

Chapter 1 – the train

Iris

I shivered as the cool air brushed over my skin. It was quiet for a moment before a car rushed by, the first people getting to work during the earliest morning hours or maybe a nurse returning home after a long and exhausting night shift. I draped the warm winter coat over my shoulders, covering my bare skin and shuffling my cold hands into the pockets of the thick fabric.

The night of dancing and drinking had been long and sweaty, but fun nonetheless. My feet dragged themselves down the street, my heels clanking against the stone ground, the second noise of the morning. I rarely passed people, only few were still roaming around after the clubs and bars had all shut down for the day.

As soon as the doors of the subway had closed, I kicked off my heels and sunk onto the seat. The whole wagon was empty, and I used that space to spread my legs forward. My head leaned on the window, my eyes tracing my own silhouette. My so neatly curled and fixed hair had turned into lumps of waves, a straight strand here and there and rarely a curl leftover. I did not react when a second silhouette appeared next to mine, somebody getting to work, or maybe somebody who was also finally going home after a night of clubbing. For a long moment I did not even notice the way he was staring at me, until I slowly realised the flaw in all of this. When I had entered this wagon, it had been empty, completely erased from any man or woman and we had not stopped since, so where did that guy come from?

My gaze drew away from the window and I turned my head to look at him. He smiled nicely and gave me a nod. I did not return the smile. Something felt off about him, not only the unexplained way of how he got here, but also the smile, it did not feel real, more like a hallucination on an empty face. His smile faded as he noticed my slight frown. I thought that he would use it as a sign and leave me alone, but instead his expression converted into a smirk as he opened his mouth to speak

“Hi Iris”

What the fuck

A shiver went down my spine as he let my name roll off his tongue so smoothly. It didn't seem new to him, like he had known me for a long time. But why did I not recognise a single feature on his body? Not the long raven hair that draped over his shoulders down to his chest, not the deep brown eyes that now pierced through me, waiting patiently for my reaction.

“Do I know you?”

My voice came out shakier than expected, the usual, friendly ring was gone and replaced with an insecure and almost rude tone. His eyes squinted a bit, like he was expecting a completely different and nicer answer and was searching for that answer in my face. His gaze loosened a hunch as he opened his mouth and placed a hand on his heart to answer my question

“Oh right, the name’s Mortis, but please, call me Mo”

Mortis

I thought about the name for a bit, recalling every Mo or Mortis I had ever met, trying to make sense of why he acted like he knew me so well while I did not remember a single thing about that guy.

“I believe we met a few years ago, in that one bar, you were dancing, and I knew I would remember that beautiful face!”

He blabbered on and on, like he was getting high on the attention he had achieved from me. His earlier smirk had shifted into a full-on smile and his eyes had lit up. My gaze followed his silhouette, the black turtleneck he was wearing fitted tightly around his broad frame and his beige pants hung loosely right above his calves. The black patent leather shoes completed the rich look. My eyes drifted back to his face once more, realising that he had stopped talking and was now leaning towards me.

“Sorry I-”

“Got lost in thought?”

He completed my sentence with a smirk, and I nodded, forcing an awkward smile to fly over my lips.

“Well, I asked what you’ve been up to in the past years”

Mortis repeated his question for me, he didn’t make it sound angry, which would have been the usual reaction, but understanding, like he knew that I would get lost in thought and didn’t care a single bit.

“Nothing much, started Uni, aborted the idea of Uni, started working for a small company and have been working there ever since”

I shrugged, there really hadn’t been a lot going on in the past years and I wasn’t really bothered by that fact. It was nice, instead of learning for tests, I was now learning just by doing my job and it worked out for me.

“No boyfriend?”

He was asking it in a normal tone, but it still sounded like a demand instead of a fairly usual question, like he would be angry if my answer turned out to be a yes. I shook my head, and I swear something in him lit up at that moment.

“What about your family? Are they around a lot?”

I absorbed him for a moment, swiftly letting my eyes gaze over him and his expression. He looked so confident in his words, almost cocky, like he knew he would get me to like him even though he had been strange ever since the moment he had sat down. He was still leaning forward, his forearms balanced neatly on his knees, his head was tilted slightly down but his gaze remained straight forward, fixated on me.

"Not really, they live upstate"

I replied after my moment of observation, even though the feeling of him already being aware of that was still creeping in my chest. He put on an expression that resembled something similar to an empathetic one and sighed

"Oh I know that feeling all too well, being all alone in life, no one to turn to, to tell your problems."

For the first time, the words that came out of his mouth sounded genuine, honest almost. I smiled a bit, also the first honest one since he had sat down across me. His lips curled up into a smile of his own, but it looked sad this time, not overly friendly like before.

„Oh, sorry,“

I muttered, unsure of what to answer, if I should ask him to elaborate or if he would think of that as overstepping a boundary. I looked him up and down once more, seeing if his body language might give me a hint on how to continue on, but there wasn't anything. No change in posture, no eyes hinting any more sadness than before and the corners of his mouth still smiling a bit lopsided.

„Oh don't be, it doesn't matter.“

He shrugged, his voice sounded like he was telling a lie, but I told myself to be careful not to push him.

“Why not?”

Curiosity took over.

“Why would it? I can't change the fact that I am lonely by crying about it, I need to actually do something”

“So, this is why you chose to talk to me?”

“This, and because you are very pretty”

I smiled; he said it so casually but deeply. It felt like he was giving me the biggest compliment even tho it must have been one of the most basic compliments ever given to me.

“You're smiling”

He acknowledged.

“I am”

I agreed. I didn't know if I should elaborate on my answer, I didn't even know why he decided to point out my smile in the first place.

He smiled as well. It was a pretty smile, not as eerie as his earlier ones, it was calming but still light. It felt like the sun at dawn, shining over the waves of the ocean and painting the usually dreary sky in oranges and pinks.

“You're smiling too”

I pointed out.

“Yes, I guess you infected me.”

He looked happy now, the way a child would be after receiving his birthday presents. It looked so pure, so unfamiliar to him.

For a moment, a warm and cozy silence filled the empty wagon, but then Mo’s gaze drifted away from me and up to the small screen showing the name of the next stop.

“Well, it’s time for me to go. I’ll see you around Iris”

He announced, his eyes landed on me once again as he spoke my name. Something tugged at my heart as he got up and walked towards the doors of the wagon. The train came to a halt and after a short second the doors opened and as his foot stepped out of the wagon, I called out a “See you around Mo”.

His head turned and he smiled at me once more before fully stepping out into the morning breeze again. The doors closed behind him and the train rattled on, leaving me alone once again.

Chapter 2 – Ashes and Marble

Mo

My foot kicked against the empty trashcan by the roadside. *Why did I have to get off so early, I could have easily stayed for a few more stations and walked my way back!* The short heels of my shoes clanked against the stone of the sidewalk, creating a loud and steady rhythm. It stopped as I made my way into an alleyway with uneven ground which did not give the shoes an opportunity for resonance. I opened the small extra door of the house to my right and entered while it created a loud screech. Filling out the quietness of the early morning. I entered the dark apartment -well it was not really an apartment, more like an old storage area- revamped into something home-like. It did not matter, it was not my home anyway, just a temporary space to keep my important stuff. The soles of my shoes found resonating ground again and reintroduced the rhythm as I walked across the room, making my way to the wooden door across the entrance. It opened quietly, leading into a round room. The walls were decorated with mirrors, reflecting the light from the large chandelier in the middle of the room. A sand circle was laid out on the stone floor. My hand reached for the dark red robe hanging next to the doorframe. It drifted easily over my shoulders, hiding the plain look of the suit. I stepped into the circle and sat down under the chandelier, closing my eyes. I felt the air tighten around me, everything was standing still but always in motion, my hands felt the ground change around me, a quiet and icy wind playing with my robe.

After opening my eyes, the room was gone, instead of the old brick walls, rocks and broken pillars were surrounding me. I smiled *Home again*.

I stood up, the suit had vanished, ready to return once I re-entered the human realm. Left was a slender, human-like body, grey skin rapped tightly around sharp bones. All the muscles I needed in the human world were now thin and barely noticeable. My cheekbones were hollow and my eyes empty, I looked like a human corpse ready to decompose. The hood draped over my long black hair, the only feature which remained from my human body.

I strutted forward barefoot, feet digging into the ashes and grey sand on the ground, covering a marble floor. After a few steps, a shiver ran down my spine as the sand started to trickle away and reveal the icy stone tiles. A large hall revealed itself, marble pillars revealing themselves. Some reached up to 35 metres, their peaks disappearing in the fog of the night sky. Others were already broken in half, their missing parts lying around all over the hall, causing cracks and friction across the floor. My steps echoed as I stepped forward. A shining orb was lighting up the room, little splinters and splatters lit up as the sound of my echo reached them, it was almost like the orb was having an allergic reaction to the noise. Greens and blues shimmered through the sea of red hues.

A darkness inside it grew as my hand touched the glass, I waited as the colours drained away, it reached a point where everything was quiet, no splinters, no colour, just a black gloom settling down. My eyes closed, in my head I recreated the image of her, *Iris*. Her caramel-coloured hair and the way it slumped over her shoulders this morning, the glimmering eyes, a blue like the sea of the Caribbean... (to be continued)

Chapter 3 – the café

Iris

A shrill bell rang as I pushed the door of the small café open. The eyes of a waitress trailed over to where I had just entered and smiled, I smiled back politely before taking my place on a small table next to a window. I dropped my bag on the floor under the table and pulled out my laptop. My eyes scanned the room as I waited for my laptop to start. A few people were sitting in pairs, some enjoying breakfast with a friend, others holding hands as they shared a hot chocolate and pancakes. A larger group of college students had just finished and were now starting to pack their bags, they were the only group consisting of more than two people.

I ordered a strong coffee and kept to myself, glancing up every now and then to see if any familiar faces showed up. I was a regular here and not the only one at that. It was a nice café and affordable for young adults like me, who would rather spend their time studying in a café than at home to at least get some social interactions in with people other than their bosses or professors.

Another shrill ringing and my gaze drifted to the entry and there he stood... Mo? I smiled as his eyes landed on me and waved. He smiled as well, that child-like smile once again. He gave the waitress a curt nod before walking over to me. His hands were

stuffed in the pockets of his black cloak and loose strands from his bun peeked out under his grey checkered ivy cap.

“Hi Iris”

He leaned onto the edge of the small coffee table as my name rolled off his tongue. Before I could respond, his hand had reached for the chair behind him and spun it around so he could sit down. I closed my laptop and scooped it aside.

“Hi Mo”

I finally answered, my eyes scanned him as he draped off his coat and took off the cap. He hung both parts up on the edge of the chair he had grabbed and scooted closer.

“How are you?”

He asked, it had been three days since the encounter in the train and rarely any time went by without my mind recalling that morning. I felt the joy rise as I finally got to speak with him again and so I started blabbering.

“I’m alright, the last few days were boring, kinda wish we would have met sooner. Honestly you were a nice break from all the lame work stuff. But anyways, enough about me, what have you been up to Mo?”

He grinned as he listened to my senseless blabber about the last few days which must have sounded quite dull.

“Nothing much, most of my time spent with thinking about you”

I blushed, while his first compliment in the train had sounded basic but still nice, this felt like something he had planned to happen. It felt like it fitted perfectly just for that moment.

His hand rose up as he signalled the waitress to come over. She put on a friendly smile and pulled the small black notebook out of the pocket of her apron.

“I’ll have the cappuccino and the pistachio croissant”

He ordered as the waitress nodded and wrote it down, his eyes had already drifted back to me and my outfit. I was completely underdressed when sitting next to him. While his white button up shirt and black pants made him look like he was going to a romantic dinner, my grey hoodie and jeans made me look like I was on my way to the supermarket and back home for a movie night all alone.

I forced an awkward smile and ordered a plate of pancakes with a mug of hot chocolate. The waitress took my order and hushed back behind the counter, turning to the coffee maker. As her pink apron slowly disappeared out of my sight, I let my gaze drift back to Mo. He had folded his right leg neatly over his left one and his hands were resting calmly on his lap.

“Sorry, I must look quite underdressed to you,” I mumbled, forcing the silence to break.

“Oh no, I think you look ravishing, even though you do seem like you didn’t plan on leaving your own room today”

He chuckled slightly as he waited for my response to his snarky compliment.

“Well, you don’t seem to fit in here either,” I replied, taking note that at least two thirds of the people in the café were dressed as casually as me, the other third was a bit more elegantly attired, but none of them even came close to Mo.

“I suppose I don’t” he agreed with a demure nod “Yet I’d rather be overdressed everywhere than underdressed anywhere,” he stated.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you here, my first time visiting this place,” he started a new topic, leading away from the topic of clothes, which I was honestly more curious about.

“It is, I love it here, it’s quite cheap for people with a normal salary,” I stated, letting him know that judging by his outfit, I did not see him as a person with an average salary. He smirked and nodded.

The waitress had now come back to us with a platter filled with our orders and placed them on the small coffee table. The smell of hot chocolate and coffee filled the air around us. The cap of the maple syrup for my pancakes opened with a plop as I slowly started pouring it over the small stack, creating little swirls and hearts as I proceeded. The waitress rushed over to another table waiting to order and left me and Mo back in awkward silence and empty glances. At least now there was food to keep our mouths occupied with something else than talking. I cut a piece of my pancake and stuffed it into my mouth, the piece was definitely bigger than expected and puffed up my cheeks. I knew I was resembling a hamster at this point and I just prayed he didn’t make that correlation as well. Somehow Mo managed to be the first person I had ever seen to look elegant when eating a croissant, his long fingers keeping it in place, but still giving it enough room so it doesn’t press into a big flat mess. He took small bites, savouring every bit, letting the pistachio crème melt in his mouth every time before taking the next bite.

After some time, his croissant was gone and he watched quietly as I ate up my last few pieces of pancake, dipping the slices into the spilled maple syrup on my plate. I glanced over to his side of the table, his plate was empty, so was his cappuccino. His eyes had drifted away from me and onto the plate in front of him, like he was searching for any leftovers that might be there.

A few minutes later, my plate and mug had gone empty as well. The mouths weren’t occupied anymore, but before I could make up a senseless topic to talk about, Mo’s hand shot out of the pocket where it had rested while I ate and placed a 50\$ bill on the table.

“That should cover it, the waitress can keep the change,” he spat out. It sounded more like an order than anything else. He scooted his chair back and got up, mumbling something about work and how he’s late after waiting for me for so long. His coat wasn’t even fully on as he rushed out of the café.

The waitress' gaze shot over at me with a confused look, I shrugged, as perplexed as she was. She swung her hips around the counter and made her way over to my table, where I was now seated on my own once again. The waitress' rosy cheeks puffed up as she forced a smile to appear on her face "Are you already miss?" she asked, her voice ringing like little bells. My hand grabbed the 50\$ bill and passed it to her before looking up "Apparently you can keep the change," I replied dryly, before sliding out of my chair and starting to pack my stuff.

The waitress just stared at me for a moment before taking the bill and putting it into the pouch of her apron. Her hands moved towards my table, picking up the plates and cups and carrying them to the kitchen. As the shrill bell rang, announcing my exit, I could hear a faint goodbye from behind the counter.