second mouth."

I liked her more every time comfort lost.

"Still smiling?" I asked Uryu on the second dusk.

"Less. Sulking. Sulking is quieter."

"Good. Let it sulk under watch."

The three warm coins stayed in my pocket through all of it. Not spent on Brann. Not dangled as proof. Warm witnesses that had already done their catalyst work and still refused to cool into ordinary metal.

I also rebuilt a small cloth-route reserve from local charcoal and bitter root under Chloe's eye, labeled harder than law, locked in Mara's spice chest until delivery day. No mouths from pride. No secret second bottle for Brann's market. The noon failure still lived on the wall in charcoal ghosts. I left it. Walls that remember keep shops honest.

Three days after the storm, the square held a meeting that was mostly arguments and partially civilization. Edra stood on a crate and confessed the autumn spills without theater. Mara read a list of unsafe wells and safe barrels until even the people who hated lists nodded. Chloe presented the failure of my first tonic and the success of the channel slurry with the same flat voice, which made both harder to romanticize. Enna pinned her ruined chart to a board and dared anybody to call the ruin seasonal rot.

A man in the back yelled that alchemy had cursed the pond. The grandmother from the failed trial stood up and asked him whether he preferred pretty lies or living grandchildren. He sat down.

Another voice tried to make me the whole story: loud outsider, Mana monster, flood on purpose. Joss, of all people, said, "She yelled airway cloth spring only at the weather until we could say it without her. That is not a curse. That is a drill."

I owed him a fair price later for that sentence alone.

The weaver stood with her bandaged wrists visible and said she would scar or she would not, but either way the debt was written and the loud girl had not run. The mill hand from the noon trial spat once into the dirt—not at me—and said anger was usable if you stopped feeding the hole with it. Between them, the square lost interest in a single villain. Shared responsibility is uglier than a hanging and more useful than applause.

I spoke last and shortest.

"I am not your village alchemist by decree," I said. "I am a workshop on the road. I will sell you what works at a fair price, name every ingredient, and stay through consequences when I am wrong. If you want magic that makes you agree with me, you are in the wrong square."

Uryu, on my shoulder, added, "No heart stealing."

"What he said."

I held up one of the storm labels so the square could see my name already on it. "This is the deal. My name means I can be found when the batch bites. If that is too expensive, buy from somebody who sells anonymity. Anonymity is cheaper until it isn't."

Edra, from her crate, did not clap. She nodded once, which in mill language is louder. Mara did not clap either. She tapped the ledger under her arm like a second gavel. That was enough ceremony for a square that had just survived itself.

Nobody threw a rock. In Bellwether that counted as a standing ovation.

Afterward a child asked if I was a witch. I said no. The child asked if witches charged less. Chloe said yes, and then you get what you pay for. The child looked enlightened and slightly afraid.

Edra funded filtration and a proper opening under outside inspection. Not silence money. Work money. She tried once more, quietly, to add a line item for a clearing statement. I crossed it out in front of her.

"Pay for cleanup," I said. "Not for my mouth."

"Stubborn."

"Shop policy."

She watched the crossed line dry. "If the inspectors ask who found the grate—"

"Tell them the truth. Uryu pointed. I poured ugly soup. Your crew held the line. Nobody gets to be the only hero. Heroes make bad maintenance plans."

I made her keep the storm board up beside the new filtration notice:

CHANNEL SLURRY USED. MOUTHS NOT. HEARTS NOT. GRATE OPENED CONTROLLED. EDRA SPILL ON RECORD.

History that stays nailed down is harder to rewrite into a ballad.

Mara brought the ledger to the common room table while the square still dripped.

"First human order," she said. "Say the price."

I looked at the page. Empty lines under the puni coins. My hands wanted to undercharge out of guilt for the failed trial. Father's rule knocked that out of me.

If she wants the name, she pays for every bottle.

Edra watched from the doorway, arms folded, as if fair pricing were another mill inspection.

"Wound salves for the triage bay. Pump-side contact wash. Labels with dosage and warnings. Labor for teaching two more people the external binder method." I named a number that made my stomach twist and my spine stay straight. "Half now. Half on delivery. If a batch fails, I replace it or refund. I do not disappear."

Somebody in the room whistled like I had asked for a castle.

"Too high?" Mara asked me, not them.

"Too honest," I said. "High would be charging for fear."

I almost cut the labor line to look generous. Chloe's pencil tapped the table once. I left the labor line. Teaching is work. Work is priced. Guilt is not a discount code.

Before Mara wrote, I made myself say the ingredients aloud in the room so nobody could claim later I had sold mystery:

"Willow charcoal. Blackberry root past jam into bitter. Carrier oil. Spring water. External binder ratios from the cloth method you already watched me teach. Risks: contact sting, uselessness if you scoop pond water into the same pot, no protection against lying to inspectors. If dreams worsen, stop and send for me."

Silence. Then Mara's pen.

She wrote it.

Then she paid.

Edra made a quiet sound that might have been approval from a throat unused to giving it. A mill hand muttered that academy girls always priced like cities. I told him city girls would have charged for the story too. He shut up and watched the coins move.

Copper and silver hit the table with a sound I had been waiting on since the empty shop at the end of the road. Not puni warmth. Human metal. Ordinary and thunderous. Uryu nearly fell off the chair trying to see the coins better. Chloe moved the stack back from his nose without looking.

Uryu clapped.

Chloe pretended not to watch my face and watched anyway.

"Write your name on the labels," Mara said. "Not 'traveling cure.' Your name."

I did.

Mulberry Workshop. Ulrika Mulberry. Ingredients. Dose. Risks. If dreams worsen, stop and send for me.

No romance. No "miracle blend." No blank where a warning should live. The weaver watched me write and nodded like a creditor approving a repayment schedule.

The weaver ordered thread-salve for her wrists and reminded me of the scar debt. I put the debt on the same page as her order so money and consequence could not hide from each other. The grandmother ordered nothing and gave me a basket of bread "for the road, not for penance." The mill hand Tomas ordered a sleep tea only after making me explain it three times and insulting my handwriting twice. I charged him too. He paid in mixed copper and a promise to keep saying three true things if the pond ever hummed again.

"Annoying," he said, testing the word like a tool.

"Keep it," I said. "It works."

Brann arrived on the second morning with his cheerful ledger and found the cart still mine.

He had brought a witness this time, a bored clerk with ink on his cuffs. That meant he expected either payment or theater.

"Payment," I said, and put Bellwether coin on his book before he could start the whistling.

He counted. Recounted. The clerk recounted. Brann looked briefly disappointed that tragedy had failed to deliver him a cart.

"You could have made more if you had sold the story," he said lightly.

"I sold salves."

"Until next term," he said.

"Until next term," I said. "The shop will be open. Sometimes on the road. If you come for the cart, come with paper. I have paper now too."

Mara, passing with a crate of clean bottles, added without stopping, "And witnesses who can read."

Brann's smile thinned. He left with payment and no cart and a clerk who looked almost relieved. Seven days had been a real threat. Real threats deserve real coin, not silence deals and quiet labels. The coins from the pink puni stayed on their nail-to-be in my head, still unspent as money. Evidence. Catalyst history. Not Brann's.

After he left I wrote the payment line twice: once in my ledger, once on a scrap I handed Mara.

Brann term met from Bellwether earnings. Cart remains Mulberry Workshop property. No quiet-label side deal. No story sold.

"Why give me the scrap?" Mara asked.

"Because if I die on the road, somebody in this square should be able to prove the cart was paid for with salves, not silence."

She put the scrap in her apron like a weapon.

On the last evening Edra walked me to the cart and handed over a sealed packet of mill-water samples labeled in her own hard script. "For your records. And for anybody who calls me a liar later."

"I'll keep them."

"I know. That is why I am giving them to you instead of the fire."

She hesitated, then added a second packet: copies of the wage sheets for dig watch and filtration. "In case someone claims panic was our only currency."

"I'll keep those too."

"Fair price for the next filtration batch," she said. "Do not undercharge me because we stood in rain together. Rain is not a contract."

"Shop policy," I said, and meant it.

We did not leave the same hour we got paid. That would have looked like flight. We stayed two more days teaching the binder method, checking labels, and watching the grate crew work without needing me in every breath. Leaving too fast is another kind of fraud.

The pink puni returned on the morning we finally turned the cart. Healthy. Loud. Two others bounced behind it. Chloe translated enough to confirm the hollow tasted cleaner. I still could not hear words in their squeaks. I no longer mistook that for understanding nothing. Need has a posture. Thanks has a bounce. I waved like an idiot and called it literacy.

Before we rolled, I made a last circuit of the marked wells with Enna's paint chart and forced myself not to apologize for every blue lip from the failed noon. Apology without replacement batch is theater. Replacement batch was coming on Mara's order. Theater could wait.

We left Bellwether under a clean sky that still smelled like wet stone. The punis peeled off toward the willow hollow with a chorus I did not understand and did not fake.

On the road east, referrals started.

A farm boy with a corked bottle of well water and a note from Edra. A carter with a rash map drawn by Enna. A woman from the next hamlet who had heard that Mulberry Workshop charged fairly and stayed for the ugly part.

Between Bellwether and home the cart threw its left squeak again. I greased it in the rain while Uryu offered critique from under the tarp. A farmer stopped, watched, and asked if

Mulberry Workshop fixed axles as well as wells. I said not yet. He said when I did, he had coin. Referrals are just unfinished sentences people hand you on the road.

At a crossroads shrine I treated a mule's split hoof and wrote the care steps on a scrap for the owner because he could not read my face as well as a list. He paid in oats. Uryu approved.

I took samples. I refused two jobs that asked for guaranteed miracles. I accepted three that asked for honest attempts. One refusal came with shouting. I let the man shout. Consent includes the right to storm off and hire somebody louder.

The second refusal was quieter and worse: a woman who wanted me to "make her husband kinder" the way rumors said my Mana could. Uryu went stiff on my shoulder.

"No," I said. "Not for pay. Not for pity. Not ever."

She called me useless. I wrote the refusal in the road ledger anyway:

Requested heart-change. Refused. Shop sells craft, not stolen yeses.

At a dry ford I mixed a test for a farm well while the farmer's daughter asked Uryu if he was a cloud. He said "sometimes." She paid him a daisy. He wore it for a mile like a medal. I charged the father fairly and wrote the well result without theater. Clear enough. Hard. Watch the east ditch after rain. No violet. No ruin-smell. Ordinary problems still deserve ordinary care.

Between the ford and the next hamlet I rebuilt the cart's left squeak into a scheduled stop instead of a crisis. Grease. Wedge. Check. Write the next grease day on the sideboard in charcoal. Workshops that only fix emergencies invent emergencies to feel useful. I was done inventing.

One night on the road I almost undercharged a carter because he reminded me of the empty weeks before Bellwether. Chloe was not there to tap a pencil. Uryu was.

"Name," he said.

"Price," I corrected, and named the fair one. The carter paid. My stomach twisted. My spine stayed straight. Guilt is still not a discount code when the auditor is a Mana with a daisy behind

one horn.

That same night I dreamed the empty shop again: dust, zero customers, borrowed money. I woke and touched the ledger where Mara's order lived and Brann's payment line lived and the heart-change refusal lived. The dream thinned. Not forever. Enough for the next mile.

Chloe rode with us as far as the fork.

"You will inflate," she said. "Success is a contaminant."

"Then come audit me."

"I intend to. Quarterly. Bring better pens."

She hesitated, which Chloe rarely does in doorways or farewells.

"You did not become kind," she said. "You became precise with your kindness. Do not confuse the two and get lazy."

"Yes, auditor."

"Don't call me that in public. I have a reputation for coldness to maintain."

She left before I could hug her again. Enna hugged enough for both of them and left a spare pencil behind like a blessing.

Enna hugged me hard and practical. "Send drainage notes. I am building a file called Things Under Mills So Nobody Learns This Late Again."

Pepperoni demanded a fairy medal for storm rudeness endured. I gave him a biscuit. He accepted this as equivalent. Goto bowed as if the mud had been a stage and promised to visit when his coat recovered dignity. I told him dignity was optional and labor was not. He looked oddly pleased.

When the shop at the end of the road came into view, the door was still locked and the windows still dusty. It did not look like victory. It looked like a place that could work.

The fixed shop was still badly located. Same ditch. Same thin foot traffic. Same reason the vow had needed legs. That was fine. The cart had become half the business on purpose now, not as a fleeing animal. Location was a fact. Mobility was policy.

I stood with the cart handles in my hands and let the fear of the empty weeks visit one more time. It came. It did not own the doorway.

Inside, dust had settled in my absence like a sarcastic welcome. I unlocked the door, propped it open, and swept because a working shop should not smell like surrender.

I found a moth in the salve drawer and escorted it out with dignity. Uryu claimed I had adopted it. I claimed pest control. We compromised by naming it Debt and refusing to feed it.

Then I set water to boil and cleaned the counter until the wood remembered hands. Opening the shop after Bellwether was less triumphant return and more reintroducing myself to my own tools. The cauldron did not care that I had fought a ruin. It cared whether I had scrubbed the rim.

I checked stock against the ledger like Chloe would. Three lies waited for me: a jar labeled full that was half, a binder date I had wished newer, and a "later" pile that had become a shrine to avoidance. I corrected all three before lunch. Success is a contaminant. So is nostalgia for the girl who packed a cart instead of facing a shelf.

Uryu claimed the shelf above the register with a satisfied fluff. I hung the three warm puni coins on a nail there, not spent, not for sale. Payment and evidence and reminder. They ticked once against the wood as they warmed to the room, as if clocking in for a quieter shift.

A letter had been slipped under the door while we were gone. Two, actually. One from a farmer east of town asking about well testing. One from a woman who wrote only: *Heard you stayed. That matters. Come when you can.*

I read both aloud to Uryu. He nodded at the second like it was scripture.

"Stayed," he repeated.

"Yeah."

"Hard."

"Yeah."

"Good hard."

I pinned both letters above the ledger beside a fresh copy of the foundation lines. Information, not theft. Fair price. No silence for sale. The wall at Bellwether had taught me that shops need memory as much as shelves.

I also unpackaged Edra's sealed samples onto a high shelf away from the moth's old drawer, labeled in both our hands. Evidence is inventory too. Different kind. Not for sale. For the day somebody calls a mill clean because it is convenient.

Then I opened the ledger and wrote beneath Mara's order:

Business model: if they won't come to me, I will go to them. Cart is half the shop. Labels carry my name. No forced trust. No silence for sale.

Under that:

First debt payment: made. Cart: still ours. Tomorrow: well test east, labels for Mara's refill, inventory that matches reality.

And under that, because the failed noon batch still deserved ink even at home:

Workshop foundation holds: refuse the easy lie even when the shop dies for it. Remake the batch. Stay for the consequences. What Uryu hears is information. What Uryu changes is theft.

I added one more line while the ink was still wet enough to smear if I flinched:

Canon vow kept in practice: shop open, road open, price fair, name signed, customers not enchanted into arriving.

The road back had mud on the wheels and coin in the box.

I lit the stove.

Uryu yawned on his shelf. "Best workshop?"

"Ask me after the next customer," I said.

He smiled anyway.

The pot went on because there was work tomorrow.

Before sleep I laid out tomorrow's labels on the counter in three stacks: Mara refills, east-well tests, and blank stock for whatever the road invented. Habit, not hope. Hope is a festival word. Habit is a weekday word. Pa would have liked that sentence and pretended he didn't.

Outside, a puni squeaked once in the ditch grass and bounced away. I didn't understand it. I waved anyway.

Before the lamp died I touched the cart handles once more from the doorway. Half the shop. Not a fleeing animal. A second counter with wheels. If they would not come to the bad corner at the end of the road, I would take Mulberry Workshop to their wells, their rashes, their ordinary disasters, and charge them fairly for the privilege of not being enchanted into trust.

The road had not finished with me.

Good.



EPILOGUE

Company

Months later, the shelves turned over faster than dust settled.

Not always. There were still quiet days when the road stayed empty and Uryu practiced looking majestic on insufficient evidence. But the quiet days no longer felt like a verdict. They felt like weather.

I learned the rhythm of a living shop the hard way. Morning inventory. Midday road or counter. Evening notes. No more packing the cart in a midnight panic as if motion alone were a business plan. When we went out, we went with labels written, prices set, and a return day named out loud.

Mara's orders shared the ledger with puni marks, farm requests, and commissions that ranged from sensible to absurd. Somebody asked for a perfume that smelled like victory. I sold them clean soap and a lecture. Somebody asked for a love draught. I refused and offered a tea that helped with nerves before difficult conversations. Two customers came back to thank me for the refusal. One did not. That was also information.

Uryu ruled the shelf above the register. The three warm coins hung at his feet like tiny suns that had decided to retire from the evidence bag and become household gods. He still refused to call me mom. He called me owner when he was annoyed and Ulrika when he was serious and nothing at all when he was stealing cheese.

Chloe arrived every quarter with a satchel and a face that said she had already found three filing errors from the door. She criticized the system while quietly fixing it. Once she stayed

through a flood week and slept on the workshop bench without comment, which from Chloe was a sonnet. Enna sent drainage letters covered in diagrams. Pepperoni sent glitter by accident and a formal complaint about storms. Goto sent formal invitations to "strategy dinners" that were just stew, then washed every bowl as if etiquette could redeem drama.

Edra's inspectors broke the old grate out of the mill in pieces and carted the ruin-stone away under seal. She sent a final payment with a note in a hard hand:

For chemistry and stubbornness. Do not discount either.

I did not.

Mara visited once with her brother, who looked at my shelf like a man inspecting a bridge he had crawled out from under. He bought a sleep tea and made me recite the risks until Chloe looked almost proud. Before they left, Mara straightened a label I had hung crooked and pretended she had not.

"Still don't need an alchemist," she said.

"I know."

"Keep coming anyway."

On the counter between orders I kept a copy of the Bellwether foundation lines under glass so success could not fog them:

Refuse the easy lie. Remake the batch. Stay for the consequences. What Uryu hears is information. What Uryu changes is theft.

Customers sometimes asked what the glass was for. I told them it was the shop's spine. Most did not ask twice.

Some evenings I stood in the doorway with the lamp lit and watched the road the way I had on the night of the vow. The fear still knew the way to my door. It just had to wait its turn behind work.

I had wanted to be famous.

What I was becoming was useful one customer at a time.

There was a difference, and the difference paid the debt, stocked the cart, and kept the pot honest.

Fame is a crowd looking at you. Usefulness is a person handing you a problem and trusting you with the part that hurts. I still liked attention. I liked winning. I liked being told I was right. I just stopped mistaking those appetites for the work.

Some weeks the appetites won for an afternoon. I would catch myself performing competence for a customer who only needed soap. Then Uryu would say "showy" from the shelf, or Chloe's quarterly letter would arrive with a single underlined sentence about vanity contaminants, and I would recalibrate like a scale after a hard knock.

Brann came once more at midwinter, less cheerful, more curious. He looked at the ledger, at the coins on the shelf, at the cart tracks drying by the door.

"You are still not rich," he observed.

"I'm still open," I said.

He almost tipped his hat with respect. Almost. Then he left a repayment schedule that no longer assumed my failure as the default weather.

One dusk a strange tree's message found the shop: a leaf pinned under the door with writing that was not writing, more like a direction with roots in it. Westwald, maybe. A later road. A later story. I put the leaf in the ledger and did not chase it yet. The workshop had earned the right to finish one life before being drafted into another.

I dreamed of Westwald once and woke reaching for labels. That told me which life was still mine to keep.

Some nights Chloe stayed late and we said nothing important on purpose. Some mornings the pink puni arrived with a friend and bounced until I followed. Some afternoons I closed early and walked the wheat edge outside town where an old man had once put a warm egg in a loud girl's hands.

On market days the shop smelled like mint, charcoal, and wet wool. On road days it smelled like dust and possibility. Either way, the ledger gained lines. Not every line paid well. Every line taught

something. I kept the failed trial in Bellwether written in ink that would not fade, because a workshop that erases its burns sells confidence instead of craft.

Winter tested us with quiet. Not the old empty quiet. A working quiet, where I repaired tools, rewrote labels, and taught a neighbor's nephew to read dose marks without pretending he had to love alchemy. He did not. He loved not poisoning his uncle. That was sufficient vocation for one season.

In that quiet I finally wrote Pa a letter that was not all victories. I told him about the failed tonic, the refused silence money, the coins above the register. I told him alchemy still bit. I told him I was keeping fingers and harvest in the same count as best I could.

His reply was short.

Good. Don't get fancy with the truth.

I nailed that scrap inside the cupboard door where only I would see it when reaching for charcoal.

Spring brought the pink puni back with a scar like a proud seam and three friends who bounced in formation. I still heard only round sound. I packed the cart anyway. Uryu said "family." Close enough.

Once a traveling scholar asked if I was the girl from the fallen academy who fought mana kings. I told him I was the girl who charged fairly for salves and stayed when the first batch failed. He looked disappointed. I sold him soap.

I still could not hear punis.

I still did not need to hear every word to know when I was needed.

Uryu yawned. "Tomorrow?"

"Well test north. Refill for Mara. Inventory. And if the pink one brings friends again, we pack the cart."

"Best workshop?"

I looked at the coins, the labels with my name, the muddy wheels drying by the stoop, and the empty line waiting for the next order.

"Getting there," I said.

He accepted that.

In the back room a crate still held smashed violet glass from Bellwether under seal and label. I kept it the way some people keep war medals, except mine was a warning. Chloe called it morbid. Enna called it data. I called it company of a sharper kind.

Some mornings I woke afraid the empty weeks would return. Some mornings they almost did. Then a knock would come, or a cart wheel would squeak, or Uryu would say "needed" in his small serious voice, and the fear would have to wait behind work again.

On one of those almost-empty mornings I counted the ledger aloud to the coins: Mara, farms, rash maps, mule hoof, well tests, refusals kept. Not fame. Traffic. Traffic means a living place. The vow from the empty shop had not asked for applause. It had asked for legs, labels, and the nerve to charge fairly after failing in public. I still had all three.

Outside, the road stayed a road.

Inside, the pot was on because there was work tomorrow, and company enough to do it.

If this is not the best workshop in the universe yet, it is at least a workshop that knows what best costs, and keeps a pot ready to pay in craft instead of stories.

Uryu snored. The coins ticked once against the shelf as the wood cooled. Somewhere down the road a cart that was not mine squeaked, and for once the sound did not feel like mockery. It felt like traffic.

I banked the stove, checked the locks, and went to bed with charcoal under my nails like a wedding ring for people married to work.

THE ROAD TO MULBERRY WORKSHOP

ULRIKA MULBERRY

