

Lahn
33 ABY

Snow was piling up against the door. Blocking the chimney stack and the windows. There were small divots that allowed peering eyes to see outside. A bucket was partially filled with water, sat in the middle of the room and produced the occasional drip as the hole in the ceiling allowed moisture to seep in.

Melissa stood before the front door. She'd managed to open it yesterday and it hadn't snowed again. As long as the top layer hadn't become ice overnight.

She was wrapped in all of her clothes. Many of them were too small, her eleventh birthday having passed a few months ago. She hadn't had new clothes in two years. The waistband dug in, the cuffs of her sleeves. The arms and legs didn't fit. Over them were her parents' clothes. She'd folded them over again and again to make them fit. It made it hard to move but she needed to go outside to clean the chimney.

Winter was survivable without fire but she'd spent the last week shivering and felt sick. Either because of the constant movement or the cold. It was hard to tell and too far a walk to make it into town. Not that the Echani was sure they'd accept her. No one had made eye contact with her in years. They were afraid. It was okay, she'd be afraid of her too but she wished they'd give her a chance. She could even lift things now; just herself without her hands.

Either way, the chimney needed to be cleared.

The snow was heavy, Melissa was already sweating by the time the door was open and she was quick to close it behind her. The boxes were covered in snow but she could still climb them.

It was slow but steady.

Crossing the roof was much more difficult. She was almost to the chimney when-

The snow shifted below her feet. Melissa landed on her side, the young seeress crying out as pain flared from her hip. She slid, across the roof and then into the air for a brief moment. Her stomach dropped, slamming into the floor and starting to get up before a pile of snow landed on her back.

It didn't *quite* bury her.

Melissa coughed, forcing herself up onto her knees, to her feet. The snow was sharp against her face, needles of cold pressed to her cheeks and lips. Melting on her eyelashes.

"Okay. I can do this." She mumbled to herself, stopping mid step to shiver as the wind picked up for a few seconds. "Clear now. Up there then just, brush."

So she did, up over the boxes and then stepping into her own footsteps making way across once more. There was now a gap, clear of snow so it was easier to cross the final gap. The chimney was tall. Taller than she was almost.

The girl reached up, managing to get her fingers over the edge of the stone and *pulling*.

The snow had made her heavier, soaking into all of the layers. By the *stars* it hurt to pull herself up but she managed it. Melissa knelt on the edge, breathing heavily but it was okay. She could just reach and-

A few of the bricks shifted.

Melissa tipped forward, screaming as she fell down through the chimney. A few of the bricks followed, smacking onto her legs and drawing more whimpers. There'd been old charcoal in the base. Her arm *ached* but it wasn't as sharp as when she'd broken her arm once many years ago.

It wasn't broken. It still hurt.

"Mom, dad."

She cried out for them but the names didn't even echo, the cry absorbed into the snow. As if she may as well not have spoken at all.

It was only several minutes later when she crawled out of the chimney, covered in dirt and ash and snow and sodden through all the layers of her parents' clothes.

She stripped them off until she was dry, even colder now as tears ran down her face. It was only sheer need that forced her to make up the fire.

It would have been quicker but when her hands had started shaking too much to light the kindling, Melissa had had to stop so she could cry. Curling into a ball.

The young Echani did so again once it was lit, bringing all of her blankets and pillows to in front of the fire. It hurt. She wanted them back.

She didn't want to be alone anymore.