



# *The woods during winter*

Amirah Nabilah Ab Malek

Magic, Mystery

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On warm normal days, Dorin's feet wouldn't hurt so much, and she wouldn't be as reluctant as she was now to go out and give her shoes to the girl in the house next to hers. But the snow had started to fall and thickened up to her heels. The coldness of the snow felt like it could pierce her skin, into her flesh, and numb her bone. But the girl's feet was in much worse condition than Dorin's. She's skinny, with legs that looked like they could barely hold up half of her body. She's Catina from the household of Vega. Her fragile body could barely withstand the cold, yet she's forced to do chores for her father every day. She's not even given proper shoes. Dorin trudged out of her house's territory to where the brunette stood.

"Wear this." Dorin kneeled in front of Catina to put her winter boots on Catina's feet.

"No way, you're just wearing slippers. It's yours so you should wear it." Catina backed away.

"Are you really going to collect firewood barefoot?" Dorin let out a small chuckle. "It's fine. I have another pair of boots. Your father is going to be angry if you're late"

"You're always doing this." Catina said slowly as she wore the boots, embarrassed but thankful. Her blush was obvious because of her snow white skin.

Dorin watched her friend's back as she went to the edge of the forest. Dorin even gave her winter coat because the one's Catina was wearing was too thin. If she could, Dorin would help Catina, but she's not allowed to stay out of her house for too long, especially during her study hours like this and even more at a time when her parents were not satisfied with her study progress. Dorin quickly went into the Rosenheim household, making sure her parents and siblings didn't notice that she left.

As she passed through the ivory hallway, she glanced at the big family picture hung on the wall, and numerous other pictures of her siblings' accomplishments. The only way she could be in a picture was in a picture of her siblings. Dorin was fourteen, the youngest of the three siblings. Camille was the oldest, the most beloved by

her parents. She demands respect, and she's scary when she's angry, she took after father. Aureus, her brother, was cold and discipline, he took after mother. They were geniuses and ran a trading business. Rosenheim household prioritized perfection. They want to be seen as educated and principled. They were almost considered as noble in the village of Sankori, not only because of their wealth, but also because of their legacy and intelligence. It flows through their blood. Dorin's hair was thick black and her skin was of dignified bronze. Her irises were sharp brown, clearly showing her Rosenheim heritage.

Dorin sat at her study table to learn chemistry. She hadn't made any progress with her learning since last night. Her mind trailed away from the subject she's learning to the sight of stars, projecting her imaginations into intricate sketches on her chemistry book. She snapped to reality as she heard footsteps from outside her room and quickly erased the sketches on her book. There were more things Dorin was scared of than the horror stories of monster in the woods, and one of them is being shamed by her own family for drawing nonsensical things. She always had a bad reputation in the family for wasting her time more on drawing than actually learning and was considered delusional and odd for drawing things that she could only imagine of.

As the day grew late, Dorin peered through her window, looking for signs of a certain brunette to appear. Her room location was strategic to see the gates of her neighbour's house, yet ever since Catina left in the afternoon she hadn't return. She began to grow anxious. Why was Catina out all day? Was it Dorin that hadn't pay attention that she didn't notice Catina came back? It was almost time for the people to gather at the town shelter. Every night for the whole winter, everyone had to stay at the town shelter, praying the monster of the woods wouldn't take their family away. It was to make sure everyone was safe. Dorin's father believed that their house was safer than the town shelter, but the family's relationship with the people of the town was important for their reputation.

"Dorin! Get ready. It's time to go." Camille called from outside. Dorin put on a coat and rushed out to find her sister.

"Catina haven't come back yet. Can I go look for her in the woods?" She asked for permission from her sister because there was no chance for her parents to let her go.

"You know you can't do that. It's too late."

"Please, something might have happened," Dorin pleaded. "I'll meet everyone at the shelter."

"No!" Camille grabbed Dorin's arm. "I'm sure we'll see her there. If anything happens, we'll tell the chief."

"What is happening over here? Stop arguing and let's go." Father's sharp voice scared Dorin. All chances of Dorin looking for Catina were gone by that time. She was not brave enough to ask permission from father.

"We're ready, father." Camille said.

Dorin glared at her sister as she pulled her arm away from her sister. Anger welled up inside of Dorin as the family walked to the shelter. It was not only because she can't go look for Catina, but also because Dorin was always disregarded by her family. They don't listen to her even when she's serious.

"Where's your other coat? The thicker one?" mother asked.

"I was... I was in a rush." Dorin did not dare to look at her in the eyes and tell her that she had given both to their neighbour. Mother sighed and shook her head. Dorin clenched her fist in shame. Mother must have thought that Dorin was clumsy as usual, even when she tried to put in effort to train and discipline Dorin, nothing had changed.

It was late evening when they reached the shelter. Dorin scanned for any figure of Catina as her family went around greeting the chief and the elders, but her Catina was nowhere to be seen. She mentioned the absence of Catina when after she greeted the chief, but he told her that Catina's father was still not here too, so she must be safe, and they will make sure to find them before it gets too dark. Dorin hoped so. She had heard stories about many disappearances of kids during winter, but it stopped when they built the shelter and required people to gather there a few winters ago. However, as far as Dorin knew, everyone was still scared as the monster still roamed the town every night. People said they saw sights of a creature that looked like a wolf, taller and move abnormally. She wondered if something did happened to Catina, would people go out to look for her, surely everyone will not leave the comfort of the shelter?

After they counted every family there, Catina and his father were still missing, and the chief assigned a few patrol to go to their house. The dusk already turned to night when the patrol came back with Catina's father, but Catina was not with them. They were talking with the chief, and Catina's father's expression was angry. She moved closer to them to hear clearly what they saying. She heard from the chief that it was probably too dangerous by now to go look for her. Catina's father was lashing out about how he was waiting for Catina but the insolent girl was probably wandering off somewhere, ignoring his order to come back early. Dorin felt her face heating up as she heard this, she doesn't know if it's because of despair that Catina was not here or it's because of anger that Catina's father was not raging at the town management for not looking for her, but at Catina herself. She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Camille.

"Father was looking for you," Camille said, facing in the way of their family. "And don't be involved in other household's problem."

"It was your fault." Dorin muttered under her breath.

"Excuse me?" Camille turned at her, daring her to disobey.

"I could go look for her if you hadn't stopped me. Now she's gone!" Dorin said slowly. She was scared but

determined. The last time she talked back to her family was one of her worst memory, but it just dawned upon her that she just lost her only friend. She was home schooled for all her life. All the kids in the town avoided her because she was the rich kid. She also didn't know how to approach them. She would have no one to talk to about her interests if it wasn't for the younger girl next door. For some reason, she didn't want to believe that her friend was gone yet. Her eyes were hurting, keeping herself from crying.

"Don't be ridiculous! You would've died," Camille snapped. "Behave yourself. You're always stubborn and always doing what you want. You think you're right? If it wasn't for me you would've died, and I would have one less problem to worry about."

"Then stop bothering me if I'm such a burden!" Dorin spoke what she always kept inside.

"You two come with me!" father demanded. His face looked calm, but Dorin knew he was about to explode. He began walking the basement of the shelter. Dorin walked slowly, afraid of what might come, she didn't like this feeling. Only now she noticed that people were staring. It was gut-wrenching, thinking of all those memories, her father's expression. At least he cared enough about his reputation not to scold her in front of people. There were a few times when he scold and hit her in front of other children of the town. It was one of the reason she could never face them again. He and faced them.

"Did you realise how people look at you?" His voice was gravelly, containing anger that could be provoked by a single word." Have I not taught you how to behave? Have I not taught you girls a lesson of what would happen if you embarrassed me?"

"I'm sorry father." Camille murmured, looking down.

SMACK!!! A slap flew across Camille's face. Dorin tried to contain her shock. The last time Camille was hit was five years ago.

"You can go now." He ordered. Camille's eyes were on the floor the whole time she went back upstairs. He turned to Dorin. "Why did you interfere with the Vega household so much? Do I have to move my house so that you can't see them? Do I not provide you with all kinds of luxury in my house? All of my hard work was so that you children can live comfortably. But now that kid's gone, she wouldn't interfere anymore"

"How can you say that? She is the only one who understands me," Dorin muttered. She looked up to her father. His face was red. She felt cold to her bones. She felt warm fluid flowing down to her cheeks. "I wish I was the one who disappeared."

It was fast. Before she knew it, her ears and right cheek stung.

"I've had enough of your insolence, you spoiled brat!" he raised his voice. "You never smile and always glare at your own family. Lock your door and flinch when I touch you. You never contributed anything to the family,

yet you dare to talk back? If it's not for us you wouldn't have enjoy these privileges!"

"You never tried to understand me!"

"I did and closed your doors. What about this time YOU understand US?" He was furious.

Dorin's mouth was open but no words came out. Her tears was now of frustration. She swallowed it in and looked down again. She had no answer to that. His words jabbed her, not because it's true, but because she realised she had no freedom left. She tried to please her family so hard, by not being a disturbance and just obey them. Now even her littlest gestures and mind were being taken away. She had to understand them even though she had given up a long time ago. Looking back, she never noticed he was offended by her gestures, as he always kept a straight face. He took her silence as a form of defeat and began walking, trusting her to follow. She did.

The place for sleeping was divided by male and female, and her mother slept in between the sisters. Dorin could not sleep. She was crying into her pillow. She was thinking of why she was not born like her siblings, why did she dare to talk back earlier, but most of all why was her friend not coming back? Her frustration began to pile up. The place was crowded but it felt like she was alone. She stared at the ceiling after crying her eyes out. They were now puffy and in pain. She wondered if she had been crying for a few hours non-stop. Her mind was now filling with thoughts of Catina. If she's really not coming back, what will happen now? Will her days be spent alone, with no one to talk to? Will she become crazy if she only talk to her dolls from now on? Mother will think she's becoming more childish and give her dolls away if she saw her doing that. For some reason, the future seems so bleak, even if her parents already planned it all out.

An idea struck her, and she began to follow through it without thinking much. She reached her pocket watch, it was way past midnight. She carefully stood up, not wanting everyone to wake up, and put on her coat. She was going to look for Catina no matter what it cost her. She didn't even care if she died of coldness or the monster.

A few men were supposed to staying up, guarding at the doors, so she went to the window after she took a knife from the kitchen. She was praying that the window will not make any noise as she slowly open the lock. She climbed through it. Her legs were swallowed by the thick snow. She trudged to the roads. The woods will be her last option. She was not planning to go in there, just around them, to find clues, but the heavy snowing probably already covering all of them.

She had looked at every part of the town, every corner of them. Her legs felt like they could collapse anytime, but she didn't stop. It was now the moment to look around the woods. She clutched her coat and walked in the snow. It felt like hours until she finally stopped. In front of her, were footsteps imprinted in the snow in the

direction of the woods. They didn't belong to Catina. They were huge and long, and looked like it walked on two foot. And they were new, whatever it was, it was be nearby. Dorin was petrified, she wondered if she should continue looking. She began to remember the sketches she made of the monster they always talked about. In her sketches, it looked like a wolf that walk on it hind legs, with long claws and fangs. She wondered if the knife in her grip could help her. A white, large owl suddenly perched her shoulder.

Suddenly, she felt a rush on her skin. The ghastly feeling came from behind her. The owl flew away. She prayed that it was just a wind as she turned around. The thing had wide blood-shot eyes and wide mouth reaching to its pointy ears, with transparent white fur that she couldn't distinguish it from the snow. It was thrice as tall as grown men, and looked like a large monkey rather than a wolf. The only part that looked like a wolf was the tail. Its mouth was open, revealing its fangs. One of its hand reached Dorin's head. Her legs were frozen and weak, she couldn't run. Her vision was getting blurry and her head was dizzy. The moment she fainted she saw its hand. It didn't have sharp claws, she always drew it wrong.

When Dorin opened her eyes, everything was as white as sheet. She wondered if she's already dead, or she was left in the snow. But it was too warm to be snow. The texture felt more like... fur. She was being carried, by the creature! Her mouth was shut tight, unable to scream. Even if she screamed, she wouldn't be able to break away from its arms. Her head was too dizzy to even think about how to escape. All she could see was the dark forest, and many gleaming eyes from the dark bushes. Even if she managed to escape, she'll be eaten by wolves. Trees, trees, trees, trees, darkness. She couldn't see anymore, so she closed her eyes. After a while, she felt the creature slow down. It put her down on something soft, and she heard the crackling sounds of fire. She opened her eyes, but they were hurt by the brightness of the fire. She could only make out what seemed like the creature tearing its face off, it was horrifying.

"Rest up. You were in the snow for so long." A low, husky voice said.

"Is she awake?" A familiar voice said slowly. "Dorin?"

"Catina?" Dorin's mouth was dry. She opened her eyes and saw her friend's face close to her. Her face was red, she was smiling, relieved.

"Why are your eyes all swollen?" Catina asked.

"You should look at your face, all splotched red." Dorin said, trying to avoid answering. But it's true. Catina was usually so pale.

She looked at what used to be the creature. A woman stood there, brewing something. Her hair was silvery white and shaggy, down to her waist. She had olive skin and grey eyes. She wore thick furry clothes. A mask that looked like the face of the creature was hung on the wall. Dorin scanned the place. It seemed like a cave

and a living room was merged together, with a bonfire in the middle and sofa's around it. There were a few doors at the wall and a crack with stairs leading somewhere down. The owl she met earlier was resting on the window sill. It was an odd place, the smoke from the fire disappeared when it reached the top.

"Here. This should help you," The woman approached Dorin, holding out a mug. She hesitated, but Catina nodded, reassuring her. The drink was sweet, and she felt like she gained an ounce of energy. "My name is Raelynn. You can call me Rae. I'm sure you're really confused, you both are. I'll explain to you when you're ready."

Dorin looked at Catina. Catina's eyes gleamed in anticipation, she must've already waited all night to hear all the answers.

"I'm good," Dorin said. "I want to know now"

"I'm sure you heard a lot of stories about a scary monster taking children right?" Rae said. "Well, I am the monster, and I do take children. But don't worry, I don't eat them, I save them. And I'm actually a witch. Your town, Sankori, used to be my town. They chased me out into the woods, because I practice magic."

"Why do you take children?" Dorin heard a story about how an evil witch was chased into the woods, and the witch cursed that a monster will haunt the town every winter.

"I had to. Because I know there are many parents in the town that treats children unfairly, like how they treated me. I see the pain of those children with my magic. Even when I took the children, the parents don't come looking for them. They only know how to hide. They want to avoid their fear as much as they can. I only come during winter to let them prepare to protect their children. The unprotected children, I will protect them. Of course, the choice to stay depends on the children. If you leave you wouldn't remember me." Rae smiled. "There, I explained myself, would you stay with me?"

Dorin and Catina looked at each other. Catina's eyes gleamed. Dorin was unsure

"I want to." Catina said.

"But... where are the other children?" Dorin ask.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Rae giggled. "You can come in, kids!"

The doors were opened. Two little boys ran out and hid behind Rae, nervously stealing glances to look at Dorin and Catina. Four teenagers that look more or less the same age as them walked out. Three of them were girls and one was a boy. Dorin learned that the little boys' names were Kaius and Leven. The girls were Nora, Natalia and Mirella. The teenage boy was Zeno. Those were not their original names. Nora was the oldest, and had been there since she was a kid. Leven was homeless. Zeno even knew Dorin's family because they were famous in town. Dorin noticed that Catina was not her timid, unusual self, but she looked happy. They spent the little

time left of the night to share stories until Rae ushered them to bed since it was a tiring night. She reassured Dorin that she didn't need to rush about making decisions.

It was evening when Dorin woke up in the room she shared with Catina. Catina was still fast asleep. Dorin had a lot of thoughts that she slept late, even though she's tired. She went outside, and discovered from Zeno playing a flute.

"Where is everyone?" Dorin asked.

"Probably still sleeping," Zeno answered aloofly. "We stayed up all night because there's finally a new member after years. Didn't expect that there will be two, and I didn't expect one of them to be a Rosenheim."

"What's wrong with my family?"

"I thought they were so perfect. I didn't know they would abuse their own daughter."

"I'm not abused." She muttered sharply.

"Then why are you here?"

"I..." she didn't know what to say in response. She wasn't even sure why she denied him. At the same time, her stomach growled.

"You know what? You don't have to answer. You owe no one an explanation. There's food on the table. Nora cooked them."

He walked towards her, took her hand and led her to table, as she looked like she wasn't going to move. He seemed apologetic as she ate.

"I'm sorry for being insensitive." He said.

"No... you're right. I shouldn't be here. Since I confirmed that Catina's safe, I should go back."

"Are you sure? You look like you want to stay."

"I don't know..." She said. It was silent. It was awkward since she had almost no experience having a proper conversation aside from Catina. She searched for a topic. "Why did... why did you change your name?"

"Because we don't want to be associated with our old memories, so we take on a new identity. And names carry deeper meaning, so I chose a name that I hope would inspire me to live up to it."

"Zeno?"

"It means to shine. I want to be a musician one day, when I leave this place. Do you know what your name means?"

"No."

"Lucky for you I had memorised Rae's book of names. Dorin... it means stranger."

"Oh..." Dorin was taken aback. She wondered if her parents knew when she named her, and if her siblings'

names were like that too. Was it that the reason she was so disconnected to them, because she's a stranger?

"Don't worry. You can change it anytime."

"Really? What name could possibly suit me?" She never had a defining quality as she was always trying to fit in, trying to be what her family wants her to be.

"It doesn't matter if it fits. It's what you want to be," Zeno said as he stood up. "Look, if you're still uncertain, go talk to Rae. I'm sure she has your answers"

After she finished eating, she sat by the window, looking outside. Were her family searching right now, or they will just continue on their lives, because she had been told again and again that she's not a valuable asset. A hand touched her shoulder gently.

"I see you're still uncertain." Rae sat by her.

"If I hadn't gone out to look for Catina, I wouldn't be here. You weren't supposed to take me. I'm not like them. I don't belong here. I didn't have it hard. I live in a good house, with good education." For some reason, she had no problem expressing herself to Rae. Was it because of magic, or Rae was just trustable?

"You know... the reason I went back to the town after taking Catina was because Hiraya led me to you. She knows."

"Hiraya?"

"The owl," Rae pointed her chin towards Hiraya, resting in an opened cage. "As far as I know, there may be times when you feel conflicted by your family. They gave what you need to live, they're the longest people you've known your whole life, but it doesn't mean they always do what's good for you, no matter how much they want you to believe."

"How do you know about this?"

"I'm guessing. Most of the kids who hesitated experienced different kinds of abuse from what you usually know, but still damaging. Look, I'm not trying to force you. If you're happy with your family, then I'll guide you back home."

"I don't really... don't really know." Dorin was obedient to her family. What they told her to do was what she believed was right. Of course, there were times when she was happy. Like during the trips they went together and when her sister was awarded for her intelligent. But it's hard to recall when the memory of last night was still fresh. Her vision became blurry, she cried.

"It's okay..." Rae wrapped her arms around her, and patted her back.

"I always felt so worthless and confined." She choked the words out. "I'm frustrated, that they do not understand me... and forced me to do things I hate. I don't know what they want me to say, so I silenced

myself, but that is not what they want either. I hate all those memories... but at the same time... I can't hate them. I don't know anymore... if I could trust anyone with my feelings."

"You don't deserve all that pain." Rae hugged her. "It will take a long time to heal, but we will help you. You may feel like you must love them because they are your family, but here's another family, the one that's not related by blood. The one that you find, it may mean more than your blood family, because we love you because we choose to, not because we have to."

Dorin looked at Rae's kind face. Her grey eyes doesn't seem empty as she thought earlier, it was now calming. She realised she was sobbing, and her eyes hurt more than ever, as she had been crying nonstop. She noticed the Kaius and Leven staring from behind the sofa innocently, probably too scared to interrupt them. She heard a faint sound of flute, probably Zeno. The room smelt savoury and sweet, from the food Nora made. Natalia and Mirella were probably still asleep in their shared room, so was Catina, safe now, from the real monster, her father. It was a strange feeling. It felt like she was missing this place for such a long time, even though she never been here before. Her heart was longing for this. It was her home.

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