



Too Close to Keep

Book One of the To Keep and Let Go Duology

by
Anete Štelle

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Chapter One



A Step Too Far

Stephanie

My life has always been simple. Some may say it's the definition of boring, but I say it's safe. Comforting.

I'm not usually the kind of person who does reckless things.

Until today.

No overthinking, no second-guessing. One spontaneous step into a new chapter. Where I stop fearing the unknown and start living life as my adventure.

I've always been the most responsible in my friend's group. The voice of reason. And honestly? I'm so tired of it.

When my friends asked me to go with them on an eight-month van trip across Europe, I said no. For starters, I have a job. Well, *not anymore*.

I've had enough of my boss making me work overtime without paying me a single cent extra. So, this morning, when he asked me again, I snapped.

I finally grabbed my courage, looked him dead in the eye, and told him to go screw himself. Okay, not in those exact words, but I *really* wanted to. Then I quit my boring-ass job, never again stepping a foot back in that office.

Also? My ex-fiancé is going on this trip. So, obviously, it was a solid "no" at the time. But I'll be damned if I let one cheating asshole, who

had me bawling for weeks, stop me now. Yeah. To Hell with him. I'm going.

It all happened so fast that I didn't give myself time to think. And that was the whole point. As people say in these moments: *Fuck it, let's do this.*

I don't have time to change into something more comfortable. My red blouse, classic white pants, and red heels will have to do.

My dad's away on yet another business trip, it's not like he'll notice I'm gone. And no, I'm not calling or sending a message to him. He'll yell at me for hours and make me doubt everything. I might back out of this decision.

Yeah... definitely not calling him.

I grab a sticky note and a pen, like the coward I am. Like I'm not twenty-six years old, who was engaged less than a year ago.

Dad, I am going on a trip with my friends.

Yes, I have friends. Won't be home for eight months.

Yes, I can, and I will. I am a grown woman.

No, I haven't gone crazy. Yes, I'll be careful.

Love you!

Steph

P.S. I quit my job. :)

With a smile on my lips, I rush out the door.

Oh shit, I almost forgot. I run back inside and grab my E-reader from the table. No way I'm surviving this trip without it.

I sprint outside, nearly forgetting my keys in the door, and race toward the bus stop. My heart pounds, adrenaline buzzes in my chest. I haven't felt this alive in ages.

My friends are going to be so surprised to see me. Especially Robert. My ex. We broke up after he cheated on me with one of our friends. He said it was a drunken mistake. I said, run before I demolish your car. Some things you don't forgive.

I still have seven minutes before the bus arrives. But it's a thirty-minute walk. So, shortcut through the forest it is. Fifteen minutes on foot, but if I run, I'll make it just in time.

Edvard and I used to play in this forest all the time with our childhood friends. It's small enough that you can't really get lost in it. The trees stand spaced out, a few bushes here and there, and soft trails all around.

Dad always hated us playing here. Once he asked: "*What will you do when there's a wolf or a bear in front of you?*"

Edvard's answer? "*I'll outrun it.*"

Mine? "*Pretend to be dead and pee my pants.*"

But his warnings never stopped us from coming here. We played hide-and-seek so many times in the woods that I could probably navigate this place blindfolded.

Of course, running through a forest trail in heels? Impossible. The soil is soft and muddy, so the heels keep sinking. I stop, yank them off, and carry them in my hand.

But running barefoot through the woods? When was the last time I even walked out of the house barefoot? It feels free.

The bus stop is just ahead, but, damn it, I think I can hear the bus too.

Seriously? Why didn't I exercise more? I had plenty of time to do that.

As I open my mouth to shout for the driver to wait, a piercing scream cuts through the air to my right. I instantly freeze.

That scream... It hits something deep in me. It's desperate, echoing in my bones. The kind of scream that crawls under your skin and stays there. I look around, but there's nothing. Just trees.

Okay. That was creepy.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" I call out loud, hoping no one is in trouble. I shake it off. Probably kids. Definitely kids.

Right?

Still, my heart pounds.

But the only response is silence. The forest is dead quiet. I turn back, and there it is. The bus closes its door and drives away without me in it.

Great. Just great.

All right. No big deal. I'll call Cristina and tell her to stall the group. So much for a surprise, but I've no choice now.

I unlock my phone and dial her number.

Her cheerful voice answers in seconds. "Hi, Steph!"

"Hey, Cris! Have you guys left already?" I walk slowly toward the road, almost out of my breath from running.

"Nope. Gabi's running late, again." I can feel through the phone her eyes rolling. "Can't decide what to wear. Same old drama. Honestly, I don't know how I'm going to survive eight months with her. Oh wait, Robert wants to say hi."

"Hey, Steph!" His voice. I hate how familiar it still feels to hear it. "You should've come. You hate that job, and it's not like we are going to the Bermuda triangle or jumping out of the plane." Something shatters in the background. "Daniel! For fuck's sake, we haven't even left, and you've already broken something! The car will smell like Gabi's perfume now!"

He sighs. "Sorry, Steph. Gotta go."

Cristina's voice comes back, laughing her heart out. "I swear, I'm the only one here with a functioning brain. I think you might actually be the smartest one of the five of us for not coming."

"Yeah, about that. Cris, I'm..." There's someone in front of me. Barely two meters away.

A woman, if you can even call her that. White hair drifts around her like smoke. A dress that seems to slowly stream into nothing. There isn't even a wind in the air.

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Her eyes are fully black. No whites. No pupils. Just *void*.

And the freakiest part of all? Her feet aren't touching the ground.

I'm locked in place, breath stuck in my throat, vision blurring with horror. She's floating straight toward me.

My phone rings again, but I don't have it in me to raise my hand back up.

I should scream.

I *need* to scream.

She's five steps away when her voice shatters the silence.

"You must come with me."

Her voice fractures, like radio waves breaking in and out. Echoing. It sent chills down my entire body.

I'm not brave enough for this. I don't even watch horror movies.

I wanted an adventure. But not like this. *Never like this.*

She lifts her hand, as if to take mine and take me away with her. And that's when my voice came back. I scream. Loud. So loud that it physically hurts.

She drops something in front of me, and white smoke explodes, swallowing the world.

Her voice still breaks through the air.

"Be brave."

I stumble back, gasping. The smoke starts to consume my lungs. I cough hard, waving at the air around me, but it's completely useless.

I can't see a damn thing.

What is this? What's happening?

The smoke thickens and my steps falter. I fall to my knees, still trying to catch my breath. Then gravity gives one last push, and I fall all the way down to the earth. And finally, I give in to the darkness, not able to fight it any longer.

Dad, I know the answer to your question now.

I wouldn't outrun it. I wouldn't pretend to be dead.

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I'd freeze. I'd fall. Just like I did.

Help me.

* * *

My head pounds so hard, it feels like it's about to explode. I've had migraines before, but this? This is ten times worse. At least the cold air helps ease the headache. Minutes pass with me lying there until the pain slowly starts to fade.

I dare to open my eyes. Trees looming above me, their branches heavy with white snow.

Okay... I have too many questions to sort them out in my mind right now.

Like, why is there snow in the middle of summer? Why am I sleeping on the ground in a freaking forest?

I sit up carefully, so the headache doesn't slam back into my skull. It's pitch-dark now. Only the moonlight reflects off the snow, casting a silver glow.

How long have I been lying here?

I remember quitting my job. Running to catch the bus. The ghost in front of me, the smoke surrounding the forest.

I shiver at that memory. No. That can't be real. Since when do ghosts exist? That stuff only happens in books. And I don't believe in ghosts, but that doesn't mean I'm not scared of them.

Divine mercy. That creepy-ass woman is nowhere to be seen. At least that problem is gone.

I get to my feet. My ass is freezing, and right – I'm barefoot. Fantastic. Could this day get any worse?

And where's my suitcase? It should be nearby.

But first things first: my phone.

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I drop back to my knees, searching the ground. It is lying right next to me, wet from the snow. Please don't be broken.

I pick it up and unlock the screen.

Strange. It says *11:06 a.m.* How? It's clearly nighttime. Maybe a solar eclipse? The apocalypse?

No, that's your book brain talking, Steph.

It shows three missed calls from Cris and ten text messages. I try calling her back, but there's no signal. Of course.

Gosh, I'm freezing. I need to get home before I lose my toes to frostbite.

My suitcase is nowhere in sight. Fine, it's only clothes.

Now. Which direction is home?

I didn't wander that far into the woods. I'll walk ten minutes in one direction, and if I don't find the road, I'll double back.

Switching on my phone's flashlight, I make my way hopefully back home. Now the forest seems even scarier, but I'd rather see than trip on a tree root.

I don't remember the forest being this dense. I can barely see between the trees. Shadows stretch everywhere, growing longer with every step, like the forest itself is closing in.

Then again... I also thought I saw a ghost earlier. Maybe I shouldn't trust my memory right now.

I've been walking for eight minutes now. No road. No familiar landmarks.

In the corner of my eye, I see something move on my right. I flash my phone in that direction and freeze in place, not daring to move a muscle.

It's a dog. A very big dog with glowing red eyes. He stands there, staring at me.

My heart pounds so hard, it might stop in a few seconds. I squeeze my eyes shut.

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“Please go away. Please, please, please.”

I peek my left eye open and glance around. I think he’s gone, but to be sure, I stay completely still, waiting for him to reappear. Then, I wait a little longer.

Nothing. I think I’m safe.

I force myself to walk, but every step feels louder than the last. My eyes flick from shadow to shadow, wild and searching. Every rustle makes my pulse spike like the forest is breathing around me.

Please, God, I know I don’t talk to you. Like, ever. But if you’re real, please help me get out of here alive.

And then, I hear it again. That damn scream.

Please, no. Not again.

I bolt, scanning the forest, half-certain the ghost woman will appear again.

But to my relief, it’s only the trees that blur past me, quiet, endless, and empty.

I can’t face her again. I’m not brave enough for this. I’m barely holding it together right now. And that’s exactly when I slam into a wall.

A warm, unmovable, very solid wall.

Ouch.

I rub my cheek. Yep. That’s going to bruise.

Trying to regain whatever dignity I still have and get up, when a hand drops into view. Strong. Slightly calloused.

I look up. Not a tree. Not remotely tree-shaped.

More like tall, broody, and dangerously attractive.

Hesitant, I place my fingers in his. His grip is firm, but careful, like he’s afraid I’ll break.

And then I forget how to breathe.

In front of me stands an angel. Or maybe a demon. At this point, I don’t care which – as long as he’s not the ghost.

Whatever he is, he's gorgeous. Dark, tousled hair. A three-day beard that somehow makes him look both dangerous and charming. Broad chest. A coat that fitted him too well.

And then there are his eyes. Deep, dark – no.

Red.

Almost red. Like they've soaked in flame and never forgotten it. I stare, mesmerized.

And the wildest part?

He stares back. Not like he's confused or annoyed. But like he's found something worth his time.

Maybe I've finally lost it, but I don't care. Not when he studies me like that.

He's still standing there, my hand in his, firm and steady. Then, gently, he pulls me to my feet.

I give him a small, slightly awkward smile. "Thank you. Um..." I put my hair behind my ear, suddenly feeling shy. "Do you know which way Jekaba Street is? I think I'm lost."

His forehead creases. That stare of his, sharp and unreadable, locks onto me like I've spoken in riddles.

I start to shift awkwardly. My feet are numb from the cold, and I'm pretty sure I'm standing in something that used to be snow. He glances at them.

"It's a long story," I blur, waving my hand. "I know I look like a total mess right now, but today has been weird. Really weird. I don't even know how to explain it."

I'm shivering now, my teeth chatter – whether from cold or fear, I honestly can't tell.

He watches me, unmoving. Then, without a word, he shrugs off his long black coat and holds it out. I hesitate only a moment before taking it.

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“Thanks,” I mumble, pulling it tight around me. The coat smells like him. Masculine. A little spicy. “But seriously, we need to get out of these woods. Weird things are happening today. Like ghost-woman, forest-shifting kind of weird. And now you’re here and...” I stop myself.

He hasn’t said a word. Not once.

He stands there, watching me. Eyes glowing faintly in the shadows.

Maybe he’s in shock. Maybe he’s lost, too. Or maybe I imagined him. Because no one this beautiful actually exists.

He finally opens his mouth to say something, but then it comes.

The scream. Closer this time. Too close.

Both our heads snap toward the sound.

“I keep hearing it,” I whisper, afraid she might hear me. “That scream. It belongs to a ghost. I swear I’m not crazy. We have to get out of here.”

I turn back to him, but he’s gone. Vanished.

Panic slams into my chest like a fist. I turn around, heart racing, the weight of the forest pressing in like a closing hand. He was here. I know he was.

I want to drop to my knees and cry. Just fall apart and let the woods swallow me.

What’s the point of pretending I’ll survive this day, when clearly, I won’t?

“Stranger?” I whisper.

Nothing.

Fine. I’m not waiting.

I don’t have the strength to run again, so I walk slowly, unsteadily. Legs shaking with every step.

This forest can’t go on forever. I’ll find the road. I’ll get home safely. I have to.

But what if he was the one chasing that woman?

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What if he's a serial killer? Or worse – a rapist?

Maybe I need to turn back. What if that scream was a woman in trouble? No one saved my mom. I won't walk away if someone else needs help. *I can't.*

I turn around, and... Seriously?! Him again.

I stare in disbelief.

Massive. Thick black fur. Eyes locked on me like I'm the main course. This has to be some kind of cosmic joke.

Is this what I get for wishing my life was only a little more interesting?

Stay safe, Steph. Always stay safe.

I blink at the wolf. My brain is completely empty. What the hell am I supposed to do?

Run? I'm not fast and I don't have it in me anymore. Climb? Nope. Scream? Useless. Play dead? Yeah, because that always works in the movies.

Think, Steph. *Think.*

They say not to run from dogs. Wolves are basically dogs, right? This is just a really big, really terrifying, red-eyed dog.

I took a cautious step forward. The wolf growls.

Okay. Fine. Have it your way.

I turn around and head in the opposite direction.

I keep walking, slow, casual, totally-not-panicking walking. Pretending the dog isn't behind me.

Maybe he's not aggressive. I mean, I'm not exactly threatening. He'll get bored and leave.

I walk for what feels like half an hour, cursing every spontaneous decision I made this morning. The only sound around me is my teeth clattering together as I shiver.

Finally, the trees start to thin out. A path. It splits into two.

Left, or right?

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I'll go right. The dog will go left. And I'll be home soon.

Peeking behind me, I see no one. Only that damn forest.

Sighting in relief, I turn my head forward and... for the love of God.

It. Is. Right. In. Front. Of. Me.

Please. Just give me a break.

The wolf lifts his head and points – yes, points – toward the left trail.

You know what? Sure, why not? I'm taking directions from a wolf now.

That's who I am. Apparently.

I turn back and head left. Thankfully, the trees keep growing thinner. The light shifts in front of me and then I see it.

The edge of the forest. I exhale, relieved I made it. Guess I should thank the wolf, he actually led me out.

But instead of a road there's a huge mansion. I've never seen this place before in my life.

But right now? I don't care. I simply want warmth.

I walk through the gate, moving closer. Now, I can see it clearly.

Two floors, though each one must be at least four meters high. The facade is built from golden stone that seems to catch the light, even in the shade. Soft lights glow at the base of the walls, casting everything in a warm halo. Towers, actual small towers, rise from the corners, capped with pointed spires that stretch into the sky. Tall windows climb nearly the entire height of the second floor, gleaming like glass pulled from a dream.

It's old. But somehow new. Rich, elegant, and absolutely surreal.

A sob escapes my throat, half joy, half exhaustion, as I stumble up the steps. The light shines through the windows. Someone's home.

I take five heavy steps to the door. Reach out to knock and collapse against it. My body slides down, weak and shaking, until I slump on the doorstep.

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The door opens and I fall forward, landing at someone's feet.

"*Help me,*" my voice barely leaves my lips. "*Please.*"

My vision starts to blur, softening into shadows and light. The last thing I see is a rainbow. Beautiful.

Is this what heaven looks like?

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Chapter Two



Eldogoria

Stephanie

Last night's nightmare was something new. My dreams have never felt so *real*. Maybe I'm reading too many fantasy books. Not that I'll stop doing that.

Well, it all was only a nightmare.

Except for *him*. That gorgeous man. Of course, he's not real. No one actually looks like that in real life.

I start stretching my arms and legs. Nothing hurts. My feet are warm. Cozy.

It had to be a nightmare. Definitely.

I open my eyes, and three heads are hovering over me. Two women. One man. All of them *staring*.

I scream my lungs out.

Of course I scream. I feel like that's my thing now.

The three strangers all jump back and scream *with* me. Except the girl with the pink hair. She simply lets out a tiny squeak.

I scramble out of bed, choosing the side furthest from the strangers.

"How did you get in my house?!" I shout, hoping they are my illusion as well. "I'm calling the police!"

Did I forget to lock the front door last night?

They don't *look* dangerous. But you never know. Except for the pink-haired girl. She's smiling. *Way* too much.

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Creepy.

I run my hand across the nightstand, never taking my eyes off them. Where's my phone? And why do they all look so weird?

The woman furthest from me has nearly white hair and a long, elegant dress that trails along the floor. She's pale, soft makeup perfectly applied, graceful in a way that feels ethereal.

The man beside her has dark brown curls and skin just a shade lighter. He's tall, almost as tall as Edvard. His eyes are... violet.

Then there's the girl closest to me. Pink hair streak with every color of the rainbow. Her dress as bright. Oh, and she has wings.

Wings.

But the weirdest part? They all have pointed ears.

Like... elves? Are they my brother's theater friends?

I don't remember him mentioning a play about elves. Especially not ones with *wings*.

"Get out of my house!" I try to sound scary, not scared, but my voice is shaking. Traitor.

They all seem to be as freaked out as I feel. Except Pink Hair. She's still smiling like she's at a birthday party.

What is happening?

This nightmare has to stop. Now.

The door swings open. Of course. Stranger number four. Fantastic.

It's a man – shorter than the others, stocky, with a thick black beard. He reminds me of the happy dwarf from *Snow White*.

He's carrying a tray of tea and a plate full of fruits and berries.

A tea party? In my room??

Is this a cult? A cosplay group? An incredibly weird prank?

He starts talking to me cheerfully, like I'm an old friend. I don't understand a single word. The language sounds like a mash-up of Mandarin, French, and German... Or maybe it's simply nonsense.

The pink-haired girl responds in the same language, her voice bright and bubbly.

The other two keep staring at me. Like I've grown antlers.

Then they're all casually talking to each other. Like I'm not even here.

Cool. Yeah, no problem. I'll just stand here while you finish your magical tea party.

I eye the door. Start calculating my odds.

Can I push the bearded guy out of the way? Probably. The tall one? Less likely.

Who are these people?!

And where is my goddamn phone?

I glance around and... Okay. This is *not* my room. The bedroom is enormous. Elegant, yet somehow... cozy.

The windows stretch nearly from floor to ceiling, making the room feel like it floats in an open space. Blue-gray velvet drapes are tied back in perfect symmetry. The furniture is all dark-stained wood that looks rich, heavy, and expensive. The bed could fit four people. Maybe five.

Across from it sits a fireplace, flames crackling gently, with a velvet chaise lounge angled beside it. And above it all? A gold chandelier, hanging like it belongs in a castle.

Okay, I'll admit it. I wouldn't mind living like this. But this isn't home. So, did they... *kidnap* me?

No. No, that's ridiculous. This isn't real.

Maybe I'm in hospital. Maybe Dad finally had me committed. White plastered walls should be next.

I raise my voice, trying to cut through their bizarre little tea party. "Sorry to interrupt," I snap, "but where am I? And who the hell are you?"

All their attention is back to me. No one speaks. Just stare.

Do they even understand me?

My chest tightens. "I... I don't have much money," I add quickly, "but I can give you my card PIN. Not that I know where my bag is. But if you already took it, take it all. Please, let me go."

They stare like I'm the crazy one.

Then finally the short man takes a slow step forward. He speaks carefully; every word deliberate. "Hello there! Sorry. I don't know your language well. Please speak slowly."

Excuse me?! You kidnap me, and you want me to be understanding?

My tone hardens. "What do you want from me?"

The bearded man tilts his head, confused. "Nothing."

A crease forms between my brows. "Then why am I here?"

"You needed help. We helped you," he says softly. "You were almost blue from the cold."

My eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

"You weren't dressed properly," he adds gently. "Did someone chase you?"

His eyes are kind, genuinely concerned. And it threw me off completely.

I turn slowly and glance out the window. Snow. Forest. Every bit covered in white.

No.

I sink back onto bed. Legs too shaky to hold me. I still haven't woken up apparently. *"It wasn't a nightmare..."*

The short man puts the tray on the nearby table. "What do you mean?"

"I really fainted at your door?" I whisper, my mind begging me to wake up.

He steps closer, his posture relaxing. "Yes. We brought you inside. Lorien here." The white-haired woman lifts her hand in a soft wave. "She cared for you. You didn't have serious injuries, but it looked like you'd hit your head a few times."

Tell me about it.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

I glance at Lorien, then back at him. “Better... thank you.”

She doesn’t speak, but at least she’s stopped staring like I might explode.

The man, only one speaking to me, asks. “What is your name?”

My voice is barely more than a breath. “Stephanie.”

“Hello, Stephanie,” he says with a kind smile. “I’m Francesco.” He gestures toward the girl with pink hair. “That one is Abigail.” She beams and waves like we’ve been best friends for years. I lift my hand and offer a tiny wave back. “And this is Thiago.” The tall man gives a silent, polite nod.

I turn back to Francesco. “Where am I?”

His eyes brighten. “Eldogoria.”

I blink. “Never heard of it. What country is that in?”

“Country?” He tilts his head. “It’s a kingdom.” That clears up exactly *nothing*.

“Okay... which continent?”

Francesco’s smile falters, his expression shifts, more cautious now. “Stephanie, I won’t quite. Where... What are you, exactly?”

I scowl. “What kind of question is that?”

“I’m sorry if it’s rude,” he says, “but please, I would like to know.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Human, of course. What are you? An elf?”

Francesco laughs, warm and amused. “Dear me, no. I’m a gnome. Lorien is elf.”

I snort. “Right. And the pink one’s Tinker Bell, and he’s a werewolf.”

Francesco’s smile fades into an alarm. “Oh, no, no. Abigail and Thiago are Fae.”

I shoot him a flat look. “Are you serious right now? What is this, a costume party?” I wave my hands toward them all. “Did Edvard put you up to this? Is this some elaborate prank?”

“No,” he says calmly. “We haven’t had a masquerade ball in years. And I don’t know this Edvard person.”

This is insane.

Francesco gestures to the table. “I brought you breakfast. You must be hungry. I’ll leave it here and check on you later.”

He steps back, glancing at the others. They’ve been silently watching me this entire time. Abigail has somehow crept closer without me noticing. Creepy. And stealthy.

Francesco says something in their strange language, soft, musical, completely unintelligible. One by one, they all leave.

Abigail is the last. She turns at the door to smile at me again, warm and glowing, then gently pulls it shut behind her.

Silence. Finally, I’m alone.

I walk slowly to the window, hands trembling just enough to notice. There it is. That same forest. Snow blankets the ground, glittering in the pale morning light. In the distance, there is a garden. Still beautiful, even half-frozen.

But there are no roads. No houses. Only a giant mansion in the middle of nowhere.

Where the fuck am I?

I refuse to believe anything the man-gnome, whatever he is, said. This can’t be real.

I pinch my arm. Hard. “Ow.” Okay, that does hurt.

So maybe it’s one of those hyper-realistic dreams. Or a very vivid delusion.

My stomach growls so loudly everyone probably hears it.

I blink the thoughts away and walk over to the tray Francesco left. I’m starving. Honestly, it feels like my stomach is trying to eat itself.

The tray holds a bowl of porridge, a small dish of honey, some crusty seeded bread rolls, a plate piled with fruit, a steaming pot of tea, and bless it, cookies.

I don't even like porridge. But right now? I'd eat a raw potato and thank it for its service.

I sit, drizzle a little honey on top, and add a few berries. Some of the berries are unfamiliar, so I skip those. Grandma always said: *never eat what you don't recognize*.

I scoop up a spoonful and taste it. Oh. *Oh wow*. This isn't porridge. This is divine.

Five minutes later, I'd scraped the bowl clean. I sip the tea, which is light and calming, and reach for a cookie. I take a bite.

Heaven.

So soft. So airy. Like sweet, buttery clouds that melt the second they hit your tongue.

I ate six more. No regrets.

No one has come back yet. Not that I mind. It's nice to have a moment of privacy. A chance to breathe.

I stand and take a better look around the room. Whoever owns this space has *incredible* taste.

Every piece of furniture is carved with swirling wind motifs and delicate lunar details – drawers, bedposts, even the desk legs. Even the drawer handles are custom. Small works of art.

There's nothing feminine here. No softness. No clutter. But the room is clean. Balanced with light and darkness.

It screamed: wealthy. Powerful. Precise. Definitely a man's room.

I wander over to a large chest of drawers and open one. Inside there is sheet music. Dozens of pages of handwritten guitar chords, neat and carefully notated.

I reach for the next drawer, but a knock at the door makes me jump. I quickly shut it close. I don't want them to think I'm nosy. Even though I totally am.

They're waiting for permission to enter. That's new.

Back home, my brother and his friends would just barge in. Whether I was reading, sleeping, or changing clothes.

I smooth my hair a little, like that'll help anything. "Come in," I call out.

The door cracks open. Francesco peeks in, then steps fully inside, nudging someone else back with his hand before shutting the door behind him.

"How are you feeling? Did you eat?"

I nod and offer a small smile. "Yes, thank you. It was very delicious."

He beams like I've complimented his life's work. "Why, thank you!"

"Did you make the porridge?"

He nods, proud. "Yes. I'm the cook here."

Wow. Whoever owns this place must be really rich.

I laugh. "You should teach my dad and brother how to cook."

Francesco nods solemnly. "I'll see what I can do." Then his tone slightly shifts. "Now, we have some important things to discuss." He gestures to the table. "May we sit?"

We both take our seats, unsure how I feel about his politeness. I'm not used to that. Back home almost no one bothered to be polite anymore.

"Could you tell me what you remember?"

I shake my head. "I don't want to."

He doesn't push. Simply asks, "May I ask why?"

I sigh. "You'll think I'm crazy." Honestly? I think I'm *crazy*.

But he just smiles, patiently waiting for me to speak. When's the last time a man actually waited for me to finish my thoughts?

I sigh again. "Okay, short version?"

"I quit my job. I agreed to a road trip through Europe with some friends." I pause, trying to gather the pieces into something that makes sense. "I was late, so I took a shortcut through the forest. Then I heard someone scream. And then..." I lift my hands, mimicking the moment,

making my voice a bit more dramatic. "A floating woman appeared in front of me. Thick white smoke rose up around me and I fainted."

I take a deep breath. "I tried to find my way back home and ran into someone. A man. And then I heard that scream again... and he ran off." I exhale. "Then I saw a wolf. A giant black wolf with red eyes. It followed me. And led me here." I pause, lowering my voice. "I fainted at your door. And now here we are."

Francesco didn't say anything right away. He stares at me, wide-eyed. Great. He's definitely thinking about calling a mental hospital.

"I don't think any of it really happened," I mumble. "It was only a nightmare."

Finally, he speaks. "I'm afraid not, Stephanie."

My stomach sinks. "What?"

"This ghost," he says carefully. "What did it look like?"

I blink. "Like a ghost? White hair. White dress. Black eyes."

He grows more serious. "Did it say anything to you?"

I nod. "She said I needed to go with her."

"Did she say where?"

"No. She wasn't exactly chatty."

He pauses. Then says, "And the man, what did he look like?" There's something else in his voice now. A hint of amusement.

Does he know him?

I glance away, so he doesn't see my dreamy eyes. "Dark brown hair. Almost black. Short black beard. Tall. Muscular. Eyes the color of dark cherries."

"Thank you for telling me your story," he says. Then he stands, already heading for the door.

I shoot up from my chair and grab his arm. "Wait, that's it? That's all you're going to say? Are you seriously telling me it was all real?"

He meets my eyes, calm and unwavering. "Yes, Stephanie. This is real."

I let go of his arm and sink slowly back into my chair. *This can't be real.* He's just as mad as I am.

Dad did put me in a mental hospital after all.

Francesco sits again, eyes soft with sympathy. "I don't know how, or why, you were brought here. But don't worry. We'll help you figure this out. I know it's a lot to take in."

I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "Yeah. No worries. Easy for you to say. You've probably been here a while."

He speaks gently, like he's afraid I'll bolt if he breathes too loudly. "While you're here, I'll teach you everything you need to know about this place. Since... we don't know how long you'll be stuck with us."

I squint at him. "What is this place, exactly? Can you show me on a map?"

"This kingdom, Eldogoria, is on the Mainland. What you'd call a continent." Then he pauses. "We're currently on a planet called Theophania."

What?

"It's not that far from your home planet, Earth," he adds, completely calm. "We're on the opposite side of the Sun."

I stare at him in disbelief. "So, you're telling me I'm not in a different city... or a different country... or even a different continent, I'm on a whole other fucking *planet*?" I'm shouting now. "I mean, what the actual Hell?! Are you out of your mind?!" I stand and start pacing around the room. My voice rises with every word. "How did this happen? Why me?! This can't be real, it's impossible! Stuff like this doesn't happen to people!"

He doesn't interrupt. He simply watches with the same calm expression. Sympathetic. Patient.

"I used to dream about living in my fantasy books," I mumble. "But even I knew they weren't real."

Francesco speaks softly. "Again... I can't even imagine how overwhelming this is for you. But we'll figure it out. I promise." He tries to assure me. "I do need to share what you told me with the others. This kind of thing doesn't happen. Not even here. We're as confused as you are." That actually made me feel... a little better. He continues, "Since we speak different languages, the others aren't able to communicate with you."

Oh. Right. That explains the wide-eyed stares and the awkward silence.

"But how do you understand me?" I ask.

"I've always been fascinated by humans," he replies. "I study your cultures, your languages... the way your world develops. It's quite different from ours." Then he frowns slightly. "Though I must say you humans rely far too much on your created technologies. And what you're doing to your planet." He shakes his head. "It's troubling. You take more than it gives."

He says it like he *actually* believes it. Like he's not human. Like this isn't Earth. Like I'm in a place where mythical creatures are real. Ghosts. Witches. Werewolves. Elves.

Nope. Stop. Not going there.

Francesco stands again. "I really need to speak to the others. They're probably only seconds away from barging in. They're all curious about you."

I get up too. "Then I'll go with you. I don't want to sit here waiting for... who knows what."

He smiles. "You probably want to wash up first. There's a bathroom through that door." He points across the room.

That's a polite way to say I stink and look homeless.

"I'll leave some fresh clothes on the bed," he adds. "Abigail's dresses should fit you perfectly." He gives me one last warm glance, then closes the door behind him.

Anete Štelle

My smile fades. And just like that, the silence returns – louder than ever.

I need to get out of here.

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