

THE NOTE

I DIDN'T MEAN TO. OTHER PEOPLE WOULD UNDERSTAND that. Other people would realize that I had just wandered into the room, that I had no intention of seeing what I wasn't meant to. I was just coming back from luncheon, after all, and there was no way that I could have expected to find her there.

But it was no use for anyone, let alone me, to explain that to her. I doubted that she would have accepted it.

Actually, if anyone was going to tell her about me and the depth of what was really going on, I doubted that she would have accepted it.

Because Wren would never believe that I did not mean to spy on her, nor that I would never purposefully mock her. She would never believe that I was not capable of saying a single vile word about her without regretting it, or that I did not actually push her down a few years prior but was rather trying to catch her, or that every single word that I said about her never seemed to come out right—resulting in an insult. Wren would not believe that being around her made me nervous, that some

of the time I welcomed her glares because it meant that she was looking at me and looking at me with some sort of passion.

Because in Wren's mind, she was utterly right about everything, and that was admittedly one of the things I liked most about her.

I found her stubbornness absurdly endearing. That fact was humiliating in its own right.

"You're going to tell someone, aren't you, Master Kinsley?" She said, and I couldn't help but frown at the idea.

Especially as her hand moved to cover the source of her shame.

I said nothing, just stared in turn and saw just a hint of her true irritation with me. The irritation that she kept hidden beneath a proper façade, the irritation that had been almost trained out of her by her servant education. It was visible in the slightest narrowing of her eyes.

I tried to choose my words carefully, if only because that might have meant the difference between her completely hating me, or only despising me.

"No, I do not think it is worth mentioning..."

But I failed utterly.

She flinched, and I knew where her mind raced. It was not worth mentioning because she was unsuccessful, because her attempts were so utterly horrendous that she should be embarrassed.

Little did she know that it took every ounce of control in my body to keep me from sitting beside her, from lifting her elbow and adjusting her grip, then running through the shapes with her until they were perfect. The only thing that kept me standing was one key fact—the youngest Laurent maid did not accept pity, even if my actions would be far from it, even if my actions would be born from something else—an utterly crushing desire to be near her.

In front of her sat the pot of ink that I had been using and the source of her shame, a small note that I had written to Winry and left behind, the words written upon it thickened from where they had been traced over again and again.

"I didn't know it was yours," she said, her face growing redder, and I wished at that moment that she was not able to lie, because I would have liked to have known if it were true. She spent much of her time cleaning in the library, kept close by Winry's insistence that she be near. "I just wanted to practice."

Wren, I would let you do so much more than practice, I wanted to tell her. She didn't have to trace my handwriting in secret, I would happily write her a thousand pages. Again, the urge to teach her rose within me, an itch in my palm to show her how to properly cradle the quill in her hand, how to write without the feather rubbing against her jaw like she allowed it to—

"I'll keep your secret for the time being," I said, not realizing that that was also not the right thing to say at that moment.

Nothing I ever said was right.

Nothing I ever did was right.

I fought back a sigh as she set the quill back down onto the desk, giving the curt nod that so many of the maids at the Laurent estate had perfected, one that took her ages to master. I could tell she was upset, mad that she was found out more than likely, but I'd learned enough to know that I couldn't say another word without making it all worse.

Because if anyone were to know, even Winry, they would be astonished.

Wren was the nanny's daughter, the Changeling child, the one kept closest to Winry for her amusement—even though so

many nursemaids chose to be rid of their children rather than have them face such a life.

It was shameful for a young woman to have fallen pregnant without a father, and more often than not, becoming a nursemaid was the only way for them to make do. Wren's mother had been like that, only Ms. Nettles had been lucky enough for her to have been gifted with a kind family, one that treated her well. It was because Winry saw her as a playmate, and the Laurents adored Winry too much to tell her that Wren was not equal to her until the very last moment. Meaning that the two would forever look at each other as sisters, as companions. Winry gifted Wren with so much for the bargain price of her companionship, and for a time when I was a child, Wren was allowed to run beside us and play as if she were a part of nobility.

The other maids thought she was pampered beyond belief and Winry?

I could see another sheet of paper beside mine, one that she has probably taken from Winry's stack. Awful handwriting. A large, messy scrawl that leaned all directions—If Winry knew that Wren was copying other's handwriting, trying to make hers match...

Winry would know that it would have been because Wren's mother was meant to focus on Winry, and Wren had fallen behind as a result.

I winced as the paper crumpled behind Wren's back, the maid having caught exactly where my gaze fell. I saw her eyes narrow, looking at me with utter contempt.

"I didn't know that it was yours," she repeated, her voice tense. I did not need her to tell me that she would not have traced it if she knew that it was mine.

That's alright, I wanted to say. She had no idea what the thought of her tracing my handwriting did to me, how happy I

was that she enjoyed my handwriting. Perhaps I should have told her that.

Perhaps I should have said something to calm her.

“You are dismissed,” I said quietly, and I hated, as always, that I even had the right to say that, that if I did not say it, she could not leave.

She moved faster than I thought she would, the crumpled letter in her hand and her palm stained with ink. I watched her and wished, as always, that things were different. Perhaps in another life I would have the authority to touch her, perhaps in another life she would listen to me; not because she had to but rather because she wanted to.

Wren made me wish more often than not that I was someone else.

I moved to the desk, my eyes taking in the dampened paper and the quill she left still heavy with ink.

Wren had an obvious interest in writing, and I assumed she had one in reading as well. A part of me wished that she could see the Kinsley estate and the extensive library contained within its walls—Another part of me realized that she would eventually, since she would no doubt accompany Winry when the Laurent heir married my brother.

Ah, sickness.

The thought of Wren coming to the Kinsley estate, of the maids who did not know her looking down at her with glares worse than the ones at the Laurent estate. The thought of seeing her every day, of wanting to touch her, but even the idea of it being taboo. It was already difficult enough as things were.

I had been sick exactly once in my life, fae were not prone to illness, but at that moment I felt sick and my whole being revolted.

“There you are,” said a voice happily from behind me, Winry. “I was wondering where you went.” I had not even

heard the younger girl's footsteps. "Did you talk to Wren again? She seemed rather angry in the hallway..."

I could have swallowed a fistful of sand for how dry my mouth was.

"Oh," Winry said, peering around me, taking in my pallid skin. "Another one of those days, isn't it? You'll get her next time," she said, her voice knowing as always. Winry knew. Winry had known since she had first tried to charm me into buying her exotic plants.

Since her lips almost touched mine and I pushed her back as Wren sat on the front lawn unsuspecting, talking to the gardener.

Winry wasn't stupid. She saw the panicked way that I looked at Wren, unable to look away. She knew of my infatuation, and she laughed at me. For two years Winry thought it to be the greatest joke, telling me that if I asked her she would help me, but knowing that I wouldn't dare.

And Winry was content with things so long as they always stayed the same.

"Wren's a tough egg to crack," Winry laughed, kicking at the side of the table to force me to stand properly rather than stooping over the note that Wren had just tried to copy. "Someday she'll understand." Winry didn't say what Wren would understand because she knew that if she told me that Wren would know how I felt, it would be an utter lie.

I grimaced, giving the paper before me one last look before folding it up and praying that the lines did not smudge, knowing all too well that my brother would be back to drive me home soon.

Perhaps I could find a way to fix the situation.

. . .

I DID NOT WAIT FOR KRISTIN TO TAKE HIS SEAT BESIDE ME in the car before informing him, “We have to take a detour today, I’m buying someone a gift.”

Kristin looked at me incredulously, barely managing to slide in beside me before his eyes were upon me, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth—I was sure that my brother already knew of my infatuation, but he managed to keep his observation of it to himself. “Oh, you’re buying someone a present, my little Luka?” He asked, his voice tingling with excitement, “and may I ask for whom this present is for?”

“Not Winry.”

And there it was, that damn twinkle. Because of course he thought it was amusing, of course he built it up in his head. My brother wanted to believe that I was much more successful with what he thought was my little crush that I actually was.

My brother wanted to believe that I had found love. What a surprise the maid Wren Nettles would be to him, a young woman who, when she thought I was not looking, silently repeated my words to herself with a mocking expression.

Then again, I had somehow accidentally convinced her that I meant her harm at every turn, and more than that—she had heard the rumors.

God knows what she would do if she ever found out that they were true. Then I supposed that any hope of a future between the two of us would die. Humans feared the Unseelie, and the thought of Wren, who I thought to be infallible in the face of danger, fearing my very existence—

“Quills, and ink... and quite a bit of paper,” I told my brother, listing what I planned to get her. She would not have to filch paper from Winry then, nor be forced to use my things. Though I was certain the Laurents left such things out in the open, Wren would also not steal—She likely did believe my

things to be Winry's, at the very least, since our supplies was shared by Winry and I.

So she would have her own, and I would give them to Winry to gift to her. Then, even when Winry did not leave things out, Wren could practice. She could practice all that she liked.

I swallowed at the thought of her bent over a piece of paper, laboring over some portraiture as well—

“Colored ink too,” I decided, because I thought that she would like that. “Blotting paper as well.” I thought of her face when receiving such a present, the expression would be directed at Winry, but... I would never take credit for such a thing, but I liked the thought of her smiling, of her excitedly staying up too late and practicing with the quill I bought her with the same boundless enthusiasm she seemed to show everything else.

For a moment, I imagined a scenario in which I told her that I had given her the gift, in which her face lit up and her arms wrapped around me instead of Winry.

“I like you like this,” Kristin grinned, looking up at the roof as he rested his head back against the seat. “Whoever she is, I cannot wait to meet her. You deserve to be happy, Luka.”

I snorted, glancing down at my hands, my fingers nervously knitting and unknitting. Perhaps it was selfish to think of her face, to imagine such a look of delight on it and for it to be all because of me. I tried and failed to push the idea away.

Something had begun to happen recently concerning Wren, and I did not dare to think of it, of the feeling that I dared not name when her face came to mind.

I always tried to think of her as ridiculous and unobtainable, of the scar that she left on my knee from her shoddy medical practices, and of the way that she would get distracted too easily. But those thoughts had helped less and less as of late,

and as my hand slipped into my pocket and caressed the crumpled paper once more, I couldn't help but think that I was on the cusp of something when it came to Wren.

I just couldn't figure out if it was something absurdly awful, or absurdly good. Perhaps one day I would figure out.

Perhaps one day Wren would look at me with something other than contempt.

