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The Tiny Witch FROM THE Deep Woods

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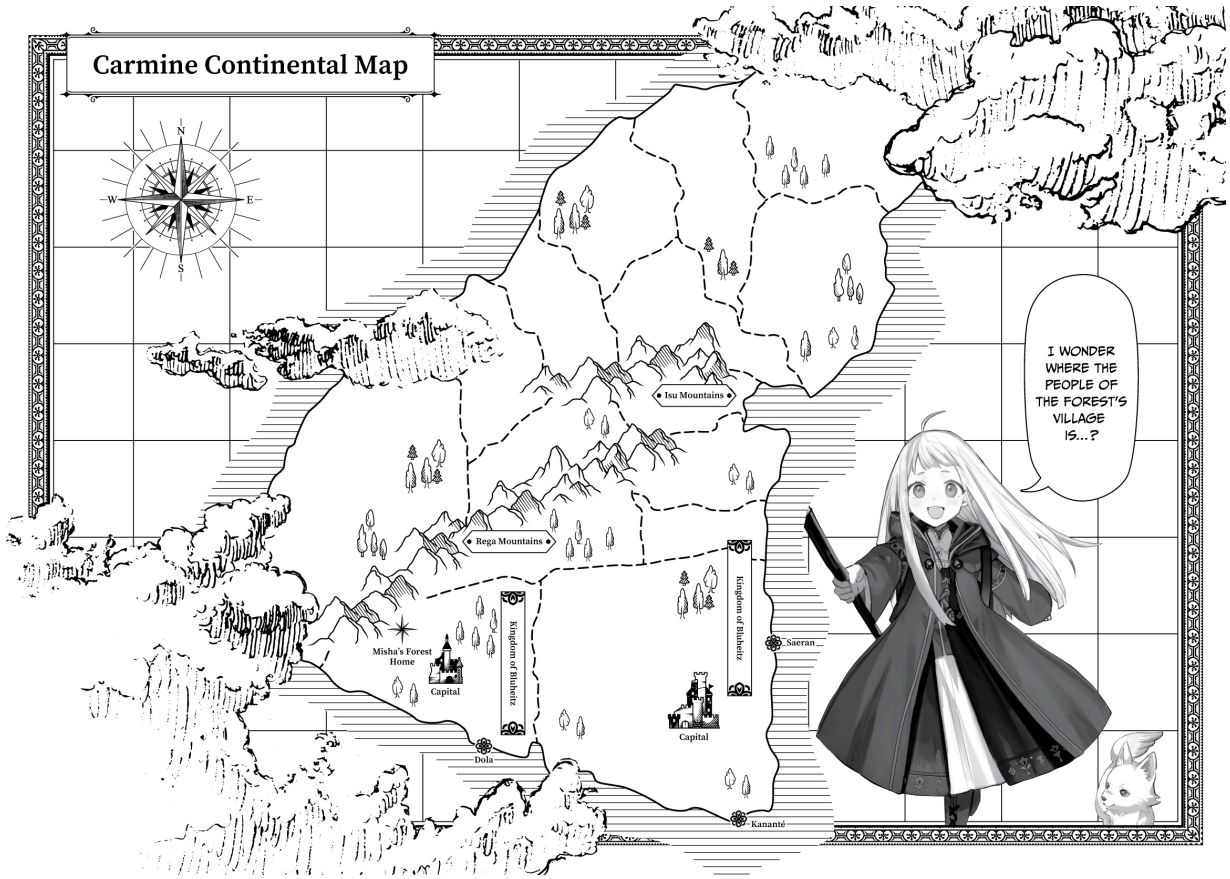

Carmine Continental Map
N
W
E
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Isu Mountains
Rega Mountains
Misha's Forest Home
Capital
Kingdom of Blubeitz
Kingdom of Blubeitz
Capital
Saeran
Dola
Kananté
I WONDER WHERE THE PEOPLE OF THE FOREST'S VILLAGE IS...?

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Carmine Continental Map
4. Book 3: The Kingdom of Redford
5. Chapter 1: Prologue
6. Chapter 2: Arrival in Redford
7. Chapter 3: A Meeting in the Castle
8. Chapter 4: A Place to Relax
9. Chapter 5: The King’s Sister Lalaya
10. Chapter 6: Begin Treatment!
11. Chapter 7: The Truth of the Illness
12. Chapter 8: The Cabin in the Garden and Miranda’s Feelings
13. Chapter 9: Problems in the Herb Garden
14. Chapter 10: The Terrifying Karas
15. Chapter 11: Embarrassment of the Morning After, and Then...
16. Chapter 12: Children of the City
17. Chapter 13: The Problem with the Herb Garden
18. Chapter 14: A Mysterious Boy
19. Chapter 15: Fun Times
20. Chapter 16: Caro’s True Identity
21. Chapter 17: Sense of Unrest
22. Chapter 18: At the Home in the Forest
23. Chapter 19: Sudden Surprises
24. Chapter 20: A Dance and a Walk
25. Chapter 21: Walking in the City (Alone with Kite)
26. Chapter 22: Her First Ball (Part 1)
27. Chapter 23: Her First Ball (Part 2)
28. Chapter 24: An Epilogue, or a Prologue?
29. Side Story: Kyne
30. Side Story: No Shoes!

31. Afterword
32. Bonus High Res Color Illustrations
33. About J-Novel Club
34. Copyright

Book 3: The Kingdom of Redford

Chapter 1: Prologue

The Kingdom of Redford was one of the largest and oldest nations on the continent of Carmine. Since it was on the southern end of the continent, its climate was fairly mild, the temperature remaining fairly stable across the year. Underground springs in the center of the kingdom fed a large lake that, coupled with large stretches of flat ground, made Redford well suited to agriculture and dairy farming. The kingdom produced such an overabundance of food that they often lent a helping hand to their neighbors. On top of that, good government over the past generations had led to the Redford royal family being famously adored.

As a result, the last few hundred years had been a time of unmitigated prosperity, cementing Redford as a powerful nation. The current king, Ryan Lou Redford, had taken the throne six years prior. He'd displayed remarkable charisma as he took over leadership of the country despite the chaos at the time, and he'd quickly made a name for himself as a wise king.

Born as fourth prince to a concubine of the previous king, he had grown up with the bare minimum of education in statecraft, his distance from the throne leaving him saddled with little in the way of expectations. As such, he had lived a relatively unfettered life. Fully intending to support his older brother's claim to the throne, he'd spent most of his time traveling around allied nations under the pretense of studying abroad. As for how he'd ended up becoming king, it could only be said that coincidence had conspired in his favor.

Ryan's father had never been great at building new things, but he was renowned as a king capable of protecting what already existed. Peaceful times were prosperous times. Instead of carrying himself with a striking charisma, he'd had a gentle, graceful aura about him. That personality should have attracted the best people, leading to a

peaceful and effective government.

That was what was supposed to have happened.

Shortly after Ryan left to study abroad in the kingdom of Jaunbrillant, a mysterious illness swept through the capital of Redford.

At first, it had seemed to be nothing more than a mild virus, but as time progressed, it developed brutal symptoms: fever, vomiting, and violent coughing fits. In the end, victims lapsed into comas, their bodies covered in strange bruises resembling worms crawling across their skin. It came to be called the "Red Eye plague" from the color of the victims' eyes upon their deaths.

More than half of people who contracted the disease died from it, and it spread indiscriminately, found just as readily in the slums as in the mansions of the rich and powerful. Most terrifying of all was that even the women of the inner palace succumbed to the disease despite rarely leaving the wing of the palace set aside for them. Strangely, there were no instances of the disease reported outside the capital.

The king immediately locked down the city. He couldn't allow the disease to spread throughout the entire kingdom. With no clues as to the source of the disease, the only hope of containing it was to quarantine the people who carried it.

However, that also meant locking the royalty and nobility in the capital. Even if they understood this lockdown was meant for everyone's safety, people acted irrationally when their own lives were at stake. In order to suppress those high-running emotions, the king and his close associates decided to remain in the capital themselves. Most of the remaining objections were quashed once the king allowed the children of those who were asymptomatic to evacuate.

However, the third prince decided to remain in the city. "There's the crown prince, the second prince, and even a fourth prince off studying in foreign lands. Three heirs is more than enough, so it should be fine for me to work on the ground," the third prince declared, heedless of his own life. He always joked about being too

dumb for his position and that he'd leave the hard thinking to his much smarter brothers. Ever since he was young, he had spent most of his time training with the knights of the kingdom, and that didn't change when those knights were sent across the disease-ridden capital.

The king, his queen, and his concubines elected to remain in the capital, hoping to offer solidarity with those suffering within the city. That act bolstered the resolve of the remaining nobility. Rather than panicking and fleeing, they followed the king's orders. Even those permitted to evacuate respected the period of quarantine demanded of them to keep any infected from leaving the area.

And so, despite being unable to find a cure for the disease, as winter set in, the disease mysteriously vanished...though not before taking the wise and gentle king with it, alongside many of his subjects. Over half of the royals had lost their lives at that point. While the kingdom was deep in mourning, the crown prince ascended the throne, preparing for a dark and lonely winter.

As citizens held out hope for a gentler spring, news of an uprising at the edge of the kingdom poured in. In such a distant city, the people struggled to find accurate information on the crown's handling of the disease. One person with ambitions for power began spreading rumors that the king had been a fool and had wanted to bring down as many of his own with him as possible when he'd grown ill. Such gossip incited people against the royalty.

Despite the plague having decimated their army, the second prince led the majority of Redford's surviving knights to quell the rebellion. They made every effort to minimize the casualties on both sides, but splitting the kingdom's army between quelling the rebellion and protecting the capital had been the rebels' goal from the beginning. With the capital's defenses stretched thin, a neighboring nation launched an attack on Redford. It had all been carefully calculated.

Upon discovering the deception, the second prince immediately led his army back toward the capital, but the lord of the rebelling city marched out to attack them from behind. This ended in their killing of the second prince, who died in despair from this betrayal.

When news of the invasion reached Ryan, he immediately gathered a force from among the troops of Jaunbrillant and returned home.

Ultimately, he was too late. By the time he reached the capital, the damage had already been done; the city had been devastated, and the newly crowned king was dead. The sudden invasion had besieged the king and his people in the capital, where they soon learned their walls were not as sturdy as they had hoped.

On the third night of the siege, someone opened the gates to the city from the inside, and the food being supplied to the defending soldiers was drugged. Even if the sabotage couldn't reach the king or those close to him, with more than half of their military outside the city *and* more than half of those remaining brought down by the drugged food, Redford had no chance against the invaders. Enemy soldiers overran the capital in no time.

In order to create a window for women and children to escape, having already been evacuated to the castle for their protection, the king marched out himself. When Ryan finally reached the castle, he was greeted by the sight of his now headless brother.

Embracing his dead brother's body, he roared, "Is this what you people do?! Crush everything underfoot in the name of greed?! You think I will let that pass?!"

Together with the forces of their allies, Ryan gathered his kingdom's remaining soldiers and returned to the battlefield. Unlike his gentle father and older brother, Ryan very much had a talent for warcraft, driving back the enemy army with every tactic imaginable. Above all, the king's willingness to sacrifice himself to protect his people had united the hearts of the common citizens. Anyone who could hold a weapon, from the elderly to the young, gathered for battle. Even an untrained militia could accomplish something with sheer numbers, especially with the individual determination each soldier brought to the battle.

In short order, Ryan found himself victorious. He returned home to take the throne. Having lost his father and brothers, even as the nobles bowed to him, he found the idea of taking the throne too much to handle. However, he'd survived; thus, he had a

responsibility to protect the people of Redford. Thinking of his citizens' well-being, he suppressed his storm of emotions and accepted the weight of the crown two years after the first outbreak of the Red Eye plague.

Ryan was nineteen years old at the time of his coronation. Redford faced many hardships from that time on, but with the remaining authority of his father, he and his young advisers quickly grew into their roles and forged a new future for their kingdom. He delivered vicious reprisal with a smile to those who underestimated him for his youth. Those who tried to suck up to him were accepted happily on the surface, but behind every smile the king weighed each of them coldly and analytically.

When Ryan muttered that all the politicking was corrupting him, the old prime minister replied with a smile, "Yet your determination has led others to revere you as a wise king."

"But my father was known for his kindness," Ryan had said, and his ministers could only share sympathetic expressions, no answer for him. It was only his newest advisers that could provide consolation.

"Your brother was said to be just like your father, but he wasn't just kind."

Even when surrounded by the enemy army, he had used his own life as a shield to protect his people. It was perfectly ordinary for someone to prioritize their own life above everything else, but Ryan's brother had instead chosen to prioritize the future of his people.

No, maybe it was simpler than that. Maybe he'd just loved them that much.

Ryan's brother had been betrothed since birth, marrying a marquis's daughter—a childhood friend—as soon as he reached adulthood. The two had been remarkably close and supportive of each other. In fact, Ryan's brother was the one who'd wanted the two of them to get married so quickly. His wife scolding him for being too openly affectionate had been a common sight around the castle.

Even so, the two had experienced some difficulty in producing children. The crown princess's aides had told her, "If the parents get

along too well, the children don't want to come in and break them up," and her husband took that as an indication they should continue enjoying life as a couple as much as they could.

By some strange twist of fate, the crown princess had found herself pregnant just as she was evacuated from the capital at the outbreak of the Red Eye plague. Although she had been stunned that it would happen then of all times, the child was born just as the disease disappeared, marking that child as a symbol of hope for the nation. Ryan's brother had given everything to protect that hope.

After escaping the capital, the queen and her infant son managed to find shelter in the port city of Kananté. When Ryan discovered them in the rubble of the city, he thanked the gods from the bottom of his heart, despite having never believed in them before. As he held the smiling baby boy in his arms, Ryan swore to make Redford into a kingdom that would ensure a future where this boy could keep on smiling.

Soon after he took the throne, people pressured him to marry, but with a declaration that he only intended to hold the throne temporarily, he avoided marriage for fear that having children might spark further conflict. For the same reason, he had his brother's wife and his nephew sent into hiding. In the restless period after the war, he felt it was necessary to stay on guard against the unstable political situation in the palace.

Colluding with the previous prime minister, he only allowed the bare minimum number of people he could absolutely trust to know of the two's whereabouts. Consequently, while the populace knew the boy was growing up strong and healthy, he had no exposure to the public eye. Behind closed doors he was known as the "phantom prince."

Four years after Ryan assumed the throne, the advisers remaining from his father's time collectively resigned. They stepped back to allow the younger generation to take hold of the kingdom's leadership, but they were never far from the front lines, watching with bemused smiles as their young successors struggled desperately to keep everything together. They lent a helping hand where it was needed. Their resignation was mostly a move to help

push the next generation onward.

Little by little, the peace Redford had been known for returned. However, unlike in previous generations, its army was now remarkably robust.

"We can't let go of power."

That was the lesson Ryan's generation had learned through their turmoil. Specifically, he sought power not for the goal of controlling others but for protecting them, drawing a stark distinction between Redford and other militaristic states.

Information was power. Having learned the bitter lesson that came from enemy spies being allowed to roam freely within their borders, Ryan bolstered the presence of his military throughout the kingdom, getting a strong grip on the flow of information. On top of that, he greatly expanded positions for common people in the military. After they trained the local people to guard their own cities and villages, crime sharply decreased, yet it was perceived as the people defending themselves, not heavy-handed oversight from the kingdom. After all the lives that had been lost, Ryan and his associates were desperate to gain the power to protect their citizens.

It went without saying that this also included a huge investment in medical study. Having just laid the groundwork for the expansion of agencies for doctors and apothecaries within the kingdom, it was no wonder he had immediately taken an interest in the People of the Forest.

A despondent voice filled the somewhat dreary looking office. "So, when is he getting back?"

The bluntness of those words, the first thing this man said after stepping into the room, took Ryan aback. It was true that Ryan didn't care for formalities and that this was very much a private space, so he wasn't about to scold the man for his tone. Even so, any other day, this was the exact man who'd be scolding others for speaking in such an impolite manner. He had barely waited for permission to enter before opening the door.

The shock on the king's face sent Tris into a reflection on his behavior, and he stopped to clear his throat.

"A runner just arrived from the port. He brought news of Geord, did he not?"

Tris's chilly tone finally brought Ryan back to his senses. "Yeah. They plan to come by ship from Dola, but the Dragon God Festival is being held now, so they've decided to see that through before leaving. Also, they have another person joining them, so he requested we make preparations for them."

"What? Staying for the festival is one thing, but they're bringing another person here?"

Ryan handed the letter to Tris, whose expression grew steadily more severe with every sentence he read.

"Another one of the People of the Forest. And this one is full-blooded. Looks like he's caught someone incredible." Tris closed his eyes, suppressing a sigh.

The People of the Forest were said to value the bonds of blood above all else. It was entirely reasonable to hear one of them had elected herself guardian of the girl that had lost her mother, especially given that girl was being sent to another country instead of staying under her father's care.

"Looks like we've got quite the scary 'guardian' to worry about. I guess if we mess up, that's the end for Redford," Ryan chuckled, earning a hard look from his prime minister.

"This is no laughing matter. We are sticking our heads in the den of a mother lion here."

Tales of the disastrous fates met by many other kingdoms came and went through Tris's head.

Ryan couldn't help but sigh, seeing Tris already starting to cook up some countermeasure or other. "That's not very nice. We're not abducting this girl. It's more like we're taking her under our wing. We have no ill intentions. They're not just going to lash out and attack anyone who gets close. Besides, I hear the newcomer is a young woman. The People of the Forest are supposed to be quite attractive, so I'm looking forward to meeting her."

Tris found the unconscious tension in his shoulders relaxing at Ryan's optimistic attitude. He was right, but as someone who had taken an interest in Misha for less forthright reasons, it was hard for

him to simply agree.

"According to Geord's report, there were no signs of the People of the Forest around Misha when they first left. This means one of them has finally shown themselves. That's lucky for us, don't you think? If things go well, we might be able to build a relationship with them." Resting his head in his hands, Ryan's eyes seemed to shine, his smile entirely guileless.

If possible, get her on our side.

Tris understood the implicit command immediately, snapping to attention.

Behind his cheerful mask, Ryan was already thinking two or three steps ahead. If he hadn't been, there was no way he could have kept hold of the reins of such a large nation while only in his mid-twenties.

"Understood."

With a small bend of the knee, Tris stepped out of the king's office, eager to make preparations for the new visitor.

"I feel like there was a fishing term for this... What was it?" Ryan mused aloud. "Ah, decoy fishing."

For better or worse, no one heard the king's realization as he watched his overly serious prime minister depart.

Chapter 2: Arrival in Redford

The sea breeze was pleasant.

Standing on the deck of the ship, Misha held her hat to her head so that the wind wouldn't steal the hat. She smiled as she felt the breeze caress her.

Sitting quietly at her feet was a white wolf pup, a bit bigger than when the two had first met. He wore a dark blue ribbon around his neck to match Misha's dress. It had only been a month, but animals grew tremendously fast at a young age.

"I can see the harbor, Ren." After she lifted the wolf pup in her arms, the two watched the city on the horizon slowly approach. "It's...kind of a big city, huh?"

She had thought Dola was large, but this place was even bigger. First of all, its harbor was enormous. Unlike Dola, where fishing vessels occupied half of the waterfront, this one was full of ships just as large as the one Misha was riding. Some of them were even twice the size.

Entranced, she watched one of those ships pass them by when someone stepped alongside her. She found Miranda had joined her. Today she was back in disguise, her hair and eyes a deep brown.

"That's a ship from Sullivan. This is the closest port to Redford's capital, so diplomats and merchants from other continents often come here," she explained, pointing at the massive ship that had caught Misha's attention.

"Sullivan..."

Recalling the name from a children's encyclopedia her father had bought for her a long time ago, she stared at the departing ship with renewed interest.

This world was divided into three continents. Sullivan was situated east of Carmine, the place Misha called home. It was only a third of the size of Carmine, but as it had been unified under a single

ruler for two hundred years, it was peaceful and culturally prosperous. They were famous for a kind of pottery they called "porcelain." Whether it was to enjoy the clean, white look of the porcelain itself or the exquisite artwork drawn upon it, owning such pieces had become somewhat of a status symbol for the wealthy and the nobility. Misha had seen a little of it in her father's mansion. He had plates about fifty centimeters across, decorated with art of vibrantly blooming flowers.

The native people of Sullivan were fairly average in size, and known for their gentle disposition and penchant for settling things with words long before violence. That said, their military was anything but weak. They would not hesitate to strike back whenever the need arose. There was a famous tale of a noble who insulted a visitor from Sullivan, only to find himself tossed from the room by a boy half his size. The boy then went on to knock out each of the noble's personal guards with ease.

They used a peculiar form of martial arts that favored a thin, straight-bladed sword, and they encouraged its practice from a young age. It went without saying that they'd only send their best as emissaries to another continent.

After accepting an apology from the Carmine nobles, the foreign visitors went on to perform a military demonstration for the locals, which was lauded as nothing short of incredible in both form and function.

The bow of the enormous ship held a statue of a mysteriously colorful beast, as if it were scanning the waves in front of them as they traveled. Recalling that people prayed to those statues for protection at sea, Misha couldn't help but be impressed at how beautifully detailed they were. She could recognize the intricacies even from quite a distance. Between that and the porcelain she had seen in her father's mansion, it was easy to conclude that the people of Sullivan were remarkably skilled in whatever craft they turned their hands to, be it martial arts or not.

"Are they heading home?" Misha asked.

"Most likely." Miranda watched with a smile as Misha's eyes alighted with wonder at her small glimpse of a vast, unknown world.

"I'd love to go there someday."

"Someday, sure," Miranda replied, turning to the rapidly approaching city. "We're about to arrive in Kananté," she said, pointing. "Like I said before, it's the closest port to the capital, so a lot of trade happens here. It got hit pretty hard in the last war, but you'd never know it by looking at the city itself. That road is beautiful, don't you think?"

A large road stretched out from the port into the rest of the city. The stone paving was wide enough for three carriages to run side by side. Assuming that road ran all the way to the capital, it spoke incredibly well of the wealth of the nation that was able to maintain it.

Buildings stretched out on either side of the road. The streets branching from the main thoroughfare were laid out in a uniformly square pattern, so they had a much more refined atmosphere than the jumbled-up feel of Dola's markets.

"The war?" Misha echoed, reminding Miranda of just how sheltered Misha's upbringing in the heart of the forest had been.

If she had been living alone with Leyas, it made sense she didn't know anything about the outside world. From what Miranda had heard, Leyas had left to live in the forest relatively quickly after leaving her village. Miranda knew it was pretty common for the People of the Forest to entirely ignore things outside their personal realm of interest. Leyas was no exception.

She might have taught Misha about the country they lived in, but while they were living in the forest, she likely saw anything about foreign nations as irrelevant. She had probably never thought Misha would leave home for another kingdom.

But it's kind of a problem if she doesn't know anything about the country that's taking care of her.

From the incident that shook the country to its core, to the civil war, to the invasion that led to the current king taking the throne, there was no shortage of things to explain to her. Still, for now she decided it would be best to start from this city's own history.

"Another country invaded. They even took the castle for a time. The surviving royalty fled to this city. They had hoped to escape

overseas, but the enemy had already taken the harbor. The lord of Kananté refused to hand the royalty over to the invaders. Keeping them in hiding, he joined forces with the few remaining knights to engage in a guerrilla warfare campaign. Because the city had expanded slowly over such a long period of time, the layout of the streets was like a labyrinth to the invaders."

"Normal people were fighting too? Not just soldiers?" Misha asked, memories of the wounded men she had encountered at her father's mansion coming back to her. Even seasoned veterans were getting horribly wounded. She could only imagine what kind of devastation met the ordinary people.

"That's right. They say anyone old enough to carry a weapon helped fight back—even children younger than you."

"What? The children had to fight?!"

Miranda gave a bitter smile at Misha's shock. "They *chose* to. It was a fight for their lives too. If they lost, the invaders would treat them terribly. They'd be enslaved or forced to pay crippling taxes just to stay alive. They were desperate to win, no matter what it took. Besides that, the people here really loved their king. His family was important enough to them that they were willing to fight to protect them."

Misha blinked. From her perspective, the idea of a king or royalty was still a foreign one. She knew her father was technically a prince, even if he had given up his claim to the throne, but it didn't feel quite real. She had grown up living in the middle of the forest, after all. Her meeting with her uncle, the king of Bluheitz, before her departure had been her first time seeing him, and he had greeted her as one of his subjects, not as a member of his family.

And yet the people of Redford had been willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of one of those distant, ineffable figures.

"After that, one of the princes who had been studying abroad returned with an army of allied reinforcements and took back the kingdom. He then led the army against the invaders, pushing them back into their own nation and defeating them in their own lands. He is the current king."

"It sounds like a fairy tale."

The prince returned and saved his country from the flames of war.

"Doesn't it? There's even a play about it, so maybe we should go see it sometime. Apparently, the king isn't too fond of it himself. He said it glorifies the events too much," Miranda said with a chuckle as she looked back over the city. "Guerrilla warfare had decimated about four-fifths of the city by the time the enemy soldiers were driven out, so in the end, leadership decided to rebuild the whole place. It had suffered more damage than anywhere else in the kingdom, and it was the first place the new king was able to liberate, so it became somewhat symbolic to the people of Redford."

She then pointed up at one particular spire towering over the city. "That is the city's church. It has a statue depicting their goddess, which people found in the old church, miraculously unharmed by the fighting—if you believe the story. It also houses a fire, burning ever since the last day of the fighting, which they lit in memory of all those who died. It's still burning to this day."



Many people had been victims of that war. Countless tears and immeasurable blood had been shed. That symbol had become a constant reminder to never let a tragedy like that happen again.

"It's kind of...overwhelming."

As Misha sighed, thinking of the sad history lurking beneath the city's beautiful surface, their ship clunked into its spot in the harbor. Ropes from the ship and shore were thrown across to each other, and suddenly the sailors burst into a flurry of motion.

"We don't want to get in the way. Let's go back to our room until they call for us."

Though she wanted to look out over the city a bit more, Misha nonetheless nodded, following Miranda back to their cabin.

Miranda knew of many things—and not just what pertained to medicine. She was well-versed in everything from the current state of the ruling powers of the continent to the trends among young women in the city.

The moment they stepped off the boat, Misha was scooped up into a carriage to take her to the castle, so Miranda decided to use the opportunity to teach the girl some etiquette. It would be impossible for her to pick up any practical level of mastery in the short time they had, but it would be better than nothing.

Much to Misha's surprise, the majority of Miranda's lesson came as a review, not as new information. Back when she had been living in the forest outside Bluheitz, she'd "played princess" with her mother. They had enjoyed their best tea and snacks on their best dishware, they had worn their best clothes, and they had done their hair up as fancy as they could. They had even talked formally—very prim and proper. Misha had worn dresses decorated with lace and jewelry the likes of which she never otherwise had seen.

Even if she had grown up as a bit of a tomboy, running around the forest with total freedom, she was also a young girl who loved the opportunity to dress up. The chance to wear a beautiful dress like that was lots of fun for her. Feeling like she had stepped into a princess's tea party from one of her picture books, she'd engaged in the game quite enthusiastically.

All the while, Leyas would tell her, “I think a real princess would act more like this” as she demonstrated. And it wasn’t just tea parties either. From dinner, to dance parties, to meeting with the king, they played through all kinds of scenarios. Since they were all things she had seen in her picture books, she had never thought twice about the game, but now Misha realized her mother had been seriously training her for living in high society. She was stunned to realize how much of the etiquette she already knew.

Someday, if the need ever arose, Misha would be ready. Her mother had made sure of that.

Giggling as she struggled to keep in the tears, Misha explained the games she’d played with her mother. Miranda could only wordlessly wrap the girl in a hug. Despite living entirely isolated from the rest of the world, Leyas had still made sure her daughter would be ready if she ever had to leave the forest. That was so very much like her.

Watching the whole exchange from the side, Geord turned his eyes outside the window, pretending not to have been paying attention. Quietly, he offered a small prayer for the mother who had been forced to leave her daughter far too soon, and he promised he’d do everything he could to help her.

In the end, it was clear Misha knew enough to at least get through an audience with the king, so Miranda turned her lessons instead to Redford itself. Rather than speaking of its history, she focused more on its culture. The kind of food and clothes people liked tied directly into who they were. Even Geord found himself enjoying her thorough breakdown of his own country’s populace.

“You seem well-informed. Is that part of the research the People of the Forest are known to do?” Geord asked, earning himself a smile from Miranda.

“In a way yes, in a way no. Some of it is necessary knowledge for blending in with the outside world, but not everyone is so interested in doing that. Really, I’d say learning about the differences among people and places is a hobby of mine.”

Although Miranda waved off his compliment, her explanation left him even more concerned. It would be one thing if she’d studied

Redford thoroughly in preparation for coming here, which was what he had expected, but if what she said was true, then she had learned of the intricate connections between the people, their history, their customs, and their culture all for curiosity's sake—all because it was a hobby. That meant she knew a lot about *many* places.

Information was power. As a veteran soldier himself, Geord was well aware of that fact.

Beyond that, the only way they really had to learn such things about other countries was by sending spies. That became much harder as the countries grew more distant from each other.

How much had this one woman learned? Unable to contain his own curiosity, Geord spoke up again.

"That's incredible. How many countries do you know that well?"

Miranda's head tilted slightly. "I wonder? I guess I have a good enough understanding of every country here on Carmine. My knowledge of other continents is just from rumors, though."

"Really? That's amazing, Miss Miranda! I want to hear about other countries too!" Misha exclaimed in excitement.

But Geord's face went pale.

The People of the Forest have incredible medical knowledge, but it sounds like their information network is terrifying too. Weren't there stories of them sneaking into highly guarded places, like the private rooms of kings and nobles? Maybe they're just as good at stealth as they are at medicine? They say not to poke a sleeping bear, but I feel like I just stumbled into a dragon's lair.

That's it. I never said anything. Didn't hear anything either.

Removing himself from Miranda's continuing lecture, Geord crossed his arms and closed his eyes, deciding it was time for a nap.

And so, thanks to the well-kept road, all but one in the carriage enjoyed a fairly comfortable ride that brought them to the capital in about three hours. An imposing set of walls surrounded the city, with one gate on the east end and one on the west being the only ways inside. Ordinarily, guards stationed at the gates checked everyone's identification before allowing them into the city. There were separate lines for pedestrians and carriages, both of which already stretched

long and far.

But in Misha's case, their carriage passed right by both lineups and headed straight for the gate. Apparently one of the carriage's escorts had run on ahead, and so another previously closed gate opened slowly at their approach. Misha couldn't help but feel a bit conflicted at the obviously special treatment she was receiving. She had gone through many similar checkpoints in their journey thus far, so skipping past all of it made it feel like she was doing something unfair.

Without so much as slowing down, her carriage passed through into the city, the gate closing immediately behind them. It had been opened exclusively for their carriage.

"It's a gate specifically for the nobility. You're an ambassador from a foreign nation, so this is the kind of treatment you should expect," Miranda murmured with a satisfied nod, witnessing Misha's confusion.

"Is it?"

"Yes, and for good reason. Any time spent stuck at the gate is a window for a possible assassination attempt. Anyone with a reasonably high social status can send word ahead to get the gate opened for them as they arrive. The people waiting in line are used to that happening, so don't worry too much about it," Geord said, trying to put Misha at ease. "You saw the flags on the outside of the carriage, right? Those have the king's own insignia on them. That's proof that this carriage is on official business, and it's proof that you're a guest of the king."

At Geord's indication, Misha looked outside at the deep-red flags bearing a gold-and-blue insignia. "Wait... Isn't that the same as the insignia on that card you carry around?"

"Good eye! This is a special identification granted by the king himself. It makes life a lot easier for us." Geord pulled out the metallic card from his pocket and handed it to Misha. About the size of her hand, it was quite heavy despite how thin it was. The intricate design on its surface made it look like a piece of art.

"That's not exactly something you should be passing around," Miranda interjected with a disapproving sigh, which caught Misha's

attention. “It’s quite a serious thing. I’ve never seen the real thing myself before, but you could probably consider that a free pass to go anywhere you like in Redford. You could even use it to mobilize the military or nobility as you pleased. It’ll even carry some authority in other countries.”

“It’s nowhere near that good,” Geord replied. “All it indicates is ‘the king has my back, so please treat me nicely.’ It’s entirely borrowed authority.”

After glancing between the two with their very different opinions on the card, Misha wordlessly handed it back to Geord.

Now that I think about it, I only saw it when Geord was talking to the important people in Dola. And back when we got wrapped up in that issue with the Karloffs. And when going through checkpoints... I bet Miranda’s right on this one.

She had started to pick up on Geord’s not so conscientious personality since leaving Bluheitz.

“Take good care of it, okay?” Misha murmured, though she understood saying that now was a bit late, which earned a big grin from her bodyguard.

Miranda pointed out the window in an effort to raise the spirits of the carriage again. “Look, Misha. You can see the castle now.”

Even one glance at the castle from the window of the carriage made it seem quite a bit more imposing than the one she’d seen in Bluheitz. The structure stood sandwiched between two enormous towers in perfect symmetry. The walls shone a brilliant white, the roofs of its many spires a deep crimson. The rooftops and window frames were all covered in elaborate reliefs, giving it very much the impression of a building that had popped out of a fairy tale.

The castle gate rattled open at the sight of them, allowing them to continue smoothly inside. Misha briefly saw soldiers saluting with fists to their chests lining the road as they went, but as she moved to get a closer look, Miranda pulled the curtains closed.

“There will be a lot of people around here now, so it’s better that we’re careful. It’s just for a little while.”

Misha thought it was odd that Miranda hadn’t been concerned about all the people they’d passed by in the city, but her question

never made its way into words. Since entering the castle, the carriage had slowed down considerably, so she figured that was probably why.

After continuing for a while, the carriage finally came to a stop before the door opened from the outside.

Nobles last.

After having those lessons of etiquette drilled into her throughout their ride here, Misha impatiently waited for Geord and Miranda to disembark from the carriage before getting to her feet. As she reached the door, she found Geord standing on the ground, offering her a hand.

It's just three steps... she thought, hesitating for a moment, but when she saw Miranda give her a faint nod, she relented.

Taking Geord's hand, she stepped down out of the carriage. Even Geord suddenly seemed much more serious than usual, as if his casual attitude for the past month had been her imagination.

Wow, this is suddenly really embarrassing...

Forcing back the instinct to lock her eyes on her own feet, Misha kept her gaze high as she descended.

As she touched down, she noticed a man standing a short distance away, waiting in front of a number of maids and guards. The man clasped his hands in front of his chest, bending his knees in a small but elegant bow.

"We have been awaiting your arrival. My name is Tris Tin Wilkinson. As inexperienced as I am, I have the honor of serving as the prime minister of Redford. I wish to offer the warmest welcome to our kingdom," he said, his voice a gentle, soothing tenor.

He had long, straight silver hair, tied up loosely behind his back. Violet eyes sat among elegant and refined features. The faint smile pulling at the corners of his mouth together with his soft expression gave a most welcoming and approachable impression. If she had to liken him to something, Misha would have said he was like a meadow in spring. His gentle demeanor did wonders for the nervous tension pulling her taut.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance. I am Misha Do Lindburg." Struggling to resist the urge to bow her head, she instead

bowed at her knees, which painted a rather endearing picture of her.

Those at the castle waiting for her had heard she was the child of a family of incredible apothecaries, so they had been prepared for the worst when it came to the kind of cheeky attitude they could expect such fame might inspire in a child. They almost let a collective sigh of relief slip at her docile greeting.

Well, if she had been like that, I guess this guy would never have taken a liking to her, Tris thought, turning his eyes to Geord at her side. The way he stood expressionless, yet entirely drawn back, must have been a silent objection to Tris's amiable mask.

Idiot. Of course I'm not going to be myself in a place like this, meeting someone for the first time.

Cursing at the knight beneath his smiling mask, Tris returned his attention to Misha, who still seemed a bit tense. "You must be exhausted from your long journey. We have prepared a room for you, so please rest there for as long as you like. We will send an attendant to bring you to the king once the preparations for the audience are complete."

At Tris's words, one of the maids stepped forward. "Please follow me."

Misha quietly followed the maid, dressed in clothing of higher quality than her own. She felt a bit shy going without Geord, who said he was busy with reports to give, but it was comforting to at least have Miranda by her side.

Speaking of which, Miranda slid into the group as if she were Misha's own personal attendant, taking up a spot at the far back of the party. She was carrying a single bag, holding Misha's apothecary tools.

Clothes and daily essentials were one thing, but if she didn't have her tools, she'd never be able to relax, so she had decided to carry them herself, but despite all her insistence, Miranda had taken the bag from her anyway. Misha had ultimately relented, deciding Miranda knew enough about what was inside to care for them properly.

She then noticed the attention of everyone in the room turning to Ren as he trotted up beside her.

Are wolves not allowed in the castle? But I can't let them take him somewhere else. He's still so small...

She hesitated for only a moment before bending down and scooping up the wolf pup in her arms. She didn't want them to be separated, and she had a responsibility to make sure he was taken care of after bringing him all the way here.

Squeezing Ren tight to her chest to make her intentions perfectly clear, she was relieved to see no one moved to stop her from bringing him inside. In truth, Geord had sent word ahead about the little wolf, so the castle's staff was well prepared for him, but Misha had no way of knowing that.

They quickly reached the room set aside for Misha, a third-floor chamber with a wide balcony that got plenty of sunlight.

"I believe it will be quite noisy until your belongings have been brought in," the maid said, guiding her to a table on the balcony where a tea set was waiting for her. Everything she did was so smooth that Misha had no room to argue. Quickly surrendering, she quietly stepped over the table and took a seat, picking up the cup in front of her. She hadn't been able to eat or drink anything while on the carriage, so she *was* quite thirsty.

The tea had a soft, flowery aroma to it and left a refreshing aftertaste in her mouth as she drank.

"As I expected, the tea leaves here are of exceptional quality."

Taking a seat opposite Misha, Miranda gave an elegant show of sipping on tea herself. If she had really been Misha's attendant, it would have been absolutely unacceptable for them to share a table like this, but neither of them minded. With no prior knowledge of their relationship, the other servants in the castle could only watch the exchange wordlessly.

"This is a nice room. And the maids they've assigned to you are clearly well trained." Miranda smiled, watching the servants going about their work.

It would have been perfectly ordinary for them to have arrived in full formal attire. Even if they'd had no time to prepare before her departure from Bluheitz, Misha was the daughter of a duke. She had been given appropriate clothing to attend even a dinner party

among foreign royalty without having to be ashamed of her appearance, so of course she also had an appropriate day dress for a situation like this.

However, Miranda had decided to keep their attire simple as part of a little mean-spirited experiment. Misha was the daughter of a duke and a guest of the king. If they had looked down on her for her simpler clothing, that would have been enough of an insult to warrant Miranda taking Misha away from this place. Honestly, since no attendants had been sent along with her, there was ample reason for the castle servants to see her as merely some random girl off the street that had been dolled up a bit. The short notice of their trip was hardly any excuse.

And yet the butlers and maids didn't so much as twitch at the sight of Misha, accepting her just as she was without issue. They had even hurriedly prepared a dish of water to account for the unusual canine companion she had curled up at her feet.

"You think so? I think it's too fancy. It's hard to relax." Misha shrugged, trying one of the sweets laid out for her. Even if she bore the title of duke's daughter, she was still a child that had grown up in the forest. It was unfair to expect her to adapt to the climate here that easily.

Miranda took another sip of tea with a smile. "Just be yourself. Even if it looks fancy, it's all just furniture. You'll get used to it in no time. Luckily, everyone seems to be friendly too."

"Are you going to spend your whole time here in disguise?" Misha whispered, careful to make sure no one was close enough to overhear.

"We'll have to see. Geord will no doubt tell the king and his aides about me, so there probably isn't much reason to. In fact, it would probably cause more of a panic, so let's keep it a secret, okay?" Miranda whispered back with a mischievous smile, putting a finger over her lips.

"Well, Geord, it seems your journey was long and arduous...or should I say, long and entertaining?"

After splitting up with Misha, Geord found himself dragged by Tris

in front of the king for the first time in a while.

Geord dropped to one knee, hand over his chest. "I have made my return. I am honored to be able to say I have carried out your orders without incident."

His formal, scripted reply was met with a snort.

"That's enough of that. Stand up and talk. It looks like you guys had quite a bit of fun on your way back."

Geord lifted his head, not missing the laughter barely kept from the king's tone.

"Well, what can I say? It was the first time in a long time I haven't had to worry about being bored. She's an interesting kid."

But as he tried to stand, someone kicked the back of his leg, forcing him back to the ground. And then to ensure he couldn't get up, that same person stomped down on the back of that leg.

"You are being too lenient, Your Majesty. He twisted your orders to his own ends and acted with more freedom than he was due. Show some contrition, Geord."

Ice-cold words rained down on him, matching the steely gaze of their owner. A shudder ran down Geord's back at the sudden transformation of Tris's smile from gentle and welcoming to harsh and cruel.

Tris could handle any situation with cool rationality. He wouldn't hesitate for a moment when it came to making decisions for the future of the kingdom. He was the worst kind of enemy to have. That was how those who knew him well would appraise him.

His gentle smile and attractive features could lead anyone to let down their guard, and before they knew it, Tris would be deep behind their defenses. His borderline-feminine face had been no small source of frustration for him growing up, but now he wielded it as readily as any weapon. And as attractive a person as he was, his face was twice as terrifying when he dropped all expression.

But Tris's frigid aura was anything but effective against Geord.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry. I got you lots of souvenirs, so lighten up."

Despite having a foot pinning his leg to the ground, Geord shrugged off the extra weight and stood up anyway, an ordinarily impossible feat made possible by sheer brute force. Even if there

were only the three of them here, it was still unseemly for them to be openly fighting in front of the king, so Tris hadn't been particularly forceful either.

"By souvenir, you mean the other woman from the People of the Forest?" Ryan guessed.

"Oh, right to the point, are we?"

"Talking at length with you is no more than a waste of time," Tris all but snorted, bringing a wry smile to Geord's face. Apparently, the prime minister was a bit angrier than he had anticipated.

"No, I've got lots of other things, but I suppose they can wait. I wouldn't say we've gone so far as to step on the tiger's tail, but they're definitely watching us now. I haven't heard anything specific, but she did make it quite clear that if we make a wrong move, they'll all be our enemies."

Tris swallowed nervously as Ryan sank into thought, but it wasn't long before the king shrugged.

"Like I said before to Tris, there's no need for us to be so worried. The maids and chamberlains assigned to her are all from my personal staff, and our favorite *butler* Kino has been informed of the situation. He'll handle any sparks that threaten something more."

"I wondered what that outfit was about. So Kino got dragged out front, did he?"

"He wasn't happy about it." Ryan gave a mischievous smile at Geord's sigh.

Kino was a bodyguard who'd protected Ryan ever since he was young. He was very much a man who preferred working behind the scenes, so he was rarely ever seen in action. One could call him the king's shadow. He had been with Ryan since he'd merely been the fourth prince, so the king trusted him implicitly.

"Well, he's a curious cat if there ever was one, so he's probably happy to have a chance to observe them up close."

Assigning someone like that to take care of Misha was a move to both protect her from malevolent actors and investigate her further. Geord couldn't help but smile at the cunning machinations leaking out from under his boss's friendly demeanor once again.

"Even if he puts up a front, he's a sucker for cute stuff, so I'm

sure he'll fall for her in no time."

"Fine with me. So, was that brown-haired woman following behind Misha the one?" Ryan asked, leaning forward eagerly and earning an exasperated sigh from Tris.

"You were spying on them as they came in, were you? That's quite impolite."

"I was going to greet them myself, but Tris wouldn't let me, so doing a bit of peeking was the best I could manage."

Proudly admitting his crime drew another heavy sigh out of Tris, and a hearty laugh out of Geord.

"Please, you're not a child, Your Majesty. At least behave yourself before the formal audience. You *are* the king, if you remember."

"Fine, fine, I get it. So, is she the one? Her eyes don't look the right color either." Turning away from Tris as the prime minister entered lecture mode, he motioned for Geord to explain.

"Well, you see..."

Ryan and Tris shared a look at the explanation Geord gave them.

"Hair is one thing, but she can change her *eye* color?"

"With just a drop of medicine, huh? It sounds like magic."

Geord could only nod as he saw the two of them go through the exact same reaction he had. "She said it doesn't last for very long, though."

"Even if it's just a short time, that still sounds remarkably useful. Changing one's hair color entirely changes a person's appearance. Changing eye color in addition to that makes for a very convincing disguise."

"Right? It's quite well suited to covert action. Unfortunately, she wouldn't share with me how she makes the stuff, though," Geord said with a shrug, prompting Tris's shoulders to slump.

"Even if she doesn't share the method for making it, can you get a sample of it? Enough for personal use?" Ryan's eyes started to shine as if an idea had suddenly occurred to him, one that Tris could immediately tell he wasn't going to like.

"What kind of personal use? It's already hard enough to keep you from sneaking out, please give us a break." He already had his hands full trying to keep Ryan from regularly sneaking out into the

city to “relax.”

Seeing he was getting dangerously close to lecture territory again, Ryan shifted the subject once more. “I doubt the People of the Forest will hand over their secret medicines that easily. Speaking of which, Misha makes her own medicine too, right? What do you think of her, Geord?”

“Yes, she’s shared some ointment with us for treating wounds. It’s a lot better than the stuff we use.”

Knowing full well how long a lecture from Tris could be, Geord quickly followed Ryan’s lead. Sighing at their obvious ploy, Tris was nevertheless curious to hear the conversation play out.

And so, the report devolved into idle chatter. Well, until Tris finally had enough and demanded they all get back to work.

Chapter 3: A Meeting in the Castle

"Okay, now that we've relaxed and had our tea, I guess we should get ready to meet the king," Miranda said, clapping her hands together as the ruckus of servants moving luggage into Misha's room died down.

"But I am ready," Misha replied, talking around the last piece of cookie she'd thrown into her mouth.

Miranda did her best to contain her laughter at the distinctly baby squirrel-like mannerism. "You can't meet a king dressed like that, can you?"

Misha looked down at her dress. It was a bit plain for a girl her age, with nothing in the way of decoration on it, but the dark blue fabric was clearly of high quality, and the skirt and sleeves flared out in a way that made her feel fancy.

"It's a wonderful dress, but you need something more formal for more official occasions. Our windy boat ride also blew your hair all over the place, so you'll need to take a bath and wash your hair. In the meantime, I'll prepare your clothes."

Miranda quickly pushed her from the balcony into the bathroom. The bath was already full of hot water, not that Misha knew when anyone had asked for it. Her mother had quite liked baths, so they'd had one in their forest home, as much of a luxury as that had been. Misha enjoyed soaking in the bath as well, so she had no inhibitions about taking one now, but there was something else in this situation bothering her.

"Umm... I can wash up on my own, so don't worry about it," she said, deftly slipping out from between the attempted helping hands of the maids.

Ever since she had been old enough to dress herself, she had bathed alone. For a girl who hadn't even bathed with her mother in so long, the thought of having someone else clean her was a bit off-

putting. And as one might have expected of someone her age, she didn't want to disrobe in front of total strangers. A bit of a struggle ensued between the fleeing Misha and the maids trying to do their job, but it came to a close when Miranda returned to the room with a handful of herbs.

"Here, Misha—if you like the smell of these, you can use them in your bath." She turned to the maids. "It's okay, she'll be fine. Can you help me over here instead?"

Although they were a little disappointed, the maids did as they were instructed and filed out of the room.

Misha slumped to her knees. The maids hadn't budged an inch for her own wishes, but one word from Miranda had completely changed their tune.

Miranda chuckled, patting Misha on the back. "Everyone just wants to help you, Misha. They're a bit jealous I've had a monopoly on you so far. Here's an idea: Once you're done with your bath, let's get to know the maids a little. They'll be taking care of us from now on, so we all need to figure out our boundaries, right?" Then Miranda tossed her bag of herbs into the tub, and a gentle aroma immediately filled the room. "These will help you relax. Plus, they'll keep your skin smooth. I'll teach you how to make them later."

With that, Miranda exited. Finally alone, Misha quickly slipped out of her clothes, washed off the grime of the day, and slipped into the bath to soak. The aroma had a refreshing hint of herbs and some kind of sweet flower in it as well. As she stirred the hot water, she felt a thickness to it as well.

She sighed heavily, completely relaxed. A bathtub large enough to fully extend your legs was always a pleasant experience. Before long, she switched to massaging her muscles, easing the tension and stiffness.

Running a bath this size must have been a lot of work. Misha had refused all attempts to help her bathe, but she at least had to properly thank the servants later for drawing the bath.

Misha watched as her platinum-blonde hair floated in the warm water. The color itself was enough to remind her of her mother, and she couldn't help the tears that threatened to escape her eyes.

It was hard to believe not even three months had passed since they had been drawn out of their home in the forest by news of her father's injury. And now Misha had come all this way, as if running away. She had kept herself busy to avoid thinking about her mother's death. At the time, she'd been so preoccupied that she hadn't even been able to get used to life in her father's mansion before this journey had conveniently whisked her away.

But every once in a while, the loneliness returned like a paralyzing chain wrapped tight around her chest. How long would it be before she came to terms with those feelings? How long would it be before thinking of her mother would make her happy again? The image of her mother that had lodged itself into her brain was not her beautiful, radiant smile, but the sickly pallor of her corpse.

"Misha, hurry up and finish in there."

She must have spent quite a long time sitting there in a daze, as Miranda's voice called through the door, bringing Misha back to her senses. After giving her hair and body a more thorough wash, she rinsed herself off. As she toweled off her hair, she recognized the faint scent of herbs clinging to her. She slumped her shoulders. The aroma was enough to show she'd enjoyed the bath for too long.

Good thing it's spring. It'd be terrible to catch a cold immediately after I arrived.

Her first order of business was to get dressed. After donning a simple yet soft white dress that had been prepared for her, she stepped out of the bathroom.

"Come here," Miranda beckoned her over to a seat in front of a large dressing table, handing her a cup of cold water. There were mint leaves floating in it, making the drink all the more refreshing.

"Please, allow us to take care of your hair," a maid said as they quickly moved to relieve Misha of her towels, and with a look from Miranda, Misha relented and let them go.

Her hair was long enough to reach her waist. Drying it all by herself was quite a bit of work. Normally she would pat most of the water out and then let the rest dry naturally, but she could imagine that was probably unacceptable when she was about to meet a king.

"Your hair is beautiful. It's a great color—and so glossy too. If I

could spend the rest of my life tending to your hair, it'd be a dream come true," one of the maids said as she dried Misha's hair. She had bright red hair tied up tight behind her head. "And it's so bright, it almost looks like it's shining. Incredible..."

"Your hair is quite pretty too. It looks just like sari flowers," Misha replied.

Sari flowers were large summer flora known for their bright red petals. The comparison drew a shy chuckle from the maid.

"My name is Misha. Could I ask yours?"

"I am Tia. And please, you do not need to be so formal with us." Tia beamed, earning a shrug from Misha.

"I've never lived in a place like this before, so I don't know how else to act. You're older than me, right? If it's an issue of social standing, can we at least be normal when there's no one else around? You don't have to be really formal with me either. If you're too polite, it feels like you're really distant, and I start to feel lonely. And not just you, Miss Tia. That goes for everyone."

At Misha's sad smile, everyone around her felt like they had taken an arrow to the heart. They were all immediately struck with the desire to turn her loneliness into radiant joy.

Unable to hold herself back, Miranda wrapped Misha in a big hug. "Yeah, it's a bit strange to deal with such politeness from people who are always around you, isn't it? So, let's all be good friends." She looked over her shoulder and grinned at the two maids behind her and the butler standing at the far wall. Despite her voice sounding bright and cheerful, her eyes were anything but. They shone with a challenge: *You wouldn't dare refuse a girl as cute as this, would you?*

Tia, quite young and already head over heels for Misha, wasted no time in nodding. "If that is what you wish, Lady Misha, I would be happy to!"

The other maid, a bit older and more experienced, hesitated but she eventually folded and gave a small bow. The last to capitulate was the butler, assenting with the silent motion of his chin.

"Okay then, let's get changed and make you beautiful. You've been invited to an early dinner after the formal audience." Miranda's

bright smile set the two maids back to working.

As Misha changed into the new dress and had her hair styled, she learned the other maid's name was Isabella, and the butler's name was Kino. Tia was sixteen years old, while Isabella was twenty-two and recently married.

This being Misha's first time wearing a formal dress, she felt uncomfortable in it. Awkward, even. The midnight-blue hues had an incredible sheen, and closer inspection revealed the dress was intricately embroidered with thread of the same color. A wide ribbon was tied slightly above the waist, where the fabric was gathered before the skirt draped delicately outward in an airy manner. White lace decorated the neckline, cuffs, and the hem of the skirt, adding a bright contrast to the darker, calmer colors of the fabric. Gemstones adorning the dress in its same deep-blue color sparkled as Misha moved.

At first glance, one might have thought the dress was on the boring side, but every accompanying second spent staring at it revealed it to be more luxurious than it first appeared. It stood thoroughly opposite to the dress she had been wearing when she arrived. Anyone who saw it could see in an instant just how much the duke treasured her. There would be no one in the castle underestimating her standing. It was the greatest support a father could have given his daughter as he sent her to a far-off land.

Unlike Misha, Miranda understood fully that people would judge others entirely based on the clothes that they wore, and so she was quite satisfied with the outfit. And even without all those ulterior motives, the princess-line silhouette suited a girl Misha's age very well.

More brilliant than any jewel on her dress, of course, was her shining golden hair, the top half tied behind her head while the bottom half flowed down her back. The deep colors of her outfit drew out the beauty of that hair even more. The careful brushing and oiling had made the strands smooth and silky. Her hair was so enchanting that others couldn't help wanting to reach out and feel it for themselves.

With the final touches of a pink diamond necklace and floral

earrings, together with a bit of rouge, she was ready. Seeing herself in the mirror, Misha winced slightly in a nervous grin. Miranda and Tia both grinned at the endearing reaction.

"It feels kind of weird. I don't look like me at all." The slightly redder tint to her lips gave an innocently mature impression.

"We have some time to spare, so go ahead and relax. I'm going to get changed too," Miranda said, leading Misha to a nearby sofa.

Afraid of getting the unfamiliar dress dirty, Misha very much refrained from anything like tea, but she didn't have much to do while waiting, and her attire made relaxing difficult. In addition to the dress, she was also wearing a corset for the first time, and although it wasn't tied all that tightly, she didn't find the experience pleasant. Instead of taking the time to decompress, she sat upright and uptight as she waited. On top of that, struggling with the volume of the petticoat under her skirt, she didn't think she could stand up from a sofa this low on her own.

"Princesses have it rough, don't they? I have a lot more respect for them all of a sudden."

Her idle sigh brought a round of laughter from the maids.

"Well, it's something you get used to, I suppose," Isabella said.

"You look quite beautiful, though," Tia added. They both tried to explain that she was just too young to be used to formal attire like this, and Misha smiled sheepishly.

I hope I don't have to wear this kind of stuff often enough to get *used to it...*

Wisely, she decided to keep that thought to herself.

She then felt something touching her skirt near the hem, so she directed her attention to the floor. Looking up at her in confusion with a soft whine was a rather perplexed Ren.

"What's wrong, Ren?" she asked the wolf pup.

"Oh, absolutely not! No getting fur on the dress!" Tia shouted as soon as she saw Misha reach out to Ren. The wolf gave a yelp in complaint at being grabbed without warning, but he didn't otherwise resist.

"He seems to like you quite a bit," Misha commented. Despite living with humans for a few months now, Ren was still a wild

animal; he was always on guard. On their journey to Redford, it had taken a long time for him to let Geord and the other knights close enough to touch him. And yet, all he'd done to protest a stranger picking him up was whine.

"I come from a barony out in the countryside that keeps hunting dogs, so I'm used to dealing with them. I took the time to introduce myself to this little guy while you were bathing."

"Hunting dogs..." Now that she thought about it, it made more sense that they would assume he was a dog than a wild wolf Misha had picked up along the way. But as she looked to Ren, she could see that as much as he sat quietly in Tia's arms, he wasn't all that pleased at being treated like a mere dog.

"Ren, you flirt..."

Ren barked in surprise.

If they were going to be staying in Redford for a while, Ren being on good terms with Tia and the other maids was important. But somehow or other, witnessing it irritated Misha. Her muttered complaint got a surprised look out of the wolf pup.

When they had first arrived, Misha had left to go take a bath, and the only other person he knew—Miranda—had immediately gotten busy with work. He had been left entirely alone. Noticing his unease, Tia had obtained permission from Miranda to borrow one of Misha's handkerchiefs. Once the familiar scent had calmed Ren, Tia had given him some dried meat. (Which hadn't even been salted! It was so good on its own!) There was no way he wouldn't have taken a liking to Tia in that situation. He didn't want to feel bad for that.

Besides, his feelings toward Tia were nothing like his feelings for Misha. As far as Ren was concerned, he thought of Tia as "a sensible girl who can at least help take care of us, I guess."

"Ah! What's wrong, Ren?!" Tia cried out in surprise, almost dropping him as he started to bark and howl.

Intent on clearing up this misunderstanding, Ren deftly slipped out of her arms and landed on his feet, dashing to Misha's side. But yet another pair of hands scooped him up before he could reach her.

"No. You were already told you are not to sully the lady's dress," Kino commanded.

Ren froze at the whisper by his ear. It wasn't violent or threatening in the least, but at the same time it made his hair stand on end. His wild instincts told him he absolutely could not disobey this person.

"He was probably confused at seeing you in such a different state. If you'll excuse my language, your scent has probably grown quite thin after taking a bath, and with it overpowered by the smell of the herbs you used, he might've struggled to recognize you."

"Is that true, Ren?" Misha asked. For some reason, he was frozen solid in Kino's arms. His ears were flat against his head, his eyes wet. "I'm not mad, don't worry. Guess I surprised you a bit, huh? Sorry for teasing you. I was just a bit jealous of Tia."

Ren softly whined as Misha stroked his fur with care. As she pulled her face closer, he licked the tip of her nose. She giggled and leaned in again to rub her nose against his.

"All better?" Misha asked.

Ren gave a happy woof, his ears popping back up energetically. But when he tried to jump into Misha's arms as he always did, he found he couldn't move an inch. Kino wasn't restraining him with any sort of force, but the wolf pup still couldn't worm his way out of the butler's arms. Ren's ears dropped once again.

"My lady is in her formal dress. I cannot allow you to get any of your fur on her. You will have to make do with me until she returns from dinner tonight."

As stony as his expression was, Kino gently stroked Ren's fur. It did little to assuage Ren's fear, though. The wolf pup's tail was still curled between his legs.

"It's okay, Kino. I'll take care of him." Seeing the stress the wolf pup was under, Tia hesitantly offered to take Ren from the butler.

"Oh? Very well, then." But as Kino reluctantly moved to hand over the wolf pup, Ren took the chance to break free and jump, trotting over to the corner of the room where a number of cushions and blankets had been laid out to create a bed for him. Resting his nose on Misha's handkerchief that had been left there, he closed his eyes.

"Ren?"

Ren's tail gave a single wag at Misha's voice, but otherwise he

remained motionless. Apparently, he was going to take a nap.

"He's probably decided to stay away because if he sticks close, he'll want to jump on Misha again, and he knows everyone will try to stop him. No need to worry. He's a very smart boy," Miranda said as she emerged from the bathroom, wearing a dress very similar to the ones worn by Tia and Isabella.

Misha gawked. "You're going dressed like that, Miranda?"

"Yep. Does it look good on me?" Miranda replied with a grin and a twirl. The maid dress was long enough to cover her ankles, and with no petticoat underneath, it was also easy to move in. It seemed Miranda was planning on continuing to act as Misha's servant.

"That looks great. I wish I could wear something like that," Misha whined.

She was happy to have pretty clothes, but the unfamiliar outfit was already starting to fluster her. She also was pretty turned off by the whole idea of not being allowed to have physical contact with Ren when he was in distress.

"We haven't even started yet! You can't be complaining already."

"But I don't even feel like I can eat in this."

Miranda patted Misha on the head. "I guess not. You can take off the corset between the formal audience and the dinner. Your figure is good enough that you don't really need it, and you should be fine without one if you're wearing a dress like this."

A glance to Isabella standing by the wall got a nod from the maid. Miranda wasn't particularly fond of corsets in the first place, considering what they did to your circulation and how they could warp your bone structure, so she was happy to have the maid's assent.

She could recognize why people would go so far as to harm their own health in the pursuit of beauty, but that didn't mean she approved of it. There were other ways to ensure one kept a good figure, methods Miranda was much fonder of.

Besides, Misha was still a growing child. Preventing her from being able to eat properly was downright abusive.

"It's dinner at a castle, after all. We want to enjoy it as best we can, right?" Miranda cheerfully said.

"Yeah! I think I can manage until then!" Misha flashed a grin.

After tidying up Misha's bangs, Miranda stepped back to make sure nothing was off with the girl's appearance. "You're as pretty as the goddess of the moon, you know? First impressions are a big deal. Make sure you stand straight and tall."

After Miranda patted her on the back to help her relax, Misha stood up straight and smiled. Miranda looked at her proudly.

"Yes, perfect."

That day, Redford's nobility filled the castle's audience chamber. Everyone had gathered to see the daughter of the duke from their neighbor.

Though she had originally been invited to become a concubine of the king, now she was simply an honored guest. Because Misha wasn't of age, this wasn't being handled as her "debut" in high society. Nevertheless, when news came out that an unmarried girl who had once been considered a potential concubine had arrived, curiosity brought a great many people out to see what was happening.

The king couldn't simply ignore everyone asking to be a part of the audience—not with the nobles being high-ranking and valuable, and not with so many of them asking. Ryan quickly grew fed up with dealing with each one by one. The easiest thing to do was to allow them all to attend.

However, in exchange, he gave them strict orders to remain quiet and reinforced that they did not have permission to speak with her. Those quick on the uptake had already caught rumors that she was connected somehow to the People of the Forest and intended to validate the truth of that claim. That was something that could be done by visual inspection alone, so most didn't complain. Besides, complaining about the restrictions seemed more likely to get them thrown out of the meeting altogether.

As a result, the audience chamber hit capacity quickly, and a much larger room had needed to be hastily prepared for the overflow. Now, even that room was lined wall to wall with silent men packed like sardines.

The door to the audience chamber slowly swung open, revealing

a young girl who took Ryan a little by surprise.

Her pale white skin and platinum-blonde hair looked all the more bright against the dark blue of her dress. Her eyes, shining with an uneasy light, were a vibrant jade-green, as if they had taken their color from the forest itself. The faint rouge on her cheeks and color on her lips naturally drew everyone's eyes to her face.

Having a thought quite unlike him, Ryan couldn't help imagining this was exactly what a forest fairy would look like. The girl had just that kind of otherworldly aura about her. Just the sight of her filled him with the impulse to shelter and protect her as if she were a piece of priceless treasure...and at the same time, he thought of how thrilling it would be to destroy that treasure.

Many of those in the room must have felt the same way, although none of the spectators were crude enough to speak out. A palpable ripple traveled through the crowd. Stepping into that tense atmosphere, the girl walked silently past the onlookers to stand before the dais where Ryan sat. She bent her knees and bowed her head, her long hair spilling forward, revealing the back of her neck.

Her curtsy was beautiful and refined. Dropping so low with that sense of elegance was actually something that took quite a bit of physical strength to accomplish, but she didn't so much as tremble as she struck the perfect posture.

Despite being quite used to displays like this, Ryan found his breath taken away.

"Please raise your head. Your journey must have been quite tiring."

The girl lifted her head in response to Ryan's solemn, calculated tone. He stared at her large eyes, so big one worried they might pop out of her face, and she stared back at him.

"My name is Misha, daughter of Duke Lindburg of Bluheitz. Thank you for your invitation." Though a bit awkward, her voice nevertheless came forth clearly as she recited what must have been a practiced line. It was exactly the kind of unease he might have expected from a girl her age.

Ryan nodded. "We are grateful for your answer on such short notice. If there is anything you have need of, please let me know. I

will do anything I can to provide it for you."

He smiled at her, and she shyly returned the gesture. The innocent reaction—the taking of his words at their face value without seeking any underlying hidden meanings—truly spoke of a girl raised apart from noble society. There was a sense of nervousness in her clear, bright eyes, but there were no signs of fear or flattery. Her direct, guileless gaze was so refreshing, Ryan dropped all pretenses and was smiling quite naturally.

He recalled Geord's appraisal of the girl: honest and hardworking, voraciously curious, sparing nothing when it came to helping others, willing to give anything and everything she had. Exhausted by the constant politicking of the nobility, that straightforward nature alone was enough to soften his heart.

"I know there are many circumstances that bring you here, but I hope you will enjoy your stay in Redford. I am certain that all who are gathered here understand the importance of doing what we can to make our guest feel at home."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the assembled nobles responded as one, hands to their chest as they gently bowed at the unexpected attention turned their way.

The unison they responded with was so perfect that it made Misha's eyes widen in surprise. It took everything she had not to turn around and gawk at them.

Chapter 4: A Place to Relax

The audience lasted for only a few minutes longer. Misha had expected something more from the formal audience with the king, not just for it to function as an opportunity for them to briefly greet each other. It felt like she'd had her legs swept out from under her.

At least I was able to give him the news that the gift from Bluheitz is on its way.

Returning to her room, she was freed from the stiff corset as promised. She finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Next is dinner. They said it would only be a few people, so it wouldn't be such a big deal... I wonder if my manners will be good enough?

She had no difficulties with the sudden cram lessons from Miranda, who confirmed Misha possessed a proper understanding of etiquette, but this would be with a *king*.

Melancholic, Misha let herself be guided to another room for the meal. When she arrived, the venue took her by surprise. Miranda had said they would be having a feast, so she had been fairly excited, but she was brought to a room quite a bit smaller than the audience chamber. It was about the size of a regular family's parlor, and in the middle of the room was a round table surrounded by a number of chairs.

"Please have a seat."

Guiding her to the dining room was Kino, who deftly pulled a chair out from the table for her.

"Thank you very much," she replied reflexively before accepting the seat. It was only then she realized she was sitting directly opposite Ryan.

"And you too, Lady Miranda." Pulling out the chair next to Misha, he urged Miranda to sit down alongside her. After hesitating for a moment, Miranda eventually accepted the gesture and sat down.

Shortly after, Prime Minister Tris came in pushing a cart of food into the room. Geord followed in with a cart of drinks and glasses.

Isn't that normally a job for the maids?

Misha watched in wonder as Kino began setting the table in front of them.

Ryan chuckled at Misha's evident confusion as he explained the situation. "In a formal dinner, they would bring each course out to us one at a time, but that doesn't leave us much room for casual conversation or relaxation. We had planned a more standard welcome banquet, but since you're here as a student rather than as a concubine, I thought it would be strange to have such a formal affair."

Unlike before, his outfit was a bit less formal and his attitude was much more relaxed.

"I've kept tonight a smaller affair with only close friends. I've got a younger sister too, but she's unfortunately not feeling well, so I'll have to introduce you to her later."

Finished setting the table, Tris and Geord took the remaining empty seats at the table. Kino alone stood at the back of the room, taking up a position beside the drink cart.

"So, once more, let me welcome you to Redford. I hope this meeting proves fruitful for the both of us," the king said, raising a glass and signaling the start of the meal.

Misha looked out over the beautiful arrangement of food before her. The hors d'oeuvres, bread, soup, and main course were all laid out at once. A bit unsure where to start, she began with the soup. The milky-white dish was a kind of cold potato soup. The mixture of milk and potatoes left a faintly sweet aftertaste in her mouth. The simplistic flavor immediately drove the tension from her body.

"It's delicious!" she said, a bright smile lighting her face. The adults around her seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief now that she'd relaxed.

Geord, the most familiar with her in the room, grinned. "See? I told you. As soon as you give her something good to eat, she's in a great mood."

"Th-That's not true at all!" Misha snapped back at him as her face

flushed, earning a round of laughter from the room. Her hands clapped to her mouth at the realization of her outburst in front of the king, but even she soon broke down and started laughing along with them.

The meal continued in that easygoing atmosphere.

"Speaking of which, Lady Miranda, I hear you are also from the People of the Forest?" Tris mentioned as if the thought had suddenly occurred to him.

Miranda shot Geord a look as she wiped her mouth with a napkin, but the knight shrugged and shook his head.

"I suppose I would be, but I'm not one of the wanderers. I am just a supporter."

"A supporter?" Tris echoed, caught by the new vocabulary.

When Misha turned to her, the young girl's eyes sparkling with curiosity at that term, Miranda chuckled.

"If everyone wandered around at will, we'd cause all sorts of problems. We have a few places set up for establishing communication between our people out in the world. Our rules say you have to show yourself at these relay points every once in a while to confirm you are still doing well...though I can't say many of the wanderers respect that rule very much."

"I had no idea there were places like that. I heard you were running a kind of pharmacy. Are all such relay points pharmacies?" Tris asked, deeply interested.

Miranda shook her head. "Not necessarily. That just happened to be how things worked out in my case. Luckily for me, it was enough to draw Misha's attention." She directed a smile to Misha. It was clear how fond she was of the girl. Misha looked on her just as happily.

"I can't tell you where the relay points are or who is managing them. That is against the laws of our people. Honestly speaking, my presence here isn't exactly something they'll be pleased with either. That said, I would appreciate it if you just think of me as Misha's attendant."

Miranda had drawn a very clear line in the sand.

Tris's and Ryan's expressions twisted between polite smiles and

winces. It was rare to see someone give such a blatant "no" in front of a king. It appeared the rumors that the People of the Forest curried favor with no rulers held plenty of truth.

After a glance from the king, Tris held back his further questions.

"My prime minister is quite the curious man. I'm sorry for any offense caused by his questions."

Miranda's eyebrows shot up at the casual apology. Even if they were in a very private setting, it was quite rare for a king to apologize. The fact he didn't bow meant he was probably in the clear, though. And Tris seemed like the kind of person to very much get on his case for issues of decorum like this, so the fact the prime minister said nothing meant this was probably a common enough occurrence between them.

"So, what are your plans here, Misha? Is there anything you want to do?" Ryan asked.

Caught by surprise as the conversation suddenly shifted to her, Misha started to choke on her current mouthful of food and hurriedly reached for a glass of water. Miranda reached over to rub her back.

"Well..." Misha quickly looked to Geord, who waved at her, urging her to spill the beans. "Umm... I heard you have a big library here. I'd like to see it. I really like reading, and learning new things."

She'd had plenty of books in her forest home that her father had given her as gifts. Books had to be written and copied by hand, so even a single one could be expensive. Not even the nobility had easy and open access to them. In general, those who enjoyed reading would need to frequent a book-lending shop or a library. It was quite a luxurious pastime. Even in those cases, the access a single individual had to literature was quite limited. For Misha, a place like the library Geord had described was an absolute treasure trove.

"You mean the royal library? We'll have to get you a reading card, then. I'll have it sent to Kino, so have him take you there sometime."

"Thank you very much!" Misha beamed, permission coming much easier than she had expected.

"What kind of books are you interested in? Medicine, I imagine?" Ryan asked, amused at Misha's response. She looked like she had just received a fancy new dress or box of jewels.

"That too, but I also love books about folklore and fantasy. They're really exciting to read."

Ryan's composure started to crack at such a predictably cute answer for a girl her age.

"If that's what you're looking for, I don't think you need to go all the way to the royal library. There are plenty of libraries here in the castle you can look through."

"You have libraries here in the castle?! That's amazing!" Misha blurted out excitedly, once again catching herself too late and clapping her hands over her mouth. But of course, no one was going to chastise her for such innocent behavior.

"Yep. Kino, sometime when she's free, take her to see them. I think that's where we keep the books we used to read too, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. As you wish." Kino politely bowed from his spot in the corner of the room.

The friendly atmosphere continued for the rest of the meal, after which Misha returned to her room. She would have honestly preferred to visit the rumored libraries, but the discussion afterward had turned to talk of their journey to the castle, and it had taken them quite late into the night, forcing her to give up on the idea for the day.

Upon returning, she found the servants had already made preparations for another bath. Misha was more than happy to indulge in getting the unfamiliar oils out of her hair and makeup off her face. Now that she'd cleaned herself up, she sat in front of the mirror, refreshed, and watched Miranda comb her hair for her. It was still a bit damp, but combing it now meant Miranda could draw out more of its shine.

"Your room is the next one over, right?" Misha asked.

The acting hairdresser nodded. The two had rooms side by side, with a door connecting them. The door could be locked from either side, but it also allowed them to visit each other without having to step out into the hallway, so it would be easy for them to visit any time they wished. It was a small consideration for Misha, who likely would have felt quite lonely to be left in an entirely new place all on her own.

She was quite grateful for that, but...

Misha continued to stare at Miranda in the mirror, evidently having something more to say. Miranda quizzically returned the stare.

"What's wrong? If you have a question, go ahead and ask."

At Miranda's urging, Misha's mouth opened and closed wordlessly a number of times before she finally managed to squeeze something out.

"Umm... Well... It's less of a question..."

"What is it?" Miranda urged again, continuing on Misha's hair while the little apothecary looked away in embarrassment.

"I mean, we've always been in the same room, right? And...this one is a bit big for me...and the bed is so big too..." After fidgeting for a while, Misha suddenly spun around to look Miranda right in the eye. "Even if it's just today, please sleep in my room with me!"

Miranda froze. Misha stared up at her, and Miranda's shocked silence brought forth shades of unease.

"Is that a no...?"

"Not at all. I'd be happy to. I'll go get ready for sleep, so you can go ahead and wait in bed for me."

Misha jumped up happily, grinning all the way to bed as she dove under the covers. "Come join soon, okay?" Misha called after Miranda as she left to change in her own room. Miranda waved in answer without turning as she slipped through the door.

Misha giggled. *I thought she'd be upset with me for acting like such a kid. I'm glad I asked so seriously.*

Her home in the forest had been small enough that even if they had slept in separate rooms, she could always tell her mother was nearby. Though she had thought she'd be okay on her own, sharing a room with Miranda for even as short a time as she had reminded her just how lonely she felt at night. She had forgotten how having someone familiar nearby helped her relax.

On top of that, as wonderful as her room was, it did a good job of making her feel isolated from the rest of the world. The massive size of the bed similarly emphasized how alone she was, making bedtime a rather oppressive affair.

I said just for today...but I wonder if she'd stay with me tomorrow too? Of course, just until I get used to this place. Once I'm comfortable here, I'll be fine on my own—I think.

There was no one around to overhear, but she still whispered her excuses in her heart, waiting excitedly for Miranda to return, staring at the door like a pet dog waiting for its owner.

Having been watching her from his cushion on the floor, Ren had finally had enough. He leaped up from the foot of the bed. And now that her face was freshly washed and free of makeup, he set about happily licking at it.

"Ah, Ren! What's wrong?!" Caught off guard by Ren's sudden assault, Misha gave a small cry and tried to grab him. But the wolf pup artfully dodged around her hands and jumped on her again, chomping gently at her hands and pulling on her sleeves as he wished.

Her confusion abated once she realized he wanted to play, and she soon obliged. Now that she thought about it, they had been at the castle for about half a day, and Ren had spent most of that time alone in their room. They had never been apart for this long since the day they first met.

"Oh, you've done it now! I'm definitely going to catch you!"

The enormous bed made the perfect playground for them to romp around. Misha used feather pillows to try and catch and squish Ren, who would nimbly dodge around them and jump on her back, pushing her down into the bed.

The commotion brought Tia into the room to investigate, but once she saw the two happily laughing with each other, she immediately turned to fetch a fresh set of linens with a smile. The pillows that Misha had weaponized had burst, throwing feathers everywhere, and the sheets were now in total disarray, making them entirely unfit for sleeping on.

I can't be too surprised when she's got a puppy like that, Tia thought.

Miranda returned to the room soon after Tia left, sighing at the state she found the room in, but she waited for the two to tire themselves out before doing the responsible thing and sitting them

down for a lecture.

It was quite a struggle to keep from gushing over how cute the two looked covered in feathers.



Chapter 5: The King's Sister Lalaya

Which one next? Misha wondered, craning her neck to search a bookshelf that towered high above her.

It was her third day in Redford. She hadn't made it to the royal library yet, but she was more than satisfied with how she'd spent her time so far. The library within the castle itself was far larger than she had anticipated and housed literature collected by the kings of Redford over the generations, so there were books of all genres. Some of the older ones were even written in the old language.

Tightly packed bookshelves stretched from the floor to the ceiling, lining much of the room. Apparently, many of Redford's kings had been very fond of books, so several of the ones present were actually gifts sent by other nations' leaders from over the years. The books weren't all fancy either—there was a vast range of qualities on display.

They were organized roughly by genre, but with no one tasked with keeping the room in order, quite a few books hadn't been returned to their rightful places. Misha couldn't help but laugh when she was perusing the fiction section and happened upon a recipe book. The books on either side of it were stories of a girl who loved to cook. Someone must have taken an interest in the food described in those stories and decided to learn how to make the dishes for themselves.

As she walked slowly past the rows of books, Misha's eyes glided over the spines of the books, searching for anything that might catch her interest.

I read a lot of folklore yesterday, so maybe today I'll go for history?

She had no other plans. The other day, Kino had taken her for a tour around the castle before she went for a walk with Miranda through the gardens and sat down to have tea with her. Today,

however, Miranda had left, saying she had some business to take care of, and Misha felt bad for monopolizing Kino's time when he looked so busy. Thus, she was spending the day in the library, finding her own entertainment.

Even Ren was absent, Tia insisting that he needed some exercise. The maid informed Misha that the castle kept dogs for hunting and security, so she had recommended he join them for some training. Miranda agreed, deciding it would only be an advantage if he learned how to fight people if he was staying with Misha, and so off he went. Misha worried he might get hurt, but Tia assured her he'd be fine. Since he was still just a puppy, they would mostly focus on communication with other dogs and people, she explained. Even after all that, Misha still hadn't successfully explained that Ren was actually a wolf, but she decided the difference couldn't be that big of a deal at this point. She shook off her concerns.

Meanwhile, Misha hadn't seen Geord lately due to the past two days having kept him busy writing reports. Ryan and Tris went out of their way to spend some time with her each day, them taking turns eating a meal together or sitting down for some tea, but it was strange to her that the one she knew best wasn't around.

With a collection of promising books in her arms, she found a sofa nestled between some bookshelves and sat down. There were plenty of sofas and chairs in the library so that one could enjoy the books without having to take them far away. Each had been placed expertly in the blind spots of bookcases so that even if someone else entered the room, the bookshelves would block a passerby's view of someone reading.

The sofas came in all different shapes and sizes too. There was even a corner of the room in which rugs and cushions were piled on top of one another, forming a mountain. After trying a few seating spots, she found one she particularly liked: a sofa with space for two people directly in front of a window through which sunlight filled the room.

The gentle early summer sun was quite pleasant, creating Misha's ideal mood for reading. Never mind that of her own country, Misha's knowledge of Redford was superficial at best, so she'd found a

collection on its history since its founding. She had found ten books in all, thick and heavy as dictionaries, but she had picked up three of them for now. At her size, carrying three of those at once was the best she could manage.

It turned out the stories of Redford's founding were written very much like myths, so she found them quite engrossing. Before she knew it, she had lost herself in them.

"Are those books really that interesting?"

Misha almost jumped at the sudden voice from above her. Looking up, she saw a girl about her own age standing in front of her. She was extremely thin—to the point it was a wonder her legs could even support her weight—and her skin was so white that Misha couldn't be sure whether the girl had ever been outside. Her face was gaunt and pale, none of the characteristic plumpness one would expect in the features of a girl her age. Even so, she wore a dress with a great deal of volume and decorative lace, making it seem like she was drowning in fabric.

The girl frowned as Misha stared dumbstruck back at her. "Hello? Are you deaf?"

Misha quickly shook her head. "No, I heard you fine—you just surprised me is all. Yeah, of course these books are interesting." After clapping the book shut, Misha showed the cover to the girl.

Her frown didn't budge. "You're kind of weird. I haven't seen anyone in this room for a long time. You're the girl from Bluheitz, right?"

"Yes, I am..." Misha nodded as a thought suddenly occurred to her. The library in the castle belonged personally to the royalty. It was a private space for them, so people couldn't just come in without the king's permission. That's what Kino had told her the other day. For this girl to so casually be standing here, did that mean she was royalty? At the very least, she was probably close to someone really important.

Misha jumped to her feet, realizing she had better introduce herself promptly. "Umm, my name is Misha Do Lindburg. I made sure to get permission before coming here!"

But the girl simply stared back at her with a blank expression.

"I know. They told me. I'm Lalaya," she replied shortly before turning around and disappearing among the bookshelves.

"Lady Lalaya... Wait, does that mean you're the king's sister?"

The girl had vanished just as suddenly as she had arrived.

Misha recognized the name from her conversations with Ryan over dinner. He had a sister who was quite a bit younger than him, but she had been frail and sickly since birth. She spent most of her time in bed. For the last month, she'd been confined to bed with a cold, but he'd promised to introduce Misha to her once she was feeling better.

Yeah, she didn't look like she was feeling well. She's also really thin. What's her nutrition like here?

Now it was Misha's turn to frown as she recalled the pallidness of Lalaya's skin. As a member of the royalty, she naturally had the best doctors. There was no room for an apothecary from the boonies like Misha to get involved, she told herself as she returned her attention to her books.

However, as she did so, she heard the sound of something falling and hitting the ground, causing her to instinctively jump back to her feet.

"Lady Lalaya!"

Misha saw the young girl sprawled on the floor between the bookshelves and hurried over. Turning Lalaya onto her side, Misha looked over her complexion as she took her pulse. Her face was already paler than a few minutes ago, and she felt cold. Her pulse was weak.

Once she'd checked the color around Lalaya's eyes, Misha quickly rolled her onto her back, grabbing some books from a nearby bookshelf to elevate her legs. She then dashed to the door, poking her head outside to look for someone to help. With perfect timing, she spotted Kino coming down the hall, pushing a cart with a tea set on it toward her.

"Mr. Kino! Lady Lalaya has collapsed. It looks like anemia. Can you carry her to her room for me?"

Eyes widening only slightly, Kino pushed the cart to the side of the hallway and quickly made his way into the library.

"She's over here." Misha guided him to the fallen princess. "Try not to shake her head too much. It would be best to use a stretcher to carry her if we can get one."

"I will go have one prepared immediately. May I trouble you to stay with the lady until I return?"

"Of course." Misha nodded, swapping out the books under Lalaya's feet for some cushions as Kino quickly made his exit. He might have moved quickly, but Kino's seeming lack of urgency had taken Misha aback.

She laid a blanket over the fallen girl and then checked Lalaya's pulse again. The girl was terribly cold to the touch, and her face was scrunched into a frown, as if she was having trouble breathing. Misha loosened her collar.

Thinner than average. Low body temperature. Her heart rate is high, and she has a bad case of anemia. It's hard to say for sure, but this might be a case of malnutrition.

Misha had already unconsciously lapsed into a professional examination. She loosened the ribbons and buttons on Lalaya's dress as she waited.

Eventually, Kino returned with two maids in tow. They gently moved Lalaya onto a simple stretcher, really no more than some cloth fastened to a couple poles. Limp as ever, Lalaya lay still as her complexion failed to improve.

"Have you called for her doctor?" Misha asked as she watched the maids carry her off, wishing she could go with them.

Kino shook his head. "Lady Lalaya has been frail ever since she was born. Collapsing like this is a daily occurrence for her. Forgive my rudeness, but I doubt they will call a doctor for something this minor."

Misha's face clouded over. "Someone losing consciousness is a big deal. It sounds like people aren't taking that seriously. And for this to be a daily occurrence, her body must be under a lot of stress," Misha murmured, staring down the hall where Lalaya and the maids had already disappeared.

Meanwhile, Kino turned to look at her with a curious expression. Misha was inarguably a bit eccentric, and she had her background

with the People of the Forest. There were a number of incidents she had been involved in during her trip to Redford. All of that together was more than enough to catch Kino's interest. Ryan's request for him to stick close to Misha hadn't bothered him. He was determined to find out whether she would be a boon or a curse on his liege, but beyond that, he found her interesting.

Unaware of his scrutiny, Misha continued to stare down the empty hallway, biting her lip.

Why?

Her head was full of questions.

Kino's dismissive attitude. The way the maids had taken away the unconscious Lalaya without being bothered in the least. Lalaya's pale complexion and dark eyes.

With a sigh, Misha spun around and returned to the library. If she was curious, she just had to investigate. Although, for starters, she needed to put away all the books she'd pulled out earlier.

Misha would never even have considered asking someone else to clean up for her, so she naturally moved to put away the books herself, but Kino, who was used to having servants doing the work, didn't understand Misha's behavior at first. Wondering if her sigh had been her way of putting Lalaya out of her mind, he watched in confused silence as she cleaned up the books.

She had finished before he'd realized it. Then she requested Kino take her back to her room. The butler quickly turned and led her through the halls. It was an uncomfortable feeling, not being able to tell what this girl was thinking as she followed quietly behind him.

But Misha was oblivious to all of Kino's overthinking. She was fully absorbed in the problem of how she was going to get the information she was after.

If she was after rumors, it would be best to talk to the women of the castle. That was the easy answer Misha came to. So, as she returned to her room, she sat down for some tea and invited Tia and Isabella to join her. She didn't really know any other women in Redford, and Miranda was still out on business. The two maids declined the invitation at first, but at Misha's sad "But drinking tea by myself is so lonely" comment, they finally relented.

While they drank, Misha casually shared her experience in the library with Lalaya.

"Her complexion looked pretty bad. I'm worried about her," she said, concerned.

"Lady Lalaya has always been somewhat frail..." Tia explained. "The change of seasons is always hard for her. Besides, she spends more than half of the year in bed."

The implicit declaration that this was all normal only caused Misha's frown to deepen.

"Does she have some particular illness?"

The two maids shared another look at Misha's question, then turned to Kino behind them. The butler waved a hand wordlessly, giving them tacit permission.

"I cannot say we know anything specific," Isabella said, "but she was born quite premature, and she was very small at the time. Perhaps because of that, she has always been susceptible to all kinds of illnesses. It is said that her survival to this day has been remarkable in and of itself." Her sights fell on the tea in front of her.

Misha tilted her head slightly. "So, she was born weak and easily gets sick. The doctor looked at her but couldn't find any cause, so the assumption is that she has a weak constitution?"

"We have not been assigned to serve her directly, so we have not been told the precise details, but that is the general understanding around the castle, yes," Tia replied haltingly.

Isabella nodded beside her. Turning to look at Kino, who had stubbornly refused to join them at the table, Misha received a small nod from him as well.

Holding her teacup in both hands, Misha stared hard into the amber liquid. From her brief examination, she believed Lalaya was suffering from a severe case of anemia. There might have been something more at play, but without a more rigorous examination, she couldn't be sure.

But above all, it was bizarre that others were unconcerned about her losing consciousness on the daily. She was a princess. She should have been very important to the kingdom. And yet, it seemed like they didn't treat her with much respect at all.

What was her doctor thinking? What was her doctor *doing*?

"I'd love to give her a proper medical exam... It would be nice to talk to her doctor too," Misha murmured to herself, but everyone in the room had heard her loud and clear.

Chapter 6: Begin Treatment!

Misha opened the door of the room with a bright and cheerful smile.

"Good morning, Lady Lalaya. How are you feeling?"

Without waiting for a reply, she stepped inside and threw the curtains wide open.

The sun was a little high for it being morning; it quickly cast out the gloomy darkness of the bedroom. Without another word of warning, Misha continued over to the princess's last fortress, throwing open the curtains of her canopied bed without a hint of mercy.

"Ngh..."

A small lump started to squirm in the center of a bed wide enough for three adults to lie comfortably side by side. Misha giggled at the soft groan coming from it.

"It's morning, Lady Lalaya. Let's get up before someone has to come in and take your blankets from you," Misha called out playfully as she rapped the foot of the bed, but she only got another wordless groan in reply. "Lady Lalaya, if you get up now, I'll add some honey to your morning medicine for you."

Despite the softness of Misha's tone, there was quite a depth to her words. What would happen if the princess stayed in bed? The maids behind Misha glanced at one another.

"U-Umm... Lady Misha, Lady Lalaya was unable to sleep until quite late last night, so..." a middle-aged maid explained after having watched Misha's behavior with a good deal of consternation.

Her name was Carrie. On her first day with the princess, Misha learned that this maid had been taking care of Lalaya since the princess was a baby.

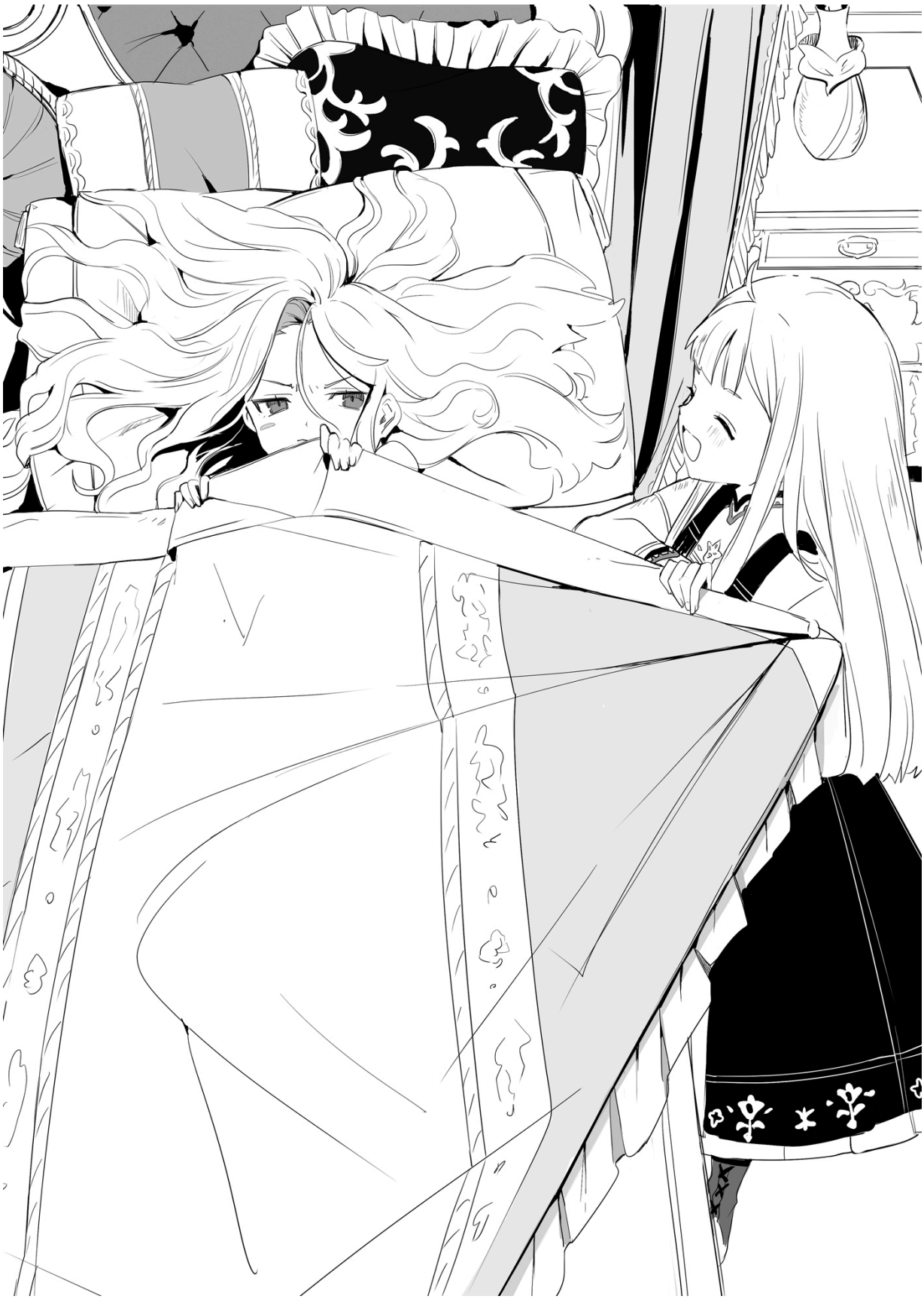
"I believe she is simply feeling unwell due to a lack of sleep..." Carrie said.

As much as Carrie tried to stop Misha's rampage, it only served to play into Misha's hands, prompting her to open her eyes wide with feigned shock.

"Oh my! In that case, I absolutely must give her a thorough examination! I may have to change up her medicine!" She firmly gripped the edge of the silky down blanket. "Please get up already. I'll give you three seconds."

Despite having no way to possibly see from under the covers, Lalaya must have felt some measure of danger in the grin that Misha wore as she delivered her ultimatum.

It had been three days since Misha had started visiting her. Much to the princess's chagrin, she knew full well what would happen if she were to disobey Misha's orders. Slowly but surely, a pair of bright blue eyes peeked out from the blanket to glare at the apothecary.



"Good morning, Lady Lalaya. Looks like I can finally see you. I know it is a bit presumptuous of me, but I really don't recommend you cover your head with your blanket while you sleep. It'll interfere with your breathing, and it could lead to you overheating and feeling worse."

Misha continued to act cheerful, heedless of the scowl the princess had turned her way. Lalaya's surliness knew no end.

"I don't normally sleep with my head under the blankets. Who do you think made me start doing that?"

She sounded bitter, but Misha's unfaltering smile soon leached the poison from her demeanor, and she fell quiet again.

Meanwhile, Misha brought out a bowl of warm water for the princess to wash her face.

"Let's have something to eat. I've got lots of your favorite fruit today."

At Misha's gentle prodding, Lalaya reluctantly pulled herself out of bed and began making preparations for the day. At the girl's obvious reluctance, Misha held back a playful sigh, thinking back to how they had gotten to this point.

The first night after Misha met Lalaya, Ryan invited her to dinner. Misha took it as a stroke of good luck and happily accepted. Ryan was even looking to talk to her about the same thing that had been on her mind. Before she could say anything, Ryan brought up the topic of his sister.

"I heard you helped take care of Lalaya today. Thank you."

"Oh, it was nothing..." Misha politely shook her head.

"She's been quite sick ever since she was born, so we've kind of spoiled her. She's grown up to be quite a selfish girl because of us." Despite his sigh, there was an unmistakable fondness in the king's voice. And though he smiled, Misha didn't miss the shadow that lurked beneath. She could tell his sister was a cause of great concern for him.

Misha thought back to her short conversation with the princess. The little royal had very much seemed to have been talking down to Misha the whole time, but when one considered that her illness severely restricted her ability to interact with others, that attitude

didn’t come as much of a surprise. Even with her limited experience, Misha had met plenty of people who had hardened due to extended illness. And she knew those people tended to be the loneliest of all.

“I heard that Lady Lalaya often collapses like that. Do you know why?” she asked.

She wasn’t entirely sure if this was appropriate conversation for the dinner table, but she knew that work was waiting right outside the door for Ryan for the moment their meal concluded. This would really be her only chance. As an apothecary, Misha couldn’t help but be curious about Lalaya’s condition, and about what kind of treatment she was receiving.

“Uhhh, what was it called? She’s always had all kinds of problems. I think the doctor said her heart is weak, and she has a poor constitution. And her blood’s thin too? I think he also mentioned something about her lungs...”

As Ryan counted off the issues on his fingers, Misha shot him a cold stare.

How can he not know what’s wrong with his own sister?! Is this what high-status families are like?

Feeling Misha’s judgment, Ryan’s shoulders dropped. “As pathetic as it is, I don’t know her condition that well. If you want to learn more, why not have a talk with her doctor?”

His dejection was clear, and Misha immediately felt guilty for having been so rude. He was probably just as worried about his sister in his own way. Among all his duties, keeping track of the specifics of his sister’s constant illness was probably more than he could manage.

Unfortunately, Misha couldn’t think of anything to say to console him, so they continued eating in awkward silence for a while. As they sat quietly, servants coming to clean up the dishes for their main course, Misha finally worked up the courage to speak again.

“I would like to speak with her doctor. If her current medicine isn’t helping her, I might be able to do something for her.”

“You’ll take a look at her?” Ryan’s sudden bright smile took Misha quite by surprise.

“U-Umm... If no one else minds, I guess...” she stammered.

"I'll make arrangements for you to see her tomorrow, then," Ryan declared at Misha's hesitant acceptance. She could immediately see Kino jump into action out of the corner of her eye, making preparations already.

As the next dish arrived, she began going over in her head everything she would need.

I wonder if Miss Miranda will be back by tonight. It would be nice to get her opinion.

Misha finished the rest of the meal lost inside her own head, then returned to her room to find a message from Miranda saying she wouldn't be back for two or three days. While she was disappointed to read that, Misha was at least sleeping on her own now. A combination of getting accustomed to her new room and the sleep-aid tea Miranda had taught her to make were both greatly helpful.

She imagined Miranda had timed her excursion specifically to line up with Misha coming to terms with sleeping on her own, which was impressive in its own right. Miranda had said her main job was to manage and keep an eye on the wanderers from the People of the Forest, so she was likely quite skilled at reading people.

I can figure out any physical problems people have easily enough, but observing mental states is still kind of hard. I guess I just need more experience.

Whether she was good at it or not, she had already said she wanted to examine Lalaya, so she would give her all. If she got stuck not knowing something, she could always take the opportunity to learn more.

Misha sighed, recalling the notebook she kept from her time studying under her mother. She was pretty sure she remembered everything that was written in it, but she would still have liked to review it again. She was regretting not bringing it with her.

Seeing how much of a frenzy the people in her father's mansion had been to get her ready to leave, she would have felt too guilty asking for a day to return to her home in the forest before leaving for Redford. Fortunately, the war had mostly been confined to the areas around the border, but the wounds left behind were deep nonetheless. Compensating those who had lost family members and

dealing with the homes and fields destroyed in the fighting had piled up mountains of work for Deenoark while he was still bedridden, resulting in a constant stream of servants filing in and out of his bedroom.

Misha couldn't ride a horse on her own, so if she wanted to go back to the forest, she'd need someone to take her there. And since she was being sent as an official envoy to another nation, one or two bodyguards would hardly suffice. On top of that, there were vanishingly few people even in Bluheitz who knew where she and her mother had lived. Misha wasn't particularly comfortable spreading that information any further.

There were also traces of activity from the People of the Forest still lingering there from her uncle's visits. Misha wasn't certain this was the case, but she suspected there were all kinds of tools in her home that couldn't be found in the outside world. It was dangerous to reveal to the public eye items developed by the People of the Forest.

She knew the way back, so in the worst case, she could ask them to take her to the edge of the forest and go the rest of the way on foot by herself. However, that would take a great deal longer and would still involve finding someone willing to take her all the way to the forest.

With all that in mind, she couldn't bring herself to ask for something so selfish. Not to mention her fear that all of the memories she had with her mother there would paralyze her.

Anyway, no point crying about it now, Misha told herself, getting ready for bed.

She couldn't think properly the next day if she didn't have enough sleep. One of the first lessons her mother had taught her was that an apothecary needed to care for their own health before anyone else's.

Misha closed her eyes as she rubbed the small pouch hanging from her neck that had become her good luck charm.

Good night, mom.

A maid came to get Misha at the expected time the next day, leading her to a room packed full of people. Stunned, Misha couldn't

help but gape as she looked around at everyone gathered.

Well... I guess she is *a princess, so that means she's in line for the throne. I shouldn't be surprised...*

Ryan and Tris were present, as well as a middle-aged man that was likely the doctor, and behind him were a number of others who were likely his assistants or students. There were also guards, including Geord at the far end. Misha suppressed a sigh. As she met his gaze, he gave her a wink and a stealthy wave. The gesture fit so poorly on his otherwise steely expression that it snapped Misha right out of her tense nervousness.

The rumor that the foreign visitor to the castle was connected to the People of the Forest had spread through the doctors and apothecaries of the castle like wildfire. A small number of them had encountered other People of the Forest during the war, just like Geord had, so they recognized her golden hair and green eyes. When they learned the king had specifically asked the girl to take a look at his sister, it was impossible to keep their curiosity in check.

Conan, the man serving as court physician for a great number of years, was no exception. Having cared for her since the day she was born, Conan was well aware that Lalaya's condition was not a simple issue. Numerous illnesses plagued the girl, and it was almost impossible to disentangle them all to find out which was the source underlying all her problems.

I guess we will see how knowledgeable this girl is.

He couldn't help feeling instinctively antagonistic toward this young girl that had appeared out of nowhere, bearing the reputation of the People of the Forest. That was why he had brought not just his own students but anyone who'd shown interest to come see her visit the court physician.

When Misha finally appeared at the scheduled time, she looked over the unexpected crowd of adults with open astonishment. She must have felt that the intentions of those who had come to watch her work were not exclusively good-hearted. However, she quickly recovered, pushing away her nerves with a single exhale.

Conan had to admit he was astonished at how quickly she was able to recover. It was honestly impressive being able to stand tall in

this room full of people who obviously held ill will toward her. And what she said next made him want to clap.

Without the slightest hint of consternation, she requested everyone not involved with the examination to leave.

"This is just a normal exam. We don't need all these people here. All that will do is stress out the patient. Or does she normally have this many people present when the doctor sees her?"

She hadn't forgotten that they didn't call for the doctor when Lalaya collapsed on a regular basis. The biting sarcasm in her voice made that clear to everyone.

She then turned to Ryan.

"I understand you are concerned about your sister's well-being, but there is no way she will be comfortable having her body examined while you're here, even if you *are* her brother. Could I please ask you to leave?"

Despite the almost aggressive tone she took, Ryan didn't seem bothered.

With a shrug, he said, "I'll wait in this room, then. But I can ask you about what you find after, yes? I don't want you to have to come find me to ask permission for every little thing either."

Misha gave another sigh at Ryan's excuses before turning to Conan. She greeted the doctor with a polite curtsy.

"I assume you are the head doctor here? My name is Misha. I am an apothecary. Thank you for creating this opportunity for me to see Lady Lalaya."

"How polite. As you have guessed, I am the attending head doctor, Conan Shyturn," he said warmly, the two of them exchanging smiles.

She then turned to the men waiting behind him. "Which of you regularly deals with Lady Lalaya?"

The men shared a look, hesitating a moment before two of them stepped forward.

"Okay, good. Everyone else, please leave."

She beamed at them as she indicated the door with her hand.

"What?!" they exclaimed.

Misha's face went cold. "I don't need your help. If I have any

questions, Mr. Conan is here. Why should you be here at all? If you are looking for practical study, go visit a hospital. Neither I nor Lady Lalaya is here to put on a show for you." Her tone was sharp and unforgiving, her face passive as she stared at the group of unmoving men. "If you are that worried about a stranger taking a look at her, surely Mr. Conan and his two students are enough to keep an eye on me. If you are that curious about what I'm going to do, you can talk to Mr. Conan about it later. I'm not going to be doing anything that's worth hiding."

Geord watched stunned from the corner of the room. It was remarkable how much intensity this tiny apothecary could muster when she dropped her smile. She was totally unlike the naive, adorable girl he had come to know.

No... I guess this is how she acts when seeing a patient or making medicine.

Thus, he decided this was just her face as an apothecary. People could change that much when they had something they weren't willing to surrender.

The tension in the room was finally cut when Ryan spoke up. "Good point. Conan, please ask them to leave. I understand their curiosity, but Lalaya is shy enough as it is, even without considering her distaste for doctors and apothecaries. With this many people around, she won't even come out from under the covers."

Conan could only nod with the chagrin of someone who understood the situation. "I suppose you are right. The princess has difficulty with a great many things."

With their boss and the king reinforcing Misha's demands, the others could no longer argue. The various doctors, apothecaries, and random nobles that had snuck their way in filed dejectedly from the room.

As Misha watched them go, Ryan sent a sly grin in her direction. "That's a fantastic way to make enemies."

Misha sighed. "I guess. When I think about how none of them seem to care when she collapses every day, I just get a bit angry. And it doesn't feel great to be put on display for everyone either." She then turned to Tris, who stood behind Ryan. "It seems like there

have been some rumors spreading about me. If you are going to gossip, I'd prefer you at least tell people the truth."

"Whatever do you mean?" Tris replied, expression even and innocent, drawing another heavy sigh from Misha.

They had only decided she'd be seeing Lalaya the night before. It made sense for there to be some doctors or apothecaries that heard the news, but how had word spread among the nobles? Misha didn't know why those rumors had gotten out, but she had to assume it had been on purpose, and the most likely culprit was the prime minister feigning innocence right in front of her.

Of course, this was only conjecture on her part, and she knew well enough from her few encounters with Tris to guess that pressing him on the issue wouldn't bear fruit. Deciding it was pointless to worry about him, she turned back to Conan.

"I don't know what kind of rumors are being spread, but let me set the record straight. Yes, my mother was from the People of the Forest, but ever since she decided to marry my father, they'd cut her off. She didn't return to her homeland a single time after. While it's true my mother trained me in medicine since I was very young, I am still a fledgling apothecary. If you are uncomfortable leaving the king's sister in the care of someone like me, please say so now."

Conan's eyes went wide at Misha's sudden outburst, before falling into a lighthearted smile. Unlike the artificially happy expression he'd been wearing up until then, it was much gentler now, like he was looking at one of his own students.

"Lady Lalaya has been unwell ever since she was a baby. Our inability to do anything for her has seeded a deep distrust of us in her. Lately she won't even take her medicine, asserting it will do her no good anyway."

"That's not good..." Misha murmured. That was difficult news for an apothecary to take. There were plenty of kinds of medicine that only showed their effects after taking them for an extended period of time.

"Perhaps she might open her heart a little to a girl her own age. Please, take a look at the princess for us."

The sad tone with which the doctor spoke was enough for Misha

to understand. He truly cared about Lalaya, and it pained him to be unable to do anything for her.

Perhaps it wasn't that they refused to call a doctor when Lalaya collapsed, and it was more that the princess herself refused their help. Misha decided she could perhaps give the doctor a little benefit of the doubt.

"Before I go in and see Lady Lalaya, may I ask a few questions?"

As the doctor in charge of her care since she was born, Conan had to know the information Misha was looking for. She was very much concerned about how the princess was treated when she was fainting, so she already had some issues trusting her current caretakers, but if Conan had been responsible for her for as long as he said, then she still had plenty to ask him.

She could always have asked Lalaya herself, but Conan would be more informed about things like her height, weight, and medical history.

"Of course. Ask me anything you need." Conan nodded graciously, secretly excited to hear just what kind of questions Misha would ask.

Anyone involved in the medical profession would have heard rumors of the People of the Forest to some degree. Though they called themselves apothecaries, their knowledge was incredibly extensive and wide-ranging, and their techniques often put other medical professionals' to shame. Since most people would never have seen those techniques for themselves, it went without saying that they'd jump at the chance to speak to one of them in person.

Conan had been very much the same when he was younger, but all his efforts at following those rumors had led to dead ends. Almost every lead he caught ended up at some second-rate swindler only posing as one of them. Their reputation as phantoms seemed well-earned. As a member of a family of doctors working for the king, Conan found himself saddled with an unfortunately high status as he grew older, and soon found himself unable to leave the castle. He had come up against a barrier that mere passion could never get him across.

That passion had continued to smolder in his heart as he took up a leadership position among the doctors of the castle, until one day

he'd heard news of a man named Geord who served the new king and claimed to have been treated by one of the People of the Forest. After a great deal of convincing, he finally managed to get Geord to show him the mystery apothecary's work.

A ten-centimeter mark adorned Geord's arm just below the elbow. It was a clean scar, with no sign of cramping or stiffness.

"The stitching is so fine and even. This would be perfect for an example in a textbook. He must have used an incredibly thin needle for this. It's remarkable he was able to perform with such precision on a live battlefield."

Having heard that the apothecary had saved Geord's life, he had expected a rather incredible wound, so this small scar was a bit disappointing. As if reading the doctor's mind, Geord winced.

"I don't know about how nice the scar is or how good his stitching was. I think the bigger deal is that he reattached my arm at all."

"What?!" Conan was flabbergasted.

According to Geord, during his first deployment as a mercenary, he was attacked from behind. He'd lifted his arm up to protect his head, and his arm had been almost entirely sliced off, kept attached only by a single flap of skin.

"I tied up the wound to stop the bleeding and tried to run, but in the end, I had lost too much blood, so I ended up passing out. That's when he found me. The next time I woke up, I was covered head to toe in bandages. And right beside me was the guy I thought I had taken down with me. It's kind of funny to think about it now."

A gentle smile had found its way to Geord's face as he reminisced. He didn't seem to harbor any ill feelings toward this stranger who had tried to take his life.

"As you can see, I have no problem moving anything, not even my fingers. The only people who ever believe me are the ones who were there, though. If it hadn't been for the assistant helping with the operation, I wouldn't have believed it myself. I would have thought losing my arm had just been a bad dream or something," Geord explained.

He flexed his arm and fingers, well accustomed to others refusing

to believe his story. While being called a liar was one thing, he couldn't stand others insulting the man that had saved him, so it was a story he had learned to stop telling. This time, his lord had specifically requested him to entertain Conan's questions, but he'd been more than ready to take his leave at the first sign of suspicion from the doctor.

Conan, meanwhile, scarcely believed his ears. A broken bone could be reconnected. An open wound could be sewn shut. But he had never heard of a limb being effectively removed and then reattached, maintaining all of its functions. He had heard of one case of a limb being cleanly severed and immediately reconnected and stitched back on, but it was a miraculous case. Necrosis hadn't set in, and the patient had ended up regaining some degree of movement in the larger joints like their elbow, but their hand and fingers had still remained paralyzed.

Yet Geord was able to move his wrist and fingers freely, and his grip was still strong. Strong enough he could crush an apple in his hand like it was no more than a sponge—much stronger than Conan's own grip strength.

"And your finger joints still work with such strength and precision. This is remarkable," Conan commented, watching Geord move tiny beans from one dish to another one at a time. Geord only stared back in bewilderment at Conan's questions about the miraculous technique used.

Conan was the greatest doctor in the castle. He was nobility, and had plenty of pride, so Geord had fully expected him to snort at his claims when he saw the tiny scar that remained.

I never expected him to believe me so easily, Geord thought. *I guess this is just a weird country. Weird enough for a mercenary like me to become bodyguard to the king out of nowhere.*

Unfortunately for Conan, Geord had been unconscious throughout the entire procedure, so he hadn't seen what happened. The idea of his lost arm being reconnected had been enough of a shock to get him to question the man that had helped him, but for someone with no medical knowledge like Geord, less than a tenth of what the man told him had stuck. Regardless, it was a conversation he'd had ten

years ago.

Conan urged him to recount any small detail he could.

"What did he say again? Something about the muscles wrapped around the bones in the body, and the paths for the blood...vessels, I think he called them? And...nerves? He mentioned something like that too. I think he said he reconnected all of those one at a time."

Honestly, Conan didn't understand what he was saying, but that didn't bother him. There were plenty of things that no one understood and plenty of people who were trying to divine those secrets.

There had once been a plague that had suddenly broken out over the capital. Conan had seen it firsthand on the front lines, but in the brutal days of rebuilding, he'd nearly lost his sense of purpose from surviving the disaster. Now, however, he felt that passion reigniting.

First, he needed to raise the next generation. At the same time, he needed to gather and record the memories they had now, and they also needed to analyze the records of the past. That was a tall order for someone already sixty years old, yet he didn't balk at the backbreaking task he had set for himself.

His students were doing well. By cooperating with other doctors who'd survived the plague and the war, he began educating those who showed promise. He could tell things were finally starting to move. Some fields had yet to bear any fruit, but this was still only the beginning. He had no need to rush.

But that plague... Conan had yet to find a satisfactory explanation for the Red Eye plague, as it had come to be called. Past records spoke of nothing similar, and the chaos during this plague had left notes sparse and unreliable. Above all, memory faded with time. That was all the more true when those memories held nothing but sorrow. People wanted to distance themselves from the pain. Many simply said, "It's over now" and refused to speak further.

Attempts at finding thorough records hadn't met with much success. Their only remaining hope had been to ask the People of the Forest for help, so they had been considering the logistics of sending an envoy to the mysterious village said to exist far to the north.

And then came the news of Misha's visit. It was only natural that he'd become excited.

"First, do you have records of her height, weight, and illnesses since she was born?" Misha asked Conan today.

Hmm. This girl's determined. Conan chuckled inwardly at Misha's serious expression. She had seemed to transform into a different person when she was driving the spectators from the room earlier, but now she had switched again, taking an entirely different attitude.

"Let me see... Lady Lalaya is one hundred and thirty-eight centimeters tall, weighs twenty-three kilograms, and is now fifteen."

"Fifteen?" Misha's eyes widened slightly. If she hadn't been in "apothecary mode," she very well might have shouted in surprise.

Although Misha was two years younger than her, they were virtually the same height. If Lalaya was fifteen, she would be recognized as an adult in only one more year, something you'd never guess from her tiny frame.

"I thought she was the same age as me..." Misha murmured to herself.

Having overheard her, the doctor smiled sheepishly. "It's hard to fault you for that. She hardly looks to be on the verge of adulthood. Believe it or not, the princess grew ten centimeters in this past year alone. I believe her body has struggled to keep up with the sudden growth, which is why she's losing consciousness more frequently."

"Does she have some illness that is impeding her growth?" Misha frowned, thinking back to her meeting with Lalaya in the library.

Conan shook his head. "About that, Miss Misha... I would like you to think of this as a challenge from me, the head doctor of the castle. May I ask you to give your opinion on her condition without any knowledge of her past illnesses?"

"Uhhh..." Confused, Misha glanced at him, not sure what he was trying to do.

"Oh, don't think too hard on it. I simply wish to hear your opinion without any potential influence from us. I suppose I can mention two facts: She was born prematurely, and she has always had problems with her heart."

Misha had already heard this information from Tia and Ryan. She sank into thought for a moment before finally nodding.

"I'll go in and see her now."

With a number of things on her mind, she turned to the door leading to Lalaya's room.

Chapter 7: The Truth of the Illness

"You again..." Lalaya's eyes shot wide open as she saw Misha step into the room. She was sitting up in bed, enjoying some tea. The sweet aroma of various fruits and flowers wafted up from the cup in her hands.

Misha smiled, also recognizing the smell of a number of herbs used as nutritional supplements.

"Pleased to meet you again. As I said before, my name is Misha Do Lindburg. I've come to ask if I can give you a medical exam." Clasping her hands in front of her chest, she bent her knees as she would in a curtsy. It was the most respectful greeting used in the kingdom.

Clasping one's hands in front of their chest was a sign of being unarmed, empty-handed. A bow that dropped one's gaze and revealed the top of one's head was a demonstration of defenselessness—in other words, to express that one had no intention of defiance.

After a long delay, the princess finally spoke. "Fine, I'll allow it."

Misha stood straight at the girl's soft reply. Lalaya was staring at her, weighing Misha in her mind.

"*You're* doing the exam? You're just an apothecary, right?"

Misha nodded with an approachable air. "Yes, we examine a patient's body to determine the most appropriate medicine for them. That's what I was taught." She then walked over to Lalaya's side. She held the princess's right hand in hers, measuring her pulse. "Did you sleep well last night?"

Bewildered, Lalaya hesitated, but she eventually gave a quiet nod.

"Did anything feel different when you woke up?"

Here was a girl close to her own age tossing questions at her like a doctor! Lalaya thought the whole experience bizarre, but not

altogether unpleasant, so she answered as honestly as she could.

"When you sat up, did you feel dizzy at all?" Misha asked.

"A little bit, but that's normal. It goes away if I sit still for a minute."

Lalaya usually didn't want to cooperate with the doctors around her, but for some reason, the young apothecary's soft voice put her at ease.

"Okay, I'm going to check your heartbeat now." Misha then pulled a strange tube from her bag.

"What is that?" Lalaya narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"This? It's a tool for listening to your heartbeat," Misha responded, unsure what the big deal was.

It was a long tube, one end of which was placed on the patient's body and the other in the user's ears. With it, Misha could listen to the sounds coming from inside the patient's body. Her mother had always used it unceremoniously. Misha didn't understand why anyone would be surprised by it.

"Oh? And how exactly does one use this?" Conan asked from behind the apothecary, deeply interested.

When did he get here? Misha thought.

His sudden appearance came as a surprise, but she *had* granted a few of the doctors permission to accompany her, so she swallowed her complaints. Seeing the equally curious looks on his two assistants, Misha concluded that the tool was unfamiliar to this part of the world.

"It's not that complex. You put this on their chest and listen. According to my mother, you can even do the same thing with a normal piece of paper in a pinch," Misha explained as she handed the tool to the doctor, who was fidgeting in his excitement. "It's easier to hear through this than by putting your ear directly on their chest."

"So, you place your ear on the other end? What kind of metal is this? And what about the inside of the tube?" he asked, tapping the metal caps on the ends of the device.

Misha could only force a small grin at the rapid-fire questions, reaching to take back the tool. "Unfortunately, I don't know anything

about the interior. My mother always treated it like it was so ordinary, I never thought to be curious about it. I'm sorry."

Judging by Conan's demeanor, Misha thought he was one step away from dismantling the whole thing and looking inside for himself. As he handed the device back to her with a disappointed expression, she figured she hadn't been far off.

"This tool is really important to me—it was my mother's. Please be careful with it. This is how you use it."

After pulling her top open, she placed one end of the tube over her own heart. That got Ryan and Tris, watching from beyond the doorway behind Conan, to whip themselves around and look away.

As doctors, Conan and his assistants were accustomed to seeing their patients in various manners of undress and curious enough about this new tool to not give much thought to what Misha had just done, but to those outside of medicine, Misha must have looked quite improper. It certainly wasn't anything suitable for a girl her age to be doing.

"Oh, I see..." Conan's eyes narrowed as he placed one end of the tube to his ear. After moving the other end of the tube to a number of different spots, he gave a sigh of admiration. He passed the listening end to his assistants. "You two try it as well. This is quite impressive."

"Please excuse me, then." The first of his students took the tube with a small bow, listening to Misha's heart. He then traded places with the other.

Misha quietly stood still until they'd had their fill. She was happy to oblige them. After all, she was quite familiar with the desire to investigate a new tool.

"You can hear it quite well, can't you?"

The two students started excitedly discussing among themselves. "Above all, not having to place your ear directly on their chest will help a lot with giving examinations to younger women."

Even if it was necessary, most women were uncomfortable having some stranger place an ear on their bare chests, particularly young and unmarried women. If they were too embarrassed, then it would be more difficult for a doctor to detect lung disease early on, before

it worsened.

Conan turned back to Misha. “What do you call this device?”

“My mother called it a stethoscope,” Misha replied as she closed her opened top once more.

“So it measures...your chest, I suppose? I see. But if your mother had this stethoscope since the time she was married, it must have been common among her people for well over ten years by now...” Conan trailed off, face troubled.

Misha tilted her head, about to unknowingly deliver another heavy blow to the three doctors.

“I guess so. She said this was already old-fashioned, so they’ve probably got much better ones now,” she murmured as she rolled the stethoscope over in her hands.

The device they had just seen was already incredible to them as it was, yet it had just been labeled “old-fashioned.” Logically, of course such an item could progress further in the span of ten years, but reason meant little to people observing something brand-new to them.

Conan could do little more than laugh dryly and then sigh. “I figured the rumors were exaggerated, but now that I’ve seen this... Wow, the People of the Forest are quite the interesting group.”

Misha motioned to the blankly staring princess behind her.

“May I continue the exam now? Assuming you’ve had your fill.”

“Ah, yes, my apologies. Please go ahead,” Conan said, having forgotten the actual reason they were present. He and his students stepped backward.

“It works better if I can place it directly on your skin. Should we lower the curtain?” Misha asked.

Despite Ryan and the others being there to make sure Misha didn’t do anything out of line, he quickly nodded, face a little red. Lalaya was a relative, but she was fifteen years old; the king thought it improper for a girl her age to be exposed in front of people. Conan and his students could only smile sheepishly at how Misha offered considerations to her patient that for some reason she felt no need to offer herself.

The maids quickly lowered the curtain attached to the canopy of

Lalaya's bed, cutting them off from the rest of the room, leaving Misha and Lalaya alone, with only Conan supervising.

"Sorry for the wait. I'm going to use this to listen to your heartbeat," Misha began.

Lalaya loosened her top, evidently quite accustomed to doing so. Having been beset by countless illnesses since she was quite young, undressing in front of a doctor was something she had long since lost any sense of shame over.

Misha listened to the princess from her chest, then her back, then from each of her sides. Afterward, she tapped Lalaya's body in a few places with her fingers. Finally, she checked the princess's mouth, eyes, and ears. With that, the exam was finished. After Lalaya dressed herself, they opened the curtain.

Ryan was there, obviously concerned. "So? How is she?"

"Well..." The apothecary held a distant look in her eyes as she mulled over her findings. She then returned the king's stare. "There is no immediate danger to her health."

"Huh?" multiple voices blurted out in unison.

Lalaya herself, Ryan, and Tris—but none of the doctors.

"Actually, I took the liberty of discussing Lady Lalaya's daily routine and diet with the maids before coming here for the examination," Misha explained. "Taking that into consideration, I can now quite confidently say that she has no urgent health concerns."

Ryan turned a bewildered expression on Conan, but the old doctor could only shrug. That was his answer too.

Misha continued, "First of all, as for the heart condition she supposedly suffered from since childhood, I can't see any relevant symptoms. Likely there was a small hole in the wall of her heart, but as she's grown, it's closed naturally. It appears she's had a cold recently, so her throat is a bit irritated. I imagine she'll have a slight cough for a bit longer, and eating solid food will leave her throat a little sore, but there is no issue with her lungs. Her bad breath leads me to believe her stomach may have a problem, but as she's expressed no subjective symptoms relating to her stomach, I don't believe it is of any great concern. Her fainting spells are likely due to anemia. Besides that, her poor diet and frequent bouts of illness

have considerably weakened her body. I will have to monitor her heart regularly, but it appears to me that her condition is currently improving. Her anemia, gastritis, and weak constitution can all be managed with improvements to her diet and daily routine. If she takes her medicine, she should recover with no problems."

Misha's detailed breakdown brought a frown to Ryan's face. He wasn't familiar with much of the medical terminology.

"In short?"

"Her life isn't in danger. The main causes of her current condition are her failure to take her medicine and her disordered lifestyle."

Lalaya's eyes went wide, her pale face turning slightly red. "How rude!"

"Of course, I understand the suffering you are going through. But refusing to take medicine or accept treatment means your symptoms won't improve. Many types of medicine will not dramatically and immediately improve your condition because they are designed to work slowly over time," Misha patiently explained to the angry princess.

Bemused, Conan watched the conversation. He had to struggle not to laugh thinking of the thoroughly opposite demeanors of the two girls who were otherwise so similar.

In truth, he had come to much the same conclusion Misha had. Though she'd been born prematurely, Lalaya had made it out of the stage of childhood in which her life was in danger. Since she had been so small and so weak for so long, others around her had ended up being overprotective and spoiling her. In the past, Conan himself had found the scolding she needed to hear dying in his throat in the face of her tears.

Now learning that his sister's life wasn't in danger, and feeling guilty at the realization he had been one of the main culprits responsible for spoiling her, Ryan had to avert his gaze from both girls.

"So, if she takes her medicine and improves her daily habits, she'll get better?" he muttered, getting an instant nod from Misha.

"Yes. I can't say much about her underlying constitution, but it should at least significantly decrease the frequency of her fainting,

and she shouldn't end up bedridden from simple colds."

Ryan glanced at the doctor. "Conan?"

"I concur. The issue for us was that Lady Lalaya had refused both my treatment and the other doctors' treatment," he replied with a polite bow.

The king closed his eyes as he sank into thought. A frown slowly crept upon his face.

"Ryan...?" Lalaya called out hesitantly, unsettled by her brother's reaction.

But without responding to her, the king opened his eyes and turned to Misha. "Would you be able to get her healthy again?"

Misha's surprised blink quickly gave way to a bright smile. Of course, she understood from her discussion with the maids earlier that working on Lalaya's day-to-day lifestyle would be backbreaking work. At the very least, the princess would doubtless resist vehemently through the first few days. That was why Misha had decided to wait until the end of the exam to ask for this permission.

"If you can promise me that I won't be punished for any disrespect I show her."

Now it was Ryan's turn to blink in surprise, but a mischievous grin quickly overtook his shock. "Then I'll leave it to you."

"Ryan?!" Lalaya all but screamed at her brother's quick assent.

As if Misha hadn't heard her, the little apothecary gave a polite, elegant bow. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Thus, Misha was appointed as Lalaya's attending physician. Although it was a prestigious position, it wouldn't be an easy one. The princess's constant screaming and shouting that began the next day were clear evidence of that. However, just as often as the princess's cries were heard echoing through the halls of the castle, so too were the apothecary's commands.

"Please get up."

"Stop being so picky and eat."

"Take your medicine."

Not to mention the constant sight of Misha chasing the princess through the halls with a bright smile on her face. And so now, everyone around the castle watched the princess's new life unfold

with bemusement.

Lalaya drank the juice provided to her with breakfast without the slightest effort to hide her displeasure at being forced out of bed. The drink was a beautiful green color, a mixture of various fruit, vegetables, and herbs.

At first, the color had made Lalaya wary of the beverage, but after trying it once, she found the sweetness of the fruit and the soft aroma of the herbs were actually delicious. Of course, having been forced to drink it the first time, that was never something she'd admit, but her expressions and demeanor while drinking were all the evidence those watching needed.

Lalaya had also taken a liking to the medicine Misha gave her. Misha had arranged it to be powdered with a sweet taste added to it or small pills that could easily be swallowed. All of it was done with consideration that the patient was a young girl. Misha had even prepared candy for Lalaya to wash the taste of medicine from her mouth. Well, those candies also had medicine in them to help with her anemia, but there was no need for the princess to know that.

"You're pretty good," Lalaya murmured, jabbing her fork into the array of breakfast food laid out in front of her. It was a good mixture of vegetables and proteins that were easy for her to enjoy despite her historically unbalanced diet. Lalaya herself knew that Misha had cooked up the arrangement personally with the head chef of the castle.

With the ongoing efforts to rebuild after the war, her brother had insisted on a serious and simplistic lifestyle for themselves, robbing her of many of these kinds of fun, happy experiences. She had grown to dislike eating after having been told to eat awful tasting food for so long, hearing things like "It's good for you" and "You need the nutrients."

But even though the base ingredients were the same, even something as simple as arranging the food aesthetically was a big help in overcoming Lalaya's trepidations, which were normal for a girl her age.

On that first morning, when Lalaya had been driven out of bed

and dragged to the breakfast table, she was stunned to see an assortment of apples cut into the shape of little bunnies and salad decorated with paprika flowers.

Lalaya gingerly picked up one of the apple bunnies. One time when she was young, she had been bedridden with a cold, so her mother had cut some apples for her. With no experience using knives herself, it had been quite the trial for her.

Back then, Lalaya had spent most of her life bedridden, but having her mother, father, and brother around meant she was nonetheless a happy girl. They had all regularly visited her in bed, stroking her hair and encouraging her, telling her she'd be better soon.

By pure chance, she had been at a remote treatment facility at the outbreak of the plague, meaning she had been entirely spared. The irony of it had her crying, laughing, and cursing the gods all at once. Yes, *she* had been spared, but her parents had been taken from her.

As she took a small bite, her mouth was filled with the gently sweet and sour flavor of the apple, easily gliding down her throat. She struggled to keep the feelings bubbling up inside from spilling out as she quietly made her way through the meal. She didn't want to admit something so simple would bring her to tears; all she could do was wrestle with it silently. She knew if she tried to say anything, the sobs would escape. She went on to take the medicine offered to her after the meal without resistance, leaving her no space to start refusing it after subsequent meals.

This morning, she was begrudgingly working her way through breakfast again. Of course, she was exaggerating how begrudged she felt.

"Why don't we take a walk through the rose garden today? The flowers are beautiful this time of year," Misha said, passing a cup of rose tea to the princess after she had finished eating.

"Now that I think about it..." After taking a sip of tea, Lalaya turned to look at Misha. "I heard your mother was one of the People of the Forest."

One of the maids all but shouted at the sudden shift in topic.

"Lady Lalaya!"

"What? Is it that weird to ask about someone's mother? And that tribe is renowned for having tons of knowledge. She should be proud of that heritage, shouldn't she?"

Lalaya's genuinely confused response sent Misha into a fit of laughter. Then she turned to Carrie and told her it was okay.

Although it barely felt real to her, Misha had heard plenty about her mother's background as one of the People of the Forest from Miranda. However, her mother hadn't ever told her about the village, and Misha had never been there. She could say only so much about them.

"As far as I've been told, yes, but my mother never mentioned anything about them. It's true that she taught me about herbs and medicine, but I don't know how much what she taught me differs from what the doctors and apothecaries of this kingdom know." Then Misha added with a smile, "But don't worry! Mr. Conan gave me his seal of approval."

Lalaya tilted her head. "Oh, really? I heard that the People of the Forest all have golden hair and jade-green eyes. You match the description perfectly. Still, there are lots of people with blond hair and green eyes around. What makes you different from them?"

"Who knows? My mother had the same color hair and eyes, so I never thought it was particularly unique."

Lalaya held up a lock of Misha's hair, bringing it closer for inspection. "Oh? It has an odd shine in the sunlight." Apparently noticing something, she laid Misha's hair in a beam of light coming in through the window. "Look at this, Carrie."

At the princess's instruction, the maid stepped closer. "My, you're right. It's almost like her hair is *glowing*."

"Not just that. It's pretty faint, but if you change the angle, it glitters in a rainbow, like topaz."



Misha picked up a lock of her own hair on the opposite side of her head and placed it under the sunlight.

"Now that you mention it... Yeah, sort of?"

Lalaya frowned, not so impressed with Misha's reaction. "What, you didn't know this about your own hair? It's really pretty."

"You think so?" Misha shyly smiled, tickled by the straightforward compliment.

"Of course! I've never seen hair that changes color like this. Now I see why people say this is a special trait you all have. What about your eyes? Do they change color too?"

As the princess leaned forward to peer into Misha's eyes, the maid couldn't bear it any longer, stepping in to hold the girl back. "Milady, you're being impolite."

"Fine, fine." At least temporarily satisfied with inspecting Misha's hair, Lalaya relented at the maid's scolding, returning to her chair.

Happily watching the two, Misha remembered her mother's hair.

Now that I think about it, she always kept the mirror away from the windows. I wonder if this is just a reaction to sunlight? But did it glow like that when we went for walks...? she thought to herself, staring dumbly at a length of her own hair.

"What's wrong, Misha?" Lalaya called out to her, snapping the apothecary out of her reverie.

"Oh, nothing." Misha shook her head.

I'll have to ask Miranda about it.

Unfortunately, the hectic days that followed swallowed up that question, leaving it unanswered for quite some time.

Chapter 8: The Cabin in the Garden and Miranda's Feelings

Misha was taking a leisurely stroll through a garden still wrapped in morning mist. There was a distinct chill lingering in the air, but being used to living in the deep forest, Misha found that more comfortable than the sweltering heat that had been lying over the capital recently.

The garden's blooming flowers were carefully cultivated and arranged. Taking a deep breath, she picked up a new, sweet smell.

"Is this...cymbidium?" It was a kind of flower she had only seen in books before. It was supposed to be a bright yellow flower that bloomed in midsummer. "I guess it's been really warm recently. Maybe the flowers thought it was summer already."

Having been frolicking around her feet, Ren stopped to look up at her. Obviously, he didn't respond, but as if he had understood what she said, he turned to one of the flowers, slowly and gently taking a bite.

"Are they yummy?" Initially surprised by his sudden attack on the flowers, she watched as he munched on them for a few moments before he broke off into another sprint. The gardens were empty this early in the morning, and he relished the opportunity to run without regard for his surroundings.

Misha felt guilty letting him romp around the carefully maintained castle despite having been told not to worry about it, so he ended up spending an awful lot of time in her room. She fretted that he wasn't getting nearly enough exercise.

Tia had smartly decided to bring him along to accompany the guards and hunting dogs being trained in the castle, but apparently the species barrier was making it difficult for him to settle in with them. To be precise, the other dogs were wary of him, so when they

were let go, they all kept a wide distance from him. Ren himself didn't seem to mind all that much, marching around the playground like he owned the place. The trainers had been impressed, saying it looked like he was going to be a big shot when he grew up.

Misha had yet to confess that Ren was a wolf from the mountains. Naturally, the trainers recognized he wasn't an ordinary dog, but the most they had concluded was that he must have had a bit of wolf blood somewhere in his family line. Ren himself didn't mind the training so much, but he was always most relaxed when he was with Misha, so these morning walks were great fun for him.

Watching him dash off with a giggle, Misha bent down and picked one of the yellow flowers, enjoying its aroma before starting off after the wolf pup again. Cymbidiums weren't particularly suited for cooking, but they were pretty enough that they'd make a good accent as decoration for the dining table. She would need to prepare Lalaya's breakfast soon anyway.

These early mornings were a precious bit of freedom for her lately. She always woke up Lalaya at the same time for her breakfast. At first, that had been quite the task, but the princess must have grown accustomed to it, considering there were fewer tantrums now. It wouldn't be long before Misha could leave the task of starting the princess's day to her maids.

Maybe I'll mix some inra into her juice today.

Inra was a fruit rich in nutrients, but it had a strong, sour taste. As Misha continued her walk, she thought over how best to mask that flavor. The castle's chefs prepared most of the princess's food, but this juice was closer to medicine, which Misha always put together herself.

But still... Misha sighed, spinning the flower in her fingers.

Lalaya was her sole patient these days; she was giving medicine to no one else. She had been getting by with her personal stockpile of herbs, but that was dwindling. She could probably request that more be brought to her, but she had always picked the herbs she used herself. In cases when that was impossible, she had at least picked them out by hand after someone else had collected them. Leaving it entirely to someone else felt wrong to her.

She had faced a similar problem back at her father's mansion, leaving her in quite the bind.

Really, the fact that medicine for royals was coming from herbs that Misha had picked who-knows-where was the actual exception being made, and Misha was the only one who didn't seem to realize that.

"What do I do...?"

"Is something the matter?"

The unexpected reply sent Misha spinning around in surprise.

"Good morning, Misha. You're up awfully early."

"Miss Miranda!" After a moment of stunned shock at her sudden appearance, Misha happily jumped into the arms of the older woman. "Where were you?! I was starting to wonder if you were ever coming back!"

Leaving little word except that she was going to "meet a friend," Miranda had been gone for ten days with no contact, which had troubled Misha.

"Sorry. It took me longer to find my friend than I'd thought, and I ended up having to go a lot farther," Miranda apologized as she stroked Misha's hair. Her gentle voice brought Misha back to her senses, making her realize just how childish she was acting.

The young girl quickly stepped away, her face flushed. "A-Anyway, welcome back. Have you eaten yet? We can have breakfast together if you like."

Miranda nodded, beaming at Misha's timid invitation. "I'm starving! I got here on the first carriage of the morning."

"I'll make sure there's lots of food!" With her hand in Miranda's, Misha pulled her along excitedly back to their room.

"Did you change rooms?" Miranda asked, confused about the room she was brought to.

They were in a small cabin in the corner of the garden. Likely built for the family of the gardener, it was quite old but still well maintained. And while it was comfortable, it was clearly a step down from a room in the palace itself.

Miranda's face took on a dark expression as she sat down at the

table in the middle of the mixed living room and kitchen. Misha stared at her confused for a moment before realization struck. She gasped, waving her hands in a panic.

"No, no, that's not it! I'm the one who asked to move here!"

Miranda could only watch as Misha seemed on the verge of hurting herself from flailing her arms around. Meanwhile, Misha's explanation poured out in a flurry.

"I'm used to living alone with my mother, so a fancy room like that, surrounded by servants, just isn't comfortable for me. I found this house wasn't being used when I was out for a walk one day, so I asked the king to move me in here. I can be alone, and there's water here, so it's better for working with herbs."

Misha all but scowled as she recalled how hard it had been to convince Ryan to let her live in "a place this shabby." Now that she realized their resistance had likely been at how they predicted Miranda would react, she felt bad for putting them in this situation—and she resented Geord a little bit for how much he had been laughing while he'd observed the whole conversation.

He should have said something! He must have known how Miranda would react if he found it that funny.

Miranda relaxed, judging that Misha was telling the truth. As Misha had said, based on her stories of what life with her mother was like, the brilliant life of a noble in the palace was likely too rigid and constraining for a girl like her. It was no wonder she had been desperate for a more private space.

Looking around the room once more, Miranda could see bundles of dried herbs lying in a space with good sunlight and air circulation. There also sat a small cistern of water with various tools used to make medicine arranged neatly around it.

The room was slowly but surely being remodeled into a space that fit Misha's tastes. Besides that, a second look revealed that while simple, the table and chairs where Miranda was sitting now were quite solid and comfortable. The people of the castle had likely done what they could to sneak in fixtures of the highest quality possible without arousing Misha's suspicion.

I bet the rest of the rooms are like this too.

It was clearly good enough that if any of her family happened to see it, they would never get the impression Misha was being treated poorly. And yet, Misha would be flustered if she were to learn just how high-grade her furniture was. Miranda couldn't stop the smile peeking through the corners of her mouth as she thought about the castle staff bending themselves over backward trying to treat Misha well but not in a way that the girl disliked.

"I see. If it's what you want, then I guess that's fine. It's a nice, cozy little place, isn't it? Does it have a room for me too?"

"Of course! If you don't mind, you are more than welcome to stay here!" Misha beamed happily as she quickly got to preparing breakfast.

After watching her work for a bit, Miranda returned to a casual inspection of the contents of the cabin. Eventually her eyes came across something out of place standing among the herbs hanging from the ceiling.

"What's this...?"

It was a large staff, just slightly taller than Miranda herself. The haft was smooth and glossy where one would hold it, but the head was rugged and knotted, evincing the natural, wild world. Hanging from the curved head was a small, old-fashioned square lantern. A large knot was left in the wood to mark the transition from polished staff to natural branch. The knot was thoroughly polished so that the user wouldn't hurt themselves on it, and it was decorated with a bundle of faded ribbons.

This was Leyas's staff. Or more accurately, it was something Leyas's mother had used in her travels when she was young. Leyas had seen it and decided she wanted to travel the world with it someday; Miranda had promised to go with her. Seeing it now, a wave of emotions struck Miranda. That staff was one of the very, very few things that Leyas had taken with her from the village when she'd left.

Miranda reached out for the decorative ribbons, tears collecting in her eyes. They were faded and frayed, speaking of the many long years they had endured.

"Ley... You kept these the whole time?"

The young and stubborn Miranda hadn't been able to bring herself to see her friend off in person. Instead, she snuck into Leyas's house the night before her departure and tied these ribbons to her staff. They were supposed to be a good luck charm for her travels and a prayer that she'd find even greater happiness abroad.

Miranda hadn't left any sign that the ribbons were her own doing, but they had been friends since the day Miranda was born. She had no doubt that Leyas had seen through her intentions, recognizing the clumsy attempt at kindness.

"A proper goodbye would have been so much better..." she murmured, a single tear streaking down her face.

The age of adulthood was later for People of the Forest than it was for others in Carmine. Other cultures considered one an adult at sixteen years old, but among the People of the Forest that was considered only an adolescent, meaning they still needed a proper adult to go with them if they were to travel outside the village.

They didn't obtain full freedom to travel on their own until they were twenty. At that age they were recognized as a full adult, granted all the privileges and responsibilities that entailed. Being three years younger than Leyas, Miranda had needed to wait quite a while to gain that freedom after Leyas's departure.

She had known there was a good chance she'd never see her friend again, but young as she had been, Miranda hadn't been able to accept Leyas's decision to cut ties with her and leave the village. Even after she'd been allowed to leave the village, the passage of time had left her unsure how to approach Leyas, and so Miranda had never visited her, shielding herself with the excuse she wasn't supposed to interact with people who had left the village for good. One could say that had made matters much worse.

In the end, that day had been their final goodbye. Ever since Miranda learned that, she'd regretted it. However, even after all this time, her last gesture toward Leyas was still tied tight around that staff.

Leyas had been a kind and gentle mentor for Miranda. She might have even shrugged off Miranda's bitter treatment, knowing full well how stubborn her friend was. And someday, when Miranda had

worked up the courage to see her again, Leyas had decided she'd show her that those ribbons were still tied there, and she'd thank her for them. This was only Miranda's speculation, but the thought gave her a small measure of consolation.

"Hmm, Ley... Were you happy?" she repeated the same question again, one she had asked last time through tears and sobs. And somewhere deep in her heart, she felt she heard the reply come back: *Of course.*

Miranda smiled, one more tear coursing its way down her cheek.

A fluffy omelet, cooked with plenty of milk and butter, was lined up beside a row of crispy bacon. More food was at the ready: salad made from a mix of fresh vegetables with a vinegar dressing, a consommé featuring a variety of root vegetables and beans, and a mix of oranges and apples cut into tiny cubes that were blanketed with yogurt and honey. For bread, there was a basket of rich, buttery rolls and pastries.

"Castle staff gave me the ingredients, but they let me cook for myself. I hope you like it," Misha said, finally bringing a steaming pot of tea over and pouring a cup for Miranda. "Thanks for waiting."

"It looks amazing."

Sitting across from each other, the two began their breakfast.

The fluffy omelet was lightly cooked, giving the eggs a texture that went perfectly with the tomato sauce on top. Additionally, the sour dressing was the same as the dressing Leyas used to make.

I seem to remember bickering with her over it being too sour.

Biting down on the feelings building inside her as her teeth tore into a roll, Miranda looked across at Misha as the girl turned her elegant cutlery on the meal before her. There was no impression of her usage of the utensils being performative. It seemed she was quite accustomed to using them even in ordinary life. Her mother had likely worked hard to ensure her daughter wouldn't be caught flat-footed no matter what situation she found herself in.

As breakfast was coming to a close, Misha shared the current situation with her.

"By the way, since you left, I've been entrusted with Lady Lalaya's

health."

Misha talked about her opportunity to give the princess a medical exam as well as her involvement in the girl's treatment, which included her adjustments to the princess's diet and the herbs she was using to treat her.

"I see. If that's working, I see no issue with continuing like that. The princess's heart concerns me, though. If we do suspect that it used to be irregular and has truly improved as she's aged, you might be right that it healed of its own accord, but it looks to me like she's stopped growing altogether. Things might change once she gets the proper nutrition again," Miranda said as they drank their tea. "I also wonder if her anemia is really just an issue of malnutrition. Have you been keeping a close eye on her condition?"

Misha nodded, a bit caught out by Miranda's sudden shift to a serious tone. "Her complexion and the color in her eyelids have slightly improved. Her constant fatigue and dizziness are both diminishing as well."

Miranda nodded quietly, sinking into thought. The silence unnerved Misha, but Miranda didn't pursue the subject, changing the topic entirely.

"But that's not what you were worried about back in the garden, right? What were you thinking of back then?"

Misha took a moment to understand, but she quickly figured out what Miranda meant.

"Oh, that. I'm about to run out of herbs in my own collection. I'd like to go into town and visit some herbalists, or maybe I can go out into the mountains and do my own harvesting, but everyone seems so busy, and I doubt they'll let me go into town by myself."

Miranda grimaced at Misha's troubled look. Although Misha didn't seem to appreciate it, her current position was the daughter of foreign royalty, studying here as a guest of honor. If she were to go into town and something were to happen to her, it would immediately explode into an international incident. Considering the relatively weak position Bluheitz was in, Misha's status was something closer to that of a hostage, but Redford couldn't ignore Misha's status and knowledge.

Of course, being raised alone in the forest isolated from civilization meant there was no way Misha could guess at such political motivations.

Miranda turned the problem over in her head. It was likely possible that she could lead an excursion out of the castle on Misha's behalf. They'd likely be assigned two or three knights as an escort, but that would be the case whoever led the party. However, as one of the People of the Forest, Miranda herself was also under observation. Visiting herbalists in person might invite unwanted attention. However, as one of the People of the Forest, Miranda's people always had their eyes on her.

Misha's place among the People of the Forest was uncertain at the moment. She was the daughter of someone who had abandoned the village, so it was hard to say whether they would see her as one of their own.

Their village was quite a distance from here, severely limiting their means of communication. The best solution would be for Miranda to head back and explain the situation herself, but that would mean leaving Misha on her own for an extended period of time, and she didn't want to leave the girl unattended in such a tumultuous situation. Instead, Miranda had entrusted her report to one of her close friends.

She could easily see the village splitting into two groups, one saying that with Misha's mother gone, Misha needed to be brought back to the village immediately, and another claiming that an estranged mother made an estranged daughter, meaning they couldn't let her waltz back into their lives.

Under normal circumstances, this would not be much of an issue, but even outdated as it was, Misha's knowledge of the People of the Forest complicated things. Additionally, she wished to be an apothecary. And as expected of Leyas's daughter, she was a smart kid. Her skills were rough and stilted, but if trained properly, she would definitely become an influential force among the People of the Forest.

But how do you explain that to those stubborn elders...?

"Miss Miranda?" Misha's concerned voice brought Miranda back to

the present. Looking up, she saw that same concern written plainly across the girl's face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got a bit lost in thought," Miranda replied with a shrug, and Misha relaxed a little. "But yes, herbs—I heard the palace just built their own herb garden recently. I wonder if we could use that?" Miranda suggested.

Misha's eyes flew open. "They have a whole herb garden here?"

"You didn't know? I guess the king ordered it created as an experiment about two years ago. Until now, those sorts of things were all small, individual efforts, so I was quite curious about the kingdom heading up an initiative like that in an official capacity. I never heard news of it being closed, so it may still be running."

"A royal herb garden..." Misha grinned at the sweet sound of those words.

A kingdom with trade ties as strong as Redford's likely had access to herbs from all over the world. Even if there wasn't anything particularly rare, she had already made use of many powdered and dried herbs that she had never had the chance to see alive and growing. She might even find them fresh in the garden. The thought of discovering new plants had her eyes sparkling like she was a girl in love. Though the color tinging her cheeks was sourced from feelings about as far from romantic as you could get, it was undeniably adorable.

"I didn't hear any news of it being closed, but I also didn't hear any news of it accomplishing anything... Oh, you're not listening anymore, are you?"

Miranda gave a small sigh and downed the last of her lukewarm tea, watching Misha's mind race its way out the window.

Chapter 9: Problems in the Herb Garden

At the center of Redford's capital was a large lake. Fed from underground springs, it had remained clean since the time of the kingdom's founding, and so it had become the primary source of water for all residents of the capital. Its fish were a key source of food. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that this lake's presence was what had led to the founding of Redford in the first place. It was undeniably a symbol of pride for the people of the kingdom.

A short distance away from the castle, a small portion of land had been sectioned off as a public park for the people to enjoy. One section of that park had been divided off to create an herb garden, which the general public did not have access to. Unlike the library, which accepted all visitors, access to the garden was highly restricted, requiring prospective visitors to get permission. That said, a request from Misha was all it took for her to be granted access for her study of its plants. However, Misha did miss one thing during her request, and it was something that Miranda had very much noticed: Tris was not pleased when he gave her permission.

And now Misha was in that very garden.

"What? They're not very effective?" she asked.

A young man named Adol all but apologized, introducing himself as the chief caretaker of the herb garden. "Mmm, unfortunately. I do not believe they will be of much value to you. We don't know why they're like this. Through some trial and error, we were able to grow a variety of medicinal herbs, but they are less than half as effective as those grown elsewhere. It is almost like they are just weeds masquerading as medicinal herbs."

The weariness in his demeanor made it clear he took this failure rather personally.

At present, medicinal herbs were generally procured by harvesting them from the wild. Efforts to cultivate them on a large scale were still very much in the experimental phase. Even if this project had been a failure, it wasn't like they had expected results in a day. Anyone who had given the issue serious thought would know this was a part of the process.

However, Adol was hard on himself. He was giving the project everything he had. Many people had worn themselves out over the long days of unfamiliar work, trying to put what little knowledge they could glean from the literature into practice through extended periods of trial and error.

And while they struggled to approach anything close to success, along came some to hit them while they were down. People began to label the whole project as useless and pointless. Voices started loudly calling for its funding to be reallocated to importing and harvesting herbs that grew naturally, rather than wasting the kingdom's resources on a garden that was bearing no fruit. The king himself was the last defender of the project, the only reason it hadn't been entirely abolished.

"We are trying something new. There are bound to be numerous setbacks. You have to think of this effort in the time frame of decades, not single years."

The whole project had begun at the request of the king, so the lack of immediate results wasn't a strong enough argument to have it entirely shut down. The project's primary goal was to research the cultivation of these herbs, so if they were producing poor quality plants with their efforts, it was just as much part of their mission to investigate why.

The workers were thankful for the king's understanding and support, but his protection of this failed project stood out as uniquely naive for a man who otherwise had risen to his position by getting results. A portion of the nobility took umbrage with the situation, and they even went out of their way behind the scenes to make life difficult for those on the project.

With little to show for their efforts, the project's workers lacked a leg to stand on, and they didn't have the power to stop the harassment. This, of course, only served to embolden their harassers. This cold treatment was driving away members from the project. With emotional abuse added on top of physical stress, Adol found he could do nothing but grit his teeth as he watched them go.

When he heard that someone who was rumored to be from the People of the Forest was coming to inspect the garden, he wanted to scream. There was also talk that she had taken on the mantle of private physician to the king's younger sister, nursing the princess back to health after even the court physicians had been forced to give up.

Though Adol was a noble himself, he was the third son in his family; he was unlikely to be the successor. If he somehow offended this guest of the king, he had no idea what kind of punishment would be levied against him, and he had no political power to protect himself from it. Having given up on his family business immediately, he had apprenticed himself to an apothecary. (He couldn't stand the sight of blood, so he'd also given up on being a doctor.) He must have possessed some talent in the field, as he had distinguished himself quickly. When his master had recommended him for the herb garden project, he had considered it a lucky break —a chance to make a real name for himself.

In the worst case, hopefully my head will be enough to satisfy them, Adol thought.

He had pessimistically prepared for a huge group to descend upon the garden, but the entourage was much smaller than he'd anticipated: the guest, a knight as escort, and one of her attendants. They hadn't even traveled by carriage. They had simply walked. Even if they were fairly close to the castle, they were still far enough away that no daughter of a noble should have been walking.

The guest was dressed rather plainly, almost as if she were trying to disguise herself, but even her simple clothing couldn't hide her natural beauty. On top of that, the brilliant, almost shining golden hair spilling out from under her hat and the startling jade-green eyes peering out from her face were striking. These were exactly the

features possessed by the People of the Forest that Adol had heard about.

After a bit of an awkward trek to the reception room, the conversation from before had begun. The shock she'd expressed at the state of the garden made Adol feel pathetic, but there was nothing of the scorn that usually accompanied such surprise. Instead, he felt something accepting—empathetic, even. Before he knew it, he was pouring his heart out to this young girl. He told himself he was pitiful, that no one wanted to hear his gripes. However, once the floodgates were open, there was no stopping the water. He had resolved himself to believe losing his job would be the best outcome of this meeting, but now he had entirely lost control.

Meanwhile, Misha could only listen to his story with wide-eyed astonishment. She had come here to ask about herbs; instead, she was inundated with the travails of setting up and running the royal herb garden. Adol's intensity left no room for her to interject, so she was forced to quietly wait until he was finished. Between the torment in his hazel eyes, the shaggy disarray of his brown hair, and his awful complexion, she could tell just how much pressure Adol was living under. He was like a thread pulled taut, ready to break.

Looks like he's pretty stressed. Reminds me of when Nene had her first child, Misha thought.

Misha knew that when people got like this, the best way to calm them down was to let them speak their piece without interruption. Even if they were talking to a child, that chance to put their worries into words was invaluable.

Back when Misha had accompanied her mother on visits to nearby villages, she'd encountered a woman named Nene. She always came to them wailing, then she'd talk, drink her tea, calm down, and head home with a smile. She had moved to the village from far away for a marriage and become pregnant almost immediately. With no one around her she could rely on, the mental stress had driven her into a corner. If Adol had realized Misha was comparing him to that newlywed, he might just have collapsed himself. But for better or worse, he was so engrossed in telling his own tale that he couldn't see the true nature of Misha's sympathy.

After all of his venting, Misha sighed quietly, realizing the garden was not in good shape. There would be no herbs from overseas. They couldn't even properly grow herbs that were native to the area.

Two years had passed since the garden's creation. With no leads on the cause of their failure, anxiety and fear had driven away a great many of the workers. It was no wonder Adol was so stressed.

But why won't they grow properly? she pondered.

With her home being in the middle of the forest, Misha had always been able to collect any herbs she needed by stepping outside. She had never had a need to cultivate the plants herself. Besides, life in the wilderness didn't allow much room for spending time and energy on things that weren't absolutely necessary.

Her mother's bad leg had stopped her from going very far into the forest, so Misha had occasionally uprooted plants from farther away and replanted them closer to their house. Her mother had possessed such a green thumb that Misha's only involvement after their replanting was to water them occasionally. This project's kind of cultivation was entirely outside the little apothecary's realm of expertise.

However, there had been the garden her mother had started at her father's estate. It had been left to go wild, but it had still been there. It had mostly been a hobby project for her mother, so it wasn't particularly large in scale, but there had been no sign that the plants growing there were any weaker than the ones Misha had found in the forest. The little plot hadn't been home to a great variety of herbs, and not all of them had survived the years after her mother had stopped taking care of them, but there had been some hardy survivors poking up among the weeds.

In other words, if there were some herbs that could survive untended after all that time, the fact that all the plants grown here were less than half as effective as their wild counterparts was unusual.

Halfway through Adol's story, she'd already concluded, *I guess I'll have to see for myself.*

She waited until he had finally talked himself out. A little dazed from his tirade, he sat across from her as she refilled his teacup. He

took it from her at her kind insistence, but he brought it to his lips rather sluggishly.

I guess he's talked himself out. He'll probably come back to his senses shortly, and then the wave of exhaustion will hit him like a brick... I should see if I can turn his attention elsewhere before that happens. But why do adults always live under so much pressure?

The image of the maids back at her father's mansion, working sleepless through the night to take care of the wounded, floated forward from a back corner of her mind. However, because she knew that had been one reason for what had led to the events that followed, she quickly cut off that line of thought—not to mention the quiet realization that she wasn't really one to talk.

People throw themselves into their work to avoid having to look at the things they don't want to. I guess the maids were trying to avoid confronting the idea of death. Then, Adol must be worried about the future of the herb garden. And I...

Misha shook her head, dispelling her half-formed thoughts. This wasn't the time or place.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Caretaker, would I be able to see the garden for myself? Maybe the fact I'm a novice will give me a fresh perspective on things."

Misha's request seemed to snap the man out of his daze. "Ah...yes, of course. Also, please, just call me Adol. No need to be so formal."

"Mr. Adol, then? I'm Misha. I'm a fledgling apothecary, so please just call me by my first name. You're so much older than me anyway."

Adol immediately shook his head. "Absolutely not. You are the king's guest. There is no way I could be so rude as to speak so casually to you."

"But why? I told you, I'm a young apothecary in training, that's all..."

They spent a short while arguing over how formal they were going to be with each other. Although they eventually came to an agreement, both of them quietly grumbled about how stubborn the other was. That said, the discussion had done a great deal to soften

the tension between them, so it hadn't all been for nothing.

"Very well, Lady Misha." Adol stood with a dramatic clearing of his throat, his complexion already much improved. "Please allow me to walk you to the garden." He made a big show of offering her his arm, a sign he had recovered quite a bit from his earlier depression.

"Thank you kindly, good sir," Misha replied with a similar dramatic flair, placing a hand on his arm, but she couldn't keep herself from bursting out laughing. Adol responded to her giggling fit with a smile of his own before guiding her in a leisurely stroll through the garden.

Seeing the unusually bright expression on his face, the other workers they passed had to wonder if he had just received some rather good news.

Adol escorted her to a place that better resembled a private garden than a field of cultivated plants. The trees had been cleared, and the ground was divided into sections, each containing its own growing herbs. The early summer wind coming in off the lake glided through the leaves, and though there was nothing as showy as a rose, the plainer flowers of the herbs still bloomed proudly, creating a calm and relaxing atmosphere.

"It's so pretty." Misha let out a breath in admiration, looking out over the garden.

It would have been quite a moving sight if the herbs were flashier, but there was a kind of calculated beauty to it. Being on the shore of the lake created a wide, sweeping view with a pleasant breeze. Since this was the first trip Misha had taken while leaving Ren at home, she had to imagine how excited he'd be to run around in a place like this.

"The gardeners of the castle were quite helpful in that regard," Adol declared with a proud puff of his chest...but his shoulders quickly slumped. "Unfortunately, the prevailing opinion seems to be that the only value it has is aesthetic."

Noticing the darkness in Adol's eyes, Misha checked around the garden once more, this time observing it as an apothecary. "This is a cedes plant?"

Cedes had some pain and fever relieving properties and readily

grew in a plethora of environments, so it was a valuable and easy to find herb. The plants were growing quite profusely, leaves large and thick. The stalks were also quite solid, and the flowers were rather large compared to others she had seen in the past.

"That's right. They were one of our first herbs thanks to how easy they are to take care of. We have carin and toryk as well."

Those were both plants with subdued medicinal effects, but they grew remarkably quickly.

Following where Adol was pointing, Misha indeed saw some familiar plants—but they were larger and greener than the ones she had remembered.

"They look to be doing quite well. And there's no sign of insect damage..." Misha said, tearing a leaf off a nearby cedes plant and popping it in her mouth, an unconscious habit formed from her time harvesting plants in the wild.

Her mother had taught her to recognize plants by their taste and smell when she was first learning. Adding taste and smell alongside sight provided more information, and that made it easier for her to remember them. Naturally, medicinal herbs were far from tasty. The violently bitter flavors had brought a young Misha to tears on more than one occasion.

"Hmm? It tastes kind of...watery?"

But that familiar gesture turned up an unfamiliar result. Cedes was a remarkably bitter herb. Even after being dried and reduced to a powder, that bitterness remained—to the point it was a struggle to get children to take it. Despite being cheap and effective, it was rather unpopular. Naturally, it was extremely bitter when it was unprocessed. This was one of those plants that Misha had struggled with when she was young, but this time, it held almost none of the bitterness she remembered. The scent of the plant was also weaker, the sharp, minty aroma virtually undetectable.

Misha studied the leaf in her hand. It was larger and thicker than she remembered, but it was definitely a cedes leaf.

"This is one of the weak herbs?" she asked, turning to Adol, who grimaced.

"If you want the normal effect, you'll need to use about three

times more. Effectively, it's useless."

"Three times..." Misha echoed with a grimace. The standard dosage of processed cedes was two fingertips' worth. Even if the characteristic bitterness was gone, needing three times that much would be a hard sell to anyone. "But they look so nice."

The leaves were bright and glossy, no sign of being touched by insects. Glancing down at the earth, Misha saw that it was dark and soft. There were basically no weeds. Lots of people were putting in plenty of effort to make sure they grew well, but they weren't getting results. It was no wonder the people cultivating these plants were demotivated.

Walking around the garden, Misha discovered the same thing all over. Despite the size and vibrancy of the plants, their tastes and smells came through thin and weak.

"Have you discovered anything?" Adol asked, a hint of desperation in his face, but Misha could only shake her head.

"Both the soil and water are fine, and no matter how pessimistic you may be, it's clear that the plants are growing wonderfully. I have no idea why they're turning out so weak, but there has to be a reason. Do you mind if I take some time to think about it?"

He had initially been crestfallen, but her intentions lifted his spirits. "Please, by all means. We are honestly at our wit's end. I'd be happy to hear any kind of opinion you can muster."

And then a drop of water fell between them.

"Looks like it's about to rain."

The gray sky that had hung over them all morning seemed finally ready to give up its tears. With the amount of rain they'd seen recently, it was honestly more surprising they had made it this far into the afternoon dry.

As the rain poured down steadily harder, the group quickly made its way back indoors. Just as they made it inside, the clouds really let go, sending rain down in sheets. After they returned to the reception room, Adol handed them some towels from a shelf to wipe themselves off.

"You walked here, right? I will arrange for a carriage to take you back. Please wait here a moment."

“Hold on a...second...” Misha said, trailing off once Adol, still soaking wet, dashed out of the room.

Left hanging, Misha turned her gaze to the window. She could see a portion of the garden from here. The greenery in the garden danced happily under the heavy rain.

“He said they haven’t been able to harvest any of the seeds or bark from the trees yet. I wonder if they’re as weak as the other plants?” Misha murmured.

“If they were raised in the same way, I imagine so.”

Misha jumped at the unexpected reply, turning to see Miranda standing right behind her with an amused grin.

“Oh... Was I talking out loud?”

“Just a whisper,” Miranda chuckled at Misha’s flush.

Though a little embarrassed, she nonetheless asked for Miranda’s thoughts. “What do you think? Do you know why?”

Being obviously a much better apothecary than Misha, Miranda might have noticed something Misha hadn’t. Miranda was as much a teacher as she was a guardian for Misha, who had no inhibitions about going to the older woman for help when she needed it.

Miranda’s eyes went wide, a bit taken off guard by Misha’s childlike straightforwardness. Doctors and apothecaries tended to be very proud people. Even if they thought someone else might have the answer, few would be willing to ask for help so directly.

“I have my theories,” Miranda murmured after a short silence, stepping alongside Misha. She continued, staring out the window. “But I think you can figure it out if you think a bit longer.”

“I can?” Misha echoed. Following Miranda’s gaze, Misha found nothing new. Just the same plants, now growing behind a haze of rain. As the girl sank into thought with a frown, Miranda gave a small sigh and patted her on the head.

“I’ll give you one hint: Plants live by putting roots into the ground.”

To Misha, it sounded more like a riddle than a hint. She didn’t have time to reflect on it for long, though. The door to the room swung open at that moment; Adol was back, and the carriage was ready. Miranda returned to her spot on the wall, falling silent like a

good attendant. And maybe because Adol accompanied them on the ride back to the castle, she didn't say another word for their entire trip. She disappeared somewhere as soon as they arrived, sending a message that she didn't have any interest in getting further involved in this situation.

Once she returned to her room, Misha prepared a cup of her favorite herbal tea to enjoy by the window.

Plants live by putting roots down into the ground...

She turned the hint over in her mind.

Unable to go outside and bored from being trapped at home all day, Ren shot Misha an exasperated look before yawning and plopping his head down on his front paws, eyes closed. Meanwhile, Misha's gaze was locked on the window and the heavy rain pouring down outside of it.

Chapter 10: The Terrifying Karas

"It's been raining so much these days," Lalaya muttered after a sip of her tea, which she partook in following her meals. "The air feels sticky from the humidity. I hate it."

Despite her condition having substantially improved, her weak constitution meant changes in the weather still hit her hard. She was eating more and more, but the recent weather had caused her appetite to nose-dive again, something Misha wasn't sure how to deal with.

"Has it been raining more than usual?" Misha asked.

Lalaya sighed and shook her head. "The rainy season is a bit early this year. Normally, all the rain brings the temperature down too. Lots of people don't like that part because they can't go out much, but it's actually more comfortable for me." She placed her empty teacup on the table, which Carrie dutifully stepped in to refill.

"My apologies for interrupting. I believe karas season will open soon. Shall I put in a request for some?" Carrie, a maid, asked after she finished pouring the tea.

Lalaya's eyes immediately lit up, but Misha had no idea what the maid was talking about.

"Oh! I guess it is about that time of year, isn't it?" Lalaya said happily.

Seeing Misha's confusion, Carrie explained, "Karas live in the lake. They're quite nutritious, and they're a staple food in the summer when the heat has dampened people's appetites. Their breeding season, during which their harvesting is forbidden, begins immediately after the snow thaws, but that will soon end. It has been a regular part of Lady Lalaya's diet ever since she was little," she said, her explanation strangely hesitant.

Seeing how intently Misha listened to the explanation, a mischievous grin took to Lalaya's face. "You're an apothecary, but

you don’t know what a karas is? Even though they’re used to make medicine?”

“Sorry, I’ve never heard of it.” While she was a bit irritated by Lalaya’s smug attitude, if Misha didn’t know, then she didn’t know. All she could do was apologize.

“That is not much of a surprise. They may be easy enough to catch for citizens of the capital, but they apparently live only in the lake here. Additionally, they are not easy to keep fresh, which means they are rarely exported,” Carrie said, glancing at Lalaya from the corner of her eye. It was meant to chastise, but from Lalaya’s reaction of a small pout and a shrug, Misha assumed the princess was accustomed to such rebukes from her lifelong maid.

“Once we get some, we should have Misha try it with us. I think it’ll be a valuable new experience,” the princess said.

“Thank you. I’d love to,” Misha replied, quite happy with Lalaya’s straightforward invitation, all the while missing the hesitation on Carrie’s face.

Lalaya giggled. “Good. It’s a promise.”

It would be two days before Misha understood the truth behind Lalaya’s amusement.

“This is a karas.”

After the castle staff obtained some of the creatures, Misha joined Ryan and Lalaya for dinner. Peering into the bucket the royal siblings showed her, she just about screamed. They had said the karas were harvested from the lake, so she had assumed it was a kind of fish, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Instead, she was presented with a bucket of lizard-like things with toad-like skin. No, they weren’t quite lizards. Their faces were flat and wide like a catfish’s, and their bodies were similarly proportioned. Their backs were covered in warts but also had a slippery appearance.

In a word, they were *ugly*. Definitely not the kind of creature a young girl would take a liking to. On top of that, the thirty-centimeter-long creatures were piled up and wriggling around in a bucket. It was a miracle that she had kept in the scream at all.

Lalaya laughed as Misha recoiled back in her chair. Ryan sighed, seeing how perfectly his sister's prank had worked. Even to people like them who had grown up with these things, they weren't exactly a pleasant sight. The sheer number of them in the bucket didn't help either.

"H-How do you eat them?" Misha stammered, face pale.

Lalaya flashed a mischievous grin. "All sorts of ways. Fry them, boil them...but the best way is to eat the hearts, innards, and blood raw. Oh, you can eat the meat raw too—if it's fresh. It's quite good with a marinade."

Frightened, Misha gawked at the bucket as it was taken away, images of the writhing creatures still vivid in her head.

They eat those raw*?!*

She knew of medical techniques that involved drinking the blood or eating the raw innards of certain animals, but she'd never used any of them. On top of that, being raised in the forest meant she had never experienced eating raw fish, making it even more alien to her. But more than anything, the natural ugliness of the karas were enough to trigger a sense of revulsion.

"I know this is a unique custom to our kingdom. You don't have to force yourself," Ryan tried to give her an avenue of escape. "Showing it to her like that was too mean, Lalaya."

"What do you mean? Don't you think it would have been a bigger shock for her to discover what they looked like afterward?" Lalaya replied with a shrug, causing Misha to stop and think if she was actually right. She wasn't quite sure.

"Can we start with cooked ones at least?" Misha asked. She couldn't deny her curiosity if they were used to make medicine, but she wasn't quite brave enough to try raw karas yet.

Ryan gave an apologetic nod at Misha's compromise as the two of them did their best to ignore Lalaya's snickers.

"I know they look disgusting, but they actually taste quite good," he said. "The taste is pretty understated, but the texture's nice. I personally like them boiled with tomatoes."

When the karas dishes came out, Misha found they were in fact quite good, just as Ryan had assured her. The karas in each dish had

a unique texture and none of the smell she'd expected. That said, the memories of lizards squirming in a bucket had already taken their toll on her appetite.

Meanwhile, Lalaya watched Misha struggling from the corner of her eye, nonchalantly drinking a mixture of karas blood and wine. The way she seemed so accustomed to drinking from a wine glass caught Misha's attention.

"Is there nothing but wine and blood in that?"

Lalaya shrugged, turning to the maid at her side.

"Many people drink it like that, but as Lady Lalaya is still underage, the wine is boiled to weaken the alcohol, then some herbs and juices are added to make it a bit easier to drink."

"Kids normally drink it with watered-down wine, but I like it this way better. Do you want to try?"

Considering the smell and flavor of raw blood, people generally put some work into making it a bit more palatable. Misha was so relieved to hear that the wine Lalaya was drinking had the alcohol boiled out of it. While it was hard to argue with a nation's customs, alcohol would not treat an underdeveloped body like hers well.

"Sure, I suppose I can give it a try." After hearing the maid's explanation, Misha was confident it was safe enough. She had never drunk wine before, but it would probably be fine with the alcohol removed. And above all, she couldn't fight her curiosity.

The glass handed to her contained a beautiful ruby liquid. As she swirled the drink around in the glass, small particles floated around. Those were probably the herbs the maid had mentioned.

"Lemon, mint, ginger, rudbeckia nectar...and what else?" she said, closing her eyes and breathing in the aroma. The smell of the wine made it difficult for her to pick out the scents of the individual ingredients.

"Apple juice and chante peel. The wine used as a base incorporates apples and a number of berries, so that will probably mask many of the smells."

Misha smiled a thank-you at the maid before taking a sip. The first and biggest impression was the flavor of the grapes, followed shortly by a soft harmony of flavors expanding in her mouth. There

was something darker lurking beneath the surface, which she suspected was the karas blood. Misha closed her eyes and worked her jaw a bit, teasing out the underlying flavor of the drink. The word that came to mind was *life*.

"What do you think?" Ryan asked.

Everyone around the table had come to a stop, holding a collective breath as Misha had tested the beverage.

Her eyes suddenly snapped open, shining bright.

"It's exceptionally easy to drink. The herbs and juice were blended perfectly, each adding something to the drink without hindering the other ingredients." She then downed the rest of the glass in a single motion. "It's also making me feel really warm inside. Is that the ginger? I don't know what can be done with the karas blood without testing it out myself, but if you want to enhance the nutritional aspect, you might try replacing the lemon with inra juice."

Seeing she quite plainly enjoyed it, the maid refilled Misha's glass.

As the meal continued, Ryan was the first to notice something was wrong. Misha was smiling as much as always, but she was far more energetic and talkative than usual.

"You're turning a little red, aren't you, Misha?" he asked.

"Huh? Am I? Ahhh, now that you mention it, I am feeling sooorta hot. I guess it's the ginger?" she said with a silly grin, her speech starting to slur.

"Hold on, you're not getting drunk off that, are you?"

Even if it had been thoroughly heated to remove much of the alcohol, wine was still wine. It was possible the trace amounts of alcohol left over would affect her if she drank too much of it.

"How much has she had?" Ryan asked the maid standing behind her.

"Three glasses, I believe," the maid replied, confused.

That would be a perfectly safe amount for most people, but everyone reacted to alcohol differently. This being Misha's first time with alcohol, her complete lack of tolerance wouldn't come as a surprise.

Ryan's shoulders slumped, feeling guilty for letting her get so carried away. She had just been enjoying it so much; he hadn't

wanted to interfere. He had to wonder if a certain caretaker of hers would take umbrage with this little indiscretion.

Misha's face had flushed bright red, and her eyes were starting to droop, so Ryan looked around the table for help. From the maids shaking their heads, to Lalaya watching with open amusement, to Kino standing expressionless by the wall, it seemed help was nowhere to be found. He'd have to do something about this problem himself.

With a sigh, Ryan stood up, preparing to take responsibility.

"Misha, can you stand?"

Now that she wasn't talking, it seemed Misha was on the verge of falling asleep, her eyes barely open. She was in no condition to continue the meal—or so Ryan wanted to tell her, but her reactions were sluggish.

What's Miranda going to do when she finds out? Surely I won't be punished for something small like this, right? Or maybe getting a kid drunk is too much even if it wasn't intentional, he thought in a panic.

As fear started to work its way through him, Misha reached up to him with both hands. It was like she was a small child asking to be picked up.

"Okay, I'm going to carry you to your room." Ryan lifted her like he would a small child, not wanting her head to dip and cause the alcohol to rush to her brain.

Her summer clothing was light enough that he could feel her slightly elevated temperature through it. In just a few quick moments, her head had already dropped to rest on his shoulder. Doing his best to ignore the scent of flowers coming off her, he walked as fast as he could without shaking Misha too much, aiming for her room. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he swore Kino was laughing at him as the butler led him through the halls. That was a touch annoying.

I'd give you a kick if I didn't have this girl in my arms, he grumbled internally.

However, that bundle of warmth in his arms—this girl who had entrusted herself to him—was more than enough to stop that wish from coming true.

I was so worried about Lalaya that maybe I didn't stop to think about Misha enough, he thought, now that the tension was easing up.

Misha was so light in his arms it felt like he was carrying no more than a cat.

"She's two years younger than Lalaya, right? Are girls her age supposed to be this small?"

The only girl around her age he knew was his sister, but he of course understood she wasn't a reliable standard for a healthy individual.

"She is doubtless a little small for her age, but seeing her diet and behavior, it is clear she is quite healthy. I imagine she is naturally small," Kino replied quietly, not turning to look back.

"I see."

Misha tried to lift her head, just about tumbling out of Ryan's arms. She must have heard them talking. Ryan overcompensated in his efforts to keep her steady, pressing her harder to himself than he intended. Unlike what he could recall of his siblings, she was so light and soft that he had to wonder if she even had bones.

Doing his best to hide the fact that his heart had just skipped a beat, Ryan made his way into Misha's room and laid her on her bed. As her warmth left his arms, he had the strange sensation of something cold stealing into his heart as well. The feeling was unfamiliar enough that he had no way to express it, so he simply stepped out of the bedroom without a word.

With Misha returning so unexpectedly when she was supposed to be at a meal, her maids Tia and Isabella flew into a flurry of activity. Ryan was promptly awash with relief that Miranda wasn't present. Even if she could hide her appearance by changing the color of her hair and eyes, she had a strength of presence that was impossible to miss. The way she questioned people, smiling with eyes still ice-cold, was enough to make a grown man cry.

As he dropped down onto the couch in Misha's living room, one of the maids immediately slipped a cup of tea in front of him.

"Lady Miranda will likely be returning tomorrow afternoon," Kino commented, the undertone of *How lucky you are* coming through

clear enough to draw a tired glare from the king.

Once Misha had started to settle into her life in the castle, Miranda, the other woman from the People of the Forest, had regularly started making excursions from the castle. As far as they knew, she was following up with her people, but the details about her activities were still a mystery. He had reluctantly sent someone to follow her once, but she had evaded them effortlessly. He hadn't been too invested in the effort in the first place, though. Besides, judging by the fact she hadn't spoken to him a single time since that first meal they shared together, it seemed she wasn't all that interested in him either.

In truth, he had a mountain of questions and requests for her, but as self-serving as they were, he had to give up on them. He'd heard enough stories of what happened to people who poked at that hornet's nest.

At the very least, Miranda had accepted them enough to leave Misha in Redford's care.

"Do you think she'll accept that this wasn't our fault?" Ryan asked.

"I believe she will at least understand there was no ill intent," Kino answered.

Despite the warmth of his tea, Ryan felt shivers ready to come on. He could only sigh as he watched Misha's maids go about their work.

Chapter 11: Embarrassment of the Morning After, and Then...

When Misha awoke, the first thing she saw was the intricately woven canopy of her bed, indicating she had been sleeping in her room in the castle rather than her cabin out in the garden.

It's been a while since I slept here. Wait... Why was I asleep?

She sat up, feeling strangely refreshed. Isabella must have realized Misha had stirred awake, as after a quick knock on the door the maid stepped into the room.

"Good morning, Lady Misha. Are you feeling well? Does your head hurt?" she asked, pushing her usual cart of things used for morning preparations.

Misha tilted her head, confused. "No, I feel fine. But do you know why I was sleeping here?" She didn't quite understand where Isabella's question was coming from, but a quick once-over of her condition turned up nothing out of the ordinary. "I remember having dinner last night, but that's it."

As if doubting Misha's honesty, Isabella stared at her long and hard before breathing a small sigh. "The alcohol in the wine you drank last night hit you pretty hard, so you ended up falling asleep. You're quite lucky you've avoided a hangover."

"Huh? A hangover?" Misha's eyes went wide. "But they said they took the alcohol out of the wine."

"Yes, that is true. The way it was prepared meant it should have been safe even for an infant...but occasionally there are some people who have an innate weakness to alcohol to an extreme degree. It may pay for you to be more cautious in the future," the maid explained, handing Misha a small basin for her to wash her face.

Misha's shoulders slumped. *Mom and dad always seemed like*

they were having so much fun drinking, so I figured I'd be fine too. I was really looking forward to it when I grew up...

"It might have just been bad luck this time. You should try again when you're older," Isabella hurriedly added as she handed her a towel, seeing how despondent Misha had become.

"Wait, if I fell asleep, how did I get all the way here?" With no memory of coming here, she must have been carried by someone. She had to imagine it was Kino, or one of the other servants.

"His Majesty."

"What?"

"After you passed out, His Majesty carried you here."

Misha was speechless.

What? Why would His Majesty do that? Kino was there, wasn't he? And there were plenty of knights outside that could have carried me, right?

A wordless panic filled her mind.

"Oh no. I must have been quite a problem," Misha said, her face as white as a sheet.

"You fell asleep while he was carrying you here, so I do not believe you bothered him much," the maid replied.

I'm pretty sure him having to carry me at all would bother him plenty, no matter when I fell asleep... Does anyone here actually respect the king?

Now that she thought about it, Geord always acted casually around Ryan, and though Tris was polite, his commentary was merciless around him. Even Isabella, a maid who was always polite and courteous, treated him flippantly.

"I suspect the truest victim in this circumstance was Ren. He poked his head in to check on you while you were asleep, and you grabbed him like a pillow, squeezing him all night."

While Misha was grappling with that realization, she was struck with another bombshell.

"Huh? I did? Speaking of which, where is he?"

Normally whenever she woke up, she could find him sleeping in his corner or playing on his own somewhere nearby. Looking around now, she couldn't find him anywhere.

"He was able to slip out of your arms around dawn, so he dragged himself to the next room over to sleep. I imagine the smell of alcohol on you was a bit too strong for his nose."

"Wait, I smell?!" Having someone, even a dog, avoid her because of how she smelled was a devastating blow to a girl her age. The news had her thunderstruck. She then began sniffing at her arms and hair.

"No, not to the degree any person would pick it up. But we can draw a bath for you if you wish."

Despite the maid's claim, Misha's unusually strong sense of smell did in fact pick up the odor of alcohol, leaving her devastated. "Yes, I'd like a bath please. Then I'll go apologize to Ren."

"Very well. I will go get it started, then."

Although Isabella felt bad for Misha, the girl's reason for her devastation and the way she expressed it were just too cute. Isabella had to struggle to keep from laughing as she quickly slipped out of the room, heading to get the bath ready.

After finishing her bath, Misha went to find Ren, who was already up and had finished breakfast. The wary eyes he turned on her as she tried to apologize made her swear never to touch wine again.

Apparently, Misha had slept quite well, or perhaps it was a result of the karas, but she felt great. Despite the psychological damage she had suffered that morning, she went ahead and prepared Lalaya's breakfast as usual, trying to stick to her routine.

Naturally, the princess was never one to miss an opportunity to attack someone, and so she pulled no punches in teasing Misha. After that round of bullying, Misha left and ate lunch, only to receive a message that Ryan wanted to speak with her, which sent her into a listless collapse on her couch.

"I wish I could run away..."

Tia gave her a sympathetic smile at Misha's uncharacteristically negative attitude, which was more than enough evidence of what Lalaya had just put her through.

"You know, I doubt he would scold you or anything."

"I know, but...I'm so embarrassed..." Misha whined, sprawled out

across the couch. Now that she and Ren were back on speaking terms, Ren seemed to think this was some new kind of game; he happily jumped up onto the couch with her. Tia chuckled at the sight as she got Misha's afternoon tea ready.

"Will you turn him down, then? I think he probably just wants to tell you the thing you were looking forward to is ready," Kino murmured softly, a faint smile on his face. He was still waiting to take Misha's answer back to the king.

With how stone-faced Kino usually was, the change in demeanor immediately caught Misha's attention. It practically pulled her upright to sit with proper posture.

"I was looking forward to something?"

That elicited another amused smile from the butler.

"I believe you may have received permission to make use of the royal library."

Her attitude instantly flipped. "I'll go! I'll meet him! Tell him any time is good!"

In the end, just as Kino had said, Ryan had intended only to inform her she had received permission to visit the royal library—as well as to check on how she was feeling after the night before. Kino had already informed him of how Misha had handled this morning, so he didn't plan to fuss over that latter part. He didn't want to bother her too much about the night before, considering how depressed she had reportedly been all day. Nonetheless, her anticipation of visiting the royal library had stolen her attention entirely away from any malaise she'd had before.

At her bright demeanor, Ryan had decided to change his plans a bit, inviting her to sit down for some tea.

"Looks like you're on your feet again."

"Yes, I slept quite well. I woke up today feeling even better than usual."

Lalaya had done what she could to exhaust most of that positivity, but Misha didn't mention that. She'd get yet another boost from what was about to come.

"I see. I discussed it a bit with Conan this morning, and he

believes what you experienced might not have just been solely due to the alcohol. Apparently, the karas blood might have had some effect on you too."

Panicked, Ryan had asked the doctor to take a look at her, but she'd been fast asleep by that point. Conan hadn't noticed anything particularly out of the ordinary with her.

"Your temperature was a little high, but your breathing was slow and easy. Karas is naturally very nutritious; the blood, in particular, is often used as a kind of nutritional supplement. He believes it might have been a bit too much for you both because of your small stature and your already great health."

Misha was quite surprised to learn a doctor had given her a checkup while she was asleep, but his explanation did explain why she felt so energized when she woke up. Had she been knocked out from alcohol intoxication, it would have been strange to have no headache or other symptoms.

"I'm glad to hear it. I was worried I'd have to be careful around alcohol even as an adult." That was one fewer worry on her mind.

Ryan's expression gave way to a small grin. "Well, it wasn't a thorough exam, so you should be careful regardless."

"Of course. Still, to think the impact karas can have on your body is that strong!"

"It's so famous for it that people in the capital will go to the lake before going to a doctor when they feel sick. And not just the common people either. Even people from the nobility consume karas liver whenever they're unwell." Ryan frowned, and Misha tilted her head in confusion.

"Just between us," Ryan said, speaking in a whisper now, "I don't mind the meat from karas, but I don't like the blood and liver. The flavor isn't that bad, but I have an instinctive aversion to it. Even last night, I didn't have any karas blood in my wine. Once I grew up, I stopped eating karas liver entirely as I was already healthy. You mustn't tell Lalaya of this, though. I'm always saying she has to eat the food she gets whether she likes it or not, so she can't know I'm breaking that rule."

Misha strained a smile at Ryan's conspiratorial grin. "Oh, heh.

Well, the blood and liver seem more important as medicine than as food. If you're healthy, I suppose you don't need to eat it. Don't worry, I won't tell Lalaya."

"Thank you."

With that out of the way, Ryan moved on to the main purpose of the visit, placing a shining, golden card on the table in front of him. It displayed both the emblem of the royal library and an engraving of Misha's name. The access cards for the library were divided into five tiers, and this signified she had the highest level of access possible, permitting her to read any book in the library and even check out some books available to the general public to take home with her. Normally, access of this level was restricted to titled nobility—a marquis or greater who had proven themselves an asset to the kingdom—and only after a lengthy application process.

Seeing how Misha's eyes glittered as she took the card, holding it like it was more precious than any jewel or fancy clothing as she listened to his explanation, made all the effort Ryan had gone through to get it for her worth it.

It was the first time this level of access had ever been granted to a foreigner, so many had been opposed. However, considering Geord's estimation that having Misha around might draw other People of the Forest to their kingdom, Ryan hadn't been willing to give in. Moreover, he didn't persuade the others by wielding his kingly authority like a club; instead, he talked to each dissenter individually, assuaging their fears one by one. He was sure Misha would balk at making use of her new rights if she knew they had been taken by force, so he made sure to use his power gently.

"Could I possibly go visit the library today?" Misha asked, giddy.

"I was wondering when you'd ask. There's already an escort prepared for you." Ryan beamed at her before calling to a familiar person outside the room.

"Yo, Misha. Doing well?"

"Mr. Geord!" Her face lit up once again as he stepped into the room.

Although he had accompanied her on the entire journey from Bluheitz to Redford, Geord had been preoccupied ever since they'd

made it to the castle. He'd been busy writing reports about their trip, meaning they hadn't had a chance to talk. She had grown to trust him quite deeply over their month of travel together, so losing all contact with him out of nowhere had left her feeling quite lonely, but now she was excited enough to jump out of her seat straight to him.

"I'm finally free from all that paperwork. Did you already eat lunch? I know a good place in town where we can grab something to eat."

Misha practically jumped into his arms, happy to see that his sunny smile and frank demeanor hadn't changed.

"What's wrong, Misha? You're acting like Ren." Geord took the surprise attack in stride, lifting her off the ground and spinning her around.

She didn't want to be seen as a child, but Misha couldn't help giggling as her feet dangled during the spin.

To the adults in the room, she finally looked like a twelve-year-old kid, not the professional apothecary who had been entrusted with Lalaya's care.

"I've never seen you like this," Ryan said, a bit surprised by the transformation. The fact that Geord had so effortlessly drawn that out of her elicited a strangely gloomy feeling in him, though he stifled that thought.

Unaware of Ryan's internal predicament, Misha came down from her excitement, suddenly embarrassed by her childish behavior. The way her face flushed brought a laugh out of Ryan, and gloom was the furthest thing from his mind.

Geord and Misha left the castle from its rear exit.

Rather, it was the two of them *plus* a ring of other knights following at a distance, where Misha couldn't see them.

"So, you're finally getting to go to the library, huh?" Geord said.

On top of a larger group drawing more attention than he wanted, Geord knew Misha wouldn't like traveling with such a large entourage, so he had arranged for his sneakiest men to accompany them in a way that wouldn't get them noticed.

"Have you ever been to the royal library?" Misha asked.

"Me? I've never gone there to read, but I've been there as a bodyguard a few times."

"Oh, come on!" Misha laughed as they continued walking. The way she almost skipped down the street made it clear just how much she was looking forward to this excursion.

When they finally arrived, the library didn't betray her expectations.

The building stood on the shore of the lake, its exterior not anything special. An observer wouldn't be wrong to describe it as "a sturdy, unadorned box made of bricks."

"The old king who called for its construction had been afraid they were going to make a building that was at risk of catching fire due to all of the paper indoors," a staff member of the library explained as he guided them around. "Therefore, this was built without the use of flammable materials. Of course, that was merely the original building. The library has continued to see expansions as more books have come in." The guide's chest swelled with pride.

As Misha learned, the original library was a fifth of the size of its current state. Every new section expanded outward as if they were building blocks being lined up around it.

"There are now three floors aboveground and one below, with about a third of the building open to the public. Though, of course, *you* have full access," he continued, a hint of envy in his voice.

Even the lower ranked members of the staff were not permitted everywhere. Being relatively new to his position, this particular young man could not access a number of areas.

"Aside from the ordinary curators like myself, we also have staffers who are tasked with studying the rare and forbidden literature in the restricted areas. This place holds a thousand years of knowledge gathered by the Kingdom of Redford."

While their excited guide pushed them through the facility, Misha found the bookshelves around them already warring for her attention. Books, books, and more books! As far as she could see, in every direction!

They were currently in the largest room of the library, a section open to the public. It stretched up well into the second floor. Other

than the countless bookcases, there were also numerous desks and chairs occupied by people absorbed in their books, some copying information and some simply reading for leisure. A spiral staircase in the center of the room led up to an intermediary platform between the ground and second floors, which had been fashioned into a corridor lined with more bookcases.

"The ground floor is mostly made up of books and journals intended for leisure reading. The platform up there has more specialized literature, sorted by field. If there is anything in particular you are interested in, I would be happy to lead you to that section."

Misha hesitated a bit at the invitation. She would have liked to wander around and browse the books freely, but with a library of this size, the sun would set long before she found what she was looking for. She decided she'd leave the exploring until she was a bit more used to the place. For now, she'd focus on the things that most interested her.

Of course, that could only be one thing.

"Do you have any books about medicinal herbs?"

"Yes, of course." The guide must have expected that answer, as he quickly and confidently started off between the books.

As they made their way after him, Misha felt a strange sense of déjà vu.

Geord didn't care much for the books, but he was acutely aware of Misha's sudden change in demeanor. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, I just feel like I've seen this gentleman before."

Geord blinked in surprise a few times before he burst out in laughter. "Hey. Good job dyeing your hair, but your cover's blown," he called out to the young man in front of them.

"Do you know him?" Misha asked, astonished.

"Yeah. Back when he was a student, I trained with him a bit."

"You were more playing than you were training. This is why I don't like you savages—always so obsessed with your swords," the guide snapped, not even bothering to face Geord.

"I use a spear, remember?" Geord teased, but the guide refused to turn around.

Once they had made it to the platform, he finally faced them,

placing a hand on his heart and giving a small bow. The simplistic, casual movement was nevertheless quite elegant, quickly bringing memories of a certain someone to mind.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mort Tin Wilkinson. I just graduated this past year. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Wilkinson? That means..." Misha murmured, peering into Mort's eyes. The color of his irises were hard for her to see, thanks to his glasses, but they were in fact that familiar violet.

"Tris is my eldest brother. Because I am the third son, I was free to pursue my own goals outside of my family's influence. That said, our family's hair color attracts a bit too much attention, so I normally wear it like this." His long hair, a faded gray color that was reminiscent of but distinctly different from Tris's bright silver, was tied behind his head. "But never mind my family. I am no more than a recently hired clerk at this library, so please don't mind me. Now, our time is limited, so let's get a move on."

Mort spun back around, heading up the stairs as if to put an end to the conversation. Misha had to hurry to keep up with him.

When they arrived at their destination, she let out a cry of astonishment. The bookshelves here were tall enough that Geord could only barely reach the highest shelf. They lined the wall from end to end, almost entirely taken up by books on herbs.

"There are more technical books available, but these should be a good starting point. Once you've found something you wish to pursue, I can show you more... Ah, I see I've lost you already."

"Oh, this is from the same series as my encyclopedia. I've never seen this one, though. *Unique Plants of the Rega Mountain Range*? That sounds interesting!"

Smiling sheepishly, Mort watched as Misha dashed back and forth in front of the shelves, her eyes racing over the spines of the books. As a fellow book lover, he couldn't help but find the behavior endearing.

"And she's gone. Guess we'll be stuck here for a while." Geord laughed and dropped into a nearby sofa.

"That sofa is for library patrons, Geord." In sharp contrast to the

warm gaze he had bestowed upon Misha, his expression turned to a subzero glare when it shifted to Geord. There was no mistaking the resemblance between the brothers.

"Oh, don't be like that. It's not like anyone comes up here but weirdos anyway."

"I suppose it *is* an infrequently visited part of the library." Mort sighed, returning his attention to Misha, who was already carrying a number of books in her arms. "She's much more childish than the rumors led me to believe. Is she really overpowering the doctors of the castle?"

Geord laughed again, his legs now draped over the armrest of the sofa. "Overpowering? I don't think I'd say that. Old man Conan treats her like his own granddaughter. And you'd be forgiven for thinking his students were her older brothers."

The mood when they met to discuss Lalaya's condition was closer to that of a tea party than of a conference of medical professionals, but the discussion went way over Geord's head anyway. He barely understood half of what they talked about.

"She's confident in her own opinions, but she still listens to others. She asks when she doesn't understand something, and she always says 'thank you' when someone does something for her. She's the ideal student. She also knows a ton of stuff that's news to the old man, so I think he enjoys his talks with her a lot."

He might have been too busy to meet with her properly, but Geord's curiosity had led him to check in on her from time to time. She'd always seemed to be having a grand old time, so he'd never bothered interrupting to say hello.

"We'll let you know if we need anything, so you can get back to work. You're pretty busy, right, Mr. Humble Novice Clerk?"

At Geord's grin and dismissive wave, Mort gave Misha one last glance before he quietly stepped away.

Chapter 12: Children of the City

"What could be wrong?" Misha muttered to herself, standing between the thickly growing plants.

The leaves glistened beautifully with rain just past. It had been four days since her first visit to the herb garden. Misha had spent what free time she had perusing old documents and accompanying the garden workers to help with their jobs, but she felt no closer to finding the cause for the weakness of the herbs.

"Let's head to the royal library." Forcing back a sigh, she trudged her way out of the garden. Ever since getting her reading card, she often went there whenever she needed something to pick her spirits up.

Naturally, Geord was too busy to accompany her on every trip to the library, but she always had a knight present as an escort. Misha had eventually come to terms with that. Regardless of how she felt, she was still the visiting daughter of a foreign duke. As annoying as that made her situation, she could still understand that it would be an international incident if anything were to happen to her.

Misha strolled leisurely through the city, its streets still slick from the rain that had recently finished. Walking in and of itself was enough to disqualify her as a daughter of nobility, but she wasn't even going a full kilometer. She couldn't fathom why someone would call a carriage for such a short distance. The capital was quite safe, and it wasn't like she was walking the back alleys or anything. Since she was with her escort, she found it very unlikely anything would happen. When others had insisted she take a carriage anyway, she had replied, "Then I guess I don't need an escort." That had silenced any objections to her walking.

Her escort today was a single knight. At first there had been quite a few on these trips, but Misha's complaints that such a large group was too stifling had helped reduce her guards to one. Between her

escort's short ash-blond hair and his crisp black uniform, along with his muscled frame and sharp gaze, he was the picture-perfect example of a knight. He had a serious personality and wasn't much for small talk. Geord had recommended him for the position, saying he was a man that would quietly and efficiently carry out any mission assigned to him, even if he was on the boring side.

And Misha knew that even though he came off as hard and unapproachable, he was actually quite fond of children, and he was responsible when it came to taking care of them. As one of the knights in their entourage traveling here from Bluheitz, he'd shown as much on ample occasions. He rarely spoke of his own accord but always replied politely to anything she asked. He was definitely one of the knights Misha trusted.

"Mr. Tenz, do you mind if I check out this shop? I'll be quick," Misha said, reminded of something when they neared a shop displaying a colorful array of candies and baked sweets. The shopkeeper, a strongly built woman standing out front, was smiling warmly at them.

After glancing around quickly, Tenz murmured a soft "okay." Misha quickly visited the shop, exiting with a bag filled with candies of all colors.

"I wonder if we'll see them today," Misha murmured, staring at the bag of candy in her hand.

"They seem to play around that area quite frequently, so I imagine so," her escort replied quietly, bringing a smile to Misha's face.

On their way home from the royal library after Misha's first visit, they had found a young girl crying just outside the entrance and two boys a few years older trying to console her. Their efforts hadn't seemed to be bearing much fruit, so Misha had asked them what was wrong and found out the girl had fallen and skinned her knee.

"That must hurt. I'll put some medicine on it for you back inside the library," Misha had said gently.

The sobbing girl had clung to her. After patting her gently on the back, Misha had lifted the younger girl into her arms. "We'll clean

the dirt off it and put some medicine on it. Once we do that, it'll stop hurting," Misha had said. Then she turned to the boys. "You two come too."

"No, umm, it's okay..." Because the boys had started to panic and tried to take the girl back, Misha reassured them with a smile, inviting them along. They acquiesced, and the whole group set off for the library.

Once there, she asked one of the staff to use their water. Informed there was a well out back, she immediately headed there.

Tenz, worrying that the girl might be too heavy for Misha, offered to carry her, only for the girl to furiously shake her head at the thought of a man she didn't know carrying her. After that, Misha had to turn down Tenz's offer. Though his expression was unchanged, a soft "Am I that scary?" from under his breath got a giggle out of Misha. The girl had also refused to be carried by the two boys, so it was probably more her personality than anything to do with him.

"This is going to be a bit cold, okay?" Sitting the girl down on a box beside the well, Misha pulled some water and began to wash the injury. "If we leave sand in your knee, it'll keep hurting forever and leave a scar, so I have to clean it. It'll hurt a little. Ready?"

The girl squeezed her eyes shut tight, biting her lip as Misha worked on her knee.

"There, good girl. You're okay now." Confirming the wound was clean, Misha spread some ointment on it before wrapping it up in a handkerchief to stand in for a bandage. "There, all done. Here's a reward for being so good." She then stuck a candy from her pocket directly in the girl's mouth.

Still teary-eyed, the girl was quite surprised by the sudden gesture, but that gave way to delight a moment later. "Yum! It's orangey!"

Seeing the girl finally stop crying, the boys were awash with exhausted relief. "Thanks, miss," they both said, bowing.

"Oh, you both are so polite as well. Here, you can have some too." She then handed over more candy to the boys. They hesitated for a moment, but after sharing a glance, they timidly accepted the gift.

“Thank you for the medicine! It doesn’t hurt anymore!” the girl said.

One of the boys sighed as the girl started practically bouncing around. “How come you’re so happy all of a sudden?”

Misha later learned they were kids who lived in a poor part of the city. They regularly went to the library for organized tutoring. The library offered lessons in basic literacy and math to children who couldn’t afford proper schooling, part of efforts to raise the literacy rate in the kingdom. Most of the kids came because of the food that was handed out after the lessons, but kids could also earn candy when they did well on the tests, so they all tried their best.

Misha was pretty impressed with how well-thought-out the program was. Children of poor families were valuable workers once they reached a certain age. Many families thought that if they had free time to go study, they should spend it helping out with work instead, and few children wanted to spend their precious free time studying. However, if they could get food just by sitting still for an hour, that changed everything. There were more than a few families that struggled just to put food on the table.

If the children put forth the effort, they could even get sweets, something children of their status would rarely ever get their hands on, so the kids were motivated to study. As a result, they worked hard to improve academically, and the reading, writing, and math skills they acquired as a result broadened their opportunities for future work. That meant increased wages, which reduced crime coming from those desperate to feed themselves and their families. Elevating the poorest in society helped everyone in the end.

The children Misha met weren’t so impoverished that they needed to worry about food, but their family still didn’t have the money to afford anything like formal education. If it hadn’t been for the royal library’s study program, they wouldn’t have even been able to write their own names.

And that was something they were proud of.

“Mom was really happy when she saw I could write my own name.”

“Yeah, she was happy when I did it too!”

"Granny was so happy she started crying!"

"Oh! She's here!"

As they neared the library, a small girl dashed toward them. Her hair, a rich honey color that reflected the sunlight well, bounced as she ran. At the same time, Ren dashed forward, leaving his post walking calmly alongside Misha.

"Anna! Be careful, you're going to trip again!"

Anna, having just turned four, was prone to tumbling when she got excited. Once again stumbling across nothing in particular, she did indeed dip unsteadily in one direction. Ren reached her just in time to push her back to regain her balance.

"Thanks, Ren!" Anna laughed, elated.

She dropped to the ground to pet the little wolf, who gave her an admonishing lick. Ren seemed to have taken a liking to the little girl. Misha witnessed something of a protective instinct in him toward her. She couldn't help but find that adorable, and she grinned as she followed after him.

"Don't run off on your own, Anna!" shouted a boy as he jumped out of the grass, soon followed by another.

"Hi, Yuu. Hi, Teto."

Once she called out to them, the boys' faces instantly lit up. "Oh! Hi, Misha!"

Yuu was Anna's older brother, and had the same poofy, honey-blond hair. Teto was their neighbor and friend. He stood out with his black hair and much darker skin tone. His grandfather was from the south, and Teto had inherited that blood quite strongly. The two boys were seven years old, and spent a great deal of their time taking care of Anna.

"You've all got grass in your hair. What were you doing?" Misha asked, pulling bits of dry grass out of Anna's hair.

The kids happily displayed the bags they were carrying. "We were collecting plants by the water, since the rain just stopped."

"It's gonna be dinner!"

Their bags were packed with numerous kinds of edible plants. The waterfront provided well for those that lived nearby. Misha

thought they had just been playing around, but they had actually been working to help their families. She couldn't help but praise them.

"Looks like you found lots. You guys are good at this." They had wormed their way into the dense thickets where adults couldn't easily go, hence the mess now decorating their heads.

Misha led the children by the hand to a grassy spot near the lake and sat down as they shared shy smiles at her compliments.

"I found some really cute candy in a shop earlier. I got enough to share."

The children shouted for joy as Misha produced a bag of candy. They excitedly held out their hands, but Misha shook her head, popping the candies directly into their mouths. Considering the work they had been doing, the children's hands were filthy with dirt and juices from the plants.

As the kids enjoyed their candy, Misha asked them all sorts of questions. About their studies, about their home lives, about the games they usually played. They happily answered everything she asked. Their innocent and excited replies quickly dispelled the gloom hanging over Misha from the problem of the herb garden.

"Actually, here. I have something for you too," Teto suddenly remembered, pulling a bright red tomato out of his bag. "Grampa grows them. He said the rain made them too big and ruined them, so he can't sell them anymore, so he gave them to us for a snack."

As he said, the big tomato in his hand had burst through its own skin. Though it still looked perfectly tasty, it wasn't really suitable for sale anymore.

"It doesn't taste like much, but it's really juicy! We carry them around instead of water," Yuu added, pulling another one from his bag and taking a bite.

After giving the tomato a serious inspection, Misha followed suit. Tomato juice gushed out into her mouth. As Yuu'd reported, it was really watery but still quite good.

"Too bad. It still tastes good, so it feels like a waste. Do they not do well with too much rain?"

Teto nodded as he wiped the mess from around Anna's mouth. "If

they suck up too much water, the insides grow faster than the skins, so they burst. Once that happens, the bugs can get inside really easily, and they rot right away, so you can't sell them. That's what their grampa says. That means we get to eat as much as we want, but I'm getting a bit tired of them," he said, shoulders slumping.

Yuu nodded. "Yeah. Dinner is always tomato soup, or boiled tomatoes, or something else—tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes! I know we don't want to waste them, but I'm so tired of them."

Misha giggled at how the two of them understood the reality of the tomato situation, but at the same time something flickered to life in the back of her mind.

"You wouldn't want to get tired of it, would you?" she asked.

"Nope. And grampa says as they get too big, they taste worse. He says you need moderation in everything."

"And then he takes our pie from us. He's so mean. We're still growing, so we need the food!"

"Yeah, he always complains we're eating too much!"

As the children continued to complain about their grandfather, Misha sank into her own head, tuning them out entirely.

"Moderation..."

Information tumbled around inside her skull. An orderly, beautifully perfect herb garden. Plants growing much larger than usual.

"I should be able to figure it out...?" That's what Miranda had said with a somewhat admonishing gaze.

And the herbs that had survived from her mother's garden, surrounded as they had been by weeds.

"Misha?" The kids realized Misha had frozen in place. They were now looking at her with concern.

Misha jumped back to her feet, not having noticed them. "I think I get it..." she murmured. Abruptly, she grabbed the three younger kids and wrapped them in a big hug. "Thank you! I think you just helped me figure out a problem I was having! I'm going to go check! I'll definitely repay you someday!" Misha shouted as she bolted off back to the herb garden.

"What was that about...?"

“Who knows?”

Utterly confused, the three kids watched her run off.

“She seemed happy,” Anna commented, holding tight to the bag of candy Misha had left with her. “Should I give some of these to granny?”

The two boys glanced at each other in response to Anna’s total lack of concern. They both shrugged.

“Sure, why not?”

“We’ll probably see Misha again later. She can explain what’s going on then.”

Recently, their grandmother hadn’t been feeling well and as a result hadn’t been eating much, so they figured something sweet might get her to start eating again. Their attention already diverted, the three grabbed their things and scampered home.

Chapter 13: The Problem with the Herb Garden

While working in the garden as usual, Adol was quite surprised to suddenly be called to the reception room by Misha, whom he'd seen leave the garden not that long ago. The desk in the reception room reserved for her was buried in so much paperwork that its surface was no longer visible.

"We're harming the plants through *over*nutrition? Meaning rapid growth is our problem?" he asked, having a hard time with the information Misha had rattled off to him.

Sitting on the other side of that desk from him, Misha nodded gravely. Her face was flushed with excitement, and her eyes were sparkling.

"I figured it out thanks to those kids today!" she said, handing him a large tomato. It was bright and fresh, but the skin had burst open to show the fruit's interior.

"What's this?"

"Take a bite."

The sudden instruction confused him, but he was no match for the pressure of Misha's smile, which would not relent until he did as he was told. The tomato was more watery than usual, but it otherwise tasted ordinary.

"Now try this one."

While he was still trying to figure out what the point of all this was, she handed him another tomato. This time it was quite a bit smaller, but the skin was completely intact.

"This one is...much better." It was far sweeter, with a stronger flavor. He stared down at the two of them, taken aback by the stark difference.

"They're the same kind—grown by the same person and with the

same soil and fertilizer too. However, they were grown a bit differently. The first one was the normal way: planted in a field. The second was in a pot situated under a roof. That means there was one difference: the amount of water they got. There's been a lot of rain this year, so the tomatoes grown outside get too much water, causing their skins to burst."

Adol listened to Misha's explanation as he held a tomato in each hand. "Okay, that I understand. Still, how does that pertain to our situation?"

Misha frowned for a moment, seeing realization had yet to dawn on him. "These are the growth records for your cedes. From the time you plant the seeds until the flowers bloom, it seems to take about three months."

"And?"

"Whenever I've harvested cedes, I've seen them bloom in four months at the earliest, and they're strongest when they bloom at six months. Yours are clearly growing far too fast."

"So..."

"Cedes was originally thought to be a weed. It can grow just about anywhere it finds itself. Maybe the fact that yours are growing in a place too rich in nutrition is causing an effect similar to these tomatoes? That cedes leaf I tasted on my first visit was weak. I barely noticed its characteristic bitterness."

"So, you're saying that's because they grew too quickly?" Adol murmured, pushing through Misha's avalanche of an explanation. "I understand that the properties of the plant might change when growing at a different speed, but..."

"Mr. Adol," Misha replied firmly as his gaze started to wander. "Someone told me that 'plants live by putting roots down into the ground.' *Now* I understand what she meant."

Misha imagined Miranda staring back at her, weighing her, testing her, together with images of the herbs grown in her mother's herb garden at her father's mansion, drowning in weeds for over ten years.

"There are some herbs that grow only in harsh, rocky environments. Some prefer humidity or grow in water. They all have

preferred environments. My mother's herb garden was small, but it had a very natural feeling to it. The plants weren't divided from each other. They were left to grow among one another, and they thrived."

Misha's eyes closed for a moment. The bright passion in her gaze had flickered with something dark for a moment. Was it nostalgia? Longing? Unaware of Misha's situation, Adol had no way of knowing, but he felt it spoke of a deep, sharp pain. Nonetheless, when her eyes opened a moment later, that negativity was gone. The emotional whiplash had left Adol confused. It was at once both a relief and a disappointment. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about it.

Too wrapped up in her thoughts, Misha failed to notice Adol's reaction. "The place you've made here is very beautiful. It's a perfectly arranged flower garden. That would be fine if it was for decoration in the castle, but that's not what you're after, is it? This garden isn't for being pretty; it's for treating people with what we grow here."

Misha's emotional speech wasn't particularly well reasoned, but it nevertheless squirmed its way into Adol's heart.

"This garden's purpose..." he murmured softly.

He was proud of the herb garden they had managed to create. They had cleared trees, dug out the roots, built walls of brick, and cultivated the soil. Although they had merely been following the instructions of the castle's gardeners because they had no prior experience in the field, he and his people had struggled through the backbreaking work of getting accustomed to this new profession. In fact, more than a few of Adol's peers saw him as giving up his profession as an apothecary to become a gardener.

But Adol had persisted, crawling around on his hands and knees in the dirt to create the desired herb garden. However, even as the garden itself had seemed like a success, the herbs he and his colleagues had grown were useless. Herbs with no medicinal value were good for nothing but decoration. He likened them to glass fashioned to imitate precious jewels—at least glass marbles were still pretty to look at.

Someday, the plants would grow properly. That's what he told

himself as he desperately continued fumbling around in the garden.

It had taken them two years to reach this point. Misha was telling him to throw all of that away and start from scratch. There was no guarantee it would work either.

Adol recalled his first meeting with the king, where they passionately discussed the king's ambitions for the garden. He didn't want it to be so hard to get herbs. He wanted a baseline level of medicine that they could produce even if the flow of goods came to a complete halt. His eyes had shone with the promise of all the lives that could be saved.

There was no doubt of where the king had gotten the motivation for his plan. When the plague had run rampant through the capital and they had been forced to seal the gates, they'd had no medicine. All they could do was watch over the victims as they died. Even if they couldn't cure them, those taking care of them had wished they could at least have eased their suffering. If only they could have brought down the fever, if only they could have reduced the swelling in the afflicted's throats so they could drink water, they lamented. Even simple medicine like that had been impossible to acquire in the sealed off capital. The king's wishes echoed Adol's own feelings during that harrowing time.

But did he have the strength left to set off in pursuit of that ideal once more? Would those who still worked at his side stay if he started everything over again?

"Mr. Adol." Misha stared hard at the silent caretaker, but rather than critical, her gaze was pleasant, comforting.

He took a deep breath at the indescribable feeling of excitement welling up inside him. "Can I even handle this?" He knew full well how pitiful that sounded, but at the same time, the passion lighting Misha's eyes had stolen his own.

"You can."

Although he knew she had no basis for saying that, her unwavering affirmation still lifted his heart.

Oh. I can, yeah. I can do this...

His lack of confidence in himself, which had caused him to shrink away, faded gently. Was he standing straighter than he had in

months? He thought he was.

With another deep breath, he gave a wide smile. "So... Where do we start, then?"

"Good question," Misha replied, an almost mischievous light in her eyes. "Why don't we start by ripping out all the plants and breaking down all the brick walls?"

The two began an earnest discussion of the future of the herb garden. An even greater surge of excitement filled Adol's heart than when he had spoken with the king.

I feel like I could do anything. I wonder why...?

Rifling through the papers on Misha's desk, Adol thought of all sorts of things he wanted to do. That feeling of limitless potential was something he hadn't experienced in a long time, he told himself as he found a blank sheet of paper and began jotting down ideas.

On their walk back to the castle, having left the group of kids by the library, Tenz said, "You seem quite knowledgeable, Lady Misha."

He was usually silent, so hearing him speak at all stopped Misha in her tracks for a moment before she shrugged and started off again.

"I learned a lot growing up in a forest. Though, really, if anyone working on the herb garden had actually had prior experience harvesting herbs, they'd probably have figured it out themselves. They should have at least noticed the plants were growing too fast, or that the herbs' fragrance was too weak."

They walked slowly through the city back to the castle. Misha and Adol had lost track of time during their passionate discussion, so it was approaching dusk by the time she left the garden. The street stalls had nearly all closed for the night, but the smell of cooking still wafted out to the street from the back alleys.

"But don't they make medicine for a living?" Tenz asked, confused.

Misha gave an awkward smile. "I'd been stuck on that thought too, but it's apparently pretty hard to find herbs around the capital. Most of Redford is flat land. There isn't much in the way of hills and mountains. Plains and prairies have their own kinds of herbs, but the

large population in the capital means most of the land has been taken over for some purpose or other, leaving very little of it to grow wild. As a result, most apothecaries have to settle for using dried herbs brought in from elsewhere. Most of their knowledge of wild plants is limited to what they can find in textbooks."

At Adol's explanation, the situation for the capital's apothecaries had arrived as a series of devastating shocks to Misha. According to him, he could count on his fingers the number of times he had harvested herbs himself. That was unbelievable to Misha, who had always sourced her herbs herself. When she had mentioned that some herbs were more potent if they were used before they were dried, Adol had reacted with surprise. That he was surprised at all had been a jolt to her system.

"I thought the whole point of the herb garden's creation was because they were having difficulty getting access to fresh plants. Apparently, I was mistaken," Misha said, smiling in spite of herself.

Tenz, entirely ignorant in the field of medicine, had no reply for her. An awkward silence settled between them, and Misha felt the need to throw it off with a joke.

"But thank you so much for today. If people knew I had sent you off to run errands, I'd probably get in a lot of trouble!"

After their meeting with the children, Misha had run back to the herb garden. Wanting to confirm her theory, she had asked Tenz to go buy some tomatoes in town. She had wanted him to get them from the same farmer, so he had gone to the children's grandfather on her behalf. The tomatoes he'd brought back had been essential in supporting her theory in front of Adol.

"It was nothing. I just happened to know where they live."

He had made use of information he had already uncovered as Misha's bodyguard. When she had started getting along with the local children, he had been tasked with investigating their backgrounds to ensure there was nothing untoward lurking in the shadows. He'd learned nothing suspicious, so he made no effort to stop their relationship. Naturally, Misha knew none of this.

Pretending not to notice the incredulity of the residents—aside from the children—at having a knight from the castle visiting their

area of the city, Tenz was able to finish his errand fairly effortlessly.

"I should make some candy for those kids as a thank-you. Can you take me to visit them sometime?" Misha asked, an excited light in her eyes.

Tenz nodded with an ever so faint smile on his face.

Chapter 14: A Mysterious Boy

"Is that book really *that* interesting?"

Misha looked up at the sudden question.

Reconstruction of the herb garden had begun, which she couldn't help with much, so she had taken to spending even more time in the royal library. After strolling through the forest of bookshelves on the first floor, she eventually wound up at her usual spot on the platform between floors—the herbology section, specifically.

When she picked her eyes up from her book, she saw a boy wearing a hat staring back at her. It was a bit surprising. This area of the library only contained books about medicinal herbs, so she almost always had the whole place to herself. Even when she didn't, those who came by rarely stayed for more than a few moments.

Misha had been told there was another room that had more technical books on the same subject, so she imagined most apothecaries and doctors went there, but this section had some rather strange books mixed in, like those describing cultural practices and folklore. It was interesting enough that she had yet to move on to the other rooms.

"This is a book about herbs that appear in old legends. It's got a really unique perspective, so it's very interesting," she explained as she displayed the book's cover.

The boy stifled a laugh. "Old legends? Are they even *real* herbs?"

Misha gave a thoughtful hum. "There certainly seems to be a lot of fictional ones, but there are some real ones mentioned. And some have different names but are probably related to herbs that actually exist. Are you interested in herbs too?"

The boy seemed to be about seven or eight years old. The large hat he wore made it hard to tell, but Misha thought she saw soft, curly blond hair tucked underneath it. His bright blue eyes reminded her somewhat of a cat's.

"Not really. I'm usually in the history section over there, but every time I come up here, I see you having a blast, so I got curious," he said, indicating another section of the platform beyond an opening in the floor.

"You like history?" Misha asked. The books on the platform were more technical than those on the first floor. If the boy really was up here on a regular basis, it came as a surprise to her.

"I wouldn't say that, but it's not like I hate it. I was just told to read it, so I do. Oh, but stories about King Ruxel, the guy who built this library, are pretty interesting."

It was an interesting perspective from a boy who looked young enough to be more at home reading picture books.

Misha was lost in thought for a moment, but then she beamed at him. "Stories about him *do* sound interesting. Where are those books?"

Her earnestness confused him. "You're not going to complain about me making stuff up or call me cheeky?"

It was something he often heard from adults who saw him with his nose in a book. He didn't really let it bother him, but he had grown so used to adults poking into his business and then finding him annoying. Misha's real desire to know more struck him as strange.

"Huh? No. Why would I?" Misha was very much confused herself. "I just thought it sounded interesting too, like I want to read it for myself sometime."

The complete lack of guile in her eyes pulled a bright smile out of him. "My name is Caro. What's yours?"

"I'm Misha. Nice to meet you."

Introductions done, Caro held out his hand, ready to lead her to the history section.

Now that he was standing and she was sitting, she could see beneath the brim of his hat to notice the happy look in his blue eyes, but she didn't know quite why he looked so happy. And though he reminded her of someone else, before the name could come to mind, Caro had pulled her out of her seat. Whenever she stood, she was tall enough that his hat obscured almost all of his face.

"It's over here. Let's go." It seemed Caro was excited to share the books he enjoyed. "Oh, I'd like to read the one you're looking at too, so let's bring it with us."

"Are we allowed to do that?" Misha asked.

"As long as we put them back in the right place!"

Misha had always read the books right by the bookshelves she had taken them from, so she hesitated to take one on a longer journey, but Caro had no such inhibitions. He tucked the book she had been reading under his arm.

"You're really used to this place, huh?" Misha commented, letting him guide her by the hand through the library.

Caro shrugged. "Not really. I usually live in a different city, but I visit the capital around this time every year, and this is where I like to kill time or study. It's safe here, and there are more than enough books to keep me busy."

His tone as he said "visit" had been remarkably cold, so Misha had to assume his parents had dragged him here against his will. She could empathize with a child's lament when being taken to a faraway city where they had no friends. His boredom shouldn't have surprised anyone. That said, a child at Caro's age couldn't be left to wander the city freely. A place like the royal library, where there were plenty of adults and little danger, would be perfect for a kid who liked reading. Still, Misha had to wonder just how happy a young, lonely boy would be, left with nothing but mountains of books to read.

Kids need to run around, after all, she thought, Anna and the boys coming to mind.

"Are you here by yourself, Caro?"

"Right now, yeah. I'm sure they'll send someone to get me if they need me." Guiding her around the large gap in the platform, Caro grabbed a step stool and used it to retrieve a large, heavy book from a higher shelf. "This is the one. And here, follow me. I'll show you something special." He smiled as he lightly tugged on her hand again.

At first, she thought he was leading her to one of the nearby tables, but he walked right past them. Instead, he took her to a

small door nestled among the bookshelves, as if it were meant to be hidden. It was short enough that an adult would have to stoop down to get through it. Misha let Caro take her inside. When she glanced back to see Tenz watch them go, he made no effort to follow them inside.

"Whoa. I never knew the library had a place like this."

Though the door was short, the inside had a tall ceiling that would have been more than spacious enough for any adult. The floor was covered in thick carpet, and there were several sofas that looked comfortable. The largest one was big enough that you could lie down on it for a nap. There were also plenty of cushions and blankets.

"This is a special room. Cool, right? This is the first time I've shown it to anyone."

Clearly quite excited, Caro urged Misha to take a seat on one of the sofas as he stepped over to a desk and rang a bell sitting on it. In short order, a second door opened to permit a maid to step inside.

"Tea, please."

The maid showed a slight hint of surprise at seeing Misha, but otherwise nodded quietly to Caro's short command and stepped back out of the room.

"Is she one of your house's servants?" The silent, graceful way the maid carried herself reminded her very much of the maids in the castle.

"No, she works for the library." He shook his head. "She's here to serve me while I'm using this room."

At the same time, the maid's door opened again, and she returned pushing a cart. Without a word she started setting out some tea and snacks.

"You can go," Caro murmured quietly the moment she was done.

The maid gave a small nod and stepped back out of the room. She kept her head down the entire time she was there, not saying a single word. Misha was used to talking with the maids, or at least thanking them, so the silence here made her fidget. Caro didn't seem to struggle with that—nor did he ever bother to look at the

maid.

Is he a noble?

That a boy his age was so accustomed to commanding adults, even maids, meant he was probably part of the ruling class. It would explain why his clothes seemed to be made of such high-quality fabric despite being styled like an outfit of a commoner. He didn't have so much as a scratch on his hands or legs. Anyway, she'd already assumed he hadn't had an ordinary education from the moment she heard him call books that would be difficult even for adults "interesting."

"Go ahead. The snacks here are really good."

But his innocent invitation had her bite back on her suspicions.

It's fine, I guess. He's probably just happy to have a friend in this library full of grown-ups.

While she was older than him, Misha understood she still counted as a kid.

Putting those thoughts behind her, she helped herself to the tea. Tenz had made no effort to stop her from going in here. That was enough for her to be sure that this boy was no threat. She thought her guard's expression had stiffened a bit, but that might have just been her imagination. Either way, it wasn't her problem.

"Oh, wow. These really are good."

"Right? It makes coming all the way here worth it."

As the kids enjoyed their snacks, the hustle and bustle of the adults outside their room faded from their minds. They talked about their book recommendations for a bit, and then they enjoyed their tea while they read. While the sofas by the bookshelves were plenty comfortable, a place like this that guaranteed one wouldn't be disturbed was the perfect environment for reading. Little by little, their conversation petered out as the two were slowly consumed by their literature. Before long, there was nothing but the sound of pages turning to be heard.

After reading for a while, Misha looked up to see that Caro had nodded off, his book still open on his lap.

He's not going to catch a cold, is he?

Quietly putting her book down, she stepped over to the sleeping

boy. She gently laid him down on the sofa before putting a blanket over him. Then, after a bit of hesitation, she removed his wide-brimmed casket hat. It looked pretty uncomfortable to wear while sleeping.

Shining blond curls spilled out over the cushion that served as his pillow. His hair looked so soft—as a young kid's often was—so Misha found herself stroking it despite herself. It felt just as pleasant to the touch as it appeared.

His hair is so pretty, she thought with a smile.

After enjoying the sensation for some time, she decided it was time for her to leave. There were no windows in the room, but judging by the number of pages she had chewed through, she could tell quite a bit of time had passed.

Mr. Tenz is probably... Well, probably not worried, but I've made him wait for quite a long time.

Normally, Misha would stop reading whenever she got to a good spot, check out any books she was interested in, and return home, but in a place as comfortable and secluded as this, she had entirely lost track of time.

"Oh, right. I should leave him a message."

She could always leave a message with the maid, but she figured Caro would probably be disappointed to wake up and find Misha missing. Instead she took out some note paper she had brought with her. On it, she wrote that she had to leave early, but she'd be back at the library at about the same time every day for a while.

With that, she left the small room behind.

A few moments later, Caro sat up. While half asleep, he'd noticed Misha walk over to him, and had pretended to be asleep because he'd been curious as to what she was doing.

"What was that about?"

He'd almost panicked when she took his hat off, but in the end, all she did was put a blanket over him and pat his head like he was a baby.

Caro had free access to this special room in the library and even had a maid to attend him while he was here. There was no way

Misha didn't understand how important he was! But she'd made no attempt to flatter or suck up to him. She'd spoken to him like an ordinary friend, enjoyed tea with him, and discussed her favorite books with him. Caro had thought that if he showed some vulnerability, her true nature would shine through, so he'd pretended to sleep, but she was still just as kind and gentle.

"Like I'm just a kid," he murmured to himself.

There were no adults who treated him that way. With the special circumstances of his birth, everyone had wanted him to grow up as fast as possible. His uncle was the only one who seemed disappointed at how mature Caro acted, but there was nothing Caro could do about that.

The closest person to him, his own mother, was the most passionate about his education. She was kind, but she never did anything close to spoiling him. She told Caro that she loved him, but when the night was dark or when the lightning fell, he was always alone.

"You need to be as smart as your father was."

"You're going to be as strong as your father was."

How old had he been when those words from her started to feel like soft, padded chains?

"She smiled when she touched my hair, didn't she?" As if to rekindle the sensation of Misha's hand on his hair, Caro reached up to touch his own head. On the desk beside him was a short letter in neat writing.

"Oh. She'll be back tomorrow?" He smiled softly.

"You went to the library again today?" Lalaya asked over dinner.

Misha nodded, feeling a twinge of embarrassment as she saw the deep red liquid in the princess's glass. "Yes. The work on the herb garden is in full swing now, so there's nothing for me to do there at the moment. And I don't have to worry about the rain if I'm in the library."

It was still as rainy as always, putting rather tight reins on what Misha could actually do, but she had yet to find herself bored.

"How nice. I wish I could spend all day in the library," Lalaya

muttered, swirling the liquid in her glass. Recently, her condition had started to improve, so she was gradually being introduced to official duties as a member of the royal family.

The only members of the royal family left to do such work were Ryan and Lalaya. With Lalaya bedridden for most of her life until now, they had put as little work on her as possible, leaving Ryan to shoulder the entire burden. Despite Lalaya having complained about having more work to do, seeing her brother under so much pressure had bothered her quite a bit, so she was secretly happy to take some of that stress off of him. Misha was well aware of that, so she couldn't bring herself to stop the princess from getting involved.

"You're not back to a hundred percent yet, so take it easy, okay?"

"I know, I know. If I collapse now, all the suffering I've been through will have been for nothing."

Lalaya's body seemed to have finally adjusted to the ordered lifestyle of getting up and going to bed early. Even when Lalaya had no interest in food, Misha telling her it counted as medicine was enough to get her to finish it, and even when Misha wasn't around, she would properly drink her juice and take her medicine. It sounded like a joke, but that was enough for her to feel good enough to get out of bed in the morning without a struggle.

It might have also helped that Misha was so annoyingly persistent that no one else felt the need to scold the princess anymore. The struggle of dealing with chronic fatigue was difficult to express to others. It always looked like the victim was simply slow and lazy. It was quite common for people to comment negatively on it in passing. As strongheaded as she was—and with her equally strong sense of responsibility—Lalaya was fully cognizant of how disappointing her behavior came across. That was why whenever she'd started feeling better, she'd immediately overdone it, and then her health had worsened yet again. People who didn't understand her situation kept trying to give her "advice," which had only led her to develop a strong rebellious streak. As a result, she'd earned a reputation for being a princess who was good for nothing but her temper.

However, once Misha had shown up, that little apothecary had

started following Lalaya all over the castle, constantly heckling her over every little thing. Because Ryan declared their guest wouldn't be punished for any rudeness she showed, no one was willing to step in and stop her constant rebuking of the princess. And when the others saw Lalaya could do nothing but scowl and reluctantly do as she was told, it seemed they lost the will to follow up with their own criticism as they had done before. In fact, the prevailing opinion quickly shifted to one of sympathy for her.

As the stress caused by those criticisms started to relent, so did her explosive temper. Misha's scolding concerned simple things, no more than "wake up on time" or "don't be a picky eater"—such things that would stress out the princess only if she let them. And as she slowly but surely realized her body was starting to recover, her rebellious impulses started to wane.

Nonetheless, she still found herself regularly wanting to shout, "What are you, my mom?!"

"Lady Lalaya, make sure you eat too. You need more than beverages alone."

Lalaya had already finished her herbal juice and was now drinking "the karas wine she'd always had since she was young." (Referring to it as such always got a funny look out of Misha, so Lalaya had made a habit of doing so.)

"I know, I know." She scowled a bit as she put the glass back on the table.

She was so used to being given the drink as a supplement when she couldn't eat that she had made getting nutrition from liquid alone a habit.

Seeing the elegant form with which she picked up and used her cutlery to eat was enough to fascinate Misha. Even something as simple as this could be beautiful when done properly. Misha did her best as well, but she couldn't hold a candle to Lalaya. In that sense, the meals she shared with Lalaya were a chance for her to practice her table manners, seeing as she had such a good example right in front of her.

"By the way..." Misha began.

As she stared at the princess, suddenly her concerns from earlier

in the day were revived. That boy's beautiful blond curls. Bright blue eyes like the sky in summer.

"I made a new friend when I was at the library today. He had exactly the same color hair and eyes as you do."

She had wondered why his features seemed so familiar, but now that she saw them again in Lalaya, she was satisfied that she'd solved the mystery.

Lalaya tilted her head. "At the library?"

"Yes. He was a cute boy named Caro. He was really smart too. He was reading some really tough books. He also treated me to some tea."

"Huh," Lalaya replied with a small frown, a gesture Misha missed in her thoughts of what to get Caro as a thank-you gift. The change in expression lasted only a brief moment, but Carrie was quick enough to catch it, and she quietly stepped out of the room.

"I'm glad you're having fun. If you're running around that much, why don't you have a glass? It'll help you keep your energy up." Lalaya gave Misha a sly grin as she lifted her wine glass.

"I'm fine, thank you." Misha had long grown used to her teasing. After all, Lalaya was always quick to shove Misha's previous mishap back in her face. Even so, Misha couldn't quite hide the burning in her ears at the suggestion.

"It's so good, though," Lalaya insisted.

"I'm healthy! I don't need it!" Misha blurted out, well aware how ill-mannered her outburst was.

Once they had finished their meal and Misha had returned to her room, Lalaya barged her way into Ryan's office.

"Misha met that boy."

With no warning of her visit and the sound of her knock still in the air as she stepped into the room, Ryan was surprised to see her, but he could only shrug at her declaration.

"I know. What about it?"

"What do you mean, 'what about it'?!" Lalaya shouted back in a very unladylike manner, but there was no one else around who'd be bothered by that. Even the maid who constantly attended to her was

left waiting outside the office. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing,” the king replied, not even looking up from his paperwork. Sensing that his sister was about to snap, he finally pried his attention off of his desk and looked up at her. “He’s usually in the capital at this time of year, and he spends more than half of his day at that library when he is. With how often Misha also goes there, it’s hardly a surprise they met.”

Ryan’s logical response almost had her dumbstruck for a moment, but Lalaya quickly snapped out of it and shook her head. She slammed her hands on his desk. “Don’t try to fool me. There’s no way someone as wary as he is would talk to a total stranger!”

Although she mustered as much menace as she could, Ryan was too accustomed to his sister’s temperament to let it faze him.

“Sure, Misha came up in conversation, but we didn’t talk that much about her. I just told her we had a visitor from Bluheitz and that she was really into the library.”

Lalaya’s glare made it clear that she didn’t trust a word he was saying. Ryan wasn’t bothered by that; he shrugged again, returning to his paperwork.

“However...” he said. “I guess Geord’s reports were lying on a table in the room before we talked, so there’s a chance he saw them.”

“Aaagh! You totally tricked him into it, didn’t you?! Well don’t come crying to me when it causes problems later!” Lalaya spat before she stormed out of the room. The sound of her footsteps was enough to express her mood to everyone in the castle.

Ryan sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “She’s really gotten better, hasn’t she?”

“Are you sure this is okay?” Tris called out softly from the corner of the room, quietly and covertly reading his own documents.

“You mean Lalaya? Or...”

“I mean the boy, of course.” He then handed Ryan the documents he’d been holding, a full report of the boy’s actions that day.

“Oh, he was calling himself Caro, was he? Then I guess there’s no doubt. No one uses that nickname anymore, but I guess it’s his now.” Ryan’s brow furrowed slightly, as if he were in pain. “I’m quite

hopeful, Tris. You saw what Misha has done for Lalaya. No one else could help her, and now she's feeling well enough to storm into my office to complain. Hopefully Misha can do something for him as well."

The soft whisper faded into the silent office.

Chapter 15: Fun Times

"There you are, Misha. Why are you waiting out here?"

Misha turned around at the voice behind her. Caro was standing there with his arms crossed.

"Oh! Hi, Caro." Though she couldn't see his face under his large hat, she could tell from his voice that he was irritated. Misha greeted him happily regardless, ignoring his apparent frustration.

"What do you mean, 'hi'? Why are you wasting time out here?"

Since Misha's message had said she'd be back at the library at the usual time, Caro had gone to look for her when she hadn't shown up. His search had brought him outside of the library. Thinking that there was no way he'd miss her if he waited at the front entrance, he instead saw her standing there as if *she* were the one waiting for someone.

"I didn't think you'd be here already, so I figured it would be best to wait outside for you," Misha replied, a little embarrassed.

Caro's frustration immediately vanished. In fact, now *he* was embarrassed that he'd been so upset. He hadn't even considered that she would have been waiting for him.

His words tumbled out of his mouth in haste. "I was bored, so I came here before lunch. The food here is pretty good."

"Mm, yeah, those snacks yesterday were really good." Misha, however, was oblivious to his embarrassment.

Suddenly, something bolted down the street toward them. Caro flinched backward but relaxed once he saw what it was. "A puppy?"

It was Ren, jumping on top of Misha's feet. She crouched down to pet him.

"Oh, back already, Ren?"

Caro opened his mouth to say something, but a faraway voice beat him to it.

"Misha! Did the boy you're waiting for show up?"

“Yes, thank you!” Misha shouted back as she stood up and waved at a girl in the distance.

“Is she a friend of yours?” Caro asked, pulling his hat down to cover his face even more.

“Yep. She was worried because I was standing around here for so long. She was waiting with me for a while, but when Ren started to get bored, she went off to play with him.”

The little white puppy at her feet gave a happy bark.

“This is Ren?” Caro pointed at him.

Hearing his name and seeing Caro’s attention on him, the puppy jumped up excitedly, realizing he was the topic of discussion.

“Yep. I picked him up while I was traveling, and we’ve been together ever since. Ren, this is Caro. Remember the boy I was telling you about yesterday?”

With Misha’s formal introduction, Ren politely sat down in front of Caro and gave his tail a happy wag, as if this were some canine way of greeting someone.

“Wow, he’s smart. It’s like he understands what you’re saying.” Caro knelt down like Misha had and patted Ren on the head. “Whoa, he’s so soft.”

Having no experience with animals except for horses, Caro was taken aback by his first experience touching a puppy’s fur.

“He feels really nice, right?”

Completely engrossed in the sensation, Caro jumped when an unfamiliar voice spoke right beside him. When he realized it was the same little girl who’d called out to Misha earlier—she had taken a seat on the ground beside him—he immediately relaxed.

“I’m Anna. Are you Misha’s friend?”

After hesitating a little at the straightforward question, Caro eventually nodded.

“Yuu and Teto are helping the grown-ups on the boat today. Let’s go.” Anna grabbed his hand and tried to pull him along.

“Huh? What?”

Having no idea what she was talking about, but also not wanting to aggressively shake off the hand of a girl so much smaller than him, Caro could only look plaintively at Misha.

"Anna's brother and their friend are helping some of the fishermen on the lake. You can see them from the beach, so she's inviting you to go see," Misha translated for him.

"Yeah, that's what I said!" Anna pouted a little at the fact she hadn't been understood.

"Come on, he needed some more context," Misha said with a laugh.

"Whatever! Let's go! If they catch lots of fish, you can take some home too!" As Anna pulled harder on the uneasy Caro, Misha kept laughing and gently pushing him from behind.

"Come on, it'll be fun!" the apothecary said.

And once Ren added his voice to the mix too, Caro had no choice but to run along with them to the lake.

"Yuuuuu!" Anna shouted, waving at one of the boats out in the open water. One of the boys heard her; he looked up from the net he was pulling on to wave back.

"He looks the same age as me," Caro murmured.

"He's gonna be eight soon!" Anna answered him, not taking her eyes off the boat.

"Oh, so we *are* the same."

"The kids of commoners start helping with labor around that age," Misha explained. "Even if someone outside their own homes needs more workers, they go to help. By helping all sorts of people, they find out what kind of work they're good at. Then at about ten years old, they start a serious apprenticeship and begin working for real."

"They bring home fish! That's gonna be dinner tonight!" Anna added happily. Caro glanced back and forth between Anna and the boats floating in the water.

He must be nobility. No merchant's kid would be surprised by this, Misha thought. His reaction had brought her one step closer to his true identity.

"I help sometimes too! When they're out working, I look for plants!" Anna declared proudly as Caro fell silent. "I'll show you how. If you bring some home, you can add it to your dinner, and your mom will be really happy!"

"Huh? Oh, no, I..."

"Don't worry, it's easy. I'll teach you!"

As Anna started pulling him away again, Misha smiled and waved goodbye. "Time for some field work! See if you can find any of the plants you read about yesterday."

Caro blinked in surprise. One of the books he had read together with Misha was an illustrated encyclopedia of plants. Some of them had been labeled as "edible," but that had been no more than trivia for Caro.

"You know some good plants too?" Anna asked. "Then we can teach each other! I wonder if there's any good ones around here..."

Without waiting for a word in reply, Anna dove into the grass, dragging a somewhat flustered Caro behind her as they left Misha.

I came here to read. Why am I crawling around in the grass? Caro thought.

Glancing behind him, he found his disguised escort watching from a distance, his panic as clear as day. He was usually stone-faced, so the change in his demeanor made Caro want to laugh.

Oh, Misha's bodyguard is talking to him.

Misha's bodyguard patted Caro's on the shoulder and told him something—Caro assumed it was to let it be—and this time, Caro burst out laughing for real.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Caro shook his head. "That looks edible. What do you think?" he said, reaching out to a plant winding up and around a low shrub.

"Wow, you're amazing! This one is really tasty in soup!" Anna started clapping excitedly before reaching for the plant herself to stop Caro from grabbing leaves at random. "But you can't take whatever you want. You need to find the pale and soft leaves. The big green ones are stiff and gross. And you can't take the shoots or else it'll never grow back."

"Got it. I'll take the pale ones," Caro replied just as seriously as Anna had lectured him.

Off to the side, Misha watched with great amusement.

She had felt it was bad for him to be cooped up in the library all

day every day, so she'd wanted to find a way for him to meet with Anna and the boys. She had been counting on the two boys since they were the same age as Caro, so their absence had been an unfortunate hiccup in the plan, but luckily, Anna's energy had been enough to pull him out of his shell. And now, for some reason or other, they were off hunting wild plants.

She's like a little hurricane of innocence. Way to go, Anna.

While she knew Anna had a way of sweeping her and the other boys up in whatever she was doing, Misha hadn't expected the young girl to treat Caro the same way on their first meeting. Misha believed his perspective on life was abnormal for a boy his age—probably because of how smart he was—but she was relieved to see him playing and smiling without a care in the world, led about by Anna.

"Oh, Yuu and Teto just jumped in the water!" Anna suddenly shouted, pointing at the boat out on the lake. Sure enough, there were two small boys swimming toward them. They were going pretty fast too, almost as if they were competing. "Wow, Yuu is quick!"

"Come on, guys! Faster!" Misha egged them on.

The two boys picked up the pace, clearly in full race mode now.

"Wow! You can do it, guys!" Anna jumped up and down excitedly as she watched, only for her feet to slip out from under her on the mud of the lakeshore.

"Careful!" Caro reflexively reached out to catch her, but he wasn't big enough to offset her momentum, and as a result, she ended up dragging him down into the lake with her. Luckily, they fell on their backsides, so neither of them was hurt, but that didn't stop them from sliding right into the water, their heads dipping underneath. Caro jolted upward, the water only coming to his belly when he sat up, but by that point he was already drenched head to toe. Even his hat was gone.

"Jeez! You know you're going to fall if you jump around somewhere slippery like that!"

"Sorry!" Anna giggled as Caro wiped his soaking wet hair out of his eyes.

“You’re not sorry at all!” he said, lightly jabbing at her head as she squeezed water out of her own hair.



“Anna, what’re you doing? And who’s this?” Yuu called out to them, arriving at the shore with Teto a short distance behind him.

“No fair! You had a head start! I want a do-over! And yeah, who’s this?”

The two boys had noticed the stranger from their spot on the boat, though since Misha was with them, they’d seemed to have decided he was harmless. That said, seeing an unfamiliar boy playing around with their sister had still left them uneasy, so the fishermen they had been working with let them off early once the bulk of the work was done.

They hadn’t wanted to force the fishermen to take them back to land partway through their work, and it would have been a pain to run around the lake to where Anna was if they were going from the dock anyway, so they’d jumped into the water and had swum. Today was uncharacteristically bright and hot, so it had been quite refreshing.

“He’s Misha’s friend. His name is... Uhh... What was it again?”

“You don’t even know?!” Yuu and Teto shouted in unison, followed by Misha clutching her sides in laughter.

Exasperated, Caro sighed. “My name is Caro. Nice to meet you.”

The lighthearted banter between the others seemed to abate most of Caro’s anger, as he extended a hand toward the two boys.

Yuu hesitated at the gesture but eventually returned the handshake. “I’m Yuu. Sorry about my sister.”

“Teto. I’m their friend. Is this your hat?” Teto handed the hat he had scooped out of the water back to its owner. Caro suddenly realized he was no longer wearing it, and his hands shot up to his head in surprise.

“Yeah, it’s mine. Thanks.” He kept his expression calm enough as he accepted his hat, but he was unsure what to do next.

He had been told it was bad for him to walk around with his hair visible, but it was kind of too late to hide it now, and putting a soaking wet hat on his soaking wet hair was about as unnatural as you could get.

Oblivious to his dilemma, Anna reached for his hair and gently pulled on it. “Your hair is so shiny and pretty. It’s even shinier than

mine!”

“It is a nice color, isn’t it?” Yuu said with a nod.

“It’s not that different from either of yours,” Teto said just before he switched to lamenting. “My hair is just black. It’s so boring.”

Before Caro realized it, he felt the previous tightness in his body relax. He had the same golden hair and blue eyes as his father. He had been told that showing those off to others was all but declaring his bloodline, yet these kids didn’t care. They just thought it was a pretty color. It was a strange thing for Caro to process. It made him want to laugh and cry all at once. Unsure how to express his feelings, he flapped his mouth wordlessly a few times.

But while the other kids noticed his bizarre behavior, before they could say anything, a howl filled the air.

Ren leaped off the bank of the lake. He had been quietly sitting at Misha’s feet for a while, but his patience had hit its limit waiting for the kids to come up out of the water. He’d decided he wanted to play in the water too. The baby wolf might’ve been small, but his jump was big enough to create a huge splash when he landed. A mini tidal wave washed over the heads of the children still sitting in the mud.

They were already soaked, so they weren’t bothered by the sloshing of water, but that didn’t mean they appreciated having it splashed in their faces. The most unfortunate of them was Teto, who ended up with a mouthful of water and quickly began to splutter.

“Reeeeeeen!”

Ren tilted his head at Teto’s vengeful tone as he called the wolf’s name. Despite the little wolf’s efforts to look innocent, his eyes hinted at mischief.

“You did that on purpose!” Teto lunged for the wolf, who artfully dodged out of the way. The impromptu game of tag created even more splashing, spreading the damage even further.

“Whoa! Teto, don’t drag us into this!”

“Ack! There’s mud flying everywhere!”

“Don’t come this way, you idiot!”

Misha took three big steps back from the chaos erupting in the water as puzzlement crossed her face. “Should I get a spare outfit

for Caro too, or just the other three?”

There was no sign of the aquatic battle settling anytime soon.

Once the ice had been broken, the kids got along extremely well. The social status by which adults categorized themselves meant nothing here. However, Caro’s bodyguard was apparently not thrilled with him being soaking wet, so he eventually swooped in, wrapped him up in towels, and took him away.

“I’ll be back soon, so wait for me at the library!” Caro shouted as he left, never having had a chance to actually talk to Misha. Meanwhile, the kids were sent home to report on their successful day helping the fishermen, so Misha was left alone. She went to visit the library as originally intended.

“I will take Ren back to the palace, then,” Tenz offered.

“Okay. I’ll be at my usual spot in the library.”

There was no way they could bring Ren, soaking wet and covered in mud, into the library, so Tenz scooped him up and took him back to the castle. Misha considered heading back with them, but she was familiar enough with the library that she didn’t mind being alone there for a short time.

“Please stick close to the front desk.”

While he was clearly a bit worried, Tenz nevertheless nodded and started on his journey back to the castle. For someone as fit as he was, the journey to the castle and back wouldn’t even take thirty minutes.

He’s such a worrywart, Misha thought to herself as she set off for the bookshelves, deciding today was a good day for some fiction.

Chapter 16: Caro's True Identity

"Excuse me, do you have a moment?"

Misha glanced up from the pages in front of her. She had been standing among the shelves, inspecting a book she had just picked off the shelf to see whether it piqued her interest. The first floor of the library had a huge variety, which in turn made it quite difficult to settle on any individual book. Unable to make up her mind, she had ended up adrift in the sea of literature. Though of course, for someone like Misha, that was half of the fun of a library.

The man who'd interrupted that experience was someone she didn't recognize. Glossy hair, smooth skin, and fancy clothes made it clear he was quite wealthy.

"I couldn't help but notice your hair and eyes. You wouldn't happen to be the girl from the People of the Forest I've been hearing rumors about, would you?" The man quite rudely examined her up and down. Misha frowned at the unpleasant sensation.

Unfortunately, she was too polite to treat a complete stranger with equal disrespect. "May I ask who you are?" Despite being dressed rather plainly to avoid catching people's interest, Misha was still the daughter of a foreign duke. Perhaps she should have ignored him and walked away, but her upbringing didn't allow her to be so rude to her elders.

"Ah, I suppose I forgot to introduce myself. My apologies. I am from the family of Count Yagole."

Misha frowned. Not only was he still clearly looking down on her, but he had also only introduced himself with his last name.

Count Yagole has quite a big business, right? The count himself is quite old, but still very active. Four children, but he hasn't picked an heir yet.

Misha racked her brain for facts about the Yagole family; she knew of them from Miranda's lectures on the noble families of

Redford. The man in front of her, with his suspicious smile, seemed plenty young to her.

So, he's either one of the children of the count's eldest son, or perhaps he's the count's youngest son? He's supposed to be much younger than the others, right?

Either way, his behavior was clearly unacceptable for a noble. With neither he nor Misha being in line for succession of their respective families, social convention indicated their interactions would be dictated by the positions of their own families. This man was either the son or grandson of a count, while Misha was the daughter of a duke. The proper procedure would be for him to formally introduce himself, and only after asking for permission to speak with her would their conversation actually start. They were both likely here in secret, so they didn't need to stick to the books so strictly, but his unilateral trampling of that unspoken understanding and the obvious disrespect he showed her was entirely unacceptable.

Not that I would know that if Miss Miranda hadn't told me.

Even beyond that, the nobility of Redford was under strict orders from the king to make no contact with Misha whatsoever, but Misha herself wasn't aware of that.

Oblivious to what Misha was thinking as she stared back at him, the man continued, "I heard you have distinguished yourself in your care for Her Highness, the king's younger sister. That she has recovered enough to participate in evening parties already is incredible. I must say, I expected nothing less of your phantom tribe."

"Uh-huh...?" Misha was totally lost as to what he was getting at.

"I am sure you have even more incredible medicines at your disposal, no? I heard you can bring the dead back to life—or even give people immortality."

"Huh? There's medicine that can do that?" Misha blinked in surprise, hearing about these kinds of things for the first time. If the People of the Forest could really make medicine like that, it was no wonder people were always trying to capture them.

"Oh, yes, I understand. It's a secret of your tribe, yes? But don't

you think it's unfair to monopolize that kind of knowledge? Think of all the lives you could save by sharing it." The man shook his head as he made a dramatic show of raising his hand to his forehead. He wasn't listening to Misha at all. That confused Misha even more.

Even so, she tried to dig through the layers of his speech to find what he was actually after. "I'm sorry, do you have someone close to you who is sick?"

The man responded by energetically stepping forward, so rapidly that Misha instinctively jumped backward, afraid he was about to run into her. As he reached a hand toward her, she lifted the book she was carrying up in front of her chest to shield herself, leaving his hand to cut through empty air. For a moment, the man's face twisted unhappily, but his suspicious grin was back in a flash.

"Luckily my family has been blessed with good health, but there are so many people longing for your mystical medicines out there in the world. My family's business reaches far and wide. We could get that medicine into the hands of the people who need it, and we could do it efficiently. Of course, we'll take a small fee of our own, but you'll be able to make quite a bit of money for yourself in the process. Doesn't that sound like a good deal?"

The man was the fourth son of Count Yagole. He wasn't particularly attractive, nor was he a very hard worker. He simply enjoyed the life of being spoiled by his position. As was standard for people like that, his sense of pride was second to none.

He had been born just as his father was reaching old age, and while his father was usually quite soft on him, he was strict and immovable when it came to business. He had never entrusted his fourth son with significant business matters, unlike his three older sons. Although the count doted on him as a child, he'd determined his fourth son's business acumen wasn't up to par.

But the youngest Yagole hadn't been willing to accept that. He believed he could do anything so long as he really tried, so he felt it was unfair that he hadn't been given a chance. Wandering around the town under the pretense of looking for business opportunities, he had all but celebrated when he'd happened across Misha on the street.

Count Yagole had made a name for himself in the war for his transportation network, putting him in a position where he was in direct contact with the king despite being only a count. Naturally, that meant the two had discussed Misha being one of the People of the Forest, and so the count had brought the conversation back to his family. The count had given them explicit instructions not to bother her, but the youngest son suffered from a severe case of selective hearing.

He had seen a girl perfectly matching her description walking about town. Her only escort had been a single knight. He'd even seen her interacting with the common children, treating a kid's skinned knee with some kind of medicine. She had an innocent smile and seemed incredibly good-natured.

This is my chance!

He could leverage people's need for medicine to exploit her guilt and responsibility, thus obtaining that medicine for himself. Medicine used by the royal family itself, with the branding of the People of the Forest! He could slap any price he wanted on it, and customers would flock to him. Beyond that, successfully negotiating with one of the People of the Forest would do wonders for his own standing. He would gain fame and fortune, and this girl would gain effortless wealth as well. He smirked to himself, confident that this was a win-win situation.

Of course, he didn't tell anyone he had seen her in the city. He wasn't about to share the spoils with anyone else.

Father always says the best merchants are those who can think ahead of others.

Knowing her escort would stop any attempts he made at contacting the girl, the man waited patiently for the right moment. That meant he needed to push his usual work onto his subordinates, but small matters like that didn't bother him in the face of the coming grand accomplishment. His subordinates were used to that behavior from him anyway, so they accepted his orders with no more than sighs. For better or worse, that meant they were none the wiser to his plan.

And then his time had come, and he had thrown the dice.

Huh? Sell? Why? Misha was totally lost. *Sure, I could make medicine, but how could I match it to their symptoms? What kind of medicine does he want anyway?*

Misha was quiet, not sure how to respond to the man's offer. Her reaction didn't seem to match the man's expectation, and it elicited an irritated quirk of his brow.

"Well, no matter. Let's discuss in detail what medicine to make and how much. Please come back to the shop with me," the man said, grabbing Misha's arm. He didn't feel there was much need to worry about contracts with a child like this, but he knew his father wouldn't accept it if he didn't have everything on paper. He figured a bit of candy or jewelry would be all it took to get her on his side.

Meanwhile, Misha flinched back in surprise at suddenly being grabbed. This stranger had appeared out of nowhere and was now trying to take her somewhere. It was no wonder she was scared. Nothing she said seemed to be getting through to him either. She immediately started to struggle, trying to throw off the man's grip.

"No, let me go!"

"What? Why are you just standing there? Hurry up, let's move." The man was only confused at her unwillingness to cooperate with such a fantastic opportunity. As small as she was, a bit of struggle on her part wasn't enough to break his grip, but her shouting would inevitably draw attention from those around them.

"I can't make medicine for someone I've never met. Besides, I don't even know you!" she screamed, prompting the man to panic. He had already introduced himself as a member of the Yagole family, so he didn't understand why she was so on edge around him.

"Oh, so you want to keep your medicine all to yourself, do you? What a selfish child. Just shut up and come with me already!" As the man raised his hand to strike her, Misha instinctively squeezed her eyes shut and braced for impact.

"What are you doing?! Let her go!" someone yelled.

But the cry of pain that followed came not from her, but from the man.

"Misha, are you okay?!"

Opening her eyes again to the familiar voice, she saw Caro

looking up at her, obviously worried. Behind him, the man was groaning, crouched low to the ground with his head in his hands. A heavy book was lying on the ground behind him. Had Caro hit him with the book?

Noticing her attention on the book, Caro quickly apologized. "Oh, sorry for being rough with the books. I threw it without thinking about that, but it doesn't look damaged, and it was kind of an emergency, so I think it's fine."

Misha giggled despite herself. "Yeah, if the librarians get mad at you for something like that, we can apologize together." The way Caro muttered the last part, entirely remorseless, like a child caught in the middle of a prank, had been funny enough to loosen the tension she was feeling a bit.

"What...? What're you laughing for? Who do you think I am?!" The man rose back to his feet, hand still holding his head.

"Uh... Some pervert trying to abduct a child?" All Caro had seen was the man holding Misha's arm, moments away from hitting her. It was a pretty natural interpretation of the situation.

"Who are you calling a pervert?! I was just trying to convince her to give me control over her secret medicine."

"You think you can convince people by hitting them? That's just being a thug," Caro replied to the man's shouting with a cold glare. "And what do you mean by secret medicine anyway? Do you have any idea, Misha?"

"No." Misha reflexively shook her head as Caro shifted the conversation toward her.

"Don't play dumb! The People of the Forest are famous for having medicine that can even bring people back from the dead! Keeping that hidden is a grave sin. I was just trying to help you by getting that to the market!"

"Medicine that brings the dead back to life? That's barely reasonable in a fairy tale. Please come back to reality, mister. You're supposed to be an adult." Caro's gaze had turned to pity, and its juxtaposition with the man's anger had Misha on the verge of laughing loudly. The backlash from her fear earlier had left her in an emotionally volatile state.

“How dare you, you commoner runt! Don’t think you can disrespect me without getting punished!”

The man attempted to lunge forward but was immediately grabbed from behind. Then in a beautiful display of skill, the nondescript newcomer overpowered and restrained him. However, the newcomer was already familiar to Misha as the man who had taken the drenched Caro off to get changed, so she breathed a sigh of relief at seeing him.

“Please, if you’re going to act like this, let us stay closer to you,” Caro’s escort grumbled. “If you got injured, I’d lose my head—literally.” Pulling a rope out of somewhere, the escort quickly tied up the man.

Caro snorted. “If you can’t keep me safe from that distance, maybe you need to find a new job.”

“Man, my boss is so heartless...” the escort moaned under his breath.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Now tied up on the ground, the man from the Yagole family raged. “Let me go! Who do you think I am?! I’m the son of a count! You won’t get away with this!” His face had turned beet red from the embarrassment of being so easily manhandled.

“Yes, yes, they’ll hear your side of the story when they take you in. But this is a library, so please keep quiet.”

At that point, the guards protecting the library came running in, so the man was quickly handed over and taken away.

“Let’s go, Misha.” After a few short words to his escort, Caro gently tugged on Misha’s hand, dragging her away from watching the man who was dragged from the library kicking and screaming.

The kind gesture coming from a much smaller hand did wonders to ease her mind. A bit in a daze, she let herself be led to a reception room in the back of the library.

“Here, have a drink.”

Before she realized it, a cup of steaming hot tea had been served in front of her.

“That must have been quite a shock. But don’t worry, you’re safe here.”

At Caro's gentle urging, she took a sip of tea, a single tear streaking down her face.

It was no wonder. She had grown up alone in the forest where there was no one to display that kind of brutish behavior; this had been her first time facing an adult who had been physically violent with her. It was shocking, terrifying, and made her want to run away.

"You're okay now," Caro repeated softly as Misha sat, silently crying. Though he knew it was small consolation, all he could do was repeat how she was safe now.

Having left the group to get changed out of his drenched clothes, Caro had run back to the library, full of excitement. But when he'd arrived, he'd found Misha being attacked by that man, and that had affected him deeply. He instinctively grabbed a book from the shelf and hit the man over the head, an instinct born from his regular training.

As a child of nobility, he was always at risk of kidnappings and assassinations. As such, he had been trained since he was very young to deal with these kinds of emergencies. He had thought it was all pointless since he always had an escort with him, but today, for the first time ever, he was thankful for all those drills he had been made to do.

I never thought I'd be using those skills to help someone else.

Though he was too small to hold her, he knew she wouldn't want to be alone at a time like this, so Caro sat close to her.

"It's okay now. That guy is going to get properly punished."

Luckily for Misha, her struggle with the emotions overwhelming her made those sinister words glide past her unheard.

After spending hours dealing with all of the aftermath of the attack on Misha, when Ryan finally made it back to his office, a certain boy was there waiting for him.

"You haven't been doing a very good job of protecting Misha, have you?" Caro challenged.

"I gave them so many warnings. Who would have expected anyone would be stupid enough to try anything?" the king replied

with an exasperated sigh.

Caro shrugged, hat in his hands. “Don’t you know? It doesn’t matter what you tell an idiot—he’s still an idiot. Warning them is the same as doing nothing at all.” Caro sneered, an expression he would never dare to make in front of Misha.

“Caro” was the name he’d given her, but his full name was Carolus, after the last king, who had been killed only half a year into his reign. Being born so soon after his father’s death, he had been his mother’s last hope, and so she had given him the same name.

When Ryan took the throne, he had declared the next king would be his brother’s son, so Caro had been taken into hiding to protect him from attempts on his life. And so, he’d become renowned as “the phantom prince.” That was his true identity.

He normally lived in hiding with the former prime minister, but he came back to visit the capital every year during the festival season. Apparently, this was the time of year Caro’s mother and father had met, so she had made it a custom to visit her husband’s grave in the capital every year around this time.

How romantic, Carolus thought cynically, though truth be told, this time of year was a rare stretch of freedom for him. Or to be more accurate, it was a time when he didn’t have to do anything. That said, there wasn’t all that much he was interested in doing, so he typically spent his time idling the hours away in the library.

Caro was his late father’s nickname. The infant Ryan had struggled to say his full name, making it come out as something closer to “Carolush,” so it was clear that it had been too hard to pronounce. Eventually, it was shortened to “Caro.” Gradually, the people in their family and his closest friends had taken to calling him that too.

Since she had been betrothed to him from a young age, Carolus’s mother had been one of them. Ever since this Carolus was young, he had heard that nickname in her fond reminiscing, and so it had become a symbol of happiness in his mind. However, no one, neither his mother nor anyone else, had ever used that nickname to refer to the young boy himself.

One day when he had gone to meet Ryan, young Carolus had

happened across a report on Misha's journey. The report had caught his interest, so he'd gone to the library to see her in person. When Misha had asked for his name, he'd given in to temptation and told her that old, retired nickname. That name had become symbolic of happiness to him, so he had wondered how it would feel to have people refer to him that way too.

Declaring himself only king in the interim, and that he intended to return the throne to the proper royal bloodline, Ryan had thrust the succession into the lap of his nephew, the son of his deceased brother. The crushing weight of that responsibility had been dropped on Carolus when he was no older than an infant.

His mother and those around him raised him with the utmost care, with the words "You're just like your father" always on their lips. Carolus was a talented child. He absorbed knowledge like a sponge, and he took to swordsmanship and martial arts like a duck to water. He never forgot anything that he heard, and needed to see an example only once not just to replicate it but also to adapt it properly to practical use.

His mother was over the moon for him. She was more determined and passionate than anyone to turn this last memento of her deceased husband into the perfect king. As a result, Carolus had been given training and expectations from his mother rather than warmth and care, causing him to grow cold and cynical. Everyone who looked at him saw the shadow of the dead king. Why was he alive? Too talented to lament his situation, Carolus grew gradually more and more unsettled.

He had taken an interest in Misha because, though they were of different social standings, he felt like they were kindred spirits. She was only thirteen, yet she had knowledge that put adults to shame, and she put that knowledge to use saving people's lives. She was a child, but there was nothing childlike about her. Apparently, her cleverness extended beyond the knowledge of herbs too. The story of her run-in with the cultists read like a work of fiction. Not only that, but she had apparently lost her mother to an accident recently.

When he'd first met her, Carolus had been disappointed. Unlike him—icy and cold—Misha was bright and warm.

She's completely different from me.

He met her as "Caro," a nobody, but she talked to him like an equal even though she was twice his age, and she praised him as incredible for things that were perfectly ordinary. He tried to test her a bit, but she never changed, always treating him as she would any boy.

It was a refreshing experience for Carolus. Everyone else in his life wanted him to grow up as fast as possible. When he dozed off, rather than scolding him for being rude, she gently put a blanket over him and softly stroked his hair. The feelings that sparked in him were unforgettable. His time playing with the kids Misha introduced him to was also a first for him.

For a brief time, he wasn't the destined heir to the throne; he was just a seven-year-old boy. He had been soaked head to toe. He had laughed until his stomach hurt. And finally, he'd felt something soft and warm light up inside him.

This must be what happiness feels like.

Becoming king was nothing more to him than the dream of the people around him. He had no desire to take the throne, but neither did he have any particular reason not to, so he had just gone with the flow.

But now, all he could think of was that girl's bright smile...and the image of her silently crying.

"Hey, Uncle Ryan, I've found something I want to protect, so I think I'm going to be a bit more serious about becoming king now."

"Huh?"

Carolus's sudden declaration caught Ryan like a sucker punch. He felt like he heard a sigh and an "I told you so" in Lalaya's voice coming from somewhere.

Chapter 17: Sense of Unrest

In a dark room of drawn curtains, the sound of pained coughing echoed. The old woman, racked by incessant coughing, had fallen ill a few days prior.

"Your temperature isn't going down either. Maybe I should go buy some medicine after all," the old woman's daughter said, rubbing her mother's back with a concerned look.

"Oh, that's not necessary. I'll feel better after some sleep," the old woman replied, her voice hoarse.

The two lived alone. Life wasn't so easy for them that they could afford to buy medicine for every ailment, which was why they were hesitant to buy medicine for something as simple as a cold—even when that cold lasted for days, coupled with extreme fatigue and a slight fever.

The old woman blamed it on her age; she was well past seventy now. She didn't have the energy she used to have, so it took longer for her to recover from colds like this.

"But..."

The daughter seemed unconvinced, so the wrinkled old woman gave her a big smile. However, after watching her mother have a fever for days, she saw nothing but pain in that worn-out expression.

"The weather can't make up its mind, and the rain has made it really humid too. Once the sun comes out, I'll be better in no time. Now come on, you have to go to work. If you're that worried about me, then go make some big bucks so you can treat me to a good meal!"

Still clearly reluctant, the daughter nevertheless found herself driven outside. The old woman peeked through a gap in the curtains, watching her leave for work. And once again, fat drops of rain started falling outside just when they had thought it was finally

letting up.

"What is wrong with the weather these days? The rain won't stop, and it's so hot. It's like the same thing is happening again..."

As she glared at the sky, the old woman was struck by another coughing fit, and she doubled over in pain. The unease growing in the back of her mind was immediately driven away by the pain of her current sickness.

All that remained in the dark room was the pained sound of labored breathing.

"Found you! What are you guys doing?"

During a gap in the rain, Misha had gone to visit Anna's house, only to be told that the children had gone off to the lake, so she had set off in search of them. She had been quite lucky to find them deep in the reeds by the water. The plants grew tall enough to reach an adult's waist, making them the perfect hiding spot for children. If Misha hadn't happened across one of their discarded sandals near the spot the adults pointed her to, and if she hadn't had Ren with her to jump into the grass at the first sign of them, she likely would have missed them.

"Oh, it's Ren! And Misha!" Anna, face covered in mud, looked up from her work as Ren jumped on her. She pushed her way through the grass, and Ren excitedly followed, bouncing around her feet. Once she made it to Misha's side, the little wolf bolted back into the grass. No doubt he was off to find the two boys, who were likely still doing something in the water.

"We're out checking the traps we set yesterday," Anna explained with a bright smile, stepping out of the grass to reveal it wasn't just her face covered in mud. The sleeves of her dress were also thoroughly soaked.

"You've been fishing?"

"Yeah, for karas! Granny isn't feeling well, so we wanted to catch some for her!"

Misha's face twitched; images of a bucket full of squirming lizards immediately came to mind. But as gross as they looked, it was clear the people of the city loved them for the nutritional value they

offered.

"Did you get any?" she asked.

"Yeah, we got one! And it looked like the other trap had one too!" Anna bobbed her head happily, oblivious to Misha's strained expression. She was too happy at the thought of being able to help their bedridden grandmother to notice Misha's unenthusiastic response.

"Jackpot! The other trap snatched two of 'em!"

And then two mud-soaked boys pushed their way out of the grass. Beaming, they proudly held up the bamboo baskets they were carrying. Anna jumped for joy at Yuu's announcement, which prompted some happy bouncing from Ren as well. In a short time, the little wolf had acquired the same layer of mud that the children had.

"Wow! Tonight's gonna be a feast!"

The tomato stew with karas was good at least. It was, right? Yeah, Misha told herself as the kids celebrated. Unlike Ren, who was poking his head inside to sniff at their catch, she had no desire to take a look in the basket that Teto was carrying.

"What's wrong, Misha?"

After they had celebrated for a while, the three kids eventually turned their attention to Misha. Normally she was quite energetic, but she seemed a bit tired today. Misha could only sheepishly shake her head.

"Oh, it's nothing. I wanted to say thank you for the tomatoes, but you guys weren't around the house, so I came to find you. More importantly, did you say your grandma is sick?"

The three kids shared worried glances.

"I don't know if I'd say she's sick. She's just not feeling well."

"She says she always feels tired, so she's always lying down."

"She's also got a little fever. She says it's just because she gets tired easily at her age..."

The first signs of a cold, maybe? Misha thought, arranging in her head the symptoms the children mentioned.

"You know, I can make medicine," she said. "Remember that medicine I put on your knee when we first met, Anna? I made that

myself. So, I know a bit about helping sick people. Would you like me to take a look at your grandma for you?" Misha asked with a smile, stroking Anna's soft honey-colored hair.

"Can you?!" Anna's eyes shot open in surprise.

"Of course. But first, you all need to clean that mud off."

"Okay!"

While Anna happily bounced off, Yuu and Teto shared a hesitant look. They were old enough to understand how expensive medicine was. Yuu's family were farmers, growing vegetables for sale in the market, so they had no issue putting food on the table, but they weren't so wealthy that they could afford to call a doctor for anything but an emergency.

Recognizing their concern, Misha smiled and patted the two boys on the head. "It's not that strange to go see my friends' grandma if she's sick, right? And if I happen to have anything that can help, I don't mind sharing a bit. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay!"

After clearing up the boys' doubts, she urged them to set off, and they quickly ran to get cleaned up.

"Wait, Yuu! Wait for me!"

Misha laughed as she watched Anna and Ren run off after them, before making her own way down to the water. She had to clean up Ren before they could go anywhere.

Ren, of course, would have none of it, so their attempt at washing up quickly turned into simply playing in the water as they ran around trying to catch him. Misha hadn't really expected anything less—but she *didn't* expect to be roped into it along with the others.

As they all played, Tenz quietly stepped away to get towels and changes of clothes for them.

Misha ran through the symptoms. Fatigue and coughing fits—and though it wasn't bad, at night she developed a slight fever. Her throat was red and swollen, but that was easily explained by the coughing. She also suffered from an upset stomach, robbing her of much of her appetite.

"Looks like the first symptoms of a cold. I'll give you something to help your sore throat and stomach. Take it immediately before you eat. And just in case, I'll leave something here for your fever too if it gets bad. And since you've had a small appetite, make sure what you eat has plenty of nutrients."

The children's grandmother was resting in her bedroom, which faced the backyard of their house. She was a bit surprised when they brought someone who wasn't all that much older than themselves to take a look at her, but after watching Misha go about her exam, she almost felt she should apologize.

The girl her grandchildren had brought claimed to be an apothecary, so the elderly woman had assumed Misha's mother was a real apothecary while Misha played as one. Deciding there was no harm in playing along, she accepted Misha's request to take a look at her, but it quickly became apparent that Misha was the real deal. The medicine she pulled out as she talked was likely real too.

"Thank you for taking the time to give me an exam, but I am afraid we are not so wealthy that we can afford to buy medicine to cover a simple cold like this."

Misha slowly shook her head as the old woman tried to refuse the medicine. "I'm not asking for money. I may be an apothecary, but I don't sell medicine. I'm here from Bluheitz to study, not for business. I'm just here to visit my friends' grandmother."

It wasn't that easy for the old woman to accept Misha's excuse. She knew the medicine from Misha would cost enough to feed their whole household for three days. Meanwhile, her reluctance to accept the medicine bothered Misha, who had never considered someone might turn her down.

As the two settled into a bit of a deadlock, Tenz stepped forward from where he was waiting by the back wall. "Lady Misha was able to make an enormous breakthrough in her work thanks to your grandchildren. Could you please accept this as a symbol of her gratitude?"

His serious expression mixed with his compassionate tone was such an odd juxtaposition that it single-handedly broke the tension of the room.

"Anna and the boys were really worried about you, so I wanted to see if I could do anything. Besides, this medicine was made from herbs that I picked from my home. I'd be much happier if they helped someone who really needed it," Misha added. It was a perfect follow-up to Tenz's persuasion.

Anna and the boys nodded energetically in agreement. Finally, the serious looks arrayed against her pushed the old woman back, and she gave them an awkward smile.

"Then I suppose I have no choice. Thank you."

"My pleasure. And let me know if you run out, okay? Or rather, I'll be back to see how you're doing later!" Having finally triumphed, Misha gave a wide and beaming grin.

Her reaction, like a young child who had finally gotten her hands on something she loved, was enough to draw a more natural smile out of the elderly woman.

She is a wonderful apothecary, but I suppose she is still a child at heart.

If Misha had grown up in the forest as she said, then the herbs she had picked there were probably of little more value to her than the flowers growing in the fields. That made her think of Anna, bringing home bundles of wildflowers she had picked from the fields. If that was the case, then it was her responsibility as an adult to accept the gift with grace.

Taking the medicine while everyone was still around to see it, she smiled with another thank you.

With the change in plans for the herb garden, the herbs that Adol had painstakingly raised but ended up with no medicinal value had all been uprooted. However, even if they couldn't be used to make medicine, they still could have weak effects in herbal tea, so Misha had been drying and preserving them.

While she was inspecting the racks of drying herbs, she suddenly turned to ask Adol a question. "Mr. Adol, what are the medical institutions like in this country?"

Considering her experience at Anna's house, it didn't seem like the people had much access to doctors. Misha understood that

doctors and apothecaries were fairly rare even in Bluheitz, but as far as she knew, it was perfectly normal for most people to have access to painkillers or cough medicine. At least, that was how it had been in the small farming villages she had visited with her mother.

Leyas's job had been to go see people who had more serious illnesses, those that simpler medicines couldn't handle. Well, it had been her "job," but she had hardly ever accepted money for her services. Most of the time, she had been paid in vegetables and dried meats. She would always say that "the blessings of the forest are for everyone to share."

"There are some ordinary doctors and apothecaries, but here in the capital, there are a few free clinics as well—but the only part that's free is the exam. They still charge for medicine, so poorer families can't make much use of them," Adol replied absentmindedly, still focused on his own work.

"They charge for medicine?"

"Medicine in the capital has to be made from herbs imported from elsewhere. That makes it pretty expensive here. That's one of the main reasons we started the herb garden in the first place," he finished with a heavy sigh.

That means if the herb garden goes well, those clinics would be able to give away medicine for free? Or at least sell it cheaply?

With the herbs thoroughly dried, they let off a concentrated aroma. Secretly popping a bit of a mint-like plant into her mouth, Misha tilted her head.

The herb garden had been part of the plans the capital put in place to help prevent the tragedy of the plague from years ago from repeating itself. Unfortunately, it wasn't going all that well yet.

Enjoying the sharp scent of the herb filling her mouth, Misha looked over at Adol quietly continuing his work.

"Let's do our best, then."

Adol looked up at Misha's murmur to find that pair of jade eyes staring at him from point-blank range. He gently smiled at her in return and nodded.

"Yes, let's."

Misha gave her own nod and turned back to her own work.

Chapter 18: At the Home in the Forest

Ryne,

If you are reading this letter, then it seems I failed to make it back to the forest. Maybe you just missed us while we were away at the mansion. Hopefully. But please, if I've left Misha behind, protect her. Raised as she was in the depths of the forest, she knows nothing of human malice. I have no doubt the world will hurt her greatly.

If possible, please bring her back to the ways of the People of the Forest. Being my daughter, she learned nothing of them, yet she has the skill to become one of the greatest among them. Although, perhaps that's just bias on my part as her mother. Also, while I have not confirmed it for certain, I believe she has inherited their power. Honestly, I should have put her in your care much earlier, but I was too weak to say goodbye to my daughter.

Ryne, I know you understand, but I was very happy here. I never regretted leaving our home to be with the man I loved. I was truly, truly happy. Thank you for watching over us for so long. I'm sorry for being a selfish sister until the end.

Please take care of Misha for me.

The messy writing made it clear that this letter had been hastily scrawled out. It was easy to tell from the unusual disarray inside the house that the owners had left in a hurry. It was difficult to tell how long it had been abandoned, but the large number of hoofprints out front were another sign of the urgency of their departure.

And amid all that panic, Leyas had stopped to take the time to write a letter for him. Ryne wasn't sure if that was something he should praise her for. Or perhaps Leyas, sharp as she was, had

predicted something was going to happen to her.

Sitting down on one of the chairs, cold from extended disuse, Ryne took a deep breath as he set down the letter he had found in a hidden cupboard. He was just barely weathering the storm of emotions inside him. Even after all the death he had seen in his life, the letter left behind by his little sister, his only sibling, hit him hard.

He had been wandering the battlefields as he always did when it had suddenly occurred to him it was about the time he had promised he would visit Leyas again. Perhaps the timing should have triggered a sense of foreboding in him. On his way to his sister's home in the forest, he came across a number of unsettling rumors.

No matter how quiet the funeral, there was no way to stop people from talking. To make matters worse, it was a scandal involving the king's own brother. Those rumors had brought Ryne fairly close to the truth already, but he'd still decided he needed to go and check for himself. This letter had been waiting for him.

Stupid girl, Ryne cursed inwardly as he bit his lip. He knew if he said anything out loud, the storm inside him would be unleashed.

He recalled Leyas's gentle yet strong smile. She'd always been a girl who never changed her mind once it was made up. She had been taken far from her home and lived secluded in the wilderness, yet she hadn't uttered a word of complaint. She'd spent her life waiting for her husband's monthly visits, along with the daughter she loved so dearly. It had been a quiet, peaceful life, and no doubt she'd been as happy as she'd claimed in her letter.

So there's no point in pitying her. Not even if she lived her whole life as a social outcast.

Crumpling the letter in his hands, Ryne tossed it into the fireplace and started the fire. He then took a slow, silent walk around the house, gathering up a few things of interest and tossing them in the fire alongside it. They were all evidence of knowledge that was too much for this world. The results of his sister's research, which she had continued even in her exile.

Though she never would have shared her results with anyone, Leyas had been too much of a scientist at heart to have let anything that sparked her curiosity lie unexplored. Ryne focused his efforts on

learning about treating external injuries, but it seemed Leyas had taken a different path. From his perspective, her progress had been remarkable.

Her discoveries might not cause a dramatic upheaval in the field of medicine if they became public, but they would certainly push it hard in the right direction. But with no one to manage that knowledge, Ryne couldn't allow it to leak into the outside world.

There was little reason to think anyone would ever come to this little cabin deep in the woods, but stranger things happened. Well, actually, anyone who figured out Leyas's origins would probably be drawn here by curiosity. Ryne wasn't about to let her work fall into the hands of people like that, so he spared nothing. He cast it all into the flames.

It didn't take much to turn medicine into poison. It was the first lesson taught to children among the People of the Forest, and after he'd witnessed countless battlefields, the malice of human beings had ingrained that wisdom into Ryne.

Sorry, Leyas. I'd love to take all of this back to the village, but I have to prioritize those still alive. I'll do what I can to remember what I've seen and share it, though.

If he was just heading straight back to the village, it might have been possible, but Leyas had over ten years of records here. It wasn't something he could carry around while doing other business. Of course, it also wasn't the kind of information he could trust in anyone else's hands.

Staring into the hungrily burning flames, Ryne toyed with one last book in his hands. It was a diary that Leyas had kept. She hadn't written in it every day, but occasionally she'd documented things that had struck her as particularly important. It contained everything from her insights as an apothecary to memories of her daily life.

To other apothecaries, it would be a treasure trove of information. But more than that, it would be a precious memento for the daughter she had left behind.

After a bit of hesitation, he slipped the book into his bag. As long as he kept a careful eye on it, making sure he waited for the proper time to hand it over to Misha, he could spare one book.

The diary's first entry was dated the day she'd left the village, and it brought a pang to his chest. She wouldn't have been allowed to bring her old diary out of the village, so everything before that day would have been lost. All she had taken with her was a few changes of clothes, some jewels given to her by their father the day she was born, and the staff her mother had once used, figuring she would need it if she was traveling.

"Seriously. What an idiot," Ryne muttered out loud this time as he watched the crimson flames greedily devouring the house's secrets.

Nonetheless, he still remembered the smile she'd had when she'd said she was happy; it was so clear in his mind. He had to put the rest of Leyas's life choices out of his mind. The man who'd taken her away had at least seemed to have treated her well.

Once the fire had done its work, Ryne disposed of the ashes and stepped outside. He then turned, looking slowly around from his spot in the doorway, before whistling through his fingers.



The deep sound echoed through the forest with a peculiar rhythm. As the last of the whistle vanished, the flapping of wings signaled the arrival of a bird. The bird of prey was the messenger bird Misha and her mother had kept.

"Hey, Kyne. Long time no see," Ryne said, as if speaking to an old friend. He reached out and scratched the bird beneath the chin, and Kyne happily closed her eyes, enjoying the pleasant sensation. "You must be lonely now that everyone's gone, huh? I'm going to go find Misha. Do you want to come?"

Kyne stared back at Ryne as he spoke, and quickly gave a loud squawk as if to answer the question.

Ryne smiled. "Okay, then. Can you start by taking a letter to my good-for-nothing brother-in-law, then? I'll come by right after."

After attaching the message tube to Kyne's leg, he waved his arm to send the bird back into the air. Using the offered momentum, Kyne flapped her wings hard and soared upward. After flying in a wide circle overhead, the bird glided off into the distance. Once she was out of sight, Ryne set off.

He didn't glance back at the small cabin a single time. There was nothing left of the darkness that had marked his expression as he watched the fire burning inside. It was a bit sad to think that this little house would neither have anyone to live in it nor anyone to visit it any longer. However, Ryne left it as it was, to stand as the last guardian of all those memories that had been made inside.

His arrival had been sudden, and his departure quiet and subdued.

Still recovering after Misha had left, Deenoark had been sitting in his room when the sudden arrival of the messenger bird informed him that he was to have a guest. Arriving at the chosen spot on the designated day and time, a small, forgotten herb garden in the mansion's courtyard, he saw a lone man hiding in the shadow of a tree.

Once the man saw Deenoark, he lowered the hood of his cloak. The sudden reveal of that unforgettable color made Deenoark stiffen. And then he bowed his head.

Ryne sighed as he received the duke's silent apology. He made no excuses, simply lowering his head. Ryne couldn't bring himself to throw any accusations at him. The memory of his younger sister's smile, of her happiness, killed the barbs long before they reached his lips.

"Please, lift your head. I'm not here to blame you for anything."

Deenoark lifted his head at that languid voice. Ryne's voice was no different than it was in his memories. There was no sign of hatred or even sorrow in it. Brilliant jade eyes, identical to those of his beloved wife, stared back at him. Nevertheless, there was something in the sight of him that disquieted Deenoark, who shifted uneasily just for that motion to send a twinge of pain from his back down into his leg.

"Oh, right. I heard you were wounded in the back. I guess your nerves are still a bit strained," Ryne muttered as he saw Deenoark stiffen again.

His casual mention of Deenoark's condition elicited surprise from the duke. Ryne flashed him a knowing grin.

"News of your injury is everywhere. Considering how long it's been and what symptoms you still have, it's not hard to make an educated guess, so stop looking at me like I'm some sort of monster."

When he learned that Ryne had been on that same battlefield with him, just a short distance away, Deenoark was stunned yet again. He never would have guessed that Ryne had been so close by.

"When I heard what happened, I considered heading over to see you, but you were long gone by then. Well, I wouldn't have been able to make it to you that quickly either way, so it's hard to say whether your friends' quick reaction was for the better or worse."

Deenoark hung his head. As a result of his return, the most precious person in the world to him had been lost.

Seeing the duke's silence, Ryne smiled bitterly. He had claimed he wasn't here to blame Deenoark for anything, but that was the impression he was giving, was it not? Apparently, his feelings weren't quite so easily digested as Ryne had thought.

"I'm sorry. I came to see Misha. Where is she?"

After shaking his head at Ryne's quick apology, Deenoark explained Misha's current situation. Ryne immediately frowned.

"It just had to be *there*."

"Pardon?" Deenoark asked, Ryne's murmur too quiet for him to make out.

Ryne shook his head. "Oh, nothing. I'll go visit her right away."

Deenoark immediately offered to arrange a carriage for him, but Ryne declined. Ryne could also understand why Deenoark would look so gloomy at the sudden departure. There weren't that many people he could talk to about Leyas. He would have liked to at least speak with him for a little.

But as if oblivious to Deenoark's feelings, Ryne pulled up his hood and lifted his bag from the ground at his feet. His brain was already hard at work, plotting the quickest route from here to Redford.

"Okay then, see you around. I'll send Kyne back if anything happens." With that lighthearted goodbye, Ryne disappeared among the trees.

Even after his departure, Deenoark stared after him, watching the motionless and silent trees for quite some time.

Chapter 19: Sudden Surprises

"A ball?" Misha echoed as she delivered Lalaya's meal.

"That's right. There will be a ball to celebrate the coming of summer. They hold one every year at this time. Not just in the castle either—there will be celebrations all throughout the capital. It's quite pretty with all the lanterns."

Now that Lalaya mentioned it, Misha did remember there seemed to be a lot of shops selling lanterns recently.

"Sounds like fun. I wonder if I'll be allowed out at night," Misha murmured as she poured Lalaya's special juice.

After downing the beverage, the princess replied, "I guess there's no harm in asking, but I doubt it. They'll want you at the ball."

"Me? At the ball?!" Misha exclaimed, her attention torn away from her preparation of Lalaya's postmeal medicine.

"No one told you?!" Lalaya shot back, equally shocked.

This was, of course, the first time Misha had heard of the ball, so she'd had no way of knowing that her attendance was expected.

"No, they didn't." But when she turned and saw the grin on Lalaya's face, she immediately understood why that was the case. "Lady Lalaya, you've been stopping people from telling me, haven't you?"

Lalaya giggled at Misha's bitter glare. "Don't worry. I personally arranged a dress for you. All that's left is for you to try it on for the final adjustments."

"Lady Lalaya!" Misha all but screamed. If Lalaya had a dress ready for her, then there was almost no chance Misha would be able to escape. "That's not the issue! I can't dance!"

Naturally the main attraction of a ball was the dance. There would be no way for her to avoid it.

"Don't worry, don't worry. Ryan's pretty good, so if you learn the basics, he'll do the rest."

Lalaya's attempt to "ease" Misha's concerns only made her panic more.

I have to dance with the king*...?*

As Misha stood thunderstruck, Carrie stepped forward to relieve her of Lalaya's medicine. At the same time, another maid stepped up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Without further ado, please try on the dress," Lalaya said. "After that, we'll call the dance teacher and get you some lessons. I'm feeling really good, so I think I'll be able to go for the whole night this time. I can't wait."

It was impossible to tell whether Lalaya's smile was innocent or scheming. But Misha did understand one thing: There was no running away from the gentle hand of the maid on her shoulder.

"Lady Misha is our guest of honor, after all."

But when she turned a desperate look on Kino waiting at the edge of the room, he replied only with a respectful bow. The maids didn't hide their excitement after that.

"Come now, Lady Misha, this way. Let's also think of how we'll do your hair while we're at it. I can't wait!"

"I've always wanted to dress up Lady Misha!"

"It's no fair that she never lets us do anything for her!"

As the excited maids pushed Misha from the room, she looked back to see one last delighted smile from the princess...and was given a final bombshell.

"The ball is in three days. Good luck."

After leaving, Lalaya felt like she could hear Misha screaming in the distance.

"I'm exhausted..." Misha muttered, lying flat on her desk.

"The dress does look really good on you, though," Tia said, bringing over a pot of tea without mentioning Misha's unladylike behavior. The tea cup clinked down on the table, and the aroma wafting from it drew Misha back up to a proper seated position.

"Thank you."

She had just finally been released from trying on her new dress and was now taking a break in one of the guest rooms. Her dance

lessons were next. She was just waiting for the teacher to arrive.

Even after Misha had been granted use of the cabin in the castle garden, Tia and Isabella still served her whenever she was inside the castle itself. They'd occasionally poke their heads in at the cabin as well. At this point, their relationship looked more like that of sisters than master and servants. Misha was of course elated by this, and she'd even sit down and eat meals with them when they had time after work. She had grown much more comfortable around the maids, and when there were no other onlookers, they would secretly step out of their roles and chat idly with her.

"Can you dance, Tia?"

"I guess so."

Becoming a servant in the castle required one to have a respectable background, so the maids were almost always daughters of low nobility. Tia was no exception, being the second daughter of a baron, and so she had received proper education in things like etiquette and dance as part of her upbringing.

"If only you could take my place for me..." Misha muttered, knowing it was a hopeless wish.

"No one can do that, I'm afraid," Tia replied with a wry grin.

Misha had knowledge and expertise to put professional doctors and apothecaries to shame, but could still be remarkably childish and naive. The contrast was adorable, making Tia want to spoil her even more.

Even now, Tia couldn't stop smiling. The way Misha drank her tea with her shoulders slumped made the maid feel sorry for her, but at the same time, it was undeniably cute.

Misha had golden hair that practically shone from within and jade eyes so big and bright that they seemed likely to pop out of her head. She was undeniably beautiful, but when she put on a long dress and had her hair done up, she was stiff and awkward. It was like she preferred dressing as a commoner. She was supposed to be the daughter of a duke, but she hardly looked the part.

Tia had been chosen to attend her for the sole reason that they were relatively close in age. She had been so nervous to be serving such an important guest that she could barely eat on that first day.

But once they had actually met and talked, Misha's frank and honest demeanor was so cute, Tia wished she could trade her own cheeky little sister for her. And yet at times, she'd suddenly come across as extremely refined and mature. She truly was a mystery.

In particular, when she was dressed up in formal wear like when she had been trying on the dress just prior, her beauty left them speechless. Those who worked for the castle were well accustomed to seeing attractive people, but even the older maids had been taken aback. Pride surged inside Tia's chest. *Yeah, my girl's the best!* she'd wanted to shout.

"It's okay. The basic steps are the same no matter the country, and they aren't that difficult. You'll pick them up in no time," Tia said with a smile, refilling Misha's tea.

Misha sighed quietly. She worried that Tia and Isabella had a strong tendency to overestimate her. Right now, she was way in over her head.

But I guess I have no choice. It's already decided, so there's nothing I can do but try my best. That's all they can ask of me, right?

It wasn't like her to mope for so long, so Misha finally decided to turn her mood around. At the very least, being able to actually move sounded more fun than sitting and standing on command for a bunch of other people to decorate her.

I guess now that I think about it, I used to dance with dad.

Back in the forest, they'd danced in the living room of their little cabin. They had even roped her father's escort into it. Her mother had supplied the music for them, playing the flute or singing.

Misha had been so short that she had only held her father's hands while dancing, but it was still fun, and her mother and father dancing while embracing had been a beautiful sight.

Misha was pulled from her recollections by the sound of a knock at the door. Assuming it was the dance teacher, she started getting ready, but Tia came back from answering the door in a confused state.

"Lady Misha, apparently a messenger has come from Bluheitz, sent by your father."

Misha could tell by Tia's bewildered expression that this was not part of the plan. She was a bit unsure how to deal with it herself. It seemed today was going to be a day of unexpected plans. There was no point in stewing on that alone, though. Misha granted permission to admit the guest. And when he came in following Kino, her eyes shot open wide.

"Kite!"

It was the young knight that had helped her while she stayed at her father's mansion. Perhaps because he was visiting a foreign castle, he was dressed up in his formal knight's uniform, and his black hair was combed back, making him look almost like a different person. Misha had been used to seeing him in rough shirts and pants, so his appearance came to her as a shock, but when he bowed formally with an amused look in his indigo eyes, her sense of surprise was totally replaced by the joy of reuniting with an old friend.

"Why are you here all of a sudden?!" Misha dashed over to him in excitement, and Kite's serious expression started to falter.

"I am here to deliver something for the duke."

"Deliver something?" Misha echoed, tilting her head. *What could that be?*

"You had your measurements taken before you left the mansion, remember? The clothing we were having made for you was finished, so I came to deliver it."

"Oh yeah!" Misha blurted out. Because she was perfectly happy with the clothes she already had, she had entirely forgotten, but she did recall now that all of the clothes they had given her were garments that had been adjusted for her on the fly. She had assumed it would always be too much work to make something from scratch for her.

"The luggage has been taken to your room in the castle. Please take a look at it later," Kino shared politely.

"You came all the way here for that?" Noticing Tia's gaze urging her back into the room, Misha hurriedly invited Kite in to sit. In no time, tea and snacks had been laid out for them.

"Yes. I was also asked to check in on how you were doing.

Unfortunately, the duke himself was unable to visit in person," Kite explained, a faint smile pulling at his mouth while he sipped the tea.

Despite his rough, calloused fingers as a knight, Kite had an unmistakable air of elegance. Misha couldn't help but notice that as he handled the teacup.

"How is my father recovering from his injury?" Her greatest concern slipped its way out of her mouth before she could even think of anything else.

"It's going well. He has committed to the exercise plan you planned for him before your departure, and is now able to walk short distances without a cane. Riding is still out of the question, but he is capable of traveling to and from the castle by carriage. As such, he has returned with vigor to his work," he replied smoothly, evidently prepared for the question he knew would come.

It was so smooth, it got a laugh out of Misha. She could tell her father was working hard to keep her from worrying.

"His wound has probably just closed, so please remind him to take it easy. How is everyone else recovering?" she asked.

They spent some time talking, Kite politely replying to Misha's questions, until another knock sounded at the door.

"The dance teacher has arrived," Kino announced, and Misha's face fell a little.

"Could it be you're learning to dance?" Kite asked.

"Apparently, I have to attend the ball that's coming up, so I'm starting my lessons...today," she explained as she slumped her shoulders.

But then a thought occurred to her, causing her to look hard at Kite. A knight as young as he was serving a duke would have to be a noble, right? Misha had learned after coming to Redford that it was quite rare for actual commoners to serve those of high status. Geord was a notable exception. That meant Kite was likely nobility too, and *that* meant he probably had a noble's upbringing...

"Kite...can you dance?"

He hesitated. "A little." The look in her jade eyes gave him nothing but ill premonitions, but he found himself answering honestly anyway.

Misha's eyes sparkled. "You're just here to deliver my clothes, right? That means you have no other plans? Come with me!"

"You've got to be joking," he blurted out reflexively, but there was no one there to chastise him for it. "I was thinking of going to see the castle town."

"Just as a tourist, right? Don't worry, I'm quite familiar with the city, so I can show you around later!"

It was his first time in the country, let alone the castle, and now he was going to be subjected to a dance lesson while being watched by all kinds of people. Even imagining it was tying his stomach into knots, but before he could find a good excuse to save himself, Misha had grabbed his hands and leaned in close.

"Please, Kite." As much as her words made it sound like a request, her hands made it quite clear she wouldn't take no for an answer.

After an extended silence, Kite finally broke and turned his face away. "Okay, fine. Just back up a bit please. You're far too close."

Elated with getting the answer she'd hoped for, Misha wasn't even bothered when he pushed her away by the shoulders. Just the opposite, she jumped up from the sofa with a happy smile.

"Then shall we go? Please show us the way, Kino."

Misha was almost skipping down the halls, happy to have a friend alongside her...followed by Kite very much dragging his feet.

The dance lesson ended up being more fun than she'd expected. Although her own dancing had been nothing but her playing around, she must have paid close attention when she saw her mother and father dancing together, as she absorbed these lessons with remarkable swiftness. As Tia had said, the difference between what she was being taught and what she had seen from her parents was pretty small, so it wasn't much effort to correct it.

But above all, Kite's performance as the lead was excellent. Even with the height difference between them forcing him to take a bit of an awkward hold, he was skilled enough that it didn't hinder her enjoyment.

"Next time we'll have you dance in shoes with proper heels. That

should give you a bit more height, and so make it a bit easier for you," the middle-aged teacher said.

She was quite pleased that Misha had found a partner for herself, and the fact Misha had a better grasp of the fundamentals than expected meant they could advance to the second song faster than planned.

Kite, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as pleased with his fate. The moment the teacher was out of the room, he was off to the corner, finding a sofa to sit down on. The hour or two they spent dancing wasn't enough to tire out a trained knight like him, but he couldn't say the same about an hour or two of being observed dancing by strangers in a foreign castle. It had been mentally exhausting.

"Why me...?" he muttered, head in his hands.

"You're a very good dancer, Kite. I was surprised you even know the steps for women." Oblivious to his mental state, Misha plopped down on the sofa across from him with an innocent smile.

"It is part of our cultural training as knights. Since there are so few women that train to become knights, we end up having to learn both the lead and the follow roles in practice. It's a pretty awful sight," he sighed, sitting up to take the tea offered him.

The chilled herb tea was refreshing after their exercise. He had to hand it to Redford. Having the ability to produce ice for drinks at this time of year was impressive. He could tell from this one cup of tea just how much they treasured Misha here.

As he heaved another sigh, Misha's expression turned a bit anxious. He really seemed tired, and now the guilt for that was gnawing at her.

"I'm sorry. Now that I think about it, you just arrived in Redford, didn't you? You must be tired."

"Yes, I just arrived this morning, but you don't need to worry about that. It's not my body that's tired," Kite tried to deflect, a bitter smile on his face, getting a confused look out of Misha.

Across the room, maids whispered excitedly as they watched the two on the sofa chatting. That was a sight he was used to, so it didn't bother him. But he couldn't say the same for the gaze he was

getting from Kino, the man dressed as a butler waiting by the door. His gaze was cold, analytical, weighing everything about Kite from his general athletic ability to his competence in combat. He made no effort to hide his ruthless examination. And judging by his gaze, it didn't look like he liked much of what he saw. It took a certain level of self-awareness for one to notice Kino's appraising gaze, so it was a difficult thing to express to Misha.

But when Kite threw a glance at Kino standing behind Misha, the butler responded with a grin. As expected, the harsh gaze had specifically been to test him.

Stifling a sigh, Kite pulled a small box out of his pocket. If he were really just here to deliver clothes, there would have been no reason for him to see Misha at all. He had also been asked to deliver one more thing to her personally.

"If there's a ball coming up, this is actually rather convenient timing. I have one more thing to give you from the duke."

Misha tilted her head as she looked at the cloth-wrapped box he placed on the table. It was long enough to fill both of her hands. Reaching for it tentatively, she found it was quite a bit heavier than she expected. When she finally opened it, her breath caught.

"No way...!"

They were emeralds, the same shining green as Misha's own eyes. The largest jewel was set in a necklace fashioned with brilliantly intricate silverwork, with two slightly smaller ones fashioned into a matching pair of earrings. Whether for their size or their brilliance, they would have been perfectly suited to the role of royal regalia.

"I am told they were a gift for Lady Leyas for their wedding day. I was instructed to give them to you, as you might have a chance to put them to use."

Leyas had in fact possessed the same green eyes as her daughter. With trembling hands, Misha reached out and touched the necklace, tears starting in her eyes.

"I know these. My mother showed me a picture of them."

Back in their forest home, Leyas had particularly treasured a picture of herself on her wedding day. She had said it was her

greatest treasure, smiling just as brightly and happily as the couple in the picture. In that picture, she had been wearing these.

"They were jewels her parents had left for her when they passed away. My father had them made into wonderful jewelry. She was too scared to take them out into the forest, so she had my father take care of them...and promised when I got married, she'd give them to me..."

It was a promise that she could now never keep. The vivid memory of her mother's smile coming back to her brought forth a waterfall of tears.

After hesitating for a moment, Kite slid over to sit next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. Misha leaned into his chest, as if trying to cling to his warmth, and his somewhat cool body readily accepted her tears. The way he stroked her hair made it clear he felt a bit awkward doing so, totally unlike when her mother had done the same, but the kindness behind the gesture couldn't have been more alike. It was all she needed to open up and let herself cry.

She had told herself she was done crying so many times, but there was always something else to bring the tears back out. She didn't quite understand yet that the meaning behind those tears was slowly changing. She was still too young to understand the old adage that time heals all wounds.

Someday she would. The pain would be wrapped up in good memories, and the tears would become smiles. Those around her could only hope that day would come sooner rather than later.

Chapter 20: A Dance and a Walk

"A messenger from the duke has visited the castle," Tris declared as he stepped into Ryan's office, pulling the king's attention away from the paperwork in front of him. "A fairly young knight. According to Kino, he seems skilled for his age."

Ryan tilted his head at that addendum. He didn't understand what Tris was implying, but he was sharp enough to catch his unpleasant undertone. "If he's on business for the duke, he would have to be fairly skilled, young or not. What are you trying to say?"

"In addition, it seems he is quite close to Misha," Tris continued, ignoring Ryan's question. "I hear he has been acting as her partner for her dance lessons. Supposedly, they are perfectly in sync."

The king scowled. "You of all people know how busy I am. I don't have time for this nonsense."

But Tris had known Ryan since they were little. They were far too close for him to be bothered by the king's low growl.

"Oh my, it's not good for you to be that stressed for time. Why don't you take a bit of a break?" Tris suggested. He grinned and snatched the pen from Ryan's hand before pulling him out of his chair and pushing him out of the office.

Ryan was so startled by Tris's behavior that he forgot to fight back, only coming back to his senses when the door to the office slammed shut behind him, leaving him alone.

"What is with him today...?"

For a moment he considered just going back to work, but it was clear Tris would force him out of the office if he tried to go back. Instead, he walked off with a sigh.

Tris *had* been right. Ryan was so stressed over preparations for the Moonflower Festival that he honestly needed the break. He had made good progress on those preparations, so there would be no harm in a short break.

"Speaking of being busy, I haven't seen Lalaya for a while, have I?"

He'd heard that his sister's condition had stabilized considerably. At first, Lalaya had been quite combative when it came to her treatment, but Misha's dogged persistence had won the day, and now the princess was meekly following her every instruction.

Well, perhaps not so meekly. It seemed the resentment born from Misha's treatment of her was making its way heard through Misha's screams, the little apothecary constantly finding herself the victim of Lalaya's pranks.

"I should go pay her a visit."

At this time of day, Lalaya was probably either studying in her room or taking a break herself. He started off toward his sister's room.

"Misha is a surprisingly good dancer," Lalaya murmured, relaxing with a cup of tea while she watched Misha dancing from the corner of the room.

Today Misha was practicing in heels, which gave her an extra eight centimeters. As this was her first time wearing high heels, the teacher had been considerate enough to provide her shoes with particularly wide heels to practice in. Even so, she clearly struggled to walk in them when she first put them on. As a result, rather than dancing, the practice had started off with her practicing walking to and fro while she held Kino's arm.

Once she started getting the hang of the shoes, they moved on to the actual dance steps. Though she knew the steps themselves, the unfamiliar footwear made her unsteady. The dance teacher insisted that practice made perfect, and so practice she did.

For the record, even as sick as she had been, Lalaya was still a princess with plenty of training in dance. Few people had seen it for themselves, but she was indeed flawless. Despite having barely participated in evening parties because of her health, Lalaya had danced a single song for Misha as an example to follow, and she had done so with such light-footed grace that it seemed like she was hovering over the ground instead of walking on it.

As Lalaya concluded her example with a bow, Misha's applause was riotous. Lalaya responded with a scowl, saying Misha was exaggerating and simply being silly, but the maids attending them caught Lalaya's quickly hidden smile—visible for one brief moment—that had preceded it. To the ignorance of the two girls, everyone around them was gleefully watching the exchange.

"I thought Misha's partner was a knight from Bluheitz."

As Lalaya sipped her tea, she was struck from behind by a sudden question from an unexpected voice.

"Oh, Ryan. What brings you here?" Lalaya looked up at him, standing behind her with a hand on her chair.

The king shrugged slightly and smiled. "Tris kicked me out of my office, saying I was working too much, so I figured I'd pay my sister a visit."

"Is that so?" Lalaya chuckled, eyes wide with surprise. "I suppose you have been too busy to even sit down for a meal with me."

"Things will be pretty busy until the festival is over. Give me a break."

Lalaya laughed again at Ryan's frown. "Well, apparently her knight had some business to attend to this morning. The maids said he was quite the specimen, so I was hoping to see him for myself."

"I see... Uh-oh."

As Ryan nodded at Lalaya's explanation, the two muttered in surprise as they watched Misha trip over herself. Kino deftly caught her before she hit the ground, but it seemed they had decided that was a good enough opportunity to take a break, so Misha came walking over. She was still a bit unsteady on her feet, so Kino escorted the embarrassed girl over.

"Good work out there. Perhaps you need just a bit more practice?" Lalaya commented as an exhausted Misha plopped down onto her sofa.

Misha replied with a weak smile, no energy left to offer any argument. The moment one of the maids set a cup of tea in front of her, she was downing it fast. She then turned and gave a small bow to Ryan.

"I'm really just no good with these shoes. Could I at least wear

ones with a shorter heel?" The way her shoulders slumped would make anyone feel bad for her.

"It looks to me like you're too focused on how uncomfortable you are with the shoes, so your movements are turning stiff," Ryan said after some thought, setting down his own tea and standing up. "Let's do one dance together. Come on."

After he took her hand, he urged her out of her seat and led her to the center of the room. "Don't worry about your feet; just listen to the music. Relax. I won't let you fall. I could even carry you if I had to." He grinned as they took their positions.

Unlike Kino, who had been very formal and polite as her partner, Ryan was much more forward, holding her a little closer than she was used to. While that embarrassed her a little, it also made her feel steady on her feet.

"Perfect, just like that. Let your partner carry you." Ryan nodded in encouragement as Misha looked up at him in surprise, and as if that was a signal, the music started.

It was the same song she had been practicing to before. As they started moving, Misha began to tense up again, which Ryan fought off by striking up a conversation. He asked her about Lalaya's condition and the medicine she was taking, all things Misha was very familiar with. Her attention shifted from her footwork to the conversation, the tension eased from her muscles, and Ryan's somewhat forceful but skilled lead drew her into the song. Before she realized it, her previous clumsiness was forgotten as she moved in time with him.

In no time at all, the song had come to an end. Before Misha even noticed its conclusion, the next song began. She knew exactly what to do, guided by the movements of her partner. She didn't even have time to think about her movements, instead letting Ryan carry her into the rhythm of the song as she twirled.

"You're thinking too much, Misha. Just follow what your partner is doing. That's why your partner is there," Ryan said with a laugh as he guided the bewildered girl into turn after turn. As they spun, the long skirt of her dress fluttered in beautiful arcs around her. Ryan's smile eventually drew one out of Misha as well, and she was even

enjoying the music.

As they danced, they grew even more in sync, and Ryan gradually moved on to more and more difficult steps. Carried away by the rhythm of their dance, Misha didn't even notice, entirely engrossed in the world of the songs. Before long, they weren't even talking, just smiling at each other as they moved. Their expressions made it clear that the two were enjoying themselves.

After finishing a third song, they finally came to a stop. Although Misha was left a bit short of breath, her expression was many times brighter than before they had danced.

"Come on, Ryan! If you spin her around like that, you'll just leave her dizzy!" Even Lalaya's chastising voice was mixed with laughter.

"But it was a lot of fun. Thank you," Misha said, returning to the table where Lalaya was sitting. That was the most fun she'd had since starting these lessons, and it was probably her best performance too.

"No, thank *you*. That was a great break for me. I hope we can have as much fun during the event. It's all about celebrating the coming of summer, after all." Ryan smiled once more, putting his now slightly disarrayed hair back in order.

Misha nodded happily. "I hope so too."

Kite was busy in the morning, so Misha's promised tour of the city had to be pushed off until the afternoon. The festival was in two days, and the city was buzzing with visitors and temporary shops opening to serve them.

Remembering her experience in the other cities she had visited, Misha had decided to get lunch out on the town today, and now was applauding herself for that wise choice. There were plenty of stalls selling rare foods never seen outside of Redford, and they all looked great. Of course, even Misha's home comforts counted as foreign cuisine here, a fact that really reinforced how far she was from the life she'd known.

Maybe I'll have some reno soup. I haven't had that for a while... Misha thought idly, leaning against one of the pillars in an unladylike manner outside the front of the library, their designated meeting

place.

It was a famous dish in Bluheitz, one Misha had eaten about once a week in the past, so it was quite a nostalgic dish for her.

Oh, but Kite wouldn't like that. Well, we'll get lots of different stuff while walking around, so I could just get a little, right?

As Misha convinced herself with a nod, she noticed someone out of the corner of her eye. Looking up, she saw the person she was waiting for had arrived. Or maybe "people" would be more accurate, though she hadn't been expecting anyone except Kite.

Beside the young knight was a man in his thirties, about half a head taller than Kite and a good bit more muscular. He had bright red hair and reddish-brown eyes, lit with amusement as he looked at Misha. But the biggest thing that stood out about him was one of his sleeves, flat and empty below the elbow.

The man grinned as he saw Misha's surprise, like a child who had just succeeded at a prank. "Hey, kid. Long time no see," the man greeted her with a wave of his good left hand.

"Captain Shydein!"

He was one of the soldiers she had treated back at her father's mansion. He had lost his dominant right arm from the elbow down and had survived a deep wound to his chest. If things had gone badly, the injuries could easily have taken his life, but despite his grave condition, his positivity and charisma had been instrumental in lifting the dark, despairing atmosphere of the infirmary.

Besides, he was a knight, so his body was far more robust than an ordinary person's. When Misha left the mansion, his wounds had been healing at an unbelievable pace. Never mind rehabilitation, he had already begun practicing with a sword again. Misha had scolded him for aggravating his injuries at the time.

"I'm not a captain anymore. You can just call me Shydein."

"Oh, you quit?" Misha frowned at his cheerful declaration. She glanced over at Kite, who just shrugged.

"I did. I can't fight like I used to with my arm missing, and there's no room in the army for a captain who can't pull his own weight."

"Not that he wanted to resign," Kite interjected. "It took a lot of effort for us to get him to take it easy."

Misha tilted her head at the contrasting expressions from the two. "Huh? Then, why are you here? I thought you came with Kite, but..."

"Of course I came with Kite. Even with one hand I can still handle a carriage. I've been hired as a coachman." Shydein laughed heartily, while Kite sighed gloomily. It seemed even that had been a bit of a compromise.

As curious as she was, Misha felt like this was something probably best left untouched, so she just gave a small smile and pretended she didn't notice.

Instead, she found something that interested her far more. "How are your wounds doing?"

Shydein waved his right arm energetically, the partially empty sleeve flapping about. "Thanks to you, I've got no issue in daily life. At first it threw off my balance a bit, but I've gotten used to it now."

Meanwhile, Kite was shaking his head. "After he quit as captain, there was no one left to stop him from overdoing it, so his chest wound opened up quite a few times. He's still not back to full health."

"Come on, Kite! You weren't supposed to tell her that!" Shydein hurriedly tried to cover Kite's mouth, but he missed his chance. He couldn't spare himself Misha's cold glare.

"I told you *so* many times it wasn't going to heal properly if you did that..."

Misha's irritation sent a shiver down Shydein's back.

She continued, "There's an herb garden nearby that I've been working with. I have some herbs and tools there, so please let me take a look at your wound."

The icy smile she turned on him didn't reach her eyes.

After Misha gave Shydein a thorough examination and spent a good deal of time yelling at him, the group somehow managed to get things back on track and went out for a bit of a late lunch. Of course, it was Shydein's treat.

"Why did you come with Kite anyway?" Misha asked again as she enjoyed the nostalgic taste of her home. She didn't think he was the type to travel to a foreign kingdom just to give a thank-you.

Shydein was happy-go-lucky and not particularly conscientious, but he had still been entrusted with leadership in the military. Misha knew from their short acquaintance that he was logical and had a strong grasp on any situation he found himself in.

Biting a piece of meat off the bone he was holding, Shydein returned Misha's direct gaze with a strained smile. "Well, no point in hiding it, I suppose. Being subtle isn't exactly my strong suit, so let me get right to the point." With a shrug, he put his food down before he deeply bowed his head. "Please introduce me to the People of the Forest."

Kite gulped. The People of the Forest were legendary to anyone who frequented the battlefield. Treatment from them happened too often to be treated like fairy tales. Most soldiers knew people who had been saved by them. They were like ghosts, appearing across the front lines, saving friend and foe alike, then disappearing once more.

Those close to the duke knew that Misha's mother had been one of them, and they had an unspoken understanding that it was not to be spoken about. Misha was also quite surprised by the sudden request, but eventually she sighed.

"Why?" Her voice was remarkably quiet in the tumult of the busy street.

"I want a prosthetic arm. Not just for looks—I want one that actually works. And I'm sure the People of the Forest are capable of that," Shydein replied, lifting his head to meet her gaze.

"I thought you said your missing arm wasn't getting in your way?" Misha asked.

"True. I can eat. I can work. If living was all I cared about, then one arm would be enough." Like Misha, his voice had turned terribly quiet, yet deadly serious. "But I'm too greedy to be satisfied with that. There are things I want to protect. I can't do that with one arm."

The tension between them was painfully taut. Kite could only watch nervously. Neither of them moved, as if time itself were standing still.

The two stared at each other in silence for quite some time, but

eventually Misha was the one to break the silence with another sigh.

"I can't promise you anything, but I can get you a meeting with one of my friends."

She then turned back to her soup. Though it had grown a bit colder now, the familiar taste still softened her expression.

"That's more than enough," Shydein replied, turning back to his food as well.

Kite finally relaxed. For some reason, that exchange had unnerved him far more than a demonstration in front of the king would have. But with the two of them going back to eating like nothing had happened, it felt weird for him to say something, so he could only sigh and bite into his sandwich.

Chapter 21: Walking in the City (Alone with Kite)

"Okay then, I've got some stuff to take care of, so I'll be on my way now." After putting the vegetables and meat left in front of him between some pieces of fried bread, Shydein jumped back to his feet.

"Wait, you're not going to come with us?" Misha asked.

"Nope. I've already got what I came for, so I won't spoil your good time any further," he said with a playful wink. "Besides, if I'm gonna ask you to negotiate for me, I'll need to stay in Redford for a while, which means I have to find both a place to stay and some work. People are in a great mood here thanks to that upcoming festival, so I'm sure I'll find something. Don't worry, I'll get Kite to tell you where I'm staying before he heads home."

With a wave of his left hand, the large ex-captain disappeared into the crowd. He was so quick that Misha didn't really have time to try and stop him, which left her staring at the empty space he had once occupied.

"We'll probably be staying at the same inn until I head back to Bluheitz, so you don't need to worry about him," Kite said, too used to Shydein's behavior to let something like this interrupt his meal.

Once she'd inferred as much from Kite's behavior, Misha decided not to let Shydein's sudden departure bother her and turned her attention back to her rapidly cooling soup. She fished out a tuber and popped it into her mouth. The well-cooked vegetable practically melted in her mouth.

"Is there anywhere in particular you'd like to go, Kite?"

Kite thought for a moment. "I'd like to see the cathedral. After that, my mother asked for souvenirs, so I'd appreciate some help finding some things for my family."

He bit into his fried fish. Meanwhile, Misha lined up some plans that would take them to some shops where they could find gifts that she thought a woman would appreciate.

"Okay, then let's start with the cathedral. With how crowded the city is, it will probably take us quite a while to get a turn inside."

Kite grinned at her. "You're the king's guest of honor, aren't you? Can't you skip the line?"

They both stood up, having finished their meal.

"You can't break the rules in a holy place like that!" Misha declared haughtily, turning away. Kite dropped his shoulders in a show of disappointment. They were quiet for a while, but it wasn't long before they both broke down into fits of laughter.

"Fine, I guess I'll be a good believer and endure the trial of worshipping with the crowd."

"A wise choice. Let's go."

The two walked into the town, giggling as they made their way to the cathedral.

The cathedral in question was a building with as much history as the capital itself, and it was the heart of Redford's national religion. It was also the home of the largest religion in Carmine, so even though the city had recently experienced war firsthand, even those invaders hadn't been bold enough to desecrate it, so it had survived the conflict virtually unscathed. As such, it had maintained its original appearance from the time of Redford's founding.

That made it a prime spot for both the faithful and nonbeliever tourists, so almost everyone who visited the capital made their way to the cathedral at some point. This time of year, when the capital was bursting with visitors for the Moonflower Festival, the cathedral was unbelievably packed. Locals not doing business there typically avoided the cathedral during the festival.

Being only a recent resident of the city, Misha was unaware of this, and so she found herself quickly being swept away by the crowds. She very easily would have been lost if it weren't for Kite grabbing her arm and pulling her close.

"I knew it was going to be crowded, but wow," he commented.

The road leading to the cathedral was packed so tight, one had to wonder where all these people were even coming from. Once they found themselves in the crowd, escape was almost impossible. All they could do was let the flow of people carry them forward.

Held tight in Kite's arms, she was so bewildered by the crowd around them that she couldn't even be embarrassed by how they were close together. She understood one thing very clearly: If she got separated from him for even a moment, there would be no telling where the crowd would take her. In short, she'd be lost. And that wasn't something she was willing to put up with at her age. In her minor state of panic, she didn't realize that she knew the area well enough that she could easily find her way back to the castle from here. Even Kite could likely manage on his own.

Meanwhile, Kite was a bit surprised to find Misha practically clinging to him rather than fighting to keep her distance. But one look at her face was enough to figure out her mental state, so he made sure to stifle his laughter. Instead, he turned his attention to the crowds around them.

They were packed quite tightly into the crowd, so Misha's secret escort had been driven away from them. He wouldn't be able to see or hear them, and with how small Misha was, the best he could hope to see was the top of her head. With how crowded the area was, it would be perfectly normal to pull one's face quite close just to converse normally, and since she was so short, they'd have to bend down quite low to do so. That would naturally hide their faces as they spoke. Even someone skilled at lip reading would have no way of figuring out what they were talking about.

This was exactly the opportunity Kite had been waiting for.

He bent down, whispering into her ear, "Misha, please listen carefully."

She jumped a little at the sensation of his breath on her ear.

"I have a message from the duke. Ryne will be visiting soon, so please wait for him."



"You mean my uncle?!" Misha gulped.

She hadn't expected this at all. If she was going to hear anything about Ryne, she'd figured it would come from Miranda. She had left Misha's side to search for him, after all.

Misha whipped her head around to face him, and Kite had to quickly lean back, narrowly avoiding an unintentional headbutt. It was at that moment Misha realized precisely how close Kite was, and she yelped in surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Wait, no," she instinctively apologized before correcting herself. She needed to get as much information about Ryne as possible while she still could. "My uncle visited my father? And he's coming here? Why?"

As she tried to turn around and face him properly, Kite held her tight, stopping her. Slowly and gently, he guided her forward to keep moving with the crowd.

"Calm down. We don't want news about your family getting out, right? Not even to your escort, so keep quiet."

She tilted her head as she got a glance at the trouble clear on Kite's face. She had declined to take an escort with her because she knew she'd be with Kite. She had bid that escort farewell at the library once Kite had shown up, but he was talking as if the escort was still watching her.

"I don't think they have any ill intent, but there's no harm in being careful. That's why I need you to calm down, keep facing forward. With this many people around, your escort will probably only be able to catch glimpses of your hair and nothing more."

Misha finally realized why Kite was bringing this up now. When they were in the castle, they had no idea who was listening or from where. Besides, the maids were always around. Even their present excursion, where the two of them were alone, had been met with quite a bit of opposition, such as "A boy and a girl of your ages spending time alone together will start unseemly rumors." Misha had to laugh at that.

If Kite had brought up Ryne in that environment, news that another one of the People of the Forest was approaching would have reached the king's ears in an instant. Whether that was acceptable

or not was up to Ryne to decide, and so Misha didn't think it was her place to reveal his presence. After all that had happened, she had come to understand that the People of the Forest didn't like their own presence being made public.

"When is he coming?" she asked softly, facing forward as Kite had instructed.

"I don't know. But when he visited the duke, he sent a mail bird ahead of him, so he will likely give you the same courtesy. Apparently, Ryne arrived at the duke's estate four days after we departed, so if he left to come see you immediately, I expect he'll be here in about that long," he replied, voice just as quiet.

Though the noise of the crowd around them all but drowned out his whispers, they were standing close enough that she could hear him strangely well.

"Oh, so Kyne is with him." Misha's eyes twinkled as she thought about the friend she had left behind in the forest. She had raised her from an egg, so she was very much family to her.

Misha knew Ryne had a soft spot for Kyne as well. Her uncle had happened to be visiting on the day she hatched, so he had been dragged into helping take care of the newborn bird. There was a reason "Ryne" and "Kyne" were only one letter off from each other.

She couldn't stop herself from beaming as she remembered her mother talking about them. *"She's named after someone incredibly free-spirited. There's no doubt she'll grow up to fly freely through the skies."*

"Okay. I'll put something in my window so Kyne can find me easily. Thank you for telling me, Kite."

Misha giggled. She had thought it was strange for someone like Kite to be interested in a tourist trap like the cathedral, but now it all made sense. He must have wanted the crowds here to hide the two of them from Misha's escort, who she hadn't expected to follow them.

Kite gave her a confused look.

"I thought it was weird you wanted to see the cathedral," Misha explained. "But this is what you were after, wasn't it?"

"Well...I still underestimated just how many people were going to

be here. The festival season is more than I bargained for." He sighed, shielding Misha from the throng pressing in on all sides. "Oh well. It's too late to escape the crowd, so we'll have to see it through to the end. I'm sure it'll be a funny story later."

His lackadaisical attitude made her laugh again. "The sculptures there are really beautiful, you know!" Misha insisted. "Hmm, but I don't know if we'll really have the time to appreciate them." She looked back up at him. "Once we're out of here, I'll treat you to a drink. I know a place with some great juice."

"I'll look forward to it." He replied to Misha's carefree smile with a wry one of his own, finally able to relax now that his final mission was complete.

Misha left a small bundle of dried flowers on the windowsill of her bedroom in the small cabin in the garden. It was good for keeping the bugs out, so there was nothing particularly unnatural about the display—not even if someone were to notice the dried fruit on a stick right in the middle of them all.

It was one of Kyne's favorites, something Misha used to give her as a treat back in the forest. She was sure that a bird as smart as Kyne would notice it.

The breeze coming in from the open window was still warm, reminiscent of the heat of the day. Luckily, it hadn't rained, but nature had traded that for the unseasonably harsh sun. On the bright side, that made the juice even tastier, so it wasn't all bad.

Once they had actually made it into the cathedral, they'd had much more time to enjoy themselves than Misha had first expected. Kite had seemed a bit embarrassed about his lack of knowledge of art; even so, he had been enraptured by the sculptures lining the hallways. And though Misha had been there once before, on a second viewing, she picked up a great many new details, so it was great fun for the both of them.

Afterward, they had gone shopping for souvenirs. Kite was happy to just pick up any random thing that was currently popular, but Misha had been insistent they get something tailored specifically to each person. They had ended up having an enjoyable time

wandering around all kinds of shops.

Misha reached for her hair. She had bundled it up under her hat, but now it was hanging loose on her shoulders and swaying in the night breeze, aside from a small bit pinned up with a pale-pink flower hairpin.

Kite had given her a present as a thank-you for taking him around the city. When she brought it home and opened it, she'd been surprised to find it was an item she had singled out as particularly cute while they were shopping. He must have bought it behind her back.

The soft cloth hairpin, folded and arranged in the shape of flower petals, was perfect for Misha's gentle personality. Though there was no one to show it off to, she was so happy, she had to stick it in her hair immediately. She laughed again, thinking back on her haste. She couldn't help feeling a bit abashed now, but it wasn't unpleasant.

The night breeze brought the scent of dried flowers hanging in the window back into the room.

"Maybe I'll make him some potpourri as a thank-you gift." He often worked outside, so the bug repellant effects might come in handy. "Or maybe he'd prefer something like pain medicine? But that's not very cute..."

Misha muttered to herself as she stared up at a beautiful moon hanging in the night sky.

Chapter 22: Her First Ball (Part 1)

"I'm so nervous, I feel like I'm going to throw up," Misha murmured. She was already in her dress with her hair perfectly arranged.

The ball was soon to begin. After a light lunch, Misha had been hauled away by the maids to be done up properly. Normally, they tried something similar after she had a bath but would give up if she refused. This time, however, they very much forced her to comply—by begging her in tears. They left her skin smooth and sparkling all over before wrapping her up in her formal dress. For a girl who preferred the kind of clothes that commoners wore, this formal style with a corset was a considerable challenge for her.

"You are already quite slender, so we didn't have to tie it so tightly," Isabella said with a gentle expression as she worked on Misha's hair.

Misha met the maid's gaze through the mirror and shrugged. "That's not really the problem..."

"Oh, but it is. Some people need us to call in the men to come and tie it up for us! Your corset is really just for the aesthetic," Tia added as she started laying out the accessories Misha would be wearing.

Misha's shoulders slumped. "If you tie it that tight, people will have breathing and circulation problems."

"True," Isabella said, "but we're always ready for that with emergency rooms, waiting for the inevitable few to pass out."

In any place, at any time in history, women were always willing to push just a little bit too far in pursuit of beauty, the maids explained to a stunned Misha.

"Okay, you're ready."

Looking up, Misha saw that her hair, usually left partially down, was now fully arranged behind her head, leaving her slender neck on

full display. Though it didn't reach into the territory of "alluring," she was definitely beautiful enough to garner considerable attention.

The unfamiliar hairstyle took her aback, but her misgivings were immediately blown away when one of the maids leaned in.

"Excuse my hands," she said, placing something around Misha's neck. The sparkling green jewelry lay just above her décolletage. "As I thought, your hair being in an updo like this really brings out the beauty of the necklace." Nodding in approval, the maids then added the matching earrings.

When Misha had received the jewelry, she had been unable to fight the urge to try them for herself, so she had asked the maids about them. She had been worried, since it might have thrown off the ensemble they had arranged for her already, but in the end, they had matched the dress Lalaya prepared for her perfectly, so the maids accepted the request enthusiastically. In exchange, she had been forced to sit through a lengthy session of "experimentation" with her hair, on top of a dress rehearsal of the outfit.

Ultimately, they had ended up needing to alter the neckline of the dress to match. Misha felt bad for putting more work on the maids' shoulders, but such last-minute alterations were par for the course, so they didn't think much of it. In fact, the seamstresses had been overjoyed when Misha gave them some hand cream in return.

Their work complete, Isabella and Tia sighed in admiration.

"You really are beautiful."

"Isn't she, though?"

Misha stared at her own reflection, almost ignoring the maids behind her. With her usually loose hair tied up behind her head and all the makeup they had put on her, she felt like the image in the mirror resembled her mother more than it did herself. The emerald necklace solidified the impression, reminding her very clearly of the picture of her mother in her wedding dress.

"Mom..." As she reached out to trace the image in the mirror with her finger, she felt her eyes starting to grow hot, so she tore her eyes away. If she cried now, the hours of work her maids had put in would all be washed away. She forced the feelings down, turning to the two behind her with a smile. "Thank you for making me so

pretty. I don’t even recognize myself!”

The two responded in kind to Misha’s forcefully happy tone, recognizing the girl’s attempt to dispel the gloom settling in over her.

“You’re more beautiful than any princess!”

“Honestly. You really are breathtaking!”

There was still some time before the ball, so Misha sat and enjoyed some tea with Tia and Isabella.

“By the way, who is going to be escorting you to the ball tonight?” Tia asked.

Normally it would be unthinkable for servants to sit at the same table as their master like this, but Misha had managed to convince the two maids to sit with her when they were in private.

“Lady Lalaya wouldn’t tell me. She said it would be a surprise for tonight,” Misha replied with a frown.

“Oh? So even you haven’t heard? That must be why they didn’t tell us either. Lady Lalaya must really want to shock you.” Isabella chuckled.

But Misha could only sigh. “There’s no way it would be His Majesty, right?” she asked, afraid of the worst.

Tia and Isabella glanced at each other. That would be pretty uncalled for, they agreed, but considering the way Lalaya treated Misha and how Ryan behaved, they couldn’t say it would never happen. The three of them looked at Kino, who stood alone by the wall as Misha’s guard, and he quietly shook his head.

“If the king were to bring you personally into the venue, it would be a huge scandal. I was told he will be entering last with Lady Lalaya.” Kino’s measured reply released the three girls from their nervous tension. If Kino had been told that, then there was no doubting it.

And he was right. If Ryan, who was currently single, escorted Misha into such a formal event, it would send all kinds of messages. The Kingdom of Redford had originally asked for someone to serve as Ryan’s concubine, so it would be far too believable of a rumor. True, Misha was lower on the social ladder than Ryan was, but she was still the daughter of a duke and the niece of a king. Her

bloodline was more than sufficient to qualify her as his proper wife.

"Of course! So, who could it be, then? The only other people I can really think of are Mr. Geord and Mr. Tris..." Tia rambled off some more names and counted off on her fingers. Misha alone failed to realize every person she mentioned was quite distinguished in Redford.

"It's in the banquet hall, right? There will be a ton of people there. I wonder if I'll be able to hide in the corner," Misha murmured idly. With her greatest fear dispelled, she happily started digging into the cookies in front of her.

Deeefinitely not, the three others in the room thought in unison. Though they could understand her desire, even if they didn't take into account that Lalaya would force her into the limelight, she was still the talk of the castle. There was no way she'd avoid attention.

She had never appeared in any official capacity before, so rumors had been left to breed more rumors. Redford's high society was so abuzz with talk of Misha that even the servants' network was full of talk about her. The fact this ball was to be Misha's first public appearance would make it even more packed than usual.

Usually, the ball on the night of the Moonflower Festival was open to any in the nobility who wished to attend. The king would be there from start to finish, meeting each and every attendee face-to-face, but aside from him, there was a bit of an unspoken rule that the lower nobility would attend the beginning of the party, gradually making their way out to make room for the higher nobility in the second half.

But this year, things seemed different, leading to quite some stress among the organizers. There was no doubting that the impetus was Misha herself.

She was the castle's guest of honor, the daughter of a foreign duke. She was unmistakably high nobility; however, she was in her early teens. There was no guarantee she'd stay that late into the night. If the duke were present, things might be different, but she was a young girl. In other words, no one knew when exactly Misha was planning on showing up. And since she was so disconnected from the other nobility, there was no telling when she would make

another appearance.

Noble society was built on the flow of information. No one wanted to be left out in the cold when it came to learning about this girl. For many of them, this was born of pure, genuine curiosity. Others hoped they might get a chance to build a connection with her, and some had more nefarious purposes...and so on.

This storm of circumstances had thrown all convention out the window. Some people decided to arrive at the beginning and stay through the whole party, while others were more direct in demanding to know when she'd show up. There were few people who could stand against all of that.

"Sir Geord is a commoner, so he would have a difficult time standing against the nobility. And Sir Tris is probably going to be escorting his fiancée, so I doubt it's either of them," Isabella explained.

"Wait, Mr. Tris is engaged?" Misha exclaimed. The way he carried himself, always working in secret behind the scenes with a veiled expression, made it hard for her to imagine him getting married.

"He is the heir of a duke, so he was betrothed at a young age to build family connections. Still, despite the political nature of their relationship, I've heard they are quite the happy couple. However, with how busy Sir Tris is, and with His Majesty yet to be married, he has held back from having the actual wedding."

"I see. I wonder if I'll be able to meet his fiancée tonight?" Misha asked, eyes alight with curiosity.

Isabella smiled warmly. "I imagine so. Anyway...who does that leave to be your companion?"

While they pondered this question, a knock at the door brought the answer to them.

"I have come to pick you up."

On the other side of the door was a white-haired gentleman, the familiar head physician of the castle.

"Mr. Conan?"

"Long time no see, Misha. What has it been, three days?"

"Does this mean *you're* taking me to the ball tonight?" Misha ran to the door, happy to see a familiar face. After taking over Lalaya's

care, she had conversed with Conan plenty of times. A part of her wondered if this was what it was like to have a grandfather. Beyond that, he was quite knowledgeable when it came to the field of medicine, so it was always fun to talk with him. Anything that involved learning something new always lifted her spirits.

"Believe it or not, I am a marquis. I was the lucky man to win the chance to play this supporting role for tonight."

"I was wondering, since they refused to tell me who was going to be escorting me tonight. I'm glad it's you." Misha smiled brightly.

But the doctor gave a small shrug. "Oh no, as I said, I am only in a supporting role tonight, to stave off the other nobility. *He* is your true escort."

"Huh?" Misha's eyes went wide as the doctor stepped aside to reveal another person behind him. "Kite?! Why?!"

"I have been selected to act as the duke's representative," the young knight grumbled, looking as uncomfortable as ever in his formal wear.

Earlier, Kite—for the umpteenth time—mumbled under his breath, "Why me?" However, there was no one willing to answer him. Or at least, no answer beyond the smirks of his companions. "Representative of the duke, taking Misha to the ball? This is way too much for me."

He was in the carriage as it headed for the castle. The driver delivered a lighthearted yet merciless blow.

"Well, you're the highest ranked official on this little errand, aren't you? Plus, you're pretty close with Misha, and you've certainly got the looks for the job. Stop your complaining and do your kingdom proud!"

"*Rank?* I'm the third son of a count, not even planning for succession. That's the same as nothing at all. And everyone here knows Misha just as well as I do!"

Kite's loud, frantic refutation only got him laughter in response.

"Then I guess it's just because you've got a face pretty enough to match hers."

His companions in the carriage looked back and forth now that

the private joke had been spilled.

In formal wear instead of his usual knight's uniform, Kite looked every bit the son of a noble. The formal wear someone had snuck into their luggage suited him perfectly. His hair, usually tied back in a lackadaisical manner, was now properly combed, revealing an underlying natural glossiness, and gathered into a ponytail with an elaborate braided cord. Among all of their group, Kite was the only one who could reasonably pull off the noble look.

"Kind of a sad reason to name someone the representative of the duke." The young knight hung his head, finding no one willing to console him. None were willing to risk getting stuck with his job by showing sympathy.

While they would be happy to stand hidden in the corner and indulge in everything the castle's cooks had to offer, they were united in refusing the "opportunity" to meet with Redford's king under the gaze of all of Redford's nobility.

Nonetheless, his companions attempted to offer him *some* comfort.

"But you'll get to meet Misha at her most beautiful before everyone else. That's a bit of a silver lining, isn't it?"

"She'll be pretty nervous surrounded by all the adults in the room. Make sure you take care of her."

Kite responded with a hateful glare. They all had to have known one of them was going to be involved in the ball before they left Bluheitz. Otherwise, there would have been no reason for them to have packed the formal wear. The clothes were far fancier than anything Kite had worn before, not even back in his home before knighthood. The duke had clearly provided them, and yet, none of them had said a word about it to Kite. He hadn't known until the night before. He could only assume this was part of a plot against him.

"Come on, relax. I'm sure the duke would have loved to see her like this himself, so you gotta carry his feelings as well. You've got the duke's reputation to think about too, you know."

"Yes, that's why I don't like this..."

He and Misha were going to be the only visitors at the ball from

Bluheitz; even putting the duke out of his mind, he would have to shoulder the name of his whole kingdom. For a man who had fled the strictures of his noble family to join the knighthood, it was no wonder he'd want to complain about the situation he found himself in.

But the problem was now before him. No matter how much he complained, no matter how much he wanted to flee, he couldn't disobey a direct order.

The carriage quickly arrived at their destination.

"See ya. Have fun!" Shydein waved him off after he had unloaded Kite's belongings from the carriage.

Chapter 23: Her First Ball (Part 2)

The moment her name was called, a ripple passed through the entire room. Her existence had been lurking in the back of the mind of everyone present for ages. Her father was a prince of their neighbor, and she had inherited the blood of that distant tribe of phantoms. She also possessed a good amount of that tribe's knowledge, judging by the fact she had been appointed to care for Her Highness Lalaya's condition.

Platinum-blonde hair, jade-green eyes, and rare beauty—she seemed to entrance everyone around her. Apparently, she had even turned her attention to that useless herb garden, and now big changes were starting to happen there.

Although the castle was flooded with rumors of the girl, very few had actually seen her in person, and only those of the high nobility. Even among them, vanishingly few had spoken with her. The royal family was compulsively overprotective of her, so the other nobles were starving for any information they could scrounge up. All eyes in the room immediately shifted to the door once her entrance was announced.

The girl that appeared was just as beautiful as the rumors suggested. Her beautiful hair was tied up elaborately in a light pink ribbon, paired with a pastel-colored flower ornament. Her dress matched the pink of the ribbon, the faint color growing gradually darker as it ran down her skirt, ending in a deep purplish-red. She wore a belt slightly higher on her waist than usual. Its wide ribbon accentuated her slender waist.

An escort on either side of her, she laid her delicate fingers on the arm of one man and gave a polite bow as her arrival was announced. The breath of everyone in the room caught as she raised her head to look back at them. Her striking green eyes seemed like they might suck in those watching her.

It took a moment for the people watching to realize that they were looking at a young girl. The room finally let out a collective breath. Among the elegance of her features, it was those sparkling eyes that made it clear she was no mere piece of art, but a living human being. The emerald necklace and earrings she wore—the same vivid green as her eyes—gave her a beauty that overwhelmed everyone watching, as if they were trapped in a world of green.

"She's astonishing."

"She is. And that jewelry is incredible. I suppose I shouldn't have expected less from the niece of a king."

"She looks older than I expected."

"Oh, is that Sir Conan with her?"

"If the head physician is backing her, does that mean the rumors are true?"

As whispers broke out across the room, the girl fearlessly strode forward, joining the line with her escort to greet the king. Standing beside her as one of her escorts, Conan leaned forward to whisper something in her ear, and her face suddenly lit with a bright smile. The perfectly cultivated, artificial beauty that she bore cracked, revealing the natural brilliance beneath.

Standing up a bit straighter, she replied to Conan in a whisper of her own before grinning up at the king. The young man answered only with a troubled smile.

The sight would have been right at home in a masterpiece painting.

Once she had greeted the king, the people would have a chance to talk to her. The crowd watched like hawks, waiting to see just what this rumored girl was like.

Misha practically flinched backward as she stepped into the grand hall and all eyes immediately turned to her, but she steeled herself, lifting her gaze as she stood from her bow.

The large room was so brightly lit that it looked like it could have been midday. People in fancy clothes packed the room. Previously, they had been happily chatting away, but now all attention was on her.

Sighing inwardly with relief that none of the attendees seemed to bear her any ill will, she felt a bit more comfortable looking around. A line of people to her right stretched all the way to a platform at the other end of the room, on which sat a throne. For a moment, it felt like she met Ryan's gaze, but he was so far away, she couldn't tell.

Misha felt a pull on her hand, and her attention shifted.

"Keep moving," Kite whispered, eyes still forward.

At that point, she realized she was standing in the doorway, blocking the entrance for others who were still waiting to get inside, and so she hurriedly trotted forward.

Out of consideration for Misha's unfamiliarity with the heels she was wearing, Kite kept their pace quite slow. The realization he was doing that, together with the memory of all the times she had fallen on their way here only for him to catch her, made her want to laugh. Kite was always composed and formal when in public, so seeing his true colors shine through as he panicked back then had been quite funny. But anyone would be surprised if the person walking alongside them suddenly tripped and fell.

"It seems you've garnered about as much attention as we expected," Conan murmured in amusement from his spot on her other side.

"It's quite rare to have foreigners around, isn't it?" Misha replied, looking up at Kite. "It's the first time I've seen Kite dressed up like this too."

I always thought he was handsome, but he really looks like a young noble now, doesn't he?

Misha had been surprised to learn Kite had been assigned to escort her to the ball, but she was even more surprised to learn that he was actually the son of a count. Apparently his aunt, who worked as a maid in the duke's household, had managed to get him into the duke's personal guard.

"I'm the third son, so I'm not even needed as a spare heir. My only option was to find a future for myself," Kite explained, his expression mildly bitter.

Seeing that, Misha didn't have the heart to press him further on

the subject, but it did explain why he was so formal and proper, and why he knew how to dance so well.

"I like your knight's uniform, but this look really suits you too."

Kite could answer only with a wry smile. Despite how much he hated wearing these clothes, he couldn't say it felt bad to be complimented.

"You are also quite stunning tonight, Lady Misha," Kite whispered back, almost as if just remembering it was something he needed to say.

His words came as a surprise to her, eliciting a faint blush. She then hurriedly peered to the side and changed the subject.

"There's an awful lot of people here, huh? I guess there's a lot of nobility."

Seeing her ears start to burn, Kite happily accepted the invitation to change subjects, throwing his gaze across the room. "Looks like we've got some friends camping out over there. They've formed up nicely around all the food. Guess I should have expected that from them..."

Misha turned to see a number of familiar faces excitedly digging into the food. One of them noticed they were being observed and gave a small wave in return.

"That all looks delicious. I wish I could go over there..." As it was a celebration of the coming of summer, the food prepared for the ball was no less than spectacular. Aside from a break for tea, Misha had eaten very little that day, making her gaze as hungry as it was jealous.

"Once you've introduced yourself to the king, you will be free to go where you like. And I imagine being surrounded by your countrymen will likely be the most peaceful way to spend the evening," Conan said with a bright smile, before stepping out of Misha's line of sight to throw a sharp gaze into the crowd: implicit instructions for his students to be there at the right time. The greater the wall around Misha, the better. "I doubt there is anyone here stupid enough to be rude in front of the representative of a foreign nation."

Misha and Kite exchanged a concerned glance.

What exactly were these rumors circling about her? What were the people thinking as they all stared at her?

I'm curious, but I'm not sure I actually want to know... she and Kite thought in unison as they waited for their turn to meet with the king.

"Thank you for your most generous invitation," Misha's escort said. He was a young man with dark hair, a rare feature in this part of Redford. His perfectly formulaic greeting indicated he was well educated, to the degree one would expect from nobility.

Ryan offered the young man a gracious nod. "You must have been quite busy doing the duke's work these past few days. Tonight is an evening for relaxation. Please—eat, drink, and have fun."

But even under the king's analytical gaze, the young man's bow was smooth and elegant, entirely unflinching.

His ability to be polite without excessive flattery struck a remarkable balance, one that Ryan could honestly appreciate. It seemed he understood his position as representative of the duke quite well. If he bowed too deeply, it would be degrading to Bluheitz as a vassal state of Redford. However, if he didn't bow deeply enough, it would be a sign of disrespect toward the king and Redford as a whole.

He's young, but he's good. I almost wish I could keep him.

As he inwardly praised the young man, Ryan turned his gaze to the increasingly nervous Misha at his side. She had her hair tied up behind her head, and she was wearing light makeup, a little glitter at the corners of her eyes to draw attention to her most striking feature. The impact was incredible. It made anyone she locked eyes with feel like they were being swallowed up by them. The effect was only enhanced by the emerald necklace and earrings she wore. Those must have been the rumored mementos of her mother.

She has such a different aura when she dresses up, doesn't she?

Ryan recalled the first time the two had met. She had been wearing dark clothes back then, but these lighter colors suited her just as well. Lalaya had been quite happy to boast about picking out the outfit personally, and Ryan had to hand it to her. She definitely

had a strong grasp of Misha's charm.

Glancing briefly to his side, he saw Lalaya beaming back at him smugly, dying to say something herself. It was like she was showing off her favorite doll. It took all he had not to sigh.

"Your outfit is quite stunning today, Miss Misha. I hope I can ask you for a dance later."

As he complimented her with a smile, Misha gave him one of her own. "I would be honored." That the request didn't seem to shake her meant Lalaya must have warned her beforehand.

Thinking back to the time he poked his head in during her dance lessons, his smile widened. "Then I'll look forward to it."

The line of people waiting to greet him was still long, so he didn't have much time to spend on each person. Catching the signal that they were finished, Misha's escort gracefully guided her away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lalaya's maid speaking to them, no doubt making additional arrangements for later. Impressed by Lalaya's unexpected ingenuity, Ryan stared at her, and she shone a pleasant and composed expression upon him in response.

Since Lalaya usually refrained from participating in events like this, many of the nobility greeted her with a good deal of surprise when they came to introduce themselves. She wore a blue dress the same color as her eyes, and she now looked like the picture of good health, the best in years.

I really owe it to Misha.

Going through the rote formalities of the introductions, Ryan was smiling, thinking of his promised dance with her.

With the first wave of introductions complete, the ball began in earnest. As was custom, the first dance was centered around Ryan, everyone else standing aside to let the king have the honors. With no wife, let alone a fiancée, Ryan typically danced with a daughter of the high nobility, but because Lalaya was attending the ball this time, it was a brother-sister dance tonight.

Both of them were well accustomed to dancing, and so they put on a remarkable performance. Misha watched the pair as she allowed herself to relax among the company of her father's personal

knights and Conan's subordinates. Surrounded by familiar faces as she was—though she sometimes got impolite looks from those she didn't know—she had yet to be forced to speak with anyone else. It was a remarkably solid defensive formation.

"Lady Lalaya is such a good dancer."

"The royal family is quite taken with the art. She spent many of her good days practicing in the past. She quite enjoyed the exercise, to the point she would get lost in it and collapse again, so it was a bit of one step forward, two steps back," Conan explained, watching the princess dance as he might have his own granddaughter.

"I'm a little worried about her. Her symptoms of anemia seem to have died down, but the change in weather is causing her appetite to wane again," Misha murmured as she watched the princess twirling beautifully, her dress fluttering in the air around her.

"It has been quite rainy, hot, and humid, hasn't it? Lady Lalaya isn't the only one fed up with the weather. Luckily, we have you around, so she is still making sure to eat the bare minimum. I don't believe there is much cause to worry." As Conan patted her encouragingly on the shoulder, the first song came to an end, prompting him to turn to Misha with a grin. "Perhaps an old man like me is not a fitting partner, but may I have this first dance?"

Her first dance would be when she had the most attention on her, so being her partner for that dance would be all but declaring he was personally backing her.

Misha replied to his dramatic invitation with a giggle, then pinched the edges of her skirt and gave him a formal curtsy. "I would be delighted. Please forgive me when I step on your feet." She then let him guide her into the ring of dancers.

Conan's lead was gentle and calm, giving her a sense of steadiness as she danced. Though she was stiff and awkward due to the tension of the circumstances, Conan began telling her funny stories of the noteworthy people they happened across as they danced, which helped to ease her nervousness.

"Good, good. Just enjoy the dance. Let your partner do all the work for you," Conan said, advice that seemed somehow familiar. Before she knew it, the song had come to an end, and she found

herself passed over to Kite. The next song began without delay, and the two of them slipped smoothly into it.

"Looks like you were having fun," Kite said as they shared a smile.

"Yeah. Mr. Conan told me all sorts of stories while we were dancing," she said with a giggle while executing a beautiful turn in his arms. The gradient colors of her skirt blossomed outward like a flower as she spun. Having grown up running around the forest, she was naturally nimble and agile, lending her steps and turns a floating, effortless look.

"I thought a ball would be much more nerve-racking, but it's actually quite fun," Misha said. The dance steps that had seemed so hard while she was practicing came naturally to her now. She had taken a particular liking to the turns, so Kite went out of his way to slip in a few extra. And as much as she laughed about being made dizzy, she was clearly having a great time.

Like a butterfly fluttering between flowers, Misha switched from partner to partner. While dancing, she didn't have to worry about all the stares, instead enjoying the unique dancing styles of her various partners.

As expected, she found herself a bit worn-out after five consecutive dances, and so she retired to where Conan was waiting. Confused as to why Kite wasn't there, she looked across the room to find him dancing with a young woman she didn't know. The way she looked up at him, pulling herself closer to him as they danced, made it quite clear she was thoroughly enchanted.

"A daughter of one of my friends. Sir Kite looked a bit bored, so I had him invite her for a dance," Conan explained as he handed Misha a drink.

Missing the somewhat excusatory tone of the explanation, Misha sipped on the drink as she watched the two dance. From this distance, he really did look like a young noble. In private, he was quite casual and quick to complain, but she couldn't see any of that in him now.

"He really strikes me as more of a knight than a prince. Maybe because his movements are so crisp?" Misha commented, watching

the way he spun and moved his feet.

Conan sighed quietly and thought, *It seems she doesn't quite understand what's happening over there. Well, perhaps Kite doesn't understand either.*

Kite continued dancing with perfect precision, heedless of the passionate gazes of the young women all around him. Was he actually oblivious to those looks, or was he pointedly ignoring them?

As Misha enjoyed her glass of juice, a man stepped in front of her. "May I have this dance?"

Misha giggled, handing off the glass and taking the man's hand before bowing. "It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty."

As he led her to the dance floor, she got the sense that there was suddenly more space than there had been before. As one might have expected, the other guests were a bit more considerate when it came to making room for the king himself. As such, she and Ryan were able to dance without concern for the other participants of the ball.

"Looks like you're having fun," Ryan said.

"Yes, Sir Conan has been very considerate."

"I'm glad to hear it. I struggled a bit to think of the best person to accompany you."

Misha relaxed into Ryan's usual style of leading—assertive and skilled. Over the past few songs, she had realized that relaxing made it easier to read her partner's movements and follow appropriately.

"You've gotten quite a bit better," Ryan complimented her, surprised at how quickly she was picking up on the slightest of clues. And then, like a child who had just come up with a brilliant new prank, he shifted into an unexpectedly complex step, pulling her tight to him.

Misha's eyes widened, but she recognized the test for what it was, so she immediately abandoned the idea of thinking too hard. If she tried to reason out the next steps in her head, she'd never keep up with him. Instead, she focused on how his muscles moved—made easier by having been pulled against him—to predict where Ryan was trying to go.

As it became clear to the others that Ryan was leading her in a

very complex routine, the other dancers made way, and soon the two of them were the only ones left dancing. But the pair was long gone, too absorbed in their own dance to notice.



There was no room to breathe between each step, no mercy in the turns, but there was nothing rough or coarse about the movements either. Each touch he made, from the tips of her fingers and toes to the gentle bends of her neck and back, were all done to accentuate the grace and refinement of every line of her body. There was no panic or disorder in how they moved. It was like the two danced with a single shared body. The crowd around them watched the performance, enchanted.

The few moments they danced together seemed to stretch on for eternity. But as with all things, the dance eventually came to an end. The musicians finished on a passionate final note, inspired by the dance in front of them, and the two struck a concluding pose.

The room was oddly quiet, the sound of the two dancers' heavy breathing filling the air. And then the two separated, giving each other an elegant, respectful bow.

Only a moment later, the room erupted in riotous applause. Misha practically jumped, having forgotten where she was. As the realization she was still in a crowded dance hall dawned on her, she grew flustered.

Seeing her reaction, Ryan took Misha's hand and bowed to the audience before leading her to where Lalaya was watching them. A few couches and sofas had been lined up behind a cloth screen, providing an opportunity for them to escape the attention of the crowd. It was a space they had set up for Lalaya, since she was so easily exhausted, so only the women of high noble status were invited inside.

"Looks like you had fun. You've gotten quite a bit better," Lalaya commented as Misha was led to the sofa opposite her, accepting the glass that was offered to her the moment she sat down.

"I can barely remember what happened. I was just desperate to keep up with His Majesty's movements. I doubt I could do that again," Misha replied, her faint embarrassment innocent and adorable.

"Keeping up with him is more than enough. He got *way* too into it," Lalaya said, shooting her brother a scathing glare.

Ryan shrugged with a laugh. "She was doing an excellent job of

keeping up, so I instinctively kept pushing to see how far she could go, and before I knew it, I was thoroughly enjoying the dance. Sorry."

Misha and Lalaya shared a laugh at the total lack of contrition in Ryan's expression.

"Oh, whatever. Just hurry up and get out of here. There are plenty of girls waiting for a turn with you," Lalaya said just as Ryan was about to sit down alongside them. "Misha, if you don't mind, I'd like you to keep me company for a bit."

Though grumbling about being tired too, Ryan nevertheless did as he was told and acceded to his sister's blunt dismissal. And as if to take his place, the moment he was gone, Kite stepped in.

"Now, why don't you introduce me to your friend here? Let's talk for a bit," Lalaya said.

Brought here out of the blue by someone claiming to be a servant of the princess, Kite shot Misha an inquisitive look, but she ignored the implicit question for now.

"This is Sir Kite Dyson. He was sent by my father to deliver some goods to me here in the castle. He has distinguished himself in the duke's personal guard, and I owe him a lot personally," Misha explained.

"Thank you for inviting us to your party this night," Kite replied politely, despite the obvious confusion on his face.

"Thank you for coming all this way. Please, have a seat. I owe Misha a great deal, so I would love to get to know you too."

No one could deny the princess when she smiled at them like that. Nevertheless taking the seat offered to him, Kite was still struck by an awful premonition. In short order, a drink was placed in front of him.

Good luck, Kite!

Knowing he wasn't all that comfortable talking to women, Misha cheered him on quietly as she moved over to one of the armchairs beside him.

There would be no freedom for him until the princess's curiosity was sated.

Chapter 24: An Epilogue, or a Prologue?

It wasn't until quite late in the evening that Misha made it back to her room. With so many visitors in the castle, they were worried about security in her usual garden cabin, so she was using her room in the castle for the first time in a while. After scrubbing herself clean in the bath, Misha flopped down on her bed with a big sigh.

Lalaya had decided she was done for the night, and so she'd taken Misha along with her as she retired, but the party would go well into the morning. Ryan would be there until the very end so he could meet with as many people as possible.

Adults have so much stamina, Misha thought, closing her eyes. As she surrendered herself to the sensation of sinking into the soft bed beneath her, she realized she was much more tired than she'd thought.

"That was fun..."

Memories of her time at the ball flickered in the back of her mind. She had danced, laughed, and spoken with so many people. There had been some unpleasant attention pointed her way, but Conan and Kite had been quite assertive about placing themselves between her and those people, so those negative interactions hadn't left much of an impression on her.

"A ball in the castle. It's like a story from a picture book." She laughed to herself, recalling all the scenes of young girls dancing with princes in the books her father had given her when she was little. She had read those books so many times, admiring the princesses within.

"But I didn't dance with a prince—I danced with the *king*."

She had felt so light, as if she had grown a pair of wings. Her feet had known where Ryan was going before her head could, and so

they'd moved on their own to keep up with him. It had been a wonderfully bizarre sensation. Before she'd realized it, the music had ended and everyone was applauding.

"I doubt I could pull it off again, though."

Her success must have been some kind of reward for attending her first party.

It was so, so fun. I'll have to try extra hard tomorrow.

With one final yawn, she surrendered to the world of sleep, still wrapped in those warm, fuzzy feelings.

The old woman could faintly hear the sounds of the festivities coming in through the window. Too weak to do anything else, she lay on her bed with a thin blanket over her as she listened to the celebrations outside—at least, what she could strain herself to hear over the wheezing sound of the wind blowing into the room. Racked as she was by fever, she couldn't even tell that sound was coming from her own throat.

Ah, it is time for the summer festival, isn't it? she thought hazily.

During last year's festival, she had been quite healthy; she'd spent it selling sweets on the street. She had made a good bit of money from that. But now, even lifting a finger was too much work. The fever had left her terribly exhausted. If she tried to push past the weariness and move anyway, she'd be assaulted by agonizing coughing fits and horrible joint pain.

She had collapsed with the coming of spring, and her condition only seemed to be getting worse. Her fever came and went, and she was always so weak. She had assumed she'd bounce back in no time. Now she understood it was strange for her to still be unwell. She couldn't even get out of bed anymore.

When her daughter managed to scrounge up enough money for a bit of fever medicine, it had improved her condition for a short time, but it wasn't long before the fever returned. In her brief moments of free time, her daughter worked hard catching some karas for her, but it was hard to say whether eating them had helped.

Feeling another coughing fit coming on, the old woman doubled over, suppressing it as best she could. Violent coughing, so brutal it

would pain anyone who heard it, filled the dimly lit room. The pain brought tears to her eyes, and her vision started to blur red.

Finally calming down from her coughing fit, the old woman stared dumbly down at her hands, now dripping that same vivid color. Her wrinkled hands were covered in red fluid. That unmistakable color, that unmistakable viscosity—both made her tremble. She had been born in the capital, lived here her whole life. She had survived that horrible year of plague, and so she knew full well what kind of future these symptoms indicated for her.

Instinctively she wanted to scream, but her body didn't have the energy left for it. All she got for her efforts was another coughing fit.

As her consciousness started to waver, she thought of her daughter coming home from work. She had seemed so tired lately. The old woman hadn't been paying that much attention, caught up as she was in bearing with her own sickness, but she seemed to remember her daughter coughing as well. That was exactly how it had started for her too, wasn't it?

Please, God...

In her last moments, the old woman thought of her aging daughter, folding her blood-soaked hands in prayer.

"Mom, I'm home! I got some more medicine, so try to eat something even if you're not hungry. Mr. Bean shared some of his karas with us too. He said they had a huge catch this year..."

The daughter pushed through the flimsy wooden door, a spring in her step. As usual, she had been out selling sweets for the festival. The festive atmosphere had done wonders to loosen the purse strings of those visiting the capital, so she had managed to rake in a tidy profit. The guy from across the street seemed to have been caught up in the excitement as well, as he had given her some karas and small fish he'd caught himself. Small as these victories were, they had all added up to lift her spirits for the first time in a while.

Caught up in her own buzz, she didn't notice for a while how unnaturally quiet the room was. Something seemed to be wrong with her mother's lungs, as she was always either coughing or wheezing painfully, but now the house was silent.

“Mom...?” Starting to feel uneasy, the daughter lit a lamp to illuminate the room. The sight that was waiting for her made her gulp.

Sure enough, her mother was still on the bed lying by the window. Doubled over on her side, half of her was drenched in red. It looked gruesome—her clothes and the bed were in total chaos. Her hands, nothing more than skin and bones, were clasped in a praying gesture, something that would stand out in her daughter’s mind.

“Oh...mom...”

The daughter tottered over to her mother, who had long since stopped breathing. With the lamp in hand, she reached out to touch her...and stopped. It was hard to tell through the thin layer of blood, but on closer inspection, she could see lines like little red worms running across the skin of her mother’s clasped hands.

The daughter shrieked, jumping backward the instant she recognized the signs: incessant cough, high fever, and the distinctive red lines that appeared after death. It was exactly the same symptoms as those of the plague that had nearly destroyed the capital years ago. She knew if she opened her mother’s eyes, they would be bloodred.

The terror at what that implied threatened to draw a scream out of her, but when she opened her mouth, the deep breath caught in her throat, sending her into a coughing fit. A brutal coughing fit, intense enough to stop her breathing altogether. Bending over in pain, she was panting for air when the coughing finally subsided.

Air finally rushing back into her lungs caused the part of her brain dominated by fear to cool. The two of them were poor enough that they practically lived shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors in this tiny house. Although this was technically a detached building, there wasn’t even enough room for a person to walk between their house and their neighbor’s. If her mother had died of a contagious disease in a place like this...

A whole new fear ran through the daughter. With trembling hands, she laid a light blanket over her mother’s body, then managed to lower herself into a nearby chair.

She knew what she had to do. It was well-known that anyone who caught an unfamiliar disease needed to report it to the royal infirmary. After the horrors of the last plague, the capital was not willing to risk anything when it came to disease. Even those living in the poor parts of town like this were well aware of the procedures set in place.

But what would happen to her if she complied? She and her mother had managed to survive in this neighborhood thanks to having lived there for so many years. For better or for worse, close proximity to all their neighbors meant they had a large network of support around them. Now that this had happened, there was little chance she'd be able to stay. No doubt they would drive her out. She was almost fifty years old now. How would she survive in unfamiliar land on her own?

Despite it not being cold in the least, the daughter began to tremble. The fear of being driven out struck her harder than the fear of dying.

Just a little longer. I'll stay just a little longer...

So even as foolish as she knew it was, she decided to stay where she was for now. She would wait until she calmed down, and once she saw a path for herself, she would start moving.

Certainly waiting a day or two won't hurt anyone, right?

Squeezing trembling hands together, she repeated excuses to herself over and over, failing to notice her hands had taken that same praying posture her mother had died in.

That was how, beneath the notice of the capital, the old plague rose again and claimed its first victim. And ever so quietly, it began to turn its fangs on those nearby.

Side Story: Kyne

Huh? You wanna hear my story? You're pretty weird for a human. But fine, sure.

The name's Kyne. Apparently, I'm what's called a mail bird. My job is to carry letters tied to my feet. Mommy Ley gave me this name. She said it was taken from her big brother Ryne, that it would help me grow up strong and free. Later, when I grew up and she realized I was female, she apologized a lot for giving me a boy's name. But it's hard to tell whether birds like us are male or female when we're real little, so I can't really blame her. I like the name anyway, so it's fine. It's pretty cool, don't you think? It makes me sound like a woman capable of anything!

My first memory is being in a warm, tight space, listening to a gentle sound. In hindsight, I can tell it was the sound of Mommy Ley's and Misha's voices as they were trying to talk to me, but back then, I thought I was hearing beautiful, comforting music. And then one day I thought, *Wait, I gotta get out of here!* So I broke the tight, hard walls around me, and a bright light suddenly blinded me. When I finally adjusted to the light and was able to see what was going on, I saw Mommy Ley and Misha.

Honestly, my memories of that time are a bit hazy. I was probably too young to remember it. You don't remember when you were a baby either, do you? But after a while, I remember Ryne showed up, and then everything seemed to be in color.

The water Ryne gave me was so sweet. Every time I drank it, I felt like a fog was lifting from my eyes. It made me realize that the sounds I was hearing had meaning behind them. Ryne said that it was a kind of medicine his friends made. He said it was supposed to stimulate my brain. I don't really get what he meant, but every time I drank it, their voices started to make more sense. It was clear that

their cries actually meant something.

There were a lot of other things too. I learned what it meant to *think* and how to *guess*. And I learned that the world was huge, complex, and amazing. I was really grateful to Ryne; he helped me understand all that. Even though it was some experimental medicine that might have killed me, I didn't die, so all's well that ends well, right? Also, I heard the research into that medicine didn't go so well. I might actually be really special now.

Flying is the best feeling in the world.

My kind have a strong homing instinct and a really good sense of direction. People use those traits to make us travel between a few set places, but I'm special. I don't know if it's because of that medicine Ryne gave me, but whenever I *really* want to go somewhere, I somehow always know the right way to get there. I used that ability to find Daddy Deeno when he was out doing inspections.

I learned I had that ability when one day I decided I wanted to see Ryne. I immediately knew where he was, as if I could hear him calling out to me. Maybe it was easier because he was on his way to visit Misha and Mommy Ley, so he was pretty close by. It's not all-powerful, after all. It only works up to a certain distance. But the more I practiced, the bigger the range became, so when I had free time, I'd go looking for all sorts of places.

Sometimes I ended up in the territory of other birds, and that got pretty dangerous, but hey—experience is experience, am I right? Besides, anyone who was dumb enough to attack me out of instinct was no match for me in the first place. Never mind in my own forest, now there was no one who would pick a fight with me anywhere in the world. The sky is a big place, but information travels quickly, y'know? Unlike humans, we don't have borders.

In that way, Ryne is kind of like us, isn't he? Whenever he wants to go someplace, he just goes. Maybe that's why I like him so much.

Of course, I also love Misha. She had been with me ever since I was born, so she was like a sister to me. She liked to run around the forest too, so we played together a lot. And mysterious things

always seemed to happen when she was around, so spending time with her was never boring. Sometimes she'd be lured out by the mysteries of the forest and get lost, and I'd have to go save her. Sometimes we'd leave together on an adventure to find medicine to help Mommy Ley's pain from her injury. And every once in a while, I'd go deliver a letter to Daddy Deeno. But normally I would spend my time patrolling the forest. It was a peaceful, if a bit boring, life.

But one day, Daddy Deeno got injured, and Mommy Ley went up to heaven. Misha left the country, like she was running away from her sadness. In the blink of an eye, my happy life had disappeared. My family scattered across the world. Misha's sadness must have closed her eyes and ears. She never called out to me, and she didn't hear me calling out to her. It made me really sad, but I understood how she felt after losing Mommy Ley, so I couldn't blame her. People can only see what's visible to them.

I considered going with Misha when she left on her journey, but it looked like she already had a lot of friends with her, so I decided to wait for Ryne instead. I had a hunch he was close by, and I figured I could help him out. Besides, it would take time for me to make the preparations to leave my territory.

One day, he came to get me, and the two of us left to go find Misha together.

Anyway, the whole world sits under one big sky. If I ever get lonely, home is just a short flight away. I'll probably be back to deliver letters to Daddy Deeno anyway.

Hey, Misha. I know it's not your fault that your sadness made you close your eyes. Still, you can't be sad forever. The world is a huge place, and the sky stretches on forever. After all the time we spent flying around the forest together, you should know what you need to keep moving forward. If you've forgotten, don't worry. I'll remind you. So just wait a bit longer, okay?

Side Story: No Shoes!

Being so used to doing everything for herself, Misha found her new life with the maids tending to her every need exhausting. It wasn't that she disliked them. Tia and Isabella were trying their best to make life comfortable for her. Even though it was most definitely forbidden, they still sat with Misha and drank tea like they were close friends out of respect for Misha's distaste for strict formality.

But Misha was used to living alone in the forest with her mother. This new environment, where she was perpetually surrounded by strangers, was quickly and subtly stressing her out more and more. As a result, she was having trouble sleeping properly, and now she was always tired.

What should I do...?

It wasn't bad enough to say she wasn't feeling well, but at this rate, she could tell things were only going to get worse. It would be unforgivable for an apothecary, someone who was supposed to be healing people, to get sick herself. Above all, it would sow distrust in her among the people of the castle if she were to get sick so soon after being entrusted with Lalaya's care.

But I don't really want to rely on medicine for this.

She knew some recipes for medicine that would help her sleep, but her instincts as an apothecary told her relying on something like that was a bit premature.

While taking a walk around the castle, Misha found a small house hidden in the corner of the castle's gardens. Concealed among the trees, it looked to be well cared for from the outside, but there were no signs it was currently in use. Peering through the windows, she saw furniture all covered in blankets.

"Is this house not being used?" she asked Ren, who trotted beside her. The little wolf started sniffing around the building curiously, but of course he couldn't give her an answer. The two

shared a look before Misha turned back to the window.

Judging by its position in the house, it appeared she was looking into the living room. Deeper in there was a place that looked to be for cooking. Besides that, the room had two doors.

"Looks kind of comfy, doesn't it?"

Taking a few steps back from the window, she examined the whole building up and down. The walls were white and appeared to be made from earth, and the roof was a dull red. It didn't seem to be painted, just fading caused by long years of weather. It had a small chimney, and close by it sat a weather vane, which spun in the wind. The whole place reminded her of a little cottage out of a children's picture book.

Absorbed in her inspection of the house, Misha was brought back to her senses by the feeling of something rubbing up against her foot. She saw Ren staring back up at her, having returned from scurrying about the exterior of the house to try and figure out what Misha was doing.

"Hey, Ren, don't you think it would be great if we could live here?"

It didn't take long before she put that thought into action. Immediately after returning to her room in the castle, she asked Kino about the house and for permission to borrow it if it wasn't already in use. Kino was a bit taken aback by the sudden request but quickly agreed to discuss it with "the higher-ups."

However he managed to do it, when he returned, it was with permission for Misha to use the building.

"The house hasn't been used for quite some time, so you cannot move in right away. You will need to wait for some maintenance on it to be completed. You have our apologies, but while that work is being done, they may as well modify it to suit your interests. Is there anything you would like done?" Kino relayed with a crisp bow, getting a thoughtful hum out of Misha.

"Hmm... *Anything?*"

"As long as the structure of the building allows it."

Misha's eyes sparkled. "In that case, there is one thing..."

When Geord heard that Misha was moving into the house vacated by the castle's gardener some number of years ago, he couldn't help but laugh. Nor could he help visiting right away. The house was quite far from all the pretty flowers that the people of the castle actually liked, hidden so far in the trees it almost felt like it was in a different yard altogether. The house was nestled so deep in the trees, it looked like it was trying to become a part of the forest.

I'm impressed she found this thing. She wasn't out scrounging for herbs in the castle gardens, was she? He was half impressed, half exasperated.

With those conflicted feelings, he knocked on the door. It was just about dinnertime, so he had already confirmed Misha was home before visiting.

"Coming!" The sound of Misha's voice from within was accompanied by a soft pattering of footsteps.

"Yo, I'm here to congratulate you on your new house."

"Mr. Geord?" Misha looked back in surprise as she found a familiar face waiting outside for her. A soft light and pleasant smell wafted out from the interior of the house. It seemed she was in the middle of preparing dinner.

"I heard you went off to live on your lonesome, so I came to see how you were doing. I brought you a housewarming gift too. Mind letting me in?" He smiled, showing off the bag in his hands.

With a peek into the bag, Misha grinned wide. Inside was a large array of all her favorite fruit.

"I'm making a soup from root vegetables and chicken. Do you think you'd like it?" Misha asked.

She had already been making extra, thinking of saving some leftovers for the next day. Geord took a deep breath, savoring the enticing aroma coming from the kitchen with a smile. Every dish Misha had put her hands to while they had traveled had been delicious.

"I've been out running around since noon, so I'm actually starving. You sure it's not any trouble?" Despite asking that, he could never imagine her turning him down, and that showed quite clearly in his expression. Misha laughed as she invited him in.

"Mr. Geord, freeze!"

But as he moved to step inside, Misha shouted at him, and he froze with one foot still in the air, hovering above the floor.

"Sorry, Mr. Geord, but this is a shoe-free zone!"

"What? Shoe-free?" Geord tilted his head at the unfamiliar term.

Misha seemed to be used to this reaction, as she smoothly transitioned into an explanation. "It means no shoes allowed."

"No shoes allowed...?" Geord's confusion only deepened.

Misha nodded deeply. "That's right. You have to take your shoes off before you come inside."

"I do?" Geord looked down at his feet. Considering the work involved in being a knight, he was wearing a pair of sturdy working boots.

"I also would recommend you come in with bare feet, but I realize that's a bit of a cultural difference, so I won't force that. I've got some slippers in here you can use."

She handed him some footwear that was like cloth wrapped up in the shape of a pair of sandals. They had no back, and the toes were open, leaving one's feet fairly cool in hot weather.

"I just have to switch into these?"

"Yes. You can use that chair if you like," she said, indicating a small stool nearby. "I'll bring something so you can wash your feet."

Not really understanding what was happening, Geord did as he was told, sitting on the stool and unlacing his boots. Very much carried away by Misha's strong insistence, his brain wasn't doing a good job keeping up.

Watching Geord out of the corner of her eye, Misha stepped out of sight. She had probably gone to get a foot bath, like she had said she would. It had been a pretty muggy day, so after being in his boots the whole time so far, Geord was grateful for it. That didn't mean he understood why she wanted him to take the boots off in the first place, though.

Wait, she said she recommended bare feet, right?

Taking a look around again, he saw that the entrance of the house was populated by a rough-woven mat and a large wooden screen blocking the view of the interior of the house. Beside the

stool he had been instructed to use was a vertically standing pole, on which hung a thin shawl and a hat belonging to Misha. Below it sat a pair of small shoes that he recognized as hers as well.

"So, she changes shoes when coming in here?" he mumbled to himself.

"Sorry for the wait. Here, please use this," Misha said, reappearing with a large bucket in her arms, which she set at Geord's feet. It was half full of water.

"Thanks. Huh, so you *are* barefoot," he noted, looking at her feet. Having spent his time observing his surroundings, he hadn't yet removed his boots. Misha, however, didn't even have socks on.

Redford had no custom of taking off one's shoes when going indoors. Sometimes people might change into more comfortable sandals or even go barefoot when they got back to their rooms or exited the bath, but in general, they used the same shoes inside as they did outside. Certainly, they'd never be barefoot in a place where they might meet someone else. An adult noblewoman would very much be chastised for impropriety for such behavior.

Misha grinned, like a child caught mid-prank. "Yeah, it looks kind of rude, doesn't it? But back at my home, I never wore shoes inside." She passed Geord a towel. "I'm going to go check on the soup. It's still on the stove. Feel free to hang your coat there."

For better or worse, they were friends that had traveled together for over a month. Misha's treatment of him was less like he was a guest and more like a family member who'd just come home from work as she headed back into the house without him.

Left on his own, Geord finally finished taking off his boots and dunked his feet into the bucket. The cold water felt great.

Geord took a deep breath. After toweling his feet dry, he looked over at the slippers she had pulled out for him.

She recommended I go barefoot, and she's barefoot herself. I don't really get it, but maybe it's just a part of her home's culture? If I'm the guest, it makes sense I follow her rules.

Three seconds later, Geord was walking into the house, the slippers she had offered him abandoned in the hallway behind him. "Wood floors, even though this is the ground floor?" he commented.

Castles and noble estates aside, ordinary families lived in houses with hard-packed dirt floors. On top of that, the wooden flooring here was polished to the point you could walk on it comfortably with bare feet, without threat of catching splinters.

"Oh, you didn't use the slippers?" Misha turned with a smile as she heard Geord enter the room.

"Yeah, this is more comfortable. Did this house always have wood floors?"

"Nope. When I moved in, I told them I wanted to walk around barefoot inside, so they put wood flooring down for me. I was originally expecting something like a heavy carpet."

Putting a bit of soup in a dish, she handed it to Geord. Accepting the soup, Geord looked back to the flooring.

This is corg wood, isn't it? It must be at least ten years old for this kind of color.

The glossy, dark brown wood was a signature feature in the flooring of royalty and high nobility. It was unique in that its color darkened over time. It felt smooth and soft to the touch, but was actually quite hard. Dropping dishes or cutlery on it wouldn't even scratch it.

Did they order it in a hurry, or did they have some left over from something else? I can only imagine how much this cost...

As he tasted the soup, he gave Misha a quick glance. Evidently, she had no idea how luxurious this flooring was.

"The soup's fantastic," Geord commented. "Just like the rest of your cooking."

"I'm glad you like it. It probably isn't filling enough on its own, so I'll add some ham. Could you ladle out the soup for me?" Smiling happily at the praise, Misha quickly put Geord to work. When they were traveling, it had been natural for them all to pitch in any way they could help, so she had unconsciously shifted back into that mindset.

"You got it." Geord wasn't bothered by it either, naturally moving to do as he was instructed.

Wow, this dishware and cutlery is top-notch too. And this table must be an antique Denicant. This whole place smacks of Tris's

taste.

Although all of the furniture here was relatively simple in its construction, it was clearly the work of an old, famous workshop.

For the record, the only reason Geord knew so much about fine furniture was because Tris would scold him whenever he was rough with the castle's fixtures. He still had vivid memories of learning some of the chairs scattered around were worth half a year of his own pay.

And yet they've picked stuff that looks as plain as possible. Is that so that Misha won't feel bad about using it? How much are they going to spoil this girl?

Geord's shock had finally given way to exasperation. Snorting, he got to work helping get dinner ready.

Once the table was set, the two sat down facing each other.

"Is taking off your shoes indoors a rule from your home?" Geord asked as he dug into the meal before him.

"That's right. But I guess no one in the villages we visited did the same thing, so maybe it was a rule from my mother's home," Misha replied as she broke off a piece of bread.

Misha had spent the vast majority of her life growing up in the forest. Her only points of comparison were when she accompanied her mother on very rare house calls and when she had spent a short time living in her father's mansion.

"So, it's a People of the Forest thing? I wonder why they do that."

Misha hummed thoughtfully. "I haven't really thought about it much. I guess it's so that you don't bring the dirt from outside into the house? Making things cleaner also makes it harder for you to get sick. We even had a water jug by the front door, so we'd wash our hands and gargle whenever we came in from outside. Besides that, being barefoot helps stimulate your feet more, and the better ventilation keeps them from getting sweaty, which makes it easier to keep them clean. Oh, and my father's men said it helped with rashes on their feet, so they were really happy."

Geord's eyebrows rose. "Her father's men" likely included his knights. He couldn't imagine their gear was all that different to Redford's own, so that meant they were most likely in boots, which

needed to be thick and sturdy, both to prevent accidents like if someone were to drop a weapon and to offer protection if they found themselves unexpectedly in combat. However, that kind of footwear was the worst when it came to breathability. Any kind of running around or training would work up a sweat in no time. On top of that, knights had a tendency to room together, especially the younger ones. It wasn't a huge problem, but these foot rashes were a common malady in their circles.

"So, you fixed that just by giving them more air and washing them?" Geord muttered, getting a confused look from Misha. "How does that help *feet*?" he asked, tone grave as he pointed to his own, which would otherwise always be protected by shoes.

Misha followed his finger and stared at his bare feet. "The fungal infection? If it's not that bad, any irritation usually clears up once you regularly wash your feet and give them some air. If it *is* really bad, there's some medicine you can put on it... Do you want some?" Geord's seriousness was strangely intense and elicited concern.

"Would you mind? Enough for two or three people would be great." He nodded, taking another mouthful of soup.

Misha pressed further. "If you'd like, I can take a look at your feet for you. This infection manifests in different ways, so if I know exactly what you're dealing with, I can give you better medicine."

It was a condition Misha saw a lot of, but for some reason, adults seemed really embarrassed about it. She expected he'd decline, but she also felt bad letting him suffer through it for no reason, so she offered anyway. Did he want to feel better sooner, or did he want to suck it up and tough it out? She figured she might as well give him the choice.

"Oh, no, it's not for me." But Geord shook his head right away. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. It's better if you know exactly what you're dealing with. But I'd feel bad making you examine everyone's feet. Do you have anything that's more general use? If any of them still have trouble after using that, I'll ask you about it again."

Judging that Geord didn't seem to be hiding anything, Misha gave a relieved smile. "Okay. If things get rough, feel free to bring them

here. I can keep a secret."

Geord thought of all his friends and subordinates who might need to consider that offer. He felt bad for them, but more than that, it was annoying having to work beside people who were really stressed. Geord had managed to avoid suffering a similar fate, but it was a big problem in the dorms.

Even if she is an apothecary, it might be tough getting them to show their gross feet to a young girl.

The knightly image was pretty popular with the ladies, so Geord knew many of them were hesitant to see a doctor for something that might tarnish that image. He doubted any of them would be willing to come see Misha, but that wasn't something he found easy to explain to this girl.

"I'll ask if anyone's interested." Geord bit into a thick slice of ham, wondering how the conversation had ended up here.

Whether any young knight ended up sneaking into the gardens late at night with Geord for a secret visit with the little apothecary would have to remain a secret for now...but everyone could see plainly both that hope had begun to swell within the dorms of the knighthood and that the entrances and flooring within the dorms were undergoing a remodel.

"What?! I can take off my shoes in here?!" Misha exclaimed, sitting in her room in the castle.

"Yes. You seemed so comfortable when you invited us to your house in the garden, and we figured it was best to do what made you comfortable." Tia smiled, placing a pair of cloth sandals at Misha's feet.

"Of course, it would be no good for others to see you like that, so I'd ask that you wear these while in the living room. Going barefoot is fine in the bedroom."

"That's more than enough! And these slippers are so cute!"

The soft-green fabric of the sandals was decorated here and there with bright flowers. On top of that, aside from the soles, the fabric used to make them was so thin that it barely felt like she was wearing anything at all. And they fit so snugly that there was no risk

of them coming off accidentally as she walked.

"I hope they're comfortable. I used the sandals you have in the garden house as a reference, but I had to put these together pretty quickly," Tia said with a laugh as she watched Misha happily marching circles around the sofa.

"Wait, you made these yourself, Tia? You're amazing! Thank you so much!" As Misha skipped back happily to her, Tia shyly lifted the skirt of her uniform to reveal her feet.

"I actually made some for myself in a different color. You, me, and Isabella all match."

"Wait, really?" Misha turned a shocked look on Isabella, who was getting tea ready in the corner of the room. The older maid smiled and revealed her own feet.

Tia laughed. "Our uniform hides them well, so I managed to persuade her to join me. Oh, and we got permission from the head maid, so don't worry for our sakes. I was using them in my own room, but when the other maids saw them, they really liked how cute and comfortable they are. They're starting to get popular."

Isabella shrugged. "I'm doing the same thing at home. Changing our footwear when we come inside saves us from bringing dirt and mud indoors, so we can let the children play without worry."

Isabella noted that young children fell often. She knew this well, being a mother of a three-and five-year-old. Children got sick very easily, so she was keen on keeping things clean for them.

Misha was stunned to learn that her personal custom of banning shoes inside had started to take off. And without her knowing, it continued to slowly spread throughout Redford, particularly among the families of knights and those with young children.

Afterword

Welcome, newcomers! And welcome back, old faces. This is Yanagi. It's been three months since volume 1. I'm really surprised we get to meet again so soon. You have my utmost gratitude.

"Come on, don't be so formal."

I'm sorry, who are you? This is the afterword. It's supposed to be just for me, the author!

"Sure, I normally wouldn't show up in a place like this, but this time is special. Don't worry, I already got permission from your editor."

Shouldn't you be more worried about getting permission from me?

"If you spend all your time worrying about details like that, you'll be old and gray before you know it. You've been going a bit crazy recently. So anyway, excuse my intrusion. It's me, everyone's fave, Carolus—or Caro for short. Nice to meet you."

Oh, shut it. It's perfectly natural to change as you get older! Act like an angel all you want, but I know you're a blackhearted devil! You weren't like this when you were first born. How did you end up this way?

"Is that really a question the author should be asking? Well, if you really want an answer, I guess I'd say your failure was in not setting out a strict character design from the start, letting things develop too organically. I mean, you even had to change my name halfway through because it was too similar to other characters'."

Ugh. You really know how to hit where it hurts, don't you? I'm not good at coming up with names, okay? Besides, even if I set strict character designs for you guys, it's not like you'd play nice and follow them anyway. Why are you here, anyway?

"That's because you didn't talk about me nearly enough. My appearance in the light novel was so sudden, it felt like I might get

sidelined and forgotten about in the future. That would be a problem, so I came to assert my position a bit more strongly."

Oh, so it's come to that, has it? Well, I wasn't going to forget about you...but I guess your next appearance won't be for a while.

"I knew it! That's exactly what I'm talking about! Kids only stay cute for so long, you know!"

Wow, that's a pretty grim way of looking at things. But the next part of the story is about the Red Eye plague, so I don't really want to bring kids into it. And besides, your backstory says that you only show up in the capital during the festival season. Even if not, you're supposed to be the next king, so wouldn't you expect to be evacuated immediately if you stick around?

"Yeah, that's exactly the issue! Redford is doing really well in its reconstruction, so why not have Ryan stay as king and have his own kids to take over? Having everyone's expectations pushed on me is a huge pain! Don't get us kids wrapped up in the obsessions of the adults around us."

Taking out your frustrations on me, huh? I do feel a bit bad for you, but it would have been weird for the old king to never have been married. And it was kind of weird for the king to be fighting so hard to protect something without saying what that was. It was slowing down the web novel a bit, so I didn't bring it up back then, but I did have plans for the king to have a child in my head from the start.

"Really? Sounds fishy to me. But fine, whatever. I don't remember him, but I'm thankful he protected me. Wait, that's not what this is about! I was here to make sure I got a chance to show up in the next volume! If I'm supposed to be heir to the throne, I should get a chance to say hello once the whole plague thing is worked out, right? I haven't even explained my true identity to Misha yet!"

Oh yeah, I guess not. I guess it just ended with you being a mysterious boy.

"There's no point in having a mysterious character if you never reveal the answer to the mystery, right? And you know it doesn't count if you have me show up years later when I've grown up!"

But don't you think the impact would be huge? *He grew up and*

came back, only for Misha to learn his true identity was...!

"Huh. That actually doesn't sound so bad... Wait, no! Don't try to trick me! I want to play around with Misha more! Got it?! You *gotta* let me show up in the next volume!"

Aaaaaand there he goes. He wants to show up in the next volume, does he? I guess I can give it some thought. But who does he think he is, just coming in here, saying his piece, and then storming off? I guess it's fine, but... Anyway, let's get back on track here.

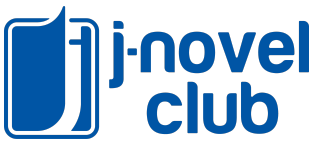
Mr. Hihara's illustrations were exactly the kind of nutrition my heart needed this time. Thank you so much. Even the little brat Caro turned out looking like an angel on the page.

Thank you for continuing to read *The Tiny Witch from the Deep Woods*. Misha will be facing quite the hurdle in the next volume, so I hope you come back to cheer her on. Thank you for coming with us on this journey.

Yanagi







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The Tiny Witch from the Deep Woods: Volume 2
by Yanagi

Translated by Nathan Macklem Edited by Carly Smith

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