

*The Birds and The Bees*

*Author Notes: This scene was removed for pacing. And I didn't want too many people that befriended Ellie in the beginning of the novel. Widow Zheng created a plot hole that a first reader thought should be answered: which is why didn't Widow Zheng just take her in?*

## Seattle

ELLIE DIDN'T LIKE PETER tried to pour iodine on her hands again. "I don't want you touching me," she hissed.

A muscle tightened next to his jaw. "The iodine helps stop infection." Holding the bottle, he reached for her hand.

"No." She yanked her hand away as hard as she could. "You can make me sick."

His mouth opened then shut. He turned away from her and to his uncle. "This project of yours is a waste of time. I've enough to deal with besides..."

Mr. Johnson put up his hand. "Just wait. Just wait." To Ellie, he said, "Tell me what you are talking about?"

"Jamie said it was dangerous. Dan said I must remain untouched or I'll get sick and the sickness will spread to them."

A redness flashed over Peter's cheeks. He seemed bigger than he had before.

However Mr. Johnson calmly asked, "You don't have any idea what that means do you?"

"Yes," she lied. Then feeling guilty, she shook her head. Fearing she might be punished or they would just throw her out on the street, Ellie began to panic. "I...I don't want to get sick. Mama got sick. Then she died and there was shit everywhere! Danny and Jamie are mad all the time. They say things that don't make any sense. I think they know what I did!"

"What you did?"

"I was supposed to be scrubbing the floor and I went out to play. I killed her!"

"Ellie, you did not kill your mother," Peter said the flush falling back from his brown cheeks.

Mr. Johnson continued, “A virus did. Most likely, the new strain of nanoflu that has been circulating around the homeless. And secondly, it is not right for us—or any man—to discuss this with you without your brothers present, but I swear to you, Peter nor I won’t ever hurt you.”

“She is a waste of your time!”

“Peter, enough,” Mr. Johnson said. Then he turned back to Ellie, “Do you trust me?”

She nodded.

“I’ll speak to Daniel and ask for permission to take you to a widow who lives in the next cabin. She can explain these things and relieve your fears. Alright?”

Ellie nodded.

“In return, you’ll let Peter clean your wounds. You won’t say another word of argument against him or you can go to bed directly after supper.”

Ellie sniffed.

“Now, none of that. Peter and I aren’t angry. We know you’re just frightened, confused, and grieving.”

Mr. Johnson was wrong. He was not angry, but the coldness of Peter’s eyes and the grim twist of his mouth did not change. If Peter were Dan or Jamie, she would hug him and press her forehead into his chest to stop him from being angry. However he wasn’t her brother. Virtuous girls didn’t hug men who weren’t their papas or brothers. It made people sick.

Peter hardly spoke during supper. During her lesson on verbs, he read his handheld in the corner. When the clock chimed eight times, he went back to the kitchen and turned on the faucet to fill the washtub.

Peter spoke in a strange foreign language. He was still angry, no matter, what Mr. Johnson said. Mr. Johnson spoke back in the same. His voice was calming. Ellie heard them move to the bedroom. Peter came back. She clenched her eyes shut waiting whatever punishment was about to fall upon her.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m thinking about my ma.”

“I’m sorry about your mother, but you need to get some sleep.” Then he adjusted her blankets and went into the kitchen for his bath.

Even when he was angry, Peter was kind. As she closed her eyes, Ellie wished he might be her husband. Icy fear compressed her heart. Ignorant or not, Ellie knew she could never say that to either of her brothers, Mr. Johnson, or Peter.

THOUGH HIS JOINTS ACHED IN the morning and he felt exhausted, Alex awoke early in order to meet with the Sethson boys.

Peter made oatmeal with strawberries. Like all adolescent boys, Daniel and James’s eyes glazed over at the thought of food. They sat down for breakfast. Dan’s hands seemed to shake as he touched the ceramic bowl, but Alex insisted he take more milk and heaped strawberries onto James plate.

Once the boys commenced shoveling food into their mouths, Alex explained, “You must know how upset Ella was last night. She wouldn’t let Peter tend to her wounded hands, terrified that in some way he would take her virginity.”

Daniel threw Ella an icy look that she cringed from. Alex wonder if he was doing the right thing. The way she held herself perfectly still, clutching the chair, it was obvious Ella expected Daniel to be angry. Careful of his tone, he made sure it sounded like she made a rather foolish mistake all revolving around the word “untouched”. Yet, Ella did not even relax even when her brothers started laughing.

Peter told her softly, “Eat your oatmeal.”

“How much did your mother explain to her?”

Dan scratched his chin. “I know they had one talk when she turned eleven, but of course, I wasn’t present. There seems to be gaps.”

Alex and Peter both nodded.

“You and James are guiding her integrity, but in my opinion, Ella needs to speak to a woman to explain what is going to happen. It is ultimately your decision and I’ll abide by whatever you wish. If you wish to discuss this with James in private and let us know tomorrow night, I understand.”

“Who did you think to send her to?” Daniel asked.

“The Widow Zheng Lei. As a worshipper of ancestors, she won’t have service on Sundays and love the companionship of a young girl for a few hours.”

With a glance at James, Daniel said, “That’d be fine...”

Alex let them out through the biometrics gate. Ella said something to Daniel that he couldn’t catch. Her big brother pulled her into a hug as they walked towards the factory.

Peter watched them go with disdain curling his lip. Alex wasn’t sure if it was for the girl or her brothers.

May 29, 3069

Ellie worried about entering into a stranger’s home until Widow Zheng Lei greeted her with open arms and fresh baked biscuits filled with berries. With a hand on Ellie’s back, she gestured her to enter the simple room, with walls painted in pale green. The curtains, another shade of springtime green, blew in the summer breeze and the beam of sunlight showed a line of dust in the air.

“We shouldn’t be longer than an hour or two if you wish to stay, James.”

Jamie blushed deeper than Ellie had ever seen him. “No, this is for Ellie.” For a moment, she wondered if Jamie knew all Dan thought he knew. In fact, she wondered if Dan knew all he said he knew. After all, he had never even heard of the nanoflu.

“At least, take some biscuits for you and your brother,” Widow Zheng said pressing them into his hands. “Poor dears are all skin and bones.”

Then she sat down on a threadbare divan and told Ellie to sit beside her.

“Do you have children, madam?”

“My son went to Eden reborn and my daughter died in childbirth as did my grandson,” she said, “But I’m second cousins to the Boyd Lei’s so Raymond and Peter take care of the yard work when I need something done. I’ve been friends with Alex for years. I am hardly alone.”

Pressing another fruit laden biscuit into Ellie’s hands, Widow Zheng Lei explained the magic of becoming a woman. Ellie would bleed at her first flowering. Then she would be able to carry a child within her womb.

As interesting as this all was, Ellie still didn’t quite understand what she was talking about. “Madam Zheng Lei, I need to know how to lose my virginity?”

“What?”

“So I can avoid it. Jamie said, I need to know a man and touch them, but I know lots of them...”

“Child, your husband will enter you on your wedding night.”

“That’s the only way?”

“The maidenhead can be broken by physical activity prior to intercourse...”

Ellie nodded again. “I work in the factory. I tape boxes.”

“That won’t effect your virginity and unlikely to effect your maidenhead either.”

“Will it hurt when someone’s Mama looks at me?”

“No, darling, she’ll just look to see the maidenhead is intact. In fact, the boy’s test is much harder—and more expensive.”

“Why?”

“Since there’s no way to tell if a boy is a virgin, he must go to the doctor for a blood-test. They look to make sure there is no disfigurement, then take blood. Only if he’s clean, can he ask the girl’s parents for permission to marry her. His mama or sister will look at her. If she is broken, but claims to be a virgin, she can have a blood test, but doctors cost money. Still it’s the only way for us to stay away from The Bug.”

Thinking of Dan, she asked, “How is it decided if there I going to be a bride price or a groom price?”

“The price is paid by the family who the couple lives with, because the couple will be bringing money into that household.”

Relieved and more to be polite than any other reason, Ellie asked the widow other questions. Becoming a woman didn't sound magical, love didn't even sound magical, it all sounded rather disgusting and confusing.

Written by Elizabeth Guizzetti

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