

## Crimson and Ivory

Clamoring voices echo from the hall outside the wooden doors when I wake. My eyes are heavy, my eyelids drooping, and yet I am awake. I am distinctly aware of the freezing cold outside the covers on the bed. Was it cold when I went to sleep? I don't remember. The door creaks. A man and a woman, my mother, enter, the latter carrying a small oil lamp. It creaks and sways as her hands fly to her face and she falls to her knees beside the bed.

“Clara! Clara, darling!”

“Mama?” My voice is barely audible.

“I'm here, love. I'm here.” Her cold hands caress my burning face. The man pulls her aside. A doctor, that's what he is. My doctor. He recommends bedrest. I don't remember being ill.

I spend days confined to the bed, mama taking care of my every need. I detest it. I'm not sick. I am perfectly well. But when I try to tell her, my voice, which sounds so full of life and healthy in my own head, becomes that of a shriveled husk.

At long last I am allowed to get up. The doctor visits, and new restrictions are placed against me. I am not to leave the house. I am not to exert myself. Most days I sit by the windows, far away from the oppressive heat of the hearth mama keeps lit. I watch the snow fall outside. I don't remember it being winter, the last time I looked out these windows. No, I remember the golden and maroon leaves of autumn, so warm and inviting. I don't mind the seasonal transitions. I quite like the winter air. But I'm not allowed outside.

Sometimes Dash curls up on my lap, begging for cuddles. I oblige. I think he missed me while I was sick. He's a sweet thing, always has been, ever since I was six years old and papa brought him home for my birthday. A lot has changed in ten years, but not Dash. Still a puppy at heart.

Mama brings me novels. They are all a tad bit dry, but I welcome the distraction. I think she worries. Sitting alone by the window isn't good for one's health, she says. I know. I want to go outside.

Mama leaves for the market for the first time in weeks. She locks the doors and the windows and makes me swear on all that is holy that I will stay indoors. I swear it, but she should know better. When I am certain she is gone, I slip off the locks and the barricades, grab a crimson shawl to match the simple but rather striking crimson day-dress, and I bound through the doors, Dash yapping at my heels.

It's snowing. I throw my arms in the air and twirl around, snow flying around me, my crimson dress darkening to a sinister shade, but I don't mind. I'm free. At long last, the world is new and ripe for the taking. The snow-covered forest looks too good to be true. I run for it, dancing through the trees, falling into an old pattern so flawless one would think it innate. These are my woods, and this is my path, and Dash is happy to walk it alongside me.

I come upon a clearing and to my delight, a wooden swing hangs from a thick overhanging branch. There is no snow on the wooden seat. I don't think about it. I have a seat and swing. Back and forth, back and forth, until my feet do not touch the ground. Until my crimson shawl flies off my shoulders and gets lost in the wind. Dash yaps from below but I ignore him, smiling. Laughing.

"You're back." I slam my heels into the ground at the sound of a melodic voice. Someone else is here. I look over my shoulders and scan the trees. I almost miss her.

Her hair is a shining waterfall of platinum, her skin perfect alabaster. But she smiles, and it's brighter than even the snow around us. My heart skips a beat. Protruding from her back are ivory feathered wings.

"Are you an angel?" The question falls from my lips, but as soon as I say it, I realize it's impertinence. The girl's smile dwindles, and I fear I have insulted her.

"No." Her voice is lovely. It's the sound of a bird's song early in the morning, a lazy stream trickling down its path. Breathtaking. "Don't you remember me?"

"I-" remember her? No. I would remember her. How could I ever forget? "I-I've been ill. For a while. Maybe I..." She scoffs, shaking her head. "I'm sorry." I blurt out "Let's start again. I'm Clara. Owen."

"I know." She says, and frowns. "I'm sorry. That was awfully harsh." She takes a step closer to me. "And I did look awfully different the last time. All red and gold. It's these seasonal changes, love." She stops, an arms-length away. Despite her cold appearance, I can feel the warmth emanating from her. "I'm Aria." She says. Aria. I repeat it in my head. Aria. Aria. Aria. I will not forget. "Can I sit with you?" Aria asks. I scoot over to make more room on the swing and she takes a seat, her side pressed up against mine. I catch a glimpse of her eyes and my heart skips a beat. Her eyes. Warm and blazing with the heat of a thousand hearths. Lovely and amber and utterly unique. She smiles again.

"Can I ask." She pushes us off the ground, nodding, urging me to go on. "The wings? If you are not an angel then..."

“Fae.” She says. “We are called fae.”

“There are more?” I ask, perking up with pure curiosity.

“Not in these woods.” She says. I mean to ask more questions, for there is so much I want to know. “They told you it was an illness?”

“Yes.” I nod, pushing the swing with the tips of my toes. “Mama still refuses to let me out of the house in fear of a cold. But I could not spend another moment staring at the world through a window.” She mutters something I do not understand. “What was that?”

“Nothing. I’m just happy you came back, even if you don’t remember the last time.”

“What happened last time?”

“I made you a promise.” She looks me in the eyes. I wait. “Do you still want to fly?”

Aria drags me up the tallest tree she can find. Standing in the upper branches that look so frail I think I might break them, my heart thunders in a wild beat, but Aria takes my hand and I find myself trusting her. She stands behind me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“Is this alright?” She asks. My heart is beating so fast.

“Yes.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.” I close my eyes, breathless. I hear the trees rustle as she spreads her wings and off we go, my feet leaving solid ground. And we soar over the treetops and my heart sings with that magnificent joy one only finds in being, at least for the moment, free of all things. All things but her, her arms around my waist, keeping me from falling. Higher and higher, until the falling snow blocks our view of the treetops. Up and over the clouds. I can see the whole world from here, and I never, ever want to leave.

She sets us down next to a frozen pond. I’m wobbly on my feet and my knees are weak after the majesty of flying.

“What are we doing here?” I ask her.

“Nothing. I just thought you would like it.” She steps onto the ice and glides. She wears no skates, and yet... I step out to follow, slipping and near falling, but she catches me before I can finish my tumble, laughter on her light-peach lips.

“You’re silly.”

“Am not!” She tilts her head, looks at me, and glides off over the pond.

“Catch me!” She calls. I frown and bend down to the snow-covered ground. She doesn’t see the snowball coming. It hits her right in the face and she squeals in surprise. I have another ready in my hand. She dodges but comes up grinning. “This means war!” She shouts, laughing, and I’m hit in the face as well. It stings, but I don’t care.

We’re both drenched, shivering and exhausted by the time I realize that the sun is disappearing over the horizon.

“You shouldn’t walk home all by yourself.” She tells me. “It’s cold and will soon be dark.” She’s right, of course, we’re so far into the woods now, I don’t even know if I can find my way home. “Spend the night.” She tells me. It sounds like a lovely offer. Too lovely to refuse.

I follow her through the forest. It’s different this late, still wonderful, but tense. I can see it in Aria too. I don’t think I’m the only one who got distracted. She leads me through a hole in the ground and down a stone staircase. The warmth hits me like a wall, comfortable and cozy. I feel at ease.

At the base of the stairs is a snug space, a bed of furs on the opposite side to the entrance, alcoves carved into the walls, storing jars of who knows what. And in the center, a blazing hearth.

“You’re soaked.” She says. It’s true. “I have some spare clothes I can lend you for the night. We can hang these up to dry.” I nod, desperate to get out of the suddenly very heavy dress. She helps me remove skirts and petticoats, helps me untie the stays and the stomacher. I slip into her warm, dry clothes, they smell of petrichor, earth after rain. As does she. Petrichor and blazing embers and roasted chestnuts.

We sit together by her hearth and eat her dinner of things I can neither name nor describe other than to say it was exquisite. She watches me take the first bite. We drink hot chocolate, although how she acquired some in these woods is beyond me. I cannot for the life of me picture her at a market place buying her wares.

We share the fur bed. She talks before we sleep, talks of ancient things and the stories of her kind, how they were like me but different and wandered into the woods to live wild amongst the birds and ended up growing wings of their own. Her sweet nightingale voice lulls me to sleep. Safe, secure. Content.

It has snowed in the night, but when we sit in the swing, our feet still don't touch the ground. Aria holds my hand while propelling us back and forth with those magnificent wings. How I wish I could fly on my own.

I look up when I hear a familiar yapping. Dash comes hurtling out of the woods. Aria's grip on my hand tightens.

"Hello boy." I stretch out my hand to him but he ignores me, sniffing around the snow. "You will not find anything, silly, I'm over here." More voices from the woods.

"We should leave." Aria tells me.

"Why? We've only just got here." I don't see what the problem is. "They're coming to take you away again. They will make you forget again." She's worried. I can see that in her amber eyes. "I won't forget. Not this time."

The men come out of the forest. I wave at them, cheerful. They don't see me. Dash comes yapping to them, his mouth closed around something crimson.

"My shawl. I lost it." I say out loud. Aria looks anxious. The men take the shawl from Dash's mouth and talk amongst themselves. One of them trips. They stop, huddle round and dig into the snow. A large frozen doll emerges. Their faces are somber as they pick up the doll in her frozen crimson dress and carry her off. Funny. I do not remember her from yesterday. I turn to Aria and say: "I guess I can stay." She smiles, and it warms me to the bone.

"Do you want to learn how to fly?" She asks.

"Yes."

"Come." We climb the tallest tree again but this time she leaps from the branch first. Alone. "It's all about balance." She tells me. I take a deep breath. I spread my wings. My own wings, scarlet, crimson and snow white. I leap into the air and soar. Free at long last.

Íris Erna Eysteinsdóttir

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