The Tiny Witch from the Deep Woods

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Book 1: A Small House in the Forest

Chapter 1: Days in the Forest

A shadow dashed through the thick undergrowth and between the densely crowded trees. It was a girl, no more than twelve or thirteen, wearing a simple dress, her long hair a glittering blonde trail behind her as she ran. Her eyes were a vivid green, as if they had taken their color from the forest itself, and they shone with joy as she ran her solitary race. She was able to maneuver over the fallen trees and between the patches of thorns with remarkable dexterity, even with the basket woven from ivy she carried on her back; anyone who saw her would doubtlessly compare her to some kind of forest-dwelling fairy.

Eventually, as a small log cabin came into view, the girl began to slow.



Coming to a stop in front of the house's door, she took a moment to catch her breath and fix her skirt, disheveled from all the running. Then, swinging the basket on her back around into her arms, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"I'm back, mom! I found those herbs you were talking about this morning! I also got some mushrooms. They were growing in the usual spot. It looks like we'll get a lot of them this year."

As she set the basket on the table, her shouting brought an older woman in a deep-green dress out from the depths of the house. The woman sighed, but her exasperation did nothing to mar her youthful beauty.

"Keep your voice down, Misha. No polite young lady should be shouting. Oh my, were you running again? Your hair is a mess." After looking her daughter up and down with eyes the same forest green, she gave a wry smile and a shake of her head before fixing the young girl's hair.

Misha could only laugh with embarrassment at being found out, surrendering to the pleasant sensation of her mother's hands smoothing her hair. Clearly, Misha had to do more than straighten out her clothing to fool her.

"I also found a cluster of honeyberry growing off to the east. Now we should be able to make more painkillers!" she reported.

"Wow! That's great, Misha. Your father was just saying that he's running out of painkillers and is worried for his people," her mother said, elated.

Misha's attempt at changing the subject had worked wonderfully.

"That's good too, but don't forget to keep some for yourself. Otherwise, you'll be the one in trouble!" Misha reminded her.

Her mother had injured her leg a long time ago. It had healed enough for her to walk on it again, but when the weather changed or she pushed herself too hard, it still hurt terribly. Despite that, her mother laughed it off every time, saying it was convenient for alerting her of incoming rain.

"I know, I know. If I can't walk, that makes things harder for you, right?"

"That's not the point!" Misha frowned at her mother's smile.

She doesn't get it at all. I just don't want her to be in pain.

Despite her youth, Misha had picked up on the fact that something untoward was going on outside the forest for the past few years. Requests for painkillers and salves had been steadily increasing in both frequency and dosage. That must have meant there were more and more people getting hurt. Her mother seemed concerned about whatever was happening, as whenever a messenger came, she sent back all of the medicine the two of them had.

As a result, she suffered during every rainfall. Though she never said as much, Misha was sure the pain was keeping her from sleeping.

I'll have to keep my own stockpile separate for mom, she decided secretly, suppressing a sigh. They might have been apothecaries by trade, but that didn't mean they could afford to ignore their own needs. *Because if you're in pain and can't concentrate, you start to make mistakes!*

She knew her mother was too skilled to let something like pain mess her up, but it was still a good excuse to convince herself to hold some medicine back.

There wasn't an unlimited supply of herbs in the forest. Though Misha had found a good amount of honeyberry—the base for their painkillers—today, she knew there wasn't much left for them to take. If you pulled up a plant by its roots, it wouldn't grow back. Maintaining the natural ecological balance was just as important as making medicine. Even with her injured leg preventing her from walking around much, Misha's mother knew the forest much better than her daughter did. There was no way she hadn't noticed the dwindling plant life. That was likely why she was keeping less of the medicine for herself.

"I hope things go back to normal soon," Misha murmured, earning a troubled smile from her mother.

Deep in the forest sat a small log cabin. Misha and her mother lived there alone. Although sometimes it was lonely to live in a place with few visitors, it was all Misha had ever known, so she could

easily accept that life for what it was. Her father visited once a month and always had plenty of gifts for her, so they really wanted for nothing here, and the forest kept her plenty occupied. Above all, Misha was happy to be able to live with such a smart, kind mother.

When she was younger, she had once asked why her father didn't live with them. She had been reading a picture book left by her father on his visit a few days prior, and that book had said a family was supposed to live together.

Her mother apologetically explained that she had been born to a clan of apothecaries in a country far, far to the north. She had met Misha's father when he was traveling across the world as part of his education. The two had fallen in love, and Misha's mother had cut her ties with her family to follow him home.

But after growing up in a quiet forest, she couldn't adjust to life in the city. Her longing for the woods all but drained the life from her. Worried for her well-being, though it broke his heart to do so, Misha's father brought her to a forest at the edge of their lands.

He wanted to live together with both of them, but he was a duke. He had important responsibilities to take care of. And so that brought them to their current living situation.

"I often think you would have been better off if we lived in your father's mansion with him," her mother said sadly, but Misha shook her head vigorously.

"I want you to be happy! And dad comes to visit, so I don't miss him at all! And I love the forest!"

Hating to see her mother looking so sad, Misha never brought up the topic again. And besides, living in the forest with her mother really *was* fun.

However, ever since that day, her mother had started teaching Misha how to act as a noble would—"just in case." Misha had asked how she knew all this stuff if she was from another country, to which she had replied that she'd studied hard to make sure she didn't embarrass Misha's father.

"In the end, I thought it was all for nothing, but now that I can teach you, I'm glad I went to the trouble."

As much as she hated the stiff manners and tons of studying,

Misha swallowed her complaints when she saw how happy her progress made her mother. A little hardship was worth her mother's smile.

Someday, those skills would become exceptionally useful for her. Of course, she had no idea of that at the time.

After moving to the forest, her mother recovered immediately, and she found she was familiar with many of the herbs and plants growing in the area. Once she had the opportunity, she started using the herbs to make medicine. Misha's father received them with great joy; her creations were much more effective than anything his duchy had. And so, her mother returned to her original work as an apothecary.

And she poured every bit of knowledge she had into her daughter. Instead of studying at a desk, Misha learned everything hands-on, her mother turning instruction into a game ever since the girl was tiny. With nothing else to distract her as she grew, Misha acquired the skills of an apothecary—from the collecting of raw ingredients to the production of medicines—by the time she was ten years old.

Now, she spent her days running through the forest in her injured mother's place, collecting medicinal herbs and all sorts of other things from nature.

"By the way, is dad coming to visit us next month?" Misha asked as she worked the mortar. She hoped she'd sounded as relaxed as she thought she did.

Her father had visited her once a month without fail ever since she was little, but he had missed the last two months. Instead, he'd sent a letter with a messenger, who'd then grabbed a bunch of medicine and left.

"I don't know. It sounds like he is still far away," her mother replied sadly as she boiled some herbs in a kettle.

Misha had to struggle not to click her tongue in frustration. Her mother would scold her in an instant if she did, so she made sure to suppress the urge.

She knew how much her mother loved her father, and though she

never said it, her mother clearly missed him and worried about him. They did their best to make as much medicine as they could, hoping it would be at least a little helpful, but they didn't even know if it reached him.

The only news they got from the outside was from their father on his monthly visits, or the irregular mail birds.

"Maybe *we* should send a mail bird?" Misha suggested.

Her mother thought for a moment but ultimately shook her head. "We need to save that for emergencies. I don't think this counts."

Mail birds were the primary means of communication in this world. These birds were trained to travel specifically between two places, carrying letters tied to their legs. They were smart, capable of following simple instructions. Consequently, they were *extremely* expensive. Even the high-ranking nobility usually possessed no more than a small handful of their own. On top of there being very few of the birds in nature, they lived deep in the dangerous wilderness, had temperamental natures, and warmed up to people slowly. Ideally, you grabbed them before they hatched, so they could be raised by hand. That made them exceptionally costly.

Misha's father was a bit of a worrywart, so even though they were used to living in the forest alone, he was always concerned there might be an emergency. Despite the exorbitant cost, he had left one of those invaluable mail birds for the two of them to use. Or rather, he had brought a mail bird egg to them just before it hatched. Luckily, Misha's mother had a way with animals, so she had managed to raise it herself, but it had been quite the trial.

Although her father was always worried about them living deep in the forest, they were quite self-sufficient. Even if they got sick or injured, they had the skills to take care of themselves, so they rarely needed to use the mail bird. As a result, the bird, who they had named Kyne, now flew freely around the forest, vying for a spot at the top of the food chain.

"Kyne's super smart. He'll find dad even if he isn't home."

The first time they had sent Kyne off to deliver a letter, they had carelessly just told him to go to Misha's father, not to the mansion. As a result, though they still didn't know how he did it, Kyne had

tracked her father down in the middle of traveling around on his inspections and delivered the letter to him in the field.

Misha's mother gave a sheepish grin. Normally mail birds stuck to a fixed route. You would raise it in one spot, then take it somewhere else and let its instincts for returning home bring it back. You repeated that process over and over. By getting the bird to associate a word with the place you set it free from, it would link the two together in its mind.

Really smart birds could remember two or three places, but they had only taught Kyne to travel to Misha's father's mansion—or so they had thought. Her father had all but ignored the letter that time, rushing over to find out what they had done to teach the bird to find him. He had brought a birdkeeper with him to thoroughly investigate their methods, but in the end, they could only conclude that Kyne was a particularly smart bird.

"I think it'd be a good idea to have some idea of what he's been up to. I'm curious too." Misha tried a little harder to push her mother, who responded only with a gloomy shake of her head.

Misha didn't know what it was like to live in her father's mansion. The forest had been her home ever since she was born. She hadn't even visited his mansion a single time. She had seen some of the villages on the edge of the forest, but that was as far as she had traveled. She knew a lot from being told things, but everything she'd learned about the country, her father's lands, and his mansion came from her parents' stories and her books.

Clever as she was, Misha was starting to notice what was unspoken.

Her mother was her father's concubine. Her father had been betrothed at a young age, so the position of his official wife had already been taken. Being a commoner from a foreign nation, she had no chance of being a duke's wife. She couldn't even handle life in the city, after all.

But considering how adaptable her mother was, Misha had to wonder whether the situation was more complicated than that. So, she put her mind to work. She questioned, for example, why her father never spoke about his family back at the mansion, and why

her mother didn't want her going to visit.

Not that I mind. I'd probably be really nervous surrounded by that many people. Living in the forest is fun enough.

Misha had no interest in city life. Trying to abide by all the manners and customs expected there would be stifling. The rigid rules of noble life that her mother had taught her were far too restraining for a girl who'd grown up running free in the woods. She still had dreams like many young girls—it wasn't like she had no interest in the fancy dresses they wore—but she was exhausted just imagining being trapped in one all day *every day*, forced to follow a thousand rules. Some people were just cut out for different lifestyles.

But right now, she felt she needed to poke for answers every time she saw her mother worrying, longing to see her father, yet unwilling to make a move on her own. What had happened?

"Anyway, he's a duke," Misha said. "He may lead from the rear, but it's not like they'll send him to the front lines, right? I'm sure he'll be fine. I'm done grinding these, by the way. Should I put them in the pot now?"

However, even if she felt that way, she didn't want to stress her mother any further, so she changed the subject. Until the actual problem was solved, it was a routine they'd repeat over and over, but as she wasn't personally involved, Misha had inevitably grown a bit numb to it.

"Good work. You'll get better results if you let the rest of the pot cool first, so just leave them on the table there for now." Misha's mother's shoulders immediately relaxed as she took the change in topic in stride.

Following her mother's instructions, she left the now powdered herbs on the table. "If we're done for now, should we break for lunch? I want to check how the dried meats are doing. Can I try a little bit?"

The rabbit they'd snared the day before had been quite plump. They had caught plenty of food that day, so they'd placed some leftovers outside to dry in the sun. Misha adored meat that hadn't completely dried out yet, that was still somewhat soft. It was one of

her personal favorites.

Seeing how excited she was, her mother nodded with a laugh. "Just a little, okay? Don't stuff yourself."

"'Kay!"

Despite her mother's word of caution, food was the only thing on Misha's mind as she stepped out of the room, completely missing the sound of her mother's sigh.

Chapter 2: News of Injury—Leaving the Forest

The news arrived suddenly and unexpectedly. It first came from a mail bird sent from the mansion. Escorted through the forest by Kyne, it delivered the letter straight to her mother like always. Would it be a notice that her father would finally be visiting as planned? Or would it be another apology that he wouldn't make it?

Pretending to be uninterested, Misha watched as her mother opened the letter—until all the blood drained from the older woman's face. Her shock made her all but collapse and brought Misha running over to hold her.

"What's wrong, mom?!"

Though Misha recognized it was a bit rude to do so, she peeked at the contents of the letter. It was a curt message: Her father had returned to the mansion heavily wounded. They were sending someone to pick her mother up for her to administer treatment.

She was stunned for a moment, but Misha quickly recovered. She shook her equally lost mother. "Get it together! They're sending someone, so that means he's still alive! We need to get the medicine ready!"

If they had sent the bird the moment her father arrived home and set off for the forest at the same time, they'd be at their doorstep in a few hours. They didn't have time for their anxiety to paralyze them.

"R-Right. We have to get to work!"

Coming back to her senses, her mother jumped to her feet and dashed to the storage room. Meanwhile, Misha hurried to start her own task. She could leave collecting the medicine to her mother, but who knew how long she'd have to stay in the mansion? Misha needed to pack a few changes of clothes and other daily life

essentials for her.

Two hours passed in the blink of an eye, and a violent knocking rang from their front door.

"Yes, one second!" After racing to the door, Misha opened it to find a familiar knight on the other side. He was a close associate of her father; Misha had often seen him during visits. However, his normally pleasant, gentle face was now grim, and his clothes were covered in dirt and blood. He must have run here immediately after returning from the battlefield. Though Misha didn't know this fact, the location of her house was known to only a small handful of her father's closest allies.

"Are you ready?!" His expression and his tone made it clear they didn't have a second to waste.

Misha's heart nearly stopped. The letter alone hadn't made it feel personal. It hadn't felt real. But with the knight here, she couldn't ignore the reality of the situation, one pressing on her with every sense of urgency. Her father was on death's doorstep.

"I am. Do you have a horse for me?" Her mother emerged from farther inside the house, wearing a gray robe and carrying a large bag on her back. Though she was still pale, she once again had the calm, collected expression of a professional apothecary.

"Mom..." Misha eked out in a weak voice, not sure what to say, not sure whether she should say anything at all.

Her mother hesitated for a moment, biting her lip as she stared at her daughter. Then she quickly turned back to the knight. "She'll be coming with us. It'll be hard for her to ride on my horse if we're traveling at full speed. Can she ride with someone else?"

"What do you mean?!" Misha was almost hysteric.

"That was our intention from the start. We have another young knight with us. She can ride with him. Let's go!"

Now it was Misha's turn to be stunned. The mansion felt like a place far, far away she'd never see. She had never considered that she'd be going there herself.

"You have five minutes to get ready, Misha. Hurry."

But the circumstances didn't give her feelings time to catch up. In

response to her mother's severe tone, Misha reflexively bolted off to her room. Grabbing some handfuls of clothes and her own apothecary's tools, she threw them into a bag. When she ran back to the front door, she saw they had all stepped outside.

"This way."

A short distance away, they came across another knight rushing to their side. Misha was dubious as to whether he had made it to twenty years yet.

"Any experience riding?" he asked, wasting no time with greetings.

"No."

In the forest, one needed to be on foot to handle the tight turns everywhere, and it wasn't really an environment where they could raise horses anyway.

Though he'd expected as much, the knight nevertheless seemed a bit discouraged. "Then you'll sit in front of me. Make sure you keep your mouth closed. I don't want you biting your tongue. Excuse me." Speaking quickly, the knight leaped onto his horse before reaching for Misha. Giving him her arms, she let him pull her up into the saddle.

"Ah!" With a pathetic little cry, she found herself suddenly on the horse.

Wow, we're so high up!

She had no idea being on a horse would put her this high off the ground. With nothing but the saddle beneath her and an arm around her waist to support her, she worried she'd fall right off.

"You can lean against me, but don't move around too much," the knight said calmly from behind her, pulling her close and tight.

She felt an unfamiliar warmth on her back. She hadn't even been this close to her own mother since she had turned ten years old. Her instinctive reaction was to push away, but the knight held her tight.

"I *just* said not to move around so much. You'll scare the horse. You don't have to do anything. Just keep your mouth closed and stay still."

That's easy for you to say!

Even if she wasn't an adult, she was a reasonably mature,

innocent girl. This kind of closeness was difficult for her to handle. But the rational part of her brain insisted now wasn't the time to be worried about things like that, so she settled for wrapping her arms tight around her bag and biting her lip.

"Let's go!"

With that signal, the horse began to run.

Ahhhhh! We're shaking too much! I'm gonna fall! I'm gonna fall!

As the horse began ruthlessly shaking her about, Misha began to scream internally. She didn't need the knight's warning. If she opened her mouth, she'd be spitting blood in moments. So, she did everything in her power to keep her screaming contained.

And so, less than two hours after receiving the letter, Misha left the home and forest she grew up in, entirely unaware how different her life would be when she returned...

The mansion itself was incredibly busy. The witch living in the depths of the forest, the lord's own concubine, was coming to visit. Having come back from the battlefield gravely wounded, the lord was clearly in danger. Some kind of poison had entered the wound, preventing it from closing. It excreted an unsettlingly colored fluid, and the fever it caused drained his strength and robbed him of his consciousness.

The Witch of the Forest crafted incredible medicine. Maybe she would have the necessary knowledge to treat his wounds. For those who loved the lord, the witch was their last hope.

Of course, his wife, whose love the witch had all but stolen, was conflicted. There was no doubt that her husband would die at this rate, but she could hardly beg for help from the witch who had attracted her husband's attention.

When she had learned she had been betrothed to the man she'd admired since she was barely old enough to walk, she'd been over the moon. Though there hadn't been much passion to it, the polite and formal kindness he showed as he escorted her around as her fiancé had been a great source of pride for her. An object of adoration for all of high society, he was the younger brother of the crown prince, promised to one day assume the title of duke. Despite

her loneliness when he'd left on his travels to see the world, their upcoming marriage on his return had made her heart dance for joy. She'd gone about preparing for the wedding like she was living in the clouds, and she'd fallen asleep every night clutching the infrequent letters he sent to her.

She had never expected he'd bring a woman home with him.

The witch was, of course, beautiful. Her hair almost shone gold, and her jade eyes reflected a deep mystique. She was also well-versed in the medicines of some foreign land. Her one failing was that she was a commoner, completely ignorant of the manners and customs of this country.

To the nobility, a marriage was a contract. Nothing so naive as "finding true love" would be enough to overturn a betrothal. The happiness—or lack thereof—of those involved had nothing to do with it.

She had been too fixated on the future she had imagined. Even when her fiancé had asked to dissolve their betrothal, even when her mother had insisted that she would never find happiness married to a man in love with another woman, she had stubbornly refused to give up on it. Marriage was a contract. If she stayed at his side, he'd no doubt grow weary of that country bumpkin soon enough.

Her stubbornness, combined with her father's desire to tie their family to royalty, ended up winning the day; she became his official wife. The woman he brought back was relegated to being his concubine.

Having known her since they were both young, her husband had a deep affection for her, even if it wasn't technically love. He made every effort to treat the two of them fairly. Still, that wasn't enough to satisfy his wife.

It wasn't odd for members of the high nobility to have multiple wives. The wife was expected to keep the concubines organized and manage the household. Having been raised as a noble herself, she had always known that fact. As she'd grown up, she'd both seen her mother experience a similar situation and watched her own half siblings be born of concubines, raised alongside her with no discrimination of status between them.

But this was different. Before they had married, he had wanted a woman for romantic reasons, not political ones; she herself had only become his wife for the latter. That seeded a deep insecurity in her.

What if...? she would dream. If it had been after they were married, she'd understand. If it had been after they had children, she'd understand. Maybe in those cases, she would have been able to accept the new woman a bit easier.

But that wasn't what happened. Instead, driven mad by jealousy, she had begun to torment the concubine behind her husband's back, knowing full well the witch had nowhere to run, bearing her suffering in silence as the harassment only continued to escalate. Scorned for her lack of knowledge of etiquette and manners, she sought out a teacher and made every effort to learn. She did everything she could to meet every unreasonable demand the wife brought on her, losing her chance to escape the wife's hostility.

And then one day...

Berating the concubine as she always did, the wife snapped and threw her fan in anger. And receiving her scolding in downcast silence as she always did, the concubine braced for the fan to strike.

It was an unfortunate accident, everyone said. The fan just happened to hit the concubine in the eye. The shock sent her stumbling backward, when she just happened to be standing at the top of a grand staircase. The fall left her seriously injured—one leg, which had helped carry her everywhere in a nimble, graceful dance, was badly broken, never to recover the dexterity it once had.

Not long after that incident, the concubine left the mansion to live in the deep wilderness on the outskirts, never to show her face at their dwelling again.

For the first time since her marriage, the wife felt at peace. Her husband continued to treat her with the polite affection she was due, and the servants never spoke of the concubine in her presence. If she ignored how once a month her husband would vanish for a few days, only to return with heaps of rare medicines, she could live out her days in happiness.

But that was no more than covering up a wound that would never heal. Though hidden, it continued to fester, tormenting the wife ever

more.

And now, after over ten years, the concubine had returned—for no other reason than to save her husband. No one could fault her for any agitation on her part.

Chapter 3: Treatment (Part 1)

The horses ran as hard as they could, and when they grew too exhausted to continue, the knight's party switched to fresh horses and sprinted on again. Never having ridden a horse before, Misha quickly found herself exhausted too. But knowing the reason for their haste, she couldn't bring herself to complain. Plus, if she complained while being jostled about on horseback, she'd probably just bite her tongue and hurt herself.

Though nerves had kept her tense at first, she had eventually relaxed, leaning her full weight on the young knight behind her. She realized that was easiest, both for her and for the knight. With time, she was even able to accept being so tightly pressed against a man she had just met, though that was mostly because she was too exhausted to maintain any sense of embarrassment.

Once she had managed to force her body to relax, her brain finally started moving again. And naturally, the first thing that came to her mind was her father. What kind of injury was it? How long ago had he been hurt? If he had left the battlefield immediately...maybe three days?

The letter mentioned nothing other than that he was gravely injured and on the verge of death. Misha hadn't treated many injuries herself, but her mother had drilled the knowledge of what to do into her. Foremost in that knowledge was how difficult it was to treat an injury that had been left to grow worse over time. If a wound wasn't properly cleaned right away, nasty stuff could get into it, causing the flesh to rot and the blood to get contaminated. Once that happened, even an apothecary had a fifty-fifty chance of saving them at best. The rest was up to the patient's endurance and luck.

Please let us be on time...!

Jostled back and forth on horseback as she was, there was only one thing Misha could do: pray.

And so, after what felt like an eternity from Misha's perspective, they finally arrived at the mansion. Their horse dashed right through the front door, taking them much farther into the house than any horse had business going.

Finally slipping out of the saddle, Misha's legs unfortunately weren't quite ready for the transition, dropping her to the floor. Her bottom hurt, and her legs were wobbly and weak, just as expected from someone unaccustomed to riding. For a first-time rider, a lap or two around the stable would probably have been the most they could handle if the horse was running at a gallop, but she had been subjected to it for two hours straight. It was impressive she hadn't just passed out.

But collapsing to the floor like that while everyone else was okay was a bit too embarrassing. And yet, as if her legs now belonged to someone else, no matter how she struggled, she just couldn't get them to move. Seeing her distress, the knight that brought her thus far lifted her up under his arm.

"I'm impressed you made it here without any whining. You'll get feeling in your legs again soon. Until then, let's find a spot for you to rest."

She nearly yelped at suddenly being pulled to her feet. Still, she could clearly feel the knight's sympathy through his curt words, leading her to button up.

"Do as he says, Misha," her mother instructed. "I will go take a look and see what we need. Come along once you can move again." As pale as she was, her voice was strong. She marched her way farther into the mansion.

"Please, come with me," an older maid said, guiding a dumbstruck Misha—or rather, the knight carrying her.

They were taken to a guest room facing the inner courtyard. Decorated in a calm and clean style, the room had a comfortable air. The knight set Misha down gently on one of the sofas in the middle of the room. She had honestly expected him to throw her, so his care took her by surprise.

"I will fetch some tea," the maid declared, heading to the small

kitchenette in the corner of the room.

Meanwhile, Misha sank into the cushions. She still felt like she was being shaken back and forth as she watched the maid go. She then turned to look at the knight standing at her side.

She didn't think she could stomach anything to drink yet, but he would probably be fine. In fact, he probably hadn't had a minute's rest since leaving the battlefield. He'd need something to drink for his own health.

"Please, have a seat," Misha said, motioning to the sofa across from her. After a moment's hesitation, the young knight sat down.

As the tea arrived, Misha was starting to feel a bit better, so she began rummaging around in her bag.

Hmm. Upset stomach, dizziness, and leg pain?

Eventually she drew out some pills and powder, measuring them out in their proper amounts and mixing them in a small mortar and pestle.

"Sorry, is there any more hot water?" she asked, and by the time she finished speaking, the maid had placed a cup of steaming hot water in front of her. Taking it with a word of thanks, Misha mixed the prepared medicine into it and gulped it down.

The knight watched intently as the girl winced at the taste. "What was that?"

Taking a sip of tea to clear the bitterness from her mouth, Misha thought for a moment. "Stomach medicine and a painkiller. And some herbs that help you feel refreshed." She assumed giving him the names of the medicines she used would be pointless, so she simplified the explanation for him.

The knight responded with a look of astonishment. "You're also an apothecary?"

The tools she had laid out on the table in front of her must have looked quite strange. The various small bags of powder she carried probably all looked identical to him. Some would come out a little green, and others a little brown, but there wouldn't be enough difference for him to distinguish between them.

"An apprentice, and I've only just been given that title." Misha shook her head before popping a sugar candy from the table into

her mouth. Being so used to raw fruit and honey, the sharp sweetness of it brought a bit of a scowl to her face.

Taking another mouthful of tea, she slowly attempted to rise back to her feet. She was still a bit shaky but much better than before. After taking a few careful steps to make sure, she nodded.

"I should be okay now. Could you please take me to my mother?" She normally spent her days running about the forest, so she was actually quite sturdy. The unexpected trip on horseback might have taken her by surprise, but she had recovered quickly.

Nonetheless, her rapid recovery was quite the shock to the two accompanying her. The knight had expected her to need an hour or two at the very least, while the old maid had been looking for an opportunity to offer her a bed to rest in.

The knight had needed to carry her into the room, yet as soon as she made some medicine for herself, she immediately stood up and declared she was okay. It was a borderline frightening experience for the two of them. Just what had been in that medicine? And who was this girl, that she could make medicine that effective?

"Umm... Hello?" Misha tilted her head, confused at the two paling faces staring at her. She never would have guessed that her behavior was anything to be scared by.

"Ah, right. They should be with my lord now. I will take you." The maid was the first to recover, hurriedly stepping forward to show Misha the way.

Grabbing her bag from the sofa, Misha hurried to follow.

The first thing that struck her when she stepped into the room was the smell, bringing a frown unbidden to her face. Medicine, blood, and pus—every bit the scent of death.

Looking around the room, she found her mother standing among the crowd and ran over to her side. Being so used to walking around the forest, she had naturally learned to move softly, so her sudden and unannounced appearance caused more than one of the adults to jerk back in surprise. Meanwhile, her mother didn't so much as lift her gaze from the mortar and pestle she was working as she started doling out instructions.

"Make an antiseptic to clean the wound. They are boiling water

for us already, so start grinding up some lai seeds."

Her mother's curt instructions were all the indication Misha needed to know how tense she was feeling, so she quickly did as instructed. Since the moment she'd stepped into the room, she hadn't been able to avoid the truth. Her father was really about to die. Her mother's behavior only drove that reality home even more.

Suppressing the urge to cry, she pulled the ingredients she needed from her bag. By dissolving the hard, brown seeds into water, she made a powerful germicide. But if the solution was too strong, it could start dissolving the flesh as well, so it needed to be handled carefully.

"How much?" Misha's quiet question was met with another short reply.

"A handful to start."

At any other time, her mother's tone would have felt cold and hurtful, but Misha knew her mother's brain was running full tilt, searching for a way to save Misha's father. This was always how she acted when she was focusing hard on something. The others in the room listening might have felt differently.

Misha focused on her work, crushing the small hard seeds.

If you work them too hard, they start to turn sticky. Without letting them get hot from the friction, slowly and carefully...

Muttering the method for crushing lai seeds her mother had taught her under her breath, she quickly and accurately reproduced the technique, reducing the seeds to a fine powder. Running the crushed seeds through a fine sieve to remove the shells, she then started grinding the remaining white powder further. Once she was satisfied, she brought it over to the water.

"Misha, take over. I'll work on the medicine."

Her mother grabbed the powder from her hands, turning her attention to a large pot being carried into the room. Watching her go for a moment, Misha quickly snapped out of it and rushed over to where her mother had been standing.

Looking into the mortar, she could tell her mother had been halfway through making something here. She could have asked her mother what it was, but she didn't want to distract her. Her mother

had turned working with herbs and plants into a game for Misha before she was old enough to speak, so reading the patterns of her mother's work was as easy to Misha as breathing. She wouldn't make a mistake in something so simple.

That profound sense of trust between mother and daughter left the other observers in the room agape. They truly were witches of the forest. It was like they weren't human.

"It's ready, Misha," her mother said, drawing Misha's attention away from her mortar. "Please show me the wound."

At her mother's urging, she stepped over to the bed, the strong scent filling the air growing even thicker. Her father's usually lively and energetic face was pale and twisted in pain. Though they said he was unconscious, he occasionally groaned in pain.

The chamberlain at their side swiftly drew back the sheets covering him. Her mother must have already inspected the injury herself, as his clothing and bandages were stripped away, revealing the wound. A sword wound, running diagonally down his back. It was quite deep, still oozing somewhat, the flesh at its edges dark with rot.

"It's been four days since he was hurt. There were no signs of poison, but never mind closing—the wound has started to fester." Her mother scowled, slowly explaining what was before them. "Either the blade used was rusty, or it was covered in some kind of mud or dirt... Regardless, something has contaminated the wound. They did a poor job of cleaning it too."

Taking the information from her mother as a basis, Misha added, "He lost so much blood that his body had no chance of fighting off anything that might get in the wound."

Her mother nodded before looking up and around the room.

"I'll now begin cleaning the wound and removing the rotten flesh. This treatment will put the lord's life at risk, but leaving him in this state will guarantee his death. He may start thrashing about in pain, so I will need belts to restrain him, and at least two people to hold him down."

Her straightforward instructions set the room abuzz.

"He could die from this?"

"You heard me, right? If we do nothing, he will die for certain. So, we have to try, no matter how bad our chances."

"Will it save him?" someone asked.

"I don't know," Misha's mother responded after a brief moment of hesitation. "It's been too long since he was wounded. Honestly speaking, it's a miracle he's still with us now."

Cries of despair began to go up as she answered question after question until a husky voice filled the room.

"If we do nothing, he will die. Please do anything you can. If you save him, you will be rewarded handsomely."

Murmurs of "the old lord" echoed as a deeply wrinkled elderly man hobbled into the room on a cane. It seemed even with his cane, he needed someone supporting him on the other side to walk, but his eyes shone bright and clear.

The previous lord...so, my grandfather?

Misha's eyes widened slightly at her first meeting with someone of her extended family.

"I feel great shame at having to drag you out of the forest after driving you there, but if there is anything you can do, please lend us your aid. I may be too old to be useful anymore, but the kingdom very much still needs *him*." The sharp sound of the old man's cane striking the floor grew closer.

"I fled to the forest out of my own selfishness," Misha's mother replied after a brief silence. "I should be the one apologizing for my weakness. There is nothing for you to be ashamed of." Seeing her mother bow down in front of the old man, Misha hurriedly moved to follow.

"So, this is your daughter? Seems you have raised her well. Once this business is all done, please tell me all about her."

The unexpected gentleness leeched the nervous tension from Misha's body. With how stubbornly her mother had refused to speak of the mansion, Misha had assumed it was akin to a den of vipers. But if nothing else, this old man didn't seem to be their enemy. However, that didn't necessarily mean she felt any closeness to him for being her grandfather.

"Do everything Leyas says. As representative of the lord of this

domain, I'm giving you an order." The old man's declaration sent a ripple through the room, and one by one, gazes turned to Misha and her mother. Unlike Misha, cowed by the sudden influx of attention, her mother stood proud and tall.

"This will soon become a difficult place for the weak of heart. We can't have people collapsing in here, so anyone who is not helping, please leave. If you don't trust me, I do not mind if you stay to watch, but you cannot interfere." Leyas then turned to Misha. "I'll be removing the rotten flesh. You will need to help. I'll need you to sterilize the tools. You have no cuts on your hands, right?"

Misha nodded with a gulp at her mother's stern expression.

First, they applied a pain-relieving salve to the site of the wound. This would likely be next to useless due to necrosis, but they did so anyway, even if just for their own peace of mind. Wrapping his hands and feet in soft cloth, they bound him to the bed and had two large men hold him down. He was unconscious, but that meant there was a greater risk he would suddenly thrash about.

While her mother doled out instructions, Misha busily prepared the tools they'd need. She had the knowledge in her head already. She had seen much smaller wounds treated in a similar way. This was the first time she was personally involved, though.

She made a desperate effort to keep herself from openly shaking. Any fear shown by the apothecary would spark fear and distrust in the patient. *"Acting boldly is even more important when you lack confidence."* That was the first thing her mother had taught Misha when she had made the choice to become an apothecary. Bluffing was a critical skill for members of their profession.

I can do this. We can save him. It's okay. It's okay, Misha repeated in her head over and over to encourage herself, all the while hoping no one noticed her trembling.

"Are you ready, Misha?"

"Yes."

The moment her mother's calm, composed gaze struck her, a switch was flipped in Misha's head. Her thoughts became clear, and her hands went still.

"Okay, then. Start applying the medicine here."

Hell was just beginning.

Chapter 4: Treatment (Part 2)

Misha collapsed onto the sofa, nerves finally giving way to exhaustion. She had barely managed to get through her bath, freeing herself of the blood and pus-covered clothing she had been wearing, but she didn't have the energy to even dry her hair. Perhaps as some sort of consequence of her calm and detached behavior during the treatment, her head felt too stuffed to allow any thoughts in.

Mom is amazing...

Although her mother had taken a bath right alongside her, she had left to check on Misha's father again once she was clean.

Just a few more minutes...

Misha closed her eyes, letting herself go. But as exhausted as she was, the tension of the situation wouldn't release its grip on her. Flashbacks of the treatment returned to her in a rush.

They had let the medical bath cool to body temperature and used it to clean the surface of the wound. That much had gone well. However, once her mother had started using something like a silver spoon to scoop out bits of pus, clotted blood, and old salves, her supposedly unconscious father had begun roaring and thrashing like a wild animal.

She had expected he wouldn't be able to do much with the way he was tied down, but the way he twisted his body had been enough to knock their hands away as they worked. Considering the placement of the wound, they couldn't tie him down by his torso, so some men had tried to hold him in place. Nevertheless, he'd continued to struggle, defying all expectations. Here was a man who was supposed to be on death's door.

Scolding the men as they flinched backward, her mother had ended up climbing on top of her father's back to hold him down as she dug into the wound. Using a small knife, she had continued the

bloody work of cutting out the rotten flesh. Once bright red, exposed flesh was all that remained, she and Misha had applied more medicine and wrapped him in bandages. The whole process had taken well over an hour.

The ghastly scene had prompted more than half of the waiting nobles to take their leave. As apothecaries, Misha and her mother were just thankful that no one had vomited nearby.

The same old maid from before had led them to their own bath after the treatment. Judging by her pale complexion, she must have been outside the room listening to the screams the entire time.

It had been a brutal affair, but Misha's father had endured it. His face was still pallid, he was still unconscious, but his heart was still beating. That was the first hurdle. Depending on how the wound developed from here, they might have to repeat the bloody, painful process yet again, but for now Misha chose not to consider that a possibility.

At long last, the memories gave her a reprieve, allowing her to drift asleep.

"Misha, wake up."

Her mother's soft voice brought Misha back to the world of the waking. Opening her bleary eyes, she was met with the pale yet still disapproving face of her mother staring back at her.

"You went to sleep without drying your hair, didn't you? It's a mess."

Oh, she's back to normal. Relieved, Misha slowly pushed herself up. Her body felt incredibly sluggish.

"There's some tea here. Would you like some?"

Accepting the cup and its familiar aroma, she drank a mouthful. That cleared her head enough for the memories to start coming back.

"How's dad?"

Her mother's face clouded over. "No change yet. His body temperature isn't going back to normal. He's lost too much blood. At this rate, the wound won't close even after being cleaned, and it's impossible to say how much of his blood is contaminated."

Her mother's words brought Misha close to tears. If the wound didn't close, they'd have to do the same thing all over again. And if he didn't regain consciousness, they could do nothing but wait for him to die anyway.

"What do we do?" Misha turned pleading eyes on her mother.

"We still have one option," she replied, uneasy.

"What is it?!" Misha all but shouted at that small sliver of hope.

Her mother, however, shook her head. "It's a new treatment from my old home, but there's so much about it I don't know; I came here while it was still being developed. It's very difficult—and *dangerous*."

"Can't you ask uncle?"

Her mother's homeland was far away. Though the populace of this country assumed her mother's people had cut all ties with her, she still had some contact. The "people of the Forest" did technically have their own country, but they prized curiosity and freedom above all. If they found something that caught their interest, national borders meant nothing to them. They'd go wherever the wind took them.

Misha's uncle was one such sort, and he had secretly visited on a number of occasions. Though he only came once every few years, he always brought tons of gifts and interesting stories, so Misha loved him.

"It's a secret technique that was never allowed to leave our home. It won't be that easy to get them to teach it to me."

"What kind of treatment is it?"

Since her mother said she was partway through learning it when she left, Misha figured she must've had *some* idea.

After a long silence, her mother finally answered, "The idea is that if someone doesn't have enough blood, you need to give them more. But people can't absorb blood through consuming it. So they decided to try inserting it directly into their body. I told you about the large pathways for blood, right? The ones that you must avoid harming at all costs?"

Misha nodded, stunned by the sudden explanation. Blood ran through pathways inside the body, some of which were larger than

others. If you cut those, the bleeding would be impossible to stop and you would die. That was something her mother taught her when they were butchering animals they had caught in the forest.

"The idea is to insert a hollow needle into one of those paths, then send blood from a healthy person through it."

"Then if we do the same thing for dad—!"

But her mother shook her head, hesitant. "One in three people who received the treatment died. When I left, they were still trying to figure out why."

Testing that treatment would have been no easy task. The only places with so many people dying of blood loss were battlefields, but that was hardly the right environment for such a delicate operation, and they obviously couldn't risk the lives of those in good health. There was no point in developing a treatment to save lives if it required killing people.

"But... But..."

"Even if they've found the reason, I don't have time to find my brother and discuss it with him. It's hard enough to get a hold of him with the way he travels the world. By the time I make it home and return here, your father will be long dead."

Misha went silent. At some point tears had started dripping down her face.

Watching her daughter silently crying, Leyas finally sighed.

A man had been out journeying the world when he became injured, unable to move. Leyas was the one who had found and helped him. It took a month for his wounds to heal. That was all the time it took for her to build up the resolve to cut her ties with her homeland and throw away her future as a master apothecary. Even though they couldn't always be together, she had been happy. Despite her father-in-law being right about how many would view her with pity, she had found bliss.

Would my brother call me stupid? Would he get angry?

She recalled the look on her brother's face when she told him she was leaving with the man. He'd been worried she would regret throwing away everything she had worked for until that point.

"Even if you don't follow the family rules like an idiot, there's *got* to be a better way." He'd laughed, drawing a laugh out of her as well.

"Unfortunately, I'm not quite as straightforward as you are." And though he was still worried all the while, he bid goodbye to her with a smile. If he were to follow the rules of their people, that would be the last time they ever met.

However, a few years after Leyas moved into the forest on the edge of the kingdom, her precious brother had stumbled upon them deep in the woods, following a rumor. He was a genius and incredibly fickle, but he treasured Leyas more than anything. At first, he'd tried to convince her to come home with him, but in recent years, it seemed he had given up on that, and he came only to visit. The fact he had finally accepted his sister's decision to remain still filled Leyas with joy, as if it had only happened yesterday.

If I had known this was going to happen, I would have let him talk...

A few years prior, her brother had informed her that the mystery of the blood had been solved. But when he'd tried to explain it to her, she'd immediately hushed him, terrified of the implication of revealing the secrets of their people to an outsider as she was now.

"This is the result of my hard work," he'd said before handing her a small bag. "So please take this at the very least."

Leyas squeezed her eyes tight now, recalling that bag. She had told her daughter it was hopeless, but she couldn't think of any other way.

If it doesn't work...I'll take full responsibility.

After sitting in silence for a while, Misha's mother finally opened her eyes and rose to her feet, her face resolute.

"Let's go talk to my father-in-law. We'll see if he's willing to take another gamble."

Hurrying after her mother, it never occurred to Misha how much she'd regret not getting her mother to explain further. After talking about the new treatment method and its risks, Misha's grandfather sat in silence for a time.

“Is this a normal treatment where you come from?” he asked.

“I cannot say. When I left, it was still being researched. That’s why it is so dangerous,” she responded softly.

He gave a small nod. “According to the rumors, the apothecaries of your land are head and shoulders above the rest. If only we could have them here...”

Leyas’s homeland was so far away, and the People of the Forest were particularly secretive. Outsiders knew very little about them. Although he lamented that a better relationship with them might have brought about a different future, Leyas shook her head.

“The moment I decided to go with my lord, they cut all ties with me. There was nothing to be done.”

Misha was confused. It was true that he only came once in a while, but they were still on very good terms with her uncle. Why was her mother keeping that a secret?

“Very well. I said I would leave it all to you, and I will. Give it a try.”

“Thank you.” Leyas bowed deeply before taking Misha with her back to the side of the girl’s father.

His complexion remained horrid, but his expression was at least peaceful. It seemed the painkillers were working.

“Misha, watch very carefully. This is an invaluable skill that almost no one else knows of,” she whispered, her apothecary’s facade coming back on.

“What’s that?” Misha asked as her mother pulled an unfamiliar implement from her belongings.

“It’s a special tool. I snuck it out of my home when I left to be with your father,” she said, though it was a little white lie. She was holding a pair of rather large needles, which were attached together by some kind of cord.

“This is hollow. We can use it to transfer blood between people.”

“How did they make a hole in such a small needle?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t make it myself. More importantly, we need to sterilize them first. Can you boil some water?”

At her mother’s instruction, Misha lit the hearth in the corner of the room on which she placed a pot. Leyas pulled back the sleeve of

his shirt and—just in case—slipped some sleeping powder under his nose. She did not expect this procedure to be as painful as the last, but things would turn dire if he started to thrash.

Deeno, please. Accept my blood, Leyas begged in her heart, running a finger down his pale cheek. He seemed so much more gaunt than she remembered.

"I'm ready, mom."

Before Leyas knew it, a good amount of time had passed. Misha was standing at her side, holding a tray with a cloth and the needles with their tube.

With one last deep breath, Leyas switched modes. It was the first time she was doing this in decades. Her skills had no doubt gone rusty, so she needed to focus.

"First, we try inserting the needle just a little," Leyas said, tightening a cord around her upper arm. Her pale skin, untouched by the sun, soon came alive with bright blue blood vessels.

"The large vessels are here and here. But don't use this one if you can help it. The blood will come out so fast, you'll have a hard time stopping it."

Using her own body as an example, she carefully explained the procedure to her daughter. Leyas couldn't help but grin at the serious expression on Misha's face as she took it all in. The way she hungered for knowledge and sucked it all in was just like Leyas when she was younger.

Learning new things was so much fun back then.

Shaking off the nostalgia, Leyas picked up the two needles. Detaching one from the tube, she then inserted the other into her arm. There was a faint pricking sensation, then blood began running through the needle. Apparently, her skills hadn't dulled quite as much as she had feared, she thought with a sigh of relief. After letting a few drops of blood flow through and out the other end of the tube, she bent it back to stop the flow.

Next, she took the arm of her husband, lying motionless on the bed. She tied a cord around his arm the same way she had her own, but perhaps because of all the blood he had lost, the paths didn't show up. However, Leyas was experienced enough to find the spot

she was looking for anyway.

With quick, sharp movements, she inserted the needle into his arm. Blood immediately started gushing out, so she wasted no time connecting it to the tube still attached to her arm. She immediately felt blood flowing from her above to her husband below.

"One, two, three..." After counting slowly to a hundred, she quickly removed the needle from her husband's arm and wrapped it in a bandage. "Misha, hold this." After confirming there was blood coming from the needle still, she then removed it from her own arm.

"Is dad okay?" Misha asked, her voice trembling. The red splotch growing on the bandage felt somehow scarier than usual.

"I don't know. If there is no change in him after some time, that means he accepted the blood. Then we'll be able to relax."

"What kind of change?"

"There are lots of possibilities. Fever, pain, jaundice..."

Misha took mental note of all the possible symptoms as she watched her father rest. She wouldn't let the slightest sign of something going wrong pass her by. That was the limit of what she could do at this point.

The two of them spent the next half a day taking turns watching him and sleeping on the room's sofa. Eventually, Leyas concluded that he must have accepted her blood, earning a huge sigh of relief from her daughter. They couldn't let their guards down yet, but they had finally found a good reason to be optimistic.

After checking the wounds on his back one last time, she instructed the maid to inform them of any change, no matter how slight, and returned with Misha to the room set apart for them.

"We still have a long way to go. Rest while you can, and eat when you have the chance."

With all that had happened, Misha had no appetite at all, but she nevertheless followed her mother's instructions and forced down some of the food that had been provided for them. She realized that they couldn't afford to be collapsing themselves.

It's been such a long day since that mail bird showed up. Wait, has it really been only one *day?!*

Misha suppressed a sigh as she bit into some roast chicken. So

many things that never could have happened in the forest had hit her all at the same time. Now she felt like her head was about to explode.

"You must be tired. Why don't we call it a night?"

At her mother's urging, Misha lay down on the bed. No sooner had her head hit the pillow than a deep, dreamless sleep welcomed her.

Chapter 5: As an Apothecary

When Misha awoke, her mother was already gone. Had Misha slept in later because she was still a child, or was this a difference in their experience?

She's incredible...

Pressing a hand to her still fuzzy head as she sat up, she looked over to the empty bed, which was likely already cold. After sitting in a sleepy daze for a minute, she finally pulled herself to her feet and trudged out to the room next door. Looking around, she saw a white napkin covering something on the table. When she moved it aside, she saw a familiar sandwich underneath. Her mother must have made breakfast for her.

"Let's put some tea on."

Stepping over to the room's mini kitchen, Misha got to boiling some water. There was a teapot ready for use, likely placed there by her mother, which Misha filled and took back to the table. Though she was curious about how her father was doing, she wasn't worried so long as her mother was at his side. And above all, Misha needed something to eat if she was going to have energy for the day. An apothecary's work was an endurance contest—Misha had concluded as much after spending so much time running around the forest, looking for herbs.

As Misha finally moved to pick up the sandwich, she noticed a small letter placed on the table beside it.

"Many wounded came back with your father. I will look after him, so please take care of the others for me. Consider it practical training as an apothecary."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess he wouldn't be the only one hurt."

In fact, he was supposed to have led the army from the rear. If he was wounded at all, that must have meant there were tons of casualties. Misha slumped her shoulders. She couldn't help but feel

disappointed in herself for not realizing that earlier, obsessed as she had been with caring for her father. She really was inexperienced; there was no point in cramming all that knowledge into her head if she couldn't put it to use.

"I'll do my best," she murmured, biting into the sandwich. And the first step was to make sure she was well-fed.

After finishing her breakfast, Misha grabbed her tools and her bag of herbs and made her way back to the entrance hall. For now, she'd do as her mother said and have someone take her to the wounded. She had no idea where they were being kept, so she had little choice but to ask anyone she could find.

Figuring she'd encounter someone sooner or later if she walked around, she wasn't disappointed. In fact, she quite quickly encountered someone who was already out looking for her.

"Oh, you're the knight from yesterday." Misha stopped at the familiar face.

"Yes, my name is Kite Dyson. Lady Leyas has requested I come guide you."

Misha nodded. Though his response came off as a bit curt, Misha was familiar enough with him to know it wasn't from ill intent, so it didn't bother her.

"Please and thank you," she replied with a small curtsy. Internally, she was celebrating that she didn't need to run around searching for the people she was supposed to be helping, but after the greeting, Kite didn't move.

What's wrong? Is he *injured?*

Judging by how intense their ride had been yesterday, she found that hard to believe, but nevertheless she examined him again with an apothecary's eyes.

He doesn't seem to have any difficulty moving his arms and legs, and there's no smell of blood. His complexion is good... Yeah. He's fine, she thought with a nod to herself.

Then she tilted her head to the side. *So, why isn't he moving?*

"Um, Mr. Kite?" If she couldn't figure it out, her best bet was to ask the man himself.

The question seemed to snap him back to reality, as he quickly turned on his heel. “This way.”

Misha had to hurry a bit to keep up with him.

Kite took her to a large room in another building. All of the other furniture had been removed, replaced with rows and rows of beds. The air was filled with the sound of groaning and the thick smells of blood, pus, and medicine.

“This room has our most severely wounded. They have been given medicine and painkillers already. Is there anything else you can do for them?”

“Is there no doctor here?” Misha asked.

“Our doctor was with us on the battlefield. He was killed in action. His apprentice has his hands full there. We have no one with medical knowledge here, so we are simply following the instructions that were sent back with them.”

There was no doctor to give instructions. Her mother, who usually filled that role, wasn’t here either. It seemed she’d have to decide everything herself.

A shiver ran through her body as that realization struck her. Her decisions here could determine whether these people lived or died. This would be a test of her resolve to become an apothecary.

Misha bit her lip.

I decided I wanted to do this. I was bound to end up in a place like this eventually. Am I going to run away just because it came sooner than I expected?!

As scared as she was, even the cowardly part of herself didn’t hesitate to answer the call. She would do all she could here.

“Who is in charge here?” she asked.

“That would be me. My name is Luciana.” One of the servants stepped up with a curtsy. She was wearing an apron over her maid uniform, and she looked to be in her late twenties. A hint of nervousness and no small amount of doubt filled her eyes as she looked over Misha.

Luciana had heard rumors that the forest witch had brought another apothecary with her, but she couldn’t help but worry when she saw how young Misha was. Those rumors had also included how

much Misha had helped in the treatment of the lord, but they weren't exactly easy to believe when someone saw Misha for the young teenager that she was.

Meanwhile, Misha also frowned as she looked up at Luciana. The makeup she was wearing entirely failed to hide the dark circles under her eyes, and beneath her triangular cloth headpiece, her hair was in total disarray—not to mention the sleep still lingering at the corners of her eyes. Her face was gaunt and harrowed, making her exhaustion readily apparent.

"Miss Luciana, I apologize for being rude, but when was the last time you took a bath? And when was the last time you slept in a proper bed?"

Having expected the questions to be about the patients, Luciana's mind blanked for a moment.

"Um...a bath? Three days ago, I suppose? And as for a bed... I'm not sure. We've been taking turns sleeping on the sofa in the waiting room," she finally replied, her reflexive honesty bringing a grim look to Misha's face.

"First, please call all the staff looking after the wounded."

In the end, four women gathered, ranging in age from their teens to their thirties. Each and every one of them looked pale and weak, their clothes worn and dirty.

"There are two more, but they are sleeping at the moment," Luciana spoke hesitantly, seeing Misha's severe expression. Her fear over what this girl in front of her might do was greater than any concern about her legitimacy. She felt like one wrong word would trigger an avalanche of angry scolding, as if it were her own mother staring down disapprovingly at her. The other servants were similarly cowed, staring at their feet.

"That's fine, let them sleep... Wait, you don't mean on the sofas, do you?" Misha was about to nod before she remembered what Luciana had said at first. Luciana averted her gaze, earning a look of shock from the little healer. But with a heavy sigh, she managed to keep her cool. "I will take over for now. All of you please rest. Don't come back until tomorrow morning."

"What?!" the four servants exclaimed as one.

"I understand you have been desperately doing everything you can to help. But at this rate, you're just going to collapse. Go back to your rooms, take a bath, and sleep well," Misha said, giving Luciana a serious look, hoping she would understand Misha was just as worried about her and the rest of the women working. Meanwhile, the little healer's sparkling jade eyes and gentle tone were slowly working their way into the servants' hearts.

"I promise I will take care of the lives you have worked so hard to save. I may look young, but my teacher has approved of me as a professional apothecary, and she has ordered me to take care of the people here. Can you please trust me?"

The confidence with which she spoke and the proud, strong stance she took made Misha look two or three times her size in the maids' eyes. Though still bewildered, Luciana and the others finally nodded, bringing a bright smile to Misha's face.

"Good. Please get a good night's sleep and come back full of energy tomorrow. I'll be waiting."

Thank goodness they all did as I asked. They must have been really tired to listen to some random kid who appeared out of nowhere.

Misha sighed in relief once they had gone, her gaze eventually landing on a somewhat unsettled Kite.

He wasn't sure how to express what he was feeling right now. The exhausted maids had looked like they were on the verge of breaking down, but with a look and a command from Misha, it was as if the girl had lifted a curse from them. They had immediately relaxed, their faces awash with solace.

It was bizarre—and all this from one little girl. He couldn't deny that she possessed a strange aura of dignity.

He thought back to their first meeting. That day, he had almost been against his orders to run his horse ragged in a desperate effort to save their dying lord. He had heard rumors of the powerful medicines their lord brought back from the forest, and Kite himself had been helped by them in the past. Treated wounds healed twice as fast compared to when they used ordinary medicines. Curious, he

had inquired about the medicines, only for their doctor to proudly declare that they came from the Witch of the Forest.

He'd learned that the witch was the lord's concubine brought here from the far north. After losing a power struggle in the home with the lord's wife, she had been driven out of the mansion to live in a forest on the edge of their territory.

There were plenty of malicious rumors about her being rustic, uncultured, and uneducated, just as there were plenty of favorable rumors about her being kind, down-to-earth, and intelligent. The unpleasant ones circulated among the high-ranked nobility, while the auspicious ones were found among the common workers. The distinction was clear; it all but guaranteed that the mean-spirited ones came from the wife, who bore some kind of grudge against her husband's concubine.

To prevent the conflict between them escalating further, the concubine was taken away and hidden. Kite didn't know what exactly that conflict had entailed, as those who witnessed it refused to speak on the matter. All he knew was that for a few days every month, his lord would disappear, only to return with armfuls of powerful medicine. Only a rare few knew exactly where he had gone.

He was then sent to pick up the Witch of the Forest. It was everyone's last desperate hope to save their gravely wounded lord. None of them seemed to mind they were relying on the very woman they had driven out of their house. Being one of the knights responsible for protecting their lord on his way back from the battlefield, Kite was one of those with little in the way of hope. Begged by his commander, practically forced to go along, he went along deep into the forest to find a small, crude cabin inhabited by a woman in plain robes.

Despite being beautiful enough to be mistaken for a spirit of the forest, she didn't have any such sinister aura about her as the title of "witch" would imply. Not to mention she had a daughter, a small, slender girl who paled and trembled in his arms at her first experience riding a horse. Nothing seemed sinister about them.

As such, they had spent a great deal of time in physical contact

with each other on horseback, but that engendered little in the way of feelings in him. He held her quite tight to himself, but only because he was constantly afraid of her falling. There was no passion or desire in him at all. Honestly, the fact this little girl was saddled with the title "daughter of a witch" was laughable.

But now, he couldn't help but see how beautiful this little girl was. According to the rumors, she had been deeply involved in helping her mother treat their lord. He'd seemed likely to pass away at any moment, but the two of them kept him firmly rooted in their own world. She hadn't so much as twitched at the brutal treatment that made the adults in the room cringe and cower.

It was hard to believe she was the same girl that had barely made it here on horseback. Though now that he thought about it, when she had seemed like she was on the edge of collapse, it had only taken a bit of self-made medicine for her to pop back onto her feet. Even when she'd seemed dead tired, with a pinch of medicine and a few minutes to rest, he'd seen the life rushing back into her face.

And then here she was, arriving at this place for the first time yet boldly admonishing and instructing the adults around her. It was honestly like she had some kind of magic.

A little uncomfortable under Kite's stare, Misha gave an awkward smile and a shrug. "I guess I'm out of helpers now," she joked.

With a small sigh, Kite removed his sword and coat, and he rolled up his sleeves. He could deal with his bewilderment later. There were wounded people all around him. Misha had the ability to help them, so at the very least she wasn't an enemy. Chivalry had engrained a sense of meritocracy in him, and surviving the horrors of war had made him into a realist. It didn't matter how suspicious her techniques were. If they could save his comrades, he was happy to have them. If trusting her ended up being the wrong choice, he knew well enough how to use a sword, and he quietly swore that he wouldn't hesitate to do so.

"You can leave the manual labor to me. I don't have any medical knowledge, though, so don't expect anything there," he said, veiling the darker thoughts in his mind.

Misha nodded with a smile. “That’s great, thank you. Okay then, please come with me.”

Her first instruction was to get the windows open, something the two of them did together. The windows and curtains, closed tight to shut out the early spring chill, were thrown open, letting in a soft sunlight and gentle breeze. Noticing the stale air starting to move, a number of the family members of the wounded lifted their faces to see what was going on. As those tired gazes gathered on Misha, she answered them with a bright smile, her mother’s lesson on the importance of appearing confident in the back of her mind.

“Hello, everyone. My name is Misha. I’m here working as an apothecary. I’ve been asked to take care of everyone here. I’ll be taking a look at everyone in order, so I’d appreciate the help from anyone who is able.”

“You’re an apothecary?” a young woman questioned immediately. Her tied up hair and clothing made it clear she was married, but it couldn’t have been for very long. She still had an innocent youth about her.

In the bed beside her was a man whose face was wrapped in bandages, only his mouth barely peeking out from beneath them. The bandages were soaked in blood, but they were not the bright red that one might have expected, meaning they had to be quite old.

It was all Misha could do to keep from scowling. Had they run out of bandages, or was there just no one around to give proper instructions? No matter how she looked at it, there was an absolute mountain of work to be done here.

Maybe I should have kept someone who understood the situation better.

A small regret crept into the back of her mind, but it was too late to worry about that. She couldn’t just call one of them back now. Instead, Misha met the woman’s gaze and nodded.

“That’s right. I’m going to change these bandages and take a look at the wound. Do we have clean cloths and water?”

“Y-Yes. I’ll get some.” Though still clearly not convinced, with nothing else she could do but hold her husband’s hand as he

suffered, she was willing to grab at any chance to get help. After pulling some white pieces of cloth from her belongings, she ran off, most likely to get some water.

After watching her go, Misha stepped close to the wounded patient and whispered, “I’m going to remove your bandages now. The blood has dried, so it might hurt if I have to peel them off. If it’s too much to bear, please let me know.”

Though his mind must have been muddled by pain and fever, her words still seemed to reach him. He gave a small nod.

“Could you get me some hot water, Mr. Kite? In as big a bowl as possible. I could also use clean cloths and bandages,” she began giving instructions as she lined her tools up on the side table.



“Got it.” Kite immediately turned and stepped through a door, likely where there was some water. At the same time, the woman returned with a bucket of water and some cloths. Misha mixed a small amount of powdered medicine into the water, turning it gradually from a faint green to purple.

“This kills the germs. There’s no point in treating their wounds if my hands are dirty,” Misha explained to the concerned woman as she dunked her hands in the mixture, then started peeling back the bandages.

Dropping the bits with dried blood and other mess into the bucket, she quickly revealed the wound and began inspecting it. It stretched from the top of his head to the top of his right ear. It was pretty deep, but luckily there didn’t seem to be any damage to the bone. Much of the skin was gone, though, so it would likely take a great deal of time to heal.

“His hair is in the way, so I’m going to cut it.” Informing the now somewhat ill-looking woman of what she was doing, Misha cut the man’s hair around the wound to better reveal the injury. She then used her antiseptic solution to clean away more of the dirt and blood. After sewing up the deeper part of the wound, adding a bit of medicine and reapplying a fresh bandage, she was done.

She worked quickly and without hesitation, so it took very little time altogether. As Kite returned, she got his help in getting the man to sit up so that she could give him some medicine to keep the wound from festering, something for his fever, and a painkiller.

“Please keep an eye on him. You can use a warm and damp cloth to wipe away his sweat. Make sure he is consuming water regularly too. When dinner comes, mix some of this medicine into warm water for him and have him drink it.”

The woman took Misha’s instructions with a deep bow of her head before Misha moved on to the next man. Despite being so much younger and smaller than her, Misha had given her a surge of confidence. It had felt like death might swoop in and collect her husband at any moment, and she had felt helpless to do anything but watch, but now she could see his condition was already improving.

Maybe because of the medicine she had given him, his strained, pain-filled expression had already started to soften, and he seemed to have slipped into a restful sleep. At last, she believed her husband had come back to her. The stress on her heart lifted all at once.

After staring at her husband's sleeping face for a time, she bit her lip and turned to the departing apothecary, quickly following after her. She had no knowledge of medicine, but there was probably something she could do to help. There were plenty of suffering people still here.

"Is there something I can do to assist you?" the woman asked, running up to Misha's side.

With a bright smile, Misha responded, "Of course! Thank you. Could you get me some hot water?"

Deep wounds needed to be stitched. Festering wounds needed to be cleaned out, sterilized, and treated with medicine. Broken bones that had set already needed to have their bandages removed, the injury inspected, and the bones reset properly. Fever medicine, painkillers, and weak tranquilizers needed to be dosed differently for each patient based on their symptoms and body type.

Misha moved swiftly, calmly, and—as was evident even to the uninformed observer—with extreme precision. Everywhere she went, the pained expressions of the wounded were lifted.

At first, the concerned family members of the patients could only watch in bewilderment, but slowly they each stood up and began pitching in. Each time Misha would happily thank them and give them a small task.

Fetch hot water. Change the sheets. Get some nutritious food. They were small things any person could do, but all absolutely had to be done. Fearing anything they might do would just worsen the condition of their loved ones, they had only been able to watch by the sidelines as they suffered in bed, so they were glad to have clear and explicit instructions on how to help.

The smell of blood and pus in the groan-filled room was slowly replaced by the scent of medicine and antiseptic. At the same time, the concerned family members' faces gradually started to brighten as well.

Kite watched the whole transformation with great surprise as he followed Misha scurrying among the beds. Every patient in this room was gravely wounded, and many of them were knights Kite knew. At first, their recovery had appeared hopeless, that it would be better to just put them out of their misery, but now they slept without pain. It was a moving sight.

It really is like magic, Kite thought.

One patient had a wound that just wouldn't stop bleeding, but with a pinch of powder from Misha's bag, it stopped almost immediately. After waiting a while, Misha wiped it away to find the dark, bloody flesh had once again taken on a healthy pink hue. She then applied some ointment, wrapped it in gauze and tied it with a bandage.

"Did you make that medicine yourself too?" Kite asked despite himself.

Misha nodded, her hands not even slowing down. "This medicine stops the bleeding and encourages the cells to grow faster. Ever since the war started, my mother's had us preparing lots of stuff like this. I never expected I'd be applying it myself, though." Handing some pills to the woman at the bedside and giving her instructions to give them to the patient, Misha turned to the next bed.

There sat a man, propped up on pillows into a sitting position. The buttons on the front of his shirt were open, revealing a chest covered in bandages. His hair was short and bright red, his eyes brown with a strong reddish hue. A bright, happy smile lit his face as he looked back at Misha. He was probably a little over thirty, quite handsome despite the stubble growing in to match his hair. He held an unlit cigarette in his mouth, shaking it around out of boredom.

"Hey kid. You're pretty good for bein' so small," he called out to her casually as she approached the bed.

But before Misha could reply to his greeting, Kite stepped forward to swipe the cigarette from his mouth. "Captain Shydein, what are you doing, smoking again?"

"C'mon, Kite. Don't be such a stick in the mud. You can see it wasn't lit." The man named Shydein laughed and shrugged, like a child caught mid-prank.

“That’s not the issue.” Kite gave an exasperated sigh, placing the cigarette gently down on the table beside them, rather than crushing it in his hand. Something in Kite seemed to relax as he did so, earning a confused look from Misha. It seemed these two were pretty close.

Noticing her attention, Kite stood up straight. “This is Shydein Rusbell, the captain of our company. However, he was injured in the fighting, thus he is here for treatment. He is my commanding officer.”

The brisk, polite explanation made Kite look very much like a proper knight. It was a strange contrast to the frank way he normally spoke, making Misha frown slightly. Something felt really off about it.

Shydein seemed to feel the same way, as he gave a much more pronounced grimace. “Knock it off. Hearing you talk like that is gross. I’m nothing that fancy. Just a loser who’s outlived his time, and lost one of his arms to show for it.”

The captain’s self-deprecating joke had Kite biting his lip in frustration. “That’s only because you were covering for us new recruits!”

“And half of them still died. Doesn’t change that I’m useless as a soldier now either. Oh, don’t make that face. I’m still alive, right? Just means I gotta find somethin’ else to do with myself.”

“Would you mind if I took a look at your injury?” Misha interjected.

“Go ahead.” Without hesitation, the captain slid out of his shirt.

His right arm stopped just beyond the elbow. The tightly wrapped bandage around it was dark with dried blood and fluid. Though he spoke in a bright and cheery tone, his behavior couldn’t mask the paleness in his face. He had lost a lot of blood.

“The blade that took my arm off cut into my side as well. Luckily, I was wearing chain mail, so it didn’t get very deep.”

She peeled back the bandages on his chest to find another wound, stretching from his right flank to the left side of his chest. Looking at the stitch work on it, Misha frowned. All of the stitching she had seen so far looked rough and amateurish. Either they hadn’t

had enough time to do a proper job or the doctor in charge wasn't very experienced. There were no signs of infection, though, so Misha assumed it had at least been cleaned properly.

Giving it another round of disinfection, Misha added a bit of medicine and retied the bandages. He was a heavily muscled man, so much so she couldn't even wrap her arms around him to get the bandages back in place. As she clicked her tongue in frustration at her own small size, Kite stepped in to help her.

Taking a look next at his amputated arm, she noticed it had been thoroughly burned.

"We couldn't stop the bleeding, so we cauterized it," he casually admitted to using a rather barbaric form of treatment, earning a scowl from Misha.

What are we, savages?! This is unbelievable!

Luckily, they had kept the burning just to the face of the wound, so the risk of it getting worse was pretty low, but it had still been extremely reckless. Quietly fuming, Misha continued working on the injury without pause.

"So, you're the daughter of that rumored forest witch?" the captain asked. "I guess even someone as young as you can be a witch. You certainly seem good at this."

"If only I really was a witch. Then I could use magic to make your arm grow back," Misha replied nonchalantly as she quickly whipped up something to treat burns rather than the usual medicine. She applied the purple paste to the wound, which she then quickly wrapped in gauze and bandages again. "Unfortunately, I'm just a normal human. The best I can do is put some medicine on it."

"No, that's more than enough." Shydein's eyes tightened a bit at the cool sensation of the ointment. "Thanks to you, these guys will all see tomorrow. I'm really grateful."

"You're welcome," Misha managed after a short pause. The honest thanks had taken her a bit by surprise, but that surprise quickly gave way to another smile. Even something as simple as that made it feel worth it to have come all the way here from their home in the forest. "I'll leave some painkillers and fever medicine for you here, so make sure you take them. And no, you can't smoke

instead.”

Shydein gave a small shrug as the tiny apothecary glared at the cigarette still sitting on the table. “It’s surprisingly good stuff, you know. These ones are pretty strong.”

“No!” Misha and Kite shouted back in unison. They then shared a startled look with each other, earning a laugh from Shydein.

“You guys seem to get along. You’re totally on the same wavelength.”

Misha turned a scowl on the laughing captain with a sigh.

“Anyone would react the same way. Anyway, no smoking or alcohol. It’ll stop you from healing properly.”

“You got it, Miss Witch.” As Shydein gave a joking bow, Kite reached forward and snatched the cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. “Hey, come on!”

“I’ll hold on to these until you’re allowed to have them again. Come, my lady, let’s move on.” Kite declared, gently pushing Misha forward.

Though Kite was able to ignore the hateful glare that followed them as they left, Misha couldn’t help but giggle. “You two are really close, huh?” she asked as she fetched more herbs and water.

“He acts like that now, but on the battlefield, he commands a lot of respect,” Kite finally replied after a long silence, eliciting another laugh from her. Kite stared at her in silence for a while again, before suddenly dropping to one knee and bowing his head. “I have been quite rude to you, underestimating you as a young girl with no experience. Please forgive me. You have saved so many people here today.”

Misha was immediately flustered. An older man had never apologized to her like this before, so she had no idea how to respond.

“P-Please, get up. I didn’t think you were being rude at all. And it’s true, I am pretty young... P-Please... You’re embarrassing me,” she babbled for a bit, finally managing to convince him to lift his head.

Looking into his eyes from where he knelt, she could now see they weren’t the same dark black as his hair that she had first

assumed, but were actually a deep blue, glittering with color as the light struck them at a new angle.

They're so pretty...

Misha's young curiosity prompted her to stare into Kite's eyes for a while, while Kite stood motionless on one knee, only able to wonder what she was doing. As a result, they ended up staring wordlessly at each other for a bit, until a very pronounced cough snapped them out of it.

Apparently, they had caught the attention of one of the family members of the wounded who had been helping them with the water. There seemed to be a mischievous light in their eyes as they watched.

"Uh...right. To the next one?" Feeling a bit awkward, Misha gave a muddled smile as she put her things into the wagon and pushed it back toward the room of waiting injured.

"I'm exhausted..."

At long last, Misha made it back to her room, collapsing onto the sofa. It wasn't until late in the afternoon before she had gotten around to seeing everyone in the makeshift infirmary, and she hadn't been able to take a moment to rest the whole time. Though she hadn't felt it while the patients were in front of her, the moment she stepped back into her own room, the fatigue of the day slammed down on her. She didn't have the energy to move a finger.

"That was so scary..." she murmured into the cushions, curling up and wrapping trembling arms around herself.

She possessed all the knowledge. She hadn't done this often, but she had occasionally gone to the village at the edge of the forest, where she watched her mother treat the injured and the sick. Still, she had never been anything more than her mother's assistant. This had been her first time directly dealing with the patients by herself.

Besides that, she had also never seen people so gravely wounded before, the only exception being her father the day before. *Plus* it was her first time stitching up human flesh. Although she had practiced before on small dead animals and boars, this had been her first time sewing stitches on something still alive, let alone human.

Feeling nervous in the face of such responsibilities was only natural for a girl as young as Misha, but she knew she couldn't show that unease to her patients. Any distress in her own mannerisms would cause them more worry.

On top of that, Misha was only thirteen. She could hardly fake any age or experience, so she was starting in the red. If she did poorly, her patients might refuse treatment altogether. Really, if there had been another doctor or healer present, Misha likely wouldn't even have had a chance to help. She knew that full well, and it was all the more why she couldn't show even the slightest bit of unease in her work.

"It's fine. I did well. I didn't make a single mistake, and I knew how to treat everyone. I did fine. It's okay, it's okay..." she continued to murmur over and over, still shaking in her own arms.

She stayed like that for who-knows-how-long, but eventually a knock at the door snapped her out of it, causing her to jump upright. Luckily, she had stopped shaking, even if her face was still a bit pale.

"Excuse me. I have brought you some food." The older maid from the other day pushed a cart into the room. Expressionless, she quickly laid the meal out on the table. "If there is anything you cannot eat, please let me know."

Although she could barely move a finger before, Misha found a renewed sense of energy upon seeing a steaming hot plate of food on the table. Soft bread, steaming soup, and a large slab of meat roasted with herbs and spices—hunger overtook her. There was even a collection of three varieties of sliced fruit.

"It all looks fantastic. Thank you."

She didn't wait for a reply before digging in to the meal, a decision that made her starving body rejoice—even though she knew her mother would scold her. Careful to at least keep to a reasonably proper pace, she steadily worked her way through the food on the table. She was so focused on her food, she didn't notice the maid's expression soften into a gentle smile as she ate.

"That was great. Thank you," Misha said once the last crumb was gone, sipping at her tea. The gentle aroma of jasmine brought a

sigh out of her.

I'm stuffed... That was amazing.

Having fully relaxed, Misha knew that sleepiness was soon to follow. With her nerves exhausted, her belly full, and the relaxing effect of the tea, it was hard to keep her eyes open.

As Misha started nodding off, tea still in her hand, she heard the maid calling out to her.

"If you plan to sleep, please feel free to use the bed."

But already halfway to dreamland, it was quite difficult for her to comply.

"Just for...a little. After a nap...I'll look at the others...so please...wake me up..."

Barely managing to squeeze out her words, she let go of consciousness and drifted away into a happy slumber.

"Thank you for your hard work," the maid murmured, snatching up the teacup miraculously before a single drop was spilled. After laying the young girl down on the sofa, she headed off to the bedroom to find a blanket for her. As small as Misha was, she was still too big for the maid to carry her all the way to bed by herself.

Returning with a light blanket, she frowned at the knight—her nephew, in fact—now standing beside the sleeping girl.

"Kite, it's rude to enter a girl's room unannounced," she scolded, albeit in a whisper.

"I *did* knock. There was no reply, so I was worried something was wrong."

Despite the obvious excuse, the maid's scowl nevertheless softened. "No matter. Having you here is convenient. Please carry her to the bed for me."

Understanding his scolding had been cut short, Kite hesitated only a moment before leaning down and taking Misha up in his arms.

She was so small and light, it sparked an odd feeling in him. The way she carried herself and the way she treated the injured gave her such a strong, powerful air. That same larger-than-life healer being a small, delicate girl was a dizzying juxtaposition. It was hard to believe this peacefully sleeping girl was the same one who'd been

tirelessly treating the injured not long ago.

"There were *so* many wounded. She must be exhausted," the maid murmured as she followed him into the bedroom. Watching Misha go about treating the wounded had likely sparked a very different kind of feeling in her. Setting the sleeping girl down on the bed, Kite stood aside as his usually stern-faced aunt affectionately tidied up Misha's disheveled hair, then put a blanket over her.

"Let's leave her for a bit. Come on, you too." With that sharp suggestion, his aunt stepped out of the room, and he reflexively did as he was told. "By the way, why are you here in the first place?"

Kite went quiet. He'd figured she was probably done eating, so he'd come to bring Misha back to the infirmary. She had seemed full of energy when he dropped her off, so he hadn't expected her to be asleep when he arrived.

I really shouldn't be surprised. There's no way she could keep pace with a trained knight.

But when he voiced his thoughts, he couldn't help but agree with his aunt that he hadn't been considerate enough of her.

His aunt—his father's younger sister—had married once but lost her husband before they were able to have any children. Deciding against remarrying, she instead had come to work at the duke's estate. Strict and proper, she had taken care of Kite many times since he was young, so he still listened to her as he would his mother. She had seen through his intentions the moment he had found himself at a loss for words.

"We'll give her another hour and then check in on her. Come back then." With a sigh, she drove him out of the room.

Left heartlessly shut out, Kite stood motionless in front of the door for a bit before finally sighing and turning away.

I guess none of them are in critical condition anyway.

He expected when he got back to the infirmary and informed those waiting that Misha would be a bit longer, he'd get another earful about rushing her.

Chapter 6: Leyas's Memories

Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp.

Leyas looked into the face of her husband, feeling his pulse through the tube connecting them. It was late at night, a small lamp by his bedside offering the only illumination in the room. The weak light flickered over a face in mild distress, exhausted and in pain.

With her free hand, Leyas reached out and traced the wrinkles on his face. It had been fifteen years since they met. Leyas gave a wry smile. Time really seemed to have gotten away from her.

"Looks like time has gotten to both of us..." she whispered affectionately, though there was still no sign of her husband waking to hear her.

Her fingers ran down his cold cheek over and over, as if hoping she could impart some warmth by doing this. Lying at his side, she shuffled a bit to get closer to his enormous frame.

"Who would have ever thought things would end up this way?"

With no one to hear them, her whispers sounded hollow. Forcing another smile, Leyas closed her eyes.

Just a little more...

As she counted the rhythm of his heartbeat, she thought back to the past.

The sacred mountain of Trandius, where the People of the Forest made their home, had long, harsh winters. The short summer and fruitful autumn were important times to prepare for the difficult winter to come.

That day, Leyas was near the coast, looking for food they could preserve for the winter months. While her brother Ryne and their friends were net fishing, Leyas, who wasn't particularly good at swimming, was on the beach collecting seaweed. Two days prior, there had been a terrible storm, which had kicked quite a bit of

seaweed onto the shore. Among all the seaweed were also large planks of wood and wooden boxes. Leyas and her people accepted this good fortune as gifts from nature.

But as Leyas searched, her breath caught when she found a person lying among the driftwood. She hurried to his side and discovered he was a young man.

"Hey, are you okay?!" Without thinking she shook the collapsed man, who gave a weak groan as his eyes fluttered open.

Oh...they're the same color as the summer sky.

That brilliant, clear blue was Leyas's favorite. She sat frozen, only able to stare into those eyes. In that brief instant, she felt something change inside her.

It truly was brief, as the man's eyes quickly shut again. With those stunning blue eyes hidden once again, Leyas came back to her senses. She immediately reached for his neck, checking his pulse. For some reason she hesitated to try speaking to the man again, instead turning to call for her brother's help after confirming his pulse was still there.

An unconscious person was very hard to move, and on top of that, he was much bigger than Leyas was. She had no illusions of being able to move him herself.

When his sister came running back, Ryne, the leader of the group, immediately sent their friends back to call for the adults to bring a stretcher. Meanwhile, he and Leyas grabbed the towels originally meant for drying themselves after fishing, and they dashed back to the fallen man.

In the end, he wasn't badly injured. He had a wound on his head that needed four stitches, but there was no damage to the bone. Besides that, he had only superficial cuts and scrapes. The People of the Forest concluded that he had lost consciousness due to dehydration and hypothermia from drifting in the sea for so long. The adults insisted he would be fine if they warmed him up, and as they said, he woke up half a day later.

He had forgotten everything about himself. All he had was his clothing—simple, yet made from high-quality fabric. He remembered what he needed to make it through daily life, but he had completely

forgotten everything else about himself. He didn't know his name, his family, or why he'd been adrift at sea.

"Systematized amnesia," they called his condition. In response to excessive stress, memories relating to a specific subject or category were forgotten. Unfortunately for this poor man, it seemed to have affected everything about himself.

Calling him Deel, from the initials found on a handkerchief he had in his pocket, Leyas and her brother invited him to stay at their house. Leyas's father had passed away the year before, so they had a spare room, but mostly it was because Leyas had been the one to discover him. She felt a strange sense of responsibility for the man.

Though he clearly wasn't happy about it, Ryne offered no objections, and so with a little embarrassment at his own helplessness, Deel came to live together with them.

The new arrival proved to be quite capable. With no serious injuries, his greatest problems were hypothermia and general weakness. His robust, fit body recovered in no time. As soon as he was healthy again, he began helping Leyas around the house, not wishing to lie around uselessly. He was perfectly competent when it came to both cleaning the rooms and making arrangements for cooking. Once he had recovered fully, he even began repairing the broken fence around their garden and the rain shutters on their windows.

"You're amazing! You can really do anything!" Leyas exclaimed. Since Ryne had no skill at all in these things, she had given up on them as unfixable.

"It's not that big a deal. You can tell it's amateur work." Deel could only scratch his head in embarrassment as her eyes sparkled at his every accomplishment. He had only wanted to give something back to the siblings who had taken him in when he lost his memories. He hadn't expected to get such a joyful response.

"That's not true at all! When my brother tried before, forget covering up the holes in the rain shutter, he just made them larger!"

"I guess we all have our strengths and weaknesses." Ryne shrugged at his sister's teasing.

As the two shared a laugh, Deel found himself joining in despite

himself.

"Hey! That's the first time I've seen you smile, Deel! You should do it more often!" The sight had taken Leyas aback, but there was joy in her voice.

He hadn't even realized he was smiling. Or rather, he realized he hadn't smiled at all before this. That discovery was quite a surprise to him, but a happy one for some reason. Although he had no idea who he was, he didn't have a penny to his name, and everything seemed to be going wrong for him, he felt bright and cheerful.

"If this is all it takes to make you happy, then I'll gladly do whatever you ask." Maybe that was why those words escaped his lips before he had even considered their gravitas.

But before he could take them back, a neighbor came calling for help. In no time at all, Deel had become the village's handyman. Repairing homes, felling problematic trees, even maintaining the roads—he did anything he was asked without a word of complaint. For the many academic types in the village, someone willing to help out with the manual labor was a godsend. He would wake up at sunrise and water the garden, eat the breakfast Leyas had made together with everyone, then head out the door to start taking care of the work asked of him. If he had nothing to do, Leyas would invite him to help gather food for the winter. She taught him which plants were edible as she harvested them, and he brought an axe to collect firewood from fallen trees they came across. Then, exhausted from a long day of hard work, they'd come home and bathe, gather around the dinner table, and share stories of the day. When the sun set, they'd head to bed.

It was a simple but fulfilling life, one that gradually drew Deel and Leyas closer. Deel would pick a flower from a high branch and put it in her hair, and Leyas would blush with a happy thank you. It was so pure and innocent that it was honestly a bit embarrassing for those around them. It would make others cringe, then strangely make them feel depressed as they reflected over their own reactions. For better or for worse, the two at the center of it all seemed oblivious to the phenomenon they had created. Eventually Ryne and the other villagers accepted that they would find happiness together in their

own time and watched the relationship blossom with warm smiles.

It was a small, secluded village, but there were a surprising number of people who had spouses from the outside world. With so few people living in this village on Mt. Trandius, it was an important measure to prevent issues from inbreeding. In order to keep their secrets from leaking to the outside world, they generally required newcomers to cut all ties with their old lives.

In that respect, an amnesiac like Deel was perfect. He had no ties to cut in the first place. Everyone looked forward to the day he would become an official member of their village.

But that happy time was not to last. The first sign of the end was a letter from the Alliance. A visitor from afar had been lost at sea on their journey to the area. He was a man about nineteen years old, with blond hair and blue eyes. He was about 180 centimeters tall—neither tall nor particularly short—had a refined body and a handsome face. It sounded far too familiar to be a coincidence, so the village chief brought it to Ryne.

"We can hardly hide his past from him just because it's convenient for us." With only a brief moment of hesitation, Ryne quickly made up his mind and recommended they talk to Deel and Leyas about it.

The two were similarly conflicted. Their lives had been so happy and peaceful, and Deel had forgotten everything about his past life. However, he could guess from his attire when he had been found that he had lived a reasonably well-off life before.

"We haven't responded yet. What do you want to do?"

With how much their village restricted access to the outside world, it had taken two months for the letter to reach them. If they simply responded that they knew nothing, he would be able to continue his life hidden here. But surprisingly enough, it was Leyas who pushed him in a direction.

"If someone is looking for you, you should meet them," she said, smiling despite her face being visibly pale.

"But..." Even if someone was looking for him, the first people he remembered were Leyas and the other villagers. His memories returning now might be no more than a hindrance to him, nor did he

have any idea what kind of life he'd be going back to. As he found himself at a loss for words, Leyas squeezed his hand.

"If you meet them and don't like what you find, you can always come back. And if you can't come back, I'll go and find you."

Deel's eyes went wide with astonishment. But before he could express his shock, Ryne at their side burst out laughing.

"Oh, come on, Ley! What are you, a prince going to rescue a captive princess?!" His laughter shattered the tense atmosphere. Leyas smacked his shoulders in retaliation for his teasing.

"You mean...I can come back?" Deel murmured, still in shock.

"Of course. We're family, aren't we?" Leyas replied, almost confused, before Ryne started to smirk.

"Are you sure you want to include me in that?"

"Give it a rest!" Leyas's face flushed as she lifted her hand to hit her brother again, but before she could, she found herself wrapped tight in Deel's arms.

"I'll come back—because this is where I belong. I love you, Ley."

Her face burned an even deeper red, but held tight in his arms as she was, she responded by wrapping her arms around him. "Me too. I love you, Deel."

And so Deel left the village, a number of adults going with him. It was against the rules for strangers to enter the village, so the People of the Forest had to leave whenever they met with visitors. And having not yet reached adulthood, Leyas was forbidden from leaving the village.

"I'll keep an eye on him for you," Ryne said, forcing himself into the group accompanying Deel, leaving Leyas to worry at home alone.

A month later, Deel returned. Or rather, the man they'd known as Deel.

Upon meeting the entourage from the Ourenge Alliance, Deel collapsed with a terrible headache. When he awoke, his memories slowly began to return.

"I never would have guessed he was a prince..."

The truth had been quite a shock. From his clothing, Leyas and

the others had surmised he was from a rather affluent family, but he was actually a prince from the Kingdom of Bluheitz. After graduating from the academy, he had been sent to travel the world to broaden his knowledge, but he'd been shipwrecked along the way.

"I couldn't bear leaving without saying thank you to the village that saved my life," he said on his return, beautiful in his fancy, noble clothing. But to Leyas, he seemed so incredibly distant now.

Unable to stand this change in him, Leyas slipped out from the group that had gone to see him and ran away. Normally a child wouldn't be allowed to see visitors from outside the village at all, but Leyas's coming of age ceremony was only a month away, and she had already spent months living with him as family, so an exception had been made for her.

It'd been easy enough to hide behind the others and find somewhere else to clear her head. Knowing if she headed back to the village someone would come to drag her back out, she instead headed to a spring deep in the forest.

"So you weren't a captive princess, but a prince..." Leyas gave a self-deprecating smile. "I can't go find you now. You're too far away..."

Seeing Deel in his bright and flashy clothes, smiling and surrounded by everybody, she thought he looked entirely different from the man who'd slipped flowers into her hair. Tears started pouring down her cheeks.

"And here I thought you were going to come kidnap me."

Leyas's breath caught as she spun at the voice behind her—Deel. His flashy clothes were gone, replaced by a plain white shirt. Apparently, he would be staying at the village for a time before departing.

"Why...?"

"You weren't at home, so I figured you'd be here. You told me this was where you would run if something happened, remember?" Deel replied, a bit perplexed by her trembling voice.

"I heard your memories came back."

"Yes. But I remember everything that happened here too." Ruffling his perfectly trimmed bangs, he walked toward her.

"I heard you're a real prince."

He paused. "Yeah, I am." As he drew closer, Leyas slowly stepped back. As if running away. As if afraid of being caught.

"I thought you'd never come back."

"But I did. I promised you, didn't I?" Deel stopped, saving Leyas from having to retreat into the spring itself.

As they stared at each other, another tear traced its way down her cheek.

"I came back, but I'll be leaving again. Once my memories returned, I remembered my responsibilities too. I can't throw that all away." Deel's brow furrowed, reminding Leyas of the faint wrinkle in his brow when she had first seen him.

Did he used to make a face like this?

From the time he had awoken with no memories, Deel's brow had contained no trace of a wrinkle, so she had completely forgotten about it. Caught up in the strangeness of it all, Leyas found herself reaching forward to touch it. Before she realized it, she was massaging his brow, as if she could massage that wrinkle away. Staring at her in shock, Deel's face finally broke into a smile.

He grabbed her hand and pulled it close to his cheek. "I love you, Ley. Even with my past memories back, that hasn't changed." He stepped a little closer, putting a hand to her cheek as another tear ran down it. His attempts at consoling her hurt her all the more.

He's older than me, but he's still barely an adult. What kind of life did he live to have this kind of wrinkle in his brow already?

"I can't stay here. Please...would you come with me? I know it's asking a lot of you...but I want to be with you."

Leyas took a deep breath at that pleading whisper. In one month she'd have her coming of age ceremony, and she'd be allowed to leave the village. She would be able to take her first steps as an apothecary traveling around the world to help people, her childhood dream come true. She had worked so hard all her life for this. There was more research she wanted to do, so many more things she wanted to learn.

But I'd have to throw that all away.

That's what it meant to marry someone outside of the tribe. She

would never be able to return to the village. She would see neither her friends nor her brother, her only remaining blood relative.

What do I really want?

Whenever she found herself at a loss, that was what she asked herself. It was something her mother had taught her when she was little. No matter how difficult the problem, she could always find the answer within.

Leyas stared deep into Deel's eyes, those twin orbs reflecting the summer sky she loved so much.

Maybe I've been his ever since I saw those eyes, she thought with a bright smile as tears continued to pour down.

"I love you, Deel. Could you tell me your real name?"

Coming back to the present, Leyas snapped a hand to the tube connecting her to her husband. She had been lost in the past for longer than she'd realized. She quickly removed the needle and pressed a cloth to the small hole left by the needle. Standing up to start cleaning, she was hit by a dizzy spell and forced back down into a chair.

Looks like I gave him too much.

She grinned sheepishly, thinking of how her brother would scold her for making such a sloppy mistake. And if her husband learned she had risked her own health to help him...

"You'd probably be mad too, right, Deeno?"

After tracing that deep wrinkle on his brow one more time, Leyas got to her feet again and started cleaning up.

"Misha will see right through me if I go to her in this state. I should make some nutritional supplements. Oh, and medicine to stimulate blood production. I guess I'll need to get a good meal, as well."

She stepped out of the room, murmuring to herself all the while.

And as she closed the door behind her, Deenoark's fingers twitched.

Chapter 7: Sudden Tragedy

"Hey, you! You're the daughter of that forest witch, right?"

Misha turned at the sudden voice behind her. Standing there was a boy with light brown hair, glaring at her with an imposing stance.

"Forest witch"—she had learned that phrase over the past two days and that it referred to her mother, though this was the first time the name had carried so much hostility.

"Lady Rosmaria's eldest son, Lord Hydgene," whispered the maid guiding Misha between rooms. Lady Rosmaria was her father's official wife, who Misha had yet to meet, which meant this boy was her half brother.

Misha found herself studying the boy. Light brown hair and blue eyes. If it hadn't been for his glare and scowl, he'd probably have been a fairly cute boy.

I guess he's a bit younger than me? she thought to herself as his scowl deepened. He probably didn't like the way she was looking at him.

"I don't accept either of you! If anything happens to my father, I'm having you both executed!" he shouted before turning and running away, leaving Misha perplexed.

"What was that about?" Misha muttered to herself, prompting an apology from the maid.

"He is normally such a bright and gentle boy. Right now, I believe he is under quite a bit of stress. Please..." Misha shook her head as the maid tried to cover for the boy.

"Don't worry about it. I guess I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me...but I'll try not to let it. I don't really know what he was trying to say anyway." Misha smiled, doing her best to ignore the gloom building in her chest.

Despite it having been their first meeting, it seemed her half brother already hated her and her mother, and she had no idea why.

Her first instinct was that his hatred stemmed from her mother being a concubine to his father, but Misha recalled reading somewhere that it was standard practice for nobility to have multiple wives in this kingdom. In other words, a duke having two wives was nothing to be upset over.

Especially since one of them lived in a distant forest, secluded from the rest of the world.

Okay, that actually does annoy me. We're here to try and save my father and his knights. Why is he talking about executing us?

Lost in thought, Misha didn't realize her expression was growing steadily more severe, which had the maid at her side growing nervous.

She didn't see the look of relief on the maid's face either when Kite came across them standing still in the hallway.

"What are you standing around here for?"

"Oh, Mr. Kite." Misha blinked in surprise, finally realizing the knight was standing right beside her.

"Weren't you going to see your father? It's been two days since you last saw him, right?"

At Kite's prodding, Misha snapped back to reality. Between caring for the already present wounded and looking after the others being brought in from the battlefield every day, Misha hadn't had the chance to see her own mother, who she was supposed to be sharing a room with, let alone her bedridden father. Just earlier, while eating lunch, the maid had said she could go see him "if they had time," so she was supposed to be hurrying there.

"We had a bit of a strange encounter..." She wasn't quite sure how to describe what had happened, so she kept it vague while she gave a weak smile. "Sorry for making you wait. Please lead on."

Ignoring the strange look that she got from Kite, she gave a small bow to the maid standing at their side.

When they made it to her father's room, she could hardly believe how much better he looked than when she last saw him. He had yet to wake up, but his wounds were slowly starting to heal. His fingers were warm, and his pulse was strong and steady.

Looks like mom's treatment went well.

Misha sighed in relief. They had probably made it past the biggest hurdle. If nothing else out of the ordinary happened, she expected him to make a full recovery.

"Where is my mother?" In her relief, she finally noticed her absence. Her not being here was strange.

However, the maid waiting in the room explained that her mother had gone to collect some herbs she was running low on. Back when her mother had lived in this mansion, she had kept a small herb garden, which had been left to grow wild with her departure.

Their timing had been bad, that's all. Misha wanted to believe that...but something didn't feel right.

Normally she would have called for me and asked me to get them. It's like she's avoiding me.

And once that thought occurred to her, she started to grow anxious. Her father's complexion had improved significantly. His pulse was strong. And her mother was avoiding her. Misha could only think of one thing that would connect those dots.

"I'm off to go see her." With that declaration as she made her way out, Misha ignored the voices calling her to stop.

Misha had been following basically the same route every time she walked through the mansion, but even a building this grand would be nothing when compared to navigating a wild forest with no landmarks. She had a pretty good sense of the layout of the mansion by now anyway.

Picking up on the shortest route to the inner courtyard, she found herself almost running by the time she heard a high-pitched voice. At the end of the hallway, in front of a descending staircase, her mother was talking with a group of other women. As her mother stood there receiving her scolding, it was clear even through her makeup that she was quite pale.

As Misha had guessed, she must have given blood to her father a number of times now. She could only guess how much blood she had given, but judging by her mother's complexion, she was suffering from a rather serious case of anemia.

"Just go back to your forest! Father won't wake up with you here anyway! You're just a nuisance!" the girl at the head of the pack

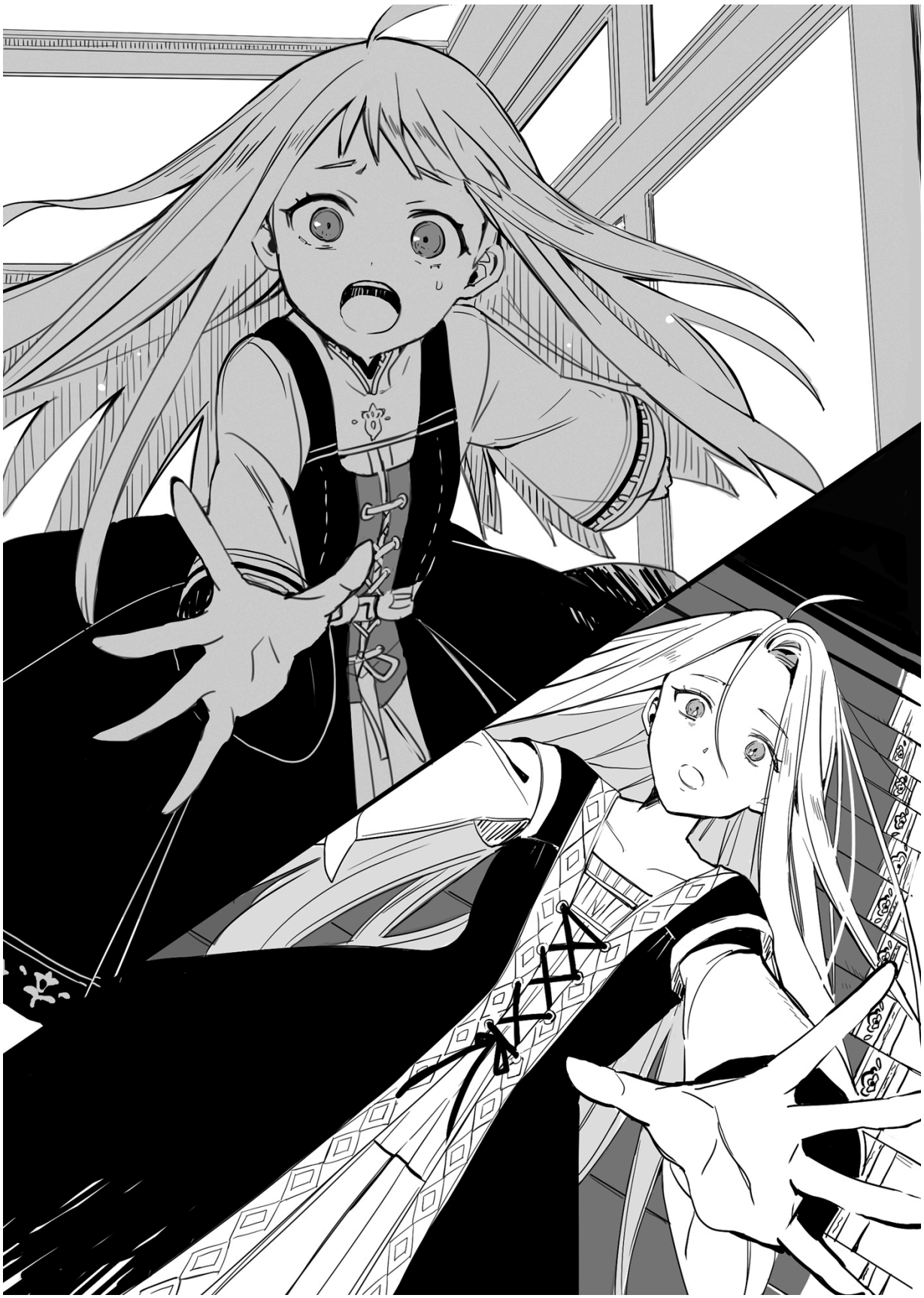
shouted. Judging by their outfits, the others with her were her maids. Standing in front of them, Leyas could only stare silently at her feet. To Misha, it looked like the standard distress of someone suffering from anemia, but the angry girl must have taken it as Leyas ignoring her.

"Say something!" With another shout, she pushed Leyas.

Someone screamed.

The small push threw Leyas off-balance, sending her staggering backward.

"Mom!!!"



Time felt like it slowed to a crawl as Misha watched her mother disappear over the edge of the stairs. Leyas's hands reached desperately forward, only to catch nothing but air. As she looked around in shock, her eyes happened over Misha.

Multiple screams filled the air as Misha dashed past the gaggle of women and ran down the stairs. As she made it to the bottom, despair rooted her in place.

"M-Mom..."

Leyas's eyes were closed. A thin line of red dripped from the corner of her mouth...her neck bent at an impossible angle. She must have fallen directly on her head, and hard.

Losing all strength in her legs, Misha dropped to the floor. It was obvious at a glance that her mother wasn't breathing, but even so, Misha's hands moved on their own to check. She felt no air moving on her fingertips. Mechanically, her hand continued to reach for her mother's neck but found no pulse there either.

No matter how much knowledge she had as an apothecary, there was no saving someone with a broken neck who wasn't breathing. Even if her body was still warm...there was no denying that Leyas was dead.

That reality smashed Misha's heart to pieces.

"What happened?!"

"What was that sound?!"

Hearing the commotion, people began to gather at both the top and bottom of the stairs.

At the top was a young girl bawling her eyes out, her two maids holding her tight as if to protect her. At the bottom, a young girl sat frozen beside her dead mother. That juxtaposition, of motion and stillness, of life and death, could only be described as cruel.

"Misha, what happened?!" Among the gathering crowd, Kite dashed forward and grabbed Misha by the shoulders.

"No..." Eyes still locked on her mother, Misha started to shake her head.

"Misha?"

She exploded in a scream, unable—unwilling—to accept what she saw in front of her.

"Nooooo!!!"

Her voice was a knife to the heart of everyone standing there. Even the girl wailing at the top of the stairs fell silent. Everything else stopped, all other sounds drowned out, overpowered by that bloodcurdling cry.

Leyas was laid on a bed, Misha sitting on a chair at her side, her eyes locked on her mother. With the blood wiped from her mouth and her neck moved back to a more natural angle, it looked like she was just sleeping, but Misha's eyes rejected that enticing illusion. Her experience told her better.

Her mother's skin was too pale. Her chest had lost the steady rise and fall of breathing. Every little detail declared that Leyas's life had come to an end.

Why... Why...?

The question repeated endlessly in Misha's head as she stared at that pair of eyes that would never open again.

If only they hadn't been standing at the top of the stairs.

If only she hadn't been unsteady from the anemia.

If only her leg hadn't been injured in the first place.

If only she had never tried the treatment of sharing her blood.

If only... If only Misha had been with her...

So many *if*s filled her mind, rushing to the surface and dissipating in futility. There was no point dwelling on any of that now. There was no going back now.

Because...mom is dead.

Tears poured down her face. Somewhere deep inside, a part of her found it strange that there were still tears left after all the crying she had done.

How long had she been sitting here? She didn't know. Was it an hour? Half a day? Ever since she saw her mother fall, she hadn't been able to feel time passing.

"Lady Misha, please at least have something to drink. You're going to dry up."

The same older maid that had been at her side since the day she arrived at this mansion pushed a glass in front of her.

Almost unconsciously, Misha grabbed the glass and lifted it to her lips. The faint sweetness, the scent of mint, glided easily down her desperately dry throat.

"It's...really good. Thank you." Though it was no more than a murmur, her voice echoed loud in the otherwise silent room. "That's quite a thing to say in a situation like this, huh?"

"Life has to go on." Misha's eyes finally left her mother as she lifted her head in surprise at the reply that came to her idle muttering. The maid in her usual attire stood beside her, eyes downcast. "No matter how difficult the days that come, we have to walk through them. That's what it means to live."

"To live...?" The maid's words slowly soaked their way into Misha's head.

"That's right."

That one word landed hard. Dropping her head, Misha closed her eyes tight. "Can... Can I have some more to drink? Something warm?"

The maid nodded wordlessly as she turned and stepped out of the room. Once she left, Misha turned her eyes back on the bed.

"I'll... I'll live. I'll do that for you...mom..."

Just as Misha finished the cup of tea the maid brought back for her, word of her father's awakening arrived.

He had been standing in total darkness.

Where...am I? Why am I here? I don't remember anything.

He couldn't even tell if he was actually standing up or lying down. He had the sense of losing sight of himself. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was freezing.

Why is it so cold? That's strange...

Rubbing himself all over, he sluggishly looked around to finally see a small light in the distance. Tiny, but steady and bright, like it was calling him. His feet naturally started carrying him toward it.

Ah. I'm supposed to go there.

Though his legs moved of their own accord, he didn't think to resist them. It had to be warmer over there. That was why there was such a gentle light.

But as he began to approach the light, he felt a jolt in his chest. Warmth surged through his frozen body.

Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp...

He felt a pulse, like someone else's heart beating in rhythm with his own. As warmth seeped out from his core into the rest of his body, his mind finally began to clear.

Oh. I was wounded in battle...so why am I here? Where am I?

Everywhere he looked, he saw only darkness. The only exception was that faint, distant light. It shone warm and inviting, with the promise of peace, but every instinct in him told him to run. He knew if he went there, he'd never see the people he loved again.

But then where do I go?

As he stood still, lost in indecision, a quiet whisper entered his ear, the voice of the most precious person in his life. So with no other clues to go on, he closed his eyes and started walking toward that voice.

Toward that worried, anxious voice.

He forced his leaden feet to move, desperately chasing after that voice.

It's okay. I'm coming back. Don't worry, Leyas.

Chapter 8: What Was Lost, and What Remains

Though he had regained consciousness, Misha's father's mind was still in a haze. He couldn't speak, only able to respond to a few questions by blinking or squeezing his hand, then he would pass out from exhaustion again.

Even so, Misha could see that was a clear sign of recovery. He had remembered his own name and recognized Misha, so there didn't seem to be any serious level of brain damage. Once Misha said as much, the servant watching over him teared up in relief.

After checking on the wound again and replacing his bandages, Misha took her leave. She needed to resupply on salves, and above all, she wanted to spend as little time away from her mother as possible.

As she hurried down the halls, a woman approached from the other direction. She seemed to be about the same age as Misha's mother, and she was wearing a rather fancy dress. Even without anyone to tell her, Misha immediately knew who she was.

That's Lady Rosmaria.

Her light brown hair matched that of the boy who'd suddenly accosted her the other day. Her eyes were a bit lighter, so the boy must have taken after his father in that regard. Out of instinct, Misha stepped aside to let her pass. Rosmaria shot her a glance as she stepped by but said nothing.

Misha breathed a sigh of relief. She had no idea how she'd respond if Rosmaria tried to speak to her. Her daughter had effectively killed Misha's mother. It hadn't been intentional—really, it had been the result of multiple unfortunate coincidences—but there was no denying who'd pushed that last piece into place. There was no way Misha could bring herself to forgive the girl.

At least, not right now. I don't even want to hear her voice, let alone see her face.

Biting her lip, she forced her feet to start moving again. It wasn't easy to keep the tears from pouring out again, but she didn't want to be caught crying where everyone could see her.

In the end, no one could tell the duke in his current state what had happened to Leyas, so they quietly had her body interred in the mansion's own cemetery. The funeral was a sad affair, attended by almost no one. Misha really wanted to bring her back to the woods, but with her father's condition still unstable, she couldn't afford to leave him for that long. That's why, as small a gesture as it was, she had to be content with keeping a lock of her mother's hair, the same shining gold as her own, wrapped in paper in a small hidden drawer in her medicine kit, to take back later.

At the funeral, her grandfather had given her a big hug, saying, "I'm so sorry." Misha decided then that would be the last time she cried over her mother. If she sat around weeping all the time, her mother would worry.

Luckily, there was no shortage of things to keep her occupied. From sunrise to sundown, she darted around nonstop, caring for the wounded. By the time she made it to bed, she passed out the moment she put her head down. She genuinely didn't have the time to dwell on her mother's death. She knew this was a kind of escapism, but she had no other way to cope. All she could do was pretend she didn't notice the concern in the eyes of everyone watching her. By doing that, she could at least keep putting one foot in front of the other.

This way I'll start feeling better little by little. Eventually, things will be back to normal, she told herself.

However, that was no more than hiding a wound that never healed. She knew full well it needed to be properly cleaned and treated, but she had no idea where to even begin.

The days continued to pass by. Around the time Deenoark recovered enough to sit up in bed, the war came to an end. Misha

didn’t know the details, but it sounded like they had made an alliance with a large country on the opposite side of their enemy, and that new support had been enough to bring the fighting to an end. It was every bit a puppy howling from the side of a wolf.

As expected, the relationship with their new allies was anything but that of equals, their country effectively becoming a vassal state of their new “friend,” but at the very least it was better than being conquered by an enemy.

That was also when Misha’s father received the belated news of Leyas’s death. He had started to suspect something was wrong when he didn’t see her around, but he was devastated when he learned his own daughter had been responsible for the accident.

“It’s like she died in my place,” he muttered before going silent again. Misha couldn’t tell what he was thinking under that silence, but the fact there was someone else grieving for her mother lifted her spirits a bit.

Even in his weakened state, when Misha stood close, her father grabbed her and pulled her into a tight hug. As thin and feeble as he was, that warmth reminded her of her mother, and she broke her vow to stop crying. This time, however, it felt different. The tears she cried in her father’s arms felt somehow warmer, like they were starting to loosen something that had turned stiff and rigid in her heart. It didn’t lessen her anger and resentment at having her mother taken from her so meaninglessly, but it did give her the courage to finally face that reality head-on. Admitting she hated someone was as painful for her as accepting her mother’s death.

“Mom was really happy that we were able to save you. Don’t be sad that you survived.” With his heart so broken, her father was about to collapse all over again, so albeit through teary eyes, Misha had to tell him that. She didn’t want her mother’s feelings to all be for nothing. Most importantly, she couldn’t bear to lose any more family.

“That’s... Yeah. Yeah...” he murmured to himself, eyes closed tight as tears began to well up. He mumbled over, and over, and over.

The man stared hard into the darkness of his room. Having barely overcome the struggle between life and death, his body wasn't yet able to move quite properly, something that greatly frustrated him. Still, he knew trying to force it wouldn't help.

Ley...what were you thinking in those last moments? Did you hate me for being weak? Were you worried about our daughter? His mind wouldn't stop racing, as futile and hollow as it all seemed.

He remembered the day Leyas decided to live in the forest, hiding her injured leg so she could protect the unborn child she bore. He had been determined to divorce Rosmaria at that point, but Leyas had stopped him. She understood what it meant to love someone so much you wanted them for yourself.

"I never could get used to living in the city anyway. Living in the forest will be more my speed. I can't support you in your work as duke anyway, and I'm the one who butted in where I don't belong. Besides, I'll have our child with me, so I won't be lonely," she said with a smile, putting a hand to her barely swollen belly.

It still felt like that had all happened yesterday.

Life had been peaceful afterward—at least on the surface. With Leyas gone, Rosmaria seemed to calm down, fulfilling her role as duchess splendidly. While he was traveling around managing distant affairs, she seemed to be doing a great job handling the household affairs and raising their children. Although it wasn't the same as his feelings for Leyas, he did have a deep affection for Rosmaria, and he truly saw her as his partner. He'd thought she understood that.

Without realizing it, he bit through his lip, and it started to bleed.

He couldn't find it in his heart to forgive her. Maybe it was all an imagined betrayal on his part. He was sure Rosmaria would have her excuses, but he didn't want to hear them. He had overlooked her behavior once before, and what had he gained for it? Loss and despair. He didn't want to make the same mistake again. There was still someone he needed to protect.

Now isn't the time for that, though.

It was difficult to give orders without being able to move freely, so his first order of business was returning to perfect health. He made this resolution to himself as he licked the blood from his lips.

He wouldn't waste the life his greatest love had sacrificed herself for.

"I never should have come back..." he muttered into the lonely darkness.

Misha's father slowly recovered. The other wounded returned to good health, no longer needing Misha's instructions to take care of themselves. With the war over, the actual doctor (the previous doctor's assistant) had returned, and once she handed things over to him, there wasn't all that much for Misha to do anymore.

What should I do, then...?

Having finished catching the doctor up to speed, Misha found herself staring out the window of her room.

I could go back to the forest...

She had the skills needed to survive in those deep woods alone, and if she asked, she could probably get her father to send her supplies from time to time. She could make medicine for him in return so that she didn't need to worry about feeling like a mooch. She definitely thought she'd feel more at home there. Something still nagged at her, though.

What's the point in holing up in the forest by myself?

Before, she'd had her mother there, and her father would regularly visit, so she'd never had to worry about being lonely. But her mother was gone now, and Misha found it hard to believe her father would visit like he used to—especially because it would be a long time before he was healthy enough to ride a horse again. If he did his best, he could probably recover enough that daily life would present no issues for him, but the hard running and physical work he used to do would still be very painful.

I don't mind staying until he's recovered a bit more, but I don't really want to stay here forever... she thought, looking up at the sky. Things had calmed down quite a bit, but the loss of her mother still stung Misha, and it didn't seem people here appreciated having her around much either. The girl responsible had locked herself in her room after the accident and had yet to emerge.

A thought suddenly occurred to Misha.

"I wonder where my uncle is now."

He was always wandering the world, following his curiosity, and would occasionally drop by their forest to visit. He didn't have a set schedule by any means, but Misha would guess he generally showed up once every year and a half to two years.

"His last visit was just after I turned eleven...so he should be back soon, right?"

He was very talented among his people, and just as strange, but seemed to have a soft spot for Misha.

"I wonder if he'd let me travel with him."

Losing her mother meant losing her teacher, but her time at the mansion had taught her just how much more she had to learn about being an apothecary. The idea of learning through hands-on experience while traveling around with her uncle was quite attractive. If possible, she'd also like to visit the forest where her mother grew up. Maybe he could take her there. Despite never saying as much, Misha's mother had longed for her old home—Misha was certain of this.

"For now, I guess I should go back to the forest and wait for my uncle to visit. Then I'll ask him to take me with him. If he refuses...I'll worry about that then."

With her mind made up, her hesitation evaporated. She immediately stood up and started toward her father's room. She needed to start making preparations immediately.

Hoping to speak with her father, she arrived at his room to find a rather unhappy crowd. He had barely recovered enough to be sitting up in bed, surrounded by his close associates, his own father, and even Rosmaria for once.

"Why not give them this girl? She might have been born from a concubine, but she is still the daughter of a duke," Rosmaria said, her voice cold as she turned a sharp gaze on Misha, who could only blink in confusion.

The coldness in her voice was nothing compared to that in her father's reply, though. "Ah, so *now* you think of her as my daughter. How convenient." Even though it wasn't aimed at her, Misha couldn't help but flinch back at hearing it. "You're the one who said you

didn’t want some stranger’s blood mixed in with our family. That’s why Misha hasn’t made her debut yet, even though she’s already thirteen.”

Rosmaria faltered under her husband’s glare. She wasn’t used to this kind of intensity from him, despite their years of marriage. His cold, freezing demeanor made her feel like a total stranger.

“Not that it was much of an issue, since her mother wanted to keep Misha out of the spotlight too. Either way, that means she’s not a viable option for this.” Her father shrugged, looking around at the people gathered. “We can’t marry off a daughter that has never appeared in the social scene before. We’ll send Lyla, as originally planned.”

“She’s only fourteen!” Rosmaria all but screamed, barely letting her husband finish speaking.

“Misha is thirteen,” he replied curtly.

“Lyla is still bedridden from shock!”

“Misha just lost her mother to that same *accident*. So?”

Misha’s father bringing up the “accident” that everyone else had tacitly refused to speak of stopped Rosmaria in her tracks, who brought her fan up to cover her face in silence.

He continued. “Never mind just being the daughter of a duke, she’s a representative of our country. It’s an honor, isn’t it? If she’s lucky, she could even find herself the mother of the next king.”

Rosmaria couldn’t stop her tears from her husband’s sarcastic remark, wordlessly turning and leaving the room, followed out by numerous servants. They were all employed by Rosmaria’s own family, so they were likely off to begin planning for this new development as quickly as possible.

With them gone, Misha’s father heaved a sigh, leaning back into the cushions.

“Dad?” Misha said, stepping close to the bed. Though she still didn’t know what they had been talking about, she could guess the conversation had involved her.

Her father opened his eyes, turning a tired smile on her. “Don’t make that face. It’s not a big deal. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“But...” All this talk of “representative of the country” and “mother

of the king," together with Rosmaria's odd behavior, had Misha concerned.

"The country we have made an alliance with is asking for a daughter to marry into their family. But the royal family has no daughters of marriageable age, so the request came down to us. Even if I married into Rosmaria's family, I am still the younger brother of the current king by birth," he explained, seeing Misha wouldn't let it rest.

Misha's frown deepened. The alliance that he'd mentioned was in name only. In reality, they had become a vassal state for another, so sending a daughter was more akin to giving them a hostage. Furthermore, because Lyla wasn't a member of the actual royal family, the chances of her being cut off eventually were quite high. There was no parent who would want to send their child into a situation like that.

That doesn't really make me want to take her place, though...

Lyla was the girl who had been shouting at Leyas right at the end. Being fourteen years old, she looked grown enough, but her behavior showed she was still quite immature. She had likely been raised like a spoiled princess by her mother and servants. A girl like that being sent off as a hostage to a foreign nation seemed quite unlikely to find any happiness there.

"You don't have to worry about it, Misha. She has lived her life in luxury thanks to the grace of the kingdom and the dukedom. This is no more than her duty as a member of the nobility."

Misha didn't have anything she could say to that. "I wanted to talk to you because I plan on going back to the forest soon," she murmured instead, remembering why she was here in the first place. That was news that would have made anyone on Rosmaria's side rejoice moments ago, but now it sounded like she was running away, so it left a bit of a bad taste in her mouth.

"You're going to live out there on your own? Won't you get lonely? You can stay here if you want."

"That's where my home is. I'm worried about it since we had to leave so suddenly," Misha replied hesitantly in the face of her father's concern. "I might get lonely...but if that happens, I'll come visit you."

Honestly speaking, Misha wanted to stay at the mansion a little longer to watch over her father's recovery, but she was starting to realize that staying any longer put her at risk of getting wrapped up in something bigger. Her father and grandfather might have had no plans to marry Misha off, but she all but expected Rosmaria to try and pull something.

Her father likely had similar concerns. Maybe if he had been in good health, he could have protected her, but in his current state, he couldn't even get out of bed without help.

After staring for a while at the last living reminder of Leyas, he sighed heavily. Those forest-jade eyes stared back at him without a hint of doubt or hesitation.

"I'll send a knight to take you back. If anything happens... No, even if nothing happens, please write to me from time to time. I'll get better as soon as I can so I can come visit you."

"Okay. I promise." Misha smiled.

"No. I won't accept this!" Rosmaria threw her fan at the floor, having fled back to her own room.

She would never accept her precious daughter being given away as a hostage to some foreign nation. Especially since the foreign king in question spurned pomp and splendor, demanding her daughter be sent with minimal servants and belongings. Her child, who had a bright future ahead of her as the daughter of a duke, would never survive in such conditions.

That other girl's face appeared in the back of her mind again, the rude directness with which those bright green eyes stared at her. She looked so much like her mother; Rosmaria couldn't help but feel disturbed by her very presence.

At the same time, she remembered the cold eyes and words of her husband. He didn't need to say it aloud. That one look had already told her he would never forgive her.

That woman is still in the way even when she's dead.

From Rosmaria's perspective, that woman's death had been nothing more than an unfortunate accident. Who would have expected a little push from a fourteen-year-old girl would send

someone tumbling down a flight of stairs? And yet everyone treated her daughter as if she had murdered the woman on purpose. The poor girl hadn't been able to take a step out of her bedroom for fear of those judging stares.

"Lyla's just as much a victim here..."

But after seeing the look in her husband's eyes, she knew that there was no chance of convincing him of that.

"I can't believe he'd send his own adorable daughter off to die like this. He must have changed while he was on the verge of dying." Throwing herself on the couch as she lamented, one of her servants stepped close.

"I have an idea, my lady," the servant whispered into Rosmaria's ear. A guardian from her own family, he'd come with her back when she'd married the duke. "It appears to me that there is no changing the duke's mind on this matter. I believe it would be more fruitful to aim higher."

"Higher?" Rosmaria tilted her head, her servant dropping to a knee and bowing his head.

"There is no need for you to worry further. As always, please leave everything to me. I promise I will save you from this tragedy."

Looking down at the servant, Rosmaria gave a deep nod. "Right... Right. I can rest assured if you are taking care of it. You have always been my greatest allies," she said, looking to the man in front of her and the servants waiting around her room. Her father had sent each of them with her when she was married. They had never failed to support her.

"Please save my daughter."

"As you command." After another deep bow, the man stood and left the room.

Chapter 9: A New Meeting

A few days had passed since Misha declared she was returning to the forest, but she was still in the mansion. Either from all the agitation or some kind of curse, her father's fever had risen again and his condition deteriorated further.

Two days of giving him medicine for the fever and ensuring he was thoroughly hydrated got exactly the returns Misha had hoped for, but as the fever subsided, his wound became inflamed again.

Seeing now that the wound was starting to heal, Misha breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't festering anymore, and new flesh was starting to grow. Her father had the refined body of a knight, so once it set its mind to healing, it would recover relatively quickly. Cloths pressed against the wound still came away wet, but the mixture of blood and fluid was mostly transparent now, indicating the cells were quite active. It wasn't a bad sign in the least.

Would he heal faster if I stitched the wound? No, that would cause more problems later. This should be better...

It was quite frustrating that she had no one she could consult. Though she was knowledgeable enough, she didn't have the experience to know which was the best option for treatment.

Maybe I should have Kyne look for my uncle? The bird's met him before, and if it's around the time he normally visits, he's probably in the area already.

But even if he was the only other person she could think to consult, she eventually shook her head. There must have been some reason her mother had cut ties with her home. She didn't want to do anything reckless until she figured out why that was.

Misha was also starting to realize her knowledge and techniques were quite strange for this kingdom. She had tried discussing her father's condition with the doctor that had returned from the battlefield, but they couldn't really connect. He basically had no

concept of aftercare for an injury. For example, he'd say things, like "We saved his life, but lingering effects are out of our control." Another was "The injury will make it impossible to walk; that's just life."

The wound on her father's back had been quite deep, but luckily, it seemed there wasn't enough nerve damage to threaten any sort of paralysis. His inability to walk right now was mostly due to muscle atrophy from being bedridden for so long. If he didn't start rebuilding those muscles and practicing walking soon, he'd be crippled more permanently.

Misha had been shocked this was something she needed to explain. It had been quite tough to make him understand.

Who really are the People of the Forest?

From her uncle, her impression of them was that of free-spirited wanderers. He always had interesting and funny stories to share, and would talk late into the night with her mother about new herbs he had discovered. He was cheerful and easygoing. But when it came to medicine and treatment, he was extremely serious. He was surprisingly stubborn, but also had a keen interest in new things. The stories of his experiences were an important part of Misha's own base of knowledge.

On top of that, by piecing together the tidbits of information she had gleaned from her mother, it seemed like the People of the Forest were a group that lived secluded in the mountains, studying medicine.

Does that mean my uncle traveling so much makes him kind of a weirdo?

Comparing the image in her head of the People of the Forest as something like hermits with the memories of her uncle almost made Misha burst out laughing.

I'd love to visit them.

Her father had been saved by that mysterious technique they'd developed. What was the secret of the blood? Even though everyone had the same red blood, sometimes it acted as medicine and sometimes as poison? Misha couldn't help but be curious.

A secret village—Misha's mother had grown up there, where she

learned an incredible amount about medicine and healing.

If I went there myself, would they teach me how to treat even more injuries and diseases? Is there still a lot mom didn't know?

With her own teacher gone, Misha began to develop an admiration for the People of the Forest that had taught her mother.

Lost in thought, Misha's hands worked on their own, precisely handling her father's injury. Just as she finished wrapping the bandages around him, a flustered rapping on the door brought her back to reality. As the maid in the corner of the room moved to answer, Misha slipped off the bed and adjusted her somewhat disheveled clothing. Even though he could move a little, it was still quite a task to wrap bandages around someone so much larger than herself. It took Misha and two other servants helping to get the job done.

"Deeno, there's a letter for you from the king. It seems to be urgent, as the messenger is waiting to take back a response," Misha's grandfather said, his cane supporting him as he hobbled into the room with a sealed letter.

Still lying on his side, her father took the letter and opened it, his eyes gradually widening as he scanned it.

"What?! Why would I send them Misha?!" he suddenly shouted, making Misha gulp.

Send me? To another country?

The conversation between her father and Rosmaria immediately jumped to the forefront of her mind. Wasn't her half sister supposed to be the one going?

"We already told them we were sending Lyla. Why would they ask for Misha?" Her grandfather seemed equally astonished by the news.

"Apparently they learned Misha is trained as an apothecary, and so they've taken an interest in her." Her father frowned, holding out the letter. As her grandfather took it to read for himself, this time he started shouting in surprise.

"'Come to the castle immediately'?! That's absurd!"

"No way! He absolutely can't!" Misha cut in.

Although her father had significantly improved, he still wasn't in

good enough condition to go anywhere. If he did, it was clear his wound would open again. He was still too weak to even stand.

But as Misha was almost to tears, her grandfather shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. They know full well Deeno can’t go anywhere. That’s not what they’re asking. They are telling him to send me and you back with the messenger.”

He then showed Misha the letter. It said that a messenger had come from the other nation, saying they wished to meet the apothecary from the People of the Forest. And if she was the real thing, they demanded she be handed over to them.

“Isn’t this talking about mom?” Misha murmured, earning a troubled nod from her grandfather.

“Most likely their information got confused. They should already be aware that Leyas has passed.”

“I’m against it. I can’t send Misha somewhere I don’t know she’ll be safe,” her father immediately declared, earning a frown from her grandfather. Even if he was a prince, it wasn’t that easy to ignore instructions from the king. Besides, this was a demand from their powerful new “ally.” They didn’t have the luxury of refusing.

“Shouldn’t I go? If they want an apothecary from the People of the Forest, they’ll probably give up when they see me and learn that mom died, right?” Misha suggested, unable to bear the tension starting to grow between the two men.

Misha didn’t know why the People of the Forest were so important, but they must have been something special for a foreign king to take such an interest in them.

And it was true enough that the gap in knowledge between Misha and the doctor trained by this kingdom had been bewildering, to say the least. It wasn’t hard to see why a leader of a great nation would prize that.

Perhaps they saw Misha as a foothold for getting access to the People of the Forest, but Misha didn’t actually know anything about them. Her mother had taught her about medicine and medical care, but all she knew about her mother’s hometown was that it was hidden deep in the woods. Now that she thought about it, it was almost like her mother had gone out of her way to avoid talking

about it. She had grown up in that forest cabin alone with her mother, separated from the rest of the world. She had never needed anything other than her mother's love, so it hadn't seemed unnatural at the time.

There was no way she could tell them anything she didn't know herself. Maybe that was why Leyas had avoided telling her anything about the People of the Forest...but ultimately, the truth of the matter had been buried with her. And no matter how great or important you were, you couldn't speak with the dead.

They could just send her grandfather to explain things, but rather than dealing with all the arguments, it seemed easier for Misha to go and show them for herself.

Besides, even if mom taught me, I'm still learning. I'm not that valuable. And, of course, I don't know where their village is.

On top of that, once they saw this famed "Person of the Forest" was just some kid, they'd probably write her off immediately. But above all, she was concerned about her father. If he got worked up over this, his condition would worsen again. Death had already taken her mother. She wasn't about to let its scythe take her father too.

"But..." Her father still resisted.

It took Misha and her grandfather together to persuade him that even if they were only allies in name, they wouldn't literally kidnap a girl against her will so soon after making their alliance. Her father then decided that he would go with them, prompting another tearful conversation about what would happen if his wound opened again and ended up taking his life. But after a considerable amount of time and no small number of tears, Misha finally got permission to go.

Leaving her father, exhausted by the whole exchange, in the care of the doctor, Misha went and found her best clothing. It was a simple linen dress, but it was basically new, and she had worked with her mother doing embroidery work on it to pass the time, so it was very much on the fancier side of her wardrobe.

"Well, even if it's not good enough, this is all I have."

She had been offered a hastily arranged dress that was much fancier...but it was clearly one of Lyla's old dresses, so as beautiful as

it was, Misha wasn't interested.

I'd rather deal with their disappointment than have to wear something like that.

That was very much a line in the sand for Misha. The most she did was adding a braid to her hair and decorating it with a few flowers.

She headed to the entrance of the mansion, where her grandfather was waiting to escort her to the castle by carriage. Misha spent the trip staring out the window, desperately trying to remember the manners her mother had taught her for dealing with important people.

Why do I of all people have to inspect candidates for the king's new concubine?

Geord was extremely unhappy. He was part of the imperial guard but had originally been a mercenary. By coincidence, he had saved the king's life in battle once. Then the king had taken a liking to him and hired him personally. He had no interest in the formation of this new "alliance," nor in the girl they were taking hostage under the pretense of taking a concubine to keep their new vassal state in line.

Honestly, all he wanted was to get through life in one piece. He had no grander ambition, the type to do the bare minimum of training. A bit of entertainment and a good drink was all he needed to be satisfied with life.

So why did he have to travel to some foreign nation chasing rumors? And if those rumors were true, he was instructed to abduct the girl before anyone else could get their hands on her. The king's expression of faint curiosity as he gave those orders had infuriated Geord. They had been surrounded by people, so he had swallowed his anger, but if the two had been alone, he would have roared furiously at the man and refused.

Geord was just a no-name member of the imperial guard, but someone from the People of the Forest had saved his life when he was still working as a mercenary. The king decided that meant he would be able to recognize one. The other members of the guard sympathized with him, saying the king was being ridiculous, but

none had been so sympathetic that they'd offered to take his place.

In the end, when he made it to his destination and asked after the apothecary, he got a rather reluctant response. It seemed they knew who he was talking about, but they weren't happy to talk about it. Using the position of the large nation backing him, he eventually forced them to talk, coming to learn that she was a concubine of the king's younger brother who had passed away in an unfortunate accident not long ago. She had a daughter, but little was known about her.

The two had lived secluded in the forest. The king had known he had a niece there, but that was pretty much the extent of his knowledge. Geord had not been impressed with the news, but he was still here under orders of his own king. So now he was waiting at the castle to meet the girl for himself. Trying to calm himself down, he sipped at some tea, idly wishing he could replace it with a good mug of ale.

Deciding he'd head to the bar as soon as he got home, a servant finally appeared to announce the visitor had arrived.

Let's get this over with.

Gulping down the remainder of his tea, Geord forced himself up out of his chair.

Who really were the People of the Forest? They were far from the country where Misha lived, so little was known about them, but they were particularly famous in countries that were prone to war.

The sacred mountain of Trandius stood at the northern end of the continent of Carmine, covered in snow year-round, and was surrounded by harsh cliffs and dense forest. It wasn't a place well suited to human habitation.

Two hundred years ago, a certain tribe was forced out of its home and fled to the mountain. No one knew how they managed to overcome the harsh environment, but nonetheless they did, establishing a village there and making a life for themselves in hiding. Originally a tribe of apothecaries, they continued to hone their craft over the years, occasionally popping up around the world to put their skills to use.

They cured supposedly incurable diseases, brought people back

from seemingly beyond the edge of death, and put an end to plagues that had claimed countless lives. Though they called themselves apothecaries, their skill far surpassed that of professional doctors with formal training, and they possessed skills and techniques found nowhere else. In general, they didn't support any given nation, and no promise of wealth or fortune could convince them to render services if they weren't interested.

They were very adept at keeping themselves hidden and next to impossible to track. If by some stroke of luck you managed to capture one, they would still refuse to lift a finger to help you unless they had already taken a personal interest in the issue.

The people they saved thought of their help as a divine miracle and always begged for them to stay. After all, they discriminated against no one in their treatment, saving poor and wealthy alike, demanding nothing in return. They could just as often be found helping the poor who could not afford doctors as they could helping the rich on whom doctors had already given up. They were revered with a kind of gratitude that defied description.

But they never answered those wishes to stay, always disappearing afterward. They wouldn't even share where they were from. They would treat the sick and the injured with a gentle smile. They had gentle blond hair that shone like the moon, and enchantingly beautiful jade-green eyes. Having taken up residence in the forests around the sacred mountain, that color came to be associated with the trees of their home, and so they were called the People of the Forest. Before long, that name spread quietly across the world, as did word of their exploits.

Royalty and nobility across the continent attempted to hire them for their services after hearing rumors of them, and no small number of them lost their lives for refusing. When those they healed pleaded with them to serve, even if they lied to save themselves and then ran away, they would shake their heads sadly, saying, "We can't allow history to repeat itself." Some of them were even tortured in hopes they'd give up the location of their hidden village, so their secrets would be open for plundering, but each of them bore their torture in silence, sometimes even with a smile.

When their lives were coming to an end, they would finally speak: “Those who harm our people will surely meet with retribution.”

And just as they predicted, those who raised a hand against the People of the Forest found themselves suffering from mysterious illnesses. Young or old, male or female, rich or poor. One family had their limbs rot and fall off, and another was overcome by oozing rashes that subjected them to terrible agony before killing them. The most mysterious thing about these diseases was that they didn’t spread. Those who bore the same family name would be entirely wiped out, while those who served and surrounded them would be entirely untouched.

The cause and cure for these illnesses were unknown. The only constant seemed to be that the women and children suffered somewhat less, while the men tended to suffer more before dying. At first it was thought to be a coincidence, but after two or three repetitions, it became clear it was somehow intentional. The retribution didn’t just come for the offender. Even babies too young to open their eyes were mercilessly cut down with them. Eventually this curse came for the royal family of a small nation, completely wiping out their lineage. At that point it became an unwritten rule that the People of the Forest were to be left alone.

Anyone with any sense of self-preservation would leave them alone. No one would risk their life to try and learn medical secrets, and once news spread of the curse set upon the royals, no one dared to test them again.

What was most terrifying of all was that the extinguished royal family had only been involved in bothering the People of the Forest behind the scenes, giving orders in secret.

The king began by giving orders to one of his nobles, who wouldn’t comply. He then moved on to find someone too powerless to refuse. In the end, it fell to a knight whose family was being held hostage.

Though knowing he was bound to fail, he desperately sought out and found one of the People of the Forest, asking for the location of the secret village. When this person refused to divulge any information, the knight begged them not to punish his family and,

before anyone could stop him, took his own life. Knowing that harming the People of the Forest would only mean his own death, he killed himself in hopes of sparing his family from the same fate.

The revenge curse seemed to skip over everyone in between, going directly for the royalty. At first it was no more than a numbness in the hands and feet. Then their extremities started to bleed and rot. They suspected poison, but no antidote had any effect. Next, they suspected disease, but no matter how they scoured the literature, they couldn't find anything that matched the symptoms they were suffering.

Slowly but surely, the condition worsened. Then late one night, someone claiming to be from the People of the Forest appeared to the noble who had refused the first order.

"You're lucky you refused that first order. No more foolish kings for you. We wouldn't want to hurt people like this again."

Shortly after, the noble in question gathered his allies and staged a coup d'état. The king was already unpopular for his failure to govern and had few allies as a result. When his transgression against the People of the Forest came to light, his own kingdom immediately rose up against him out of fear, toppling his entire dynasty without need for foreign intervention.

After that, people understood how dangerous it was to interfere with the People of the Forest, and so they were left to their own devices. Though many still longed for the secrets they kept, none were brave enough to risk their kingdoms over them.

Even today, the People of the Forest continued to live in their secret village, refining their skills and occasionally lending them out to the world around them as their whims dictated. Since they often appeared on battlefields to test their new techniques, they also came to be given nicknames like "the Jade Reapers" and "Angels of Salvation."

Geord's experience with them had also been on the battlefield. Having just begun his life as a mercenary, he got careless and took a wound to the stomach that left him all but unconscious. When he came back to his senses, he was shocked to find he was being

treated beside one of the soldiers he had been fighting against. Despite complaining about being put beside an enemy, he was told they were kept together for efficiency in treatment.

The man treating them wasn't allied with either of them, so of course he wouldn't care that they were enemies, and he had no mercy for patients who tried to fight.

"I just went through all the trouble of saving you, so don't throw your life away here. If you're going to fight, do it where I can't see." He then kicked them out, saying, "If you're well enough to fight, you don't need my help anymore."

Finding himself strangely persuaded, when he'd recovered, Geord volunteered to stay and help the man. A number of other doctors and apothecaries also gathered, forming something of a medical unit as they tried to absorb anything they could of the man's incredible skill.

But when the fighting died down, the man suddenly vanished. Geord was quite taken aback, as the man hadn't even left a letter to say he was going. One of the other doctors informed him that was just the kind of person he was. The People of the Forest hated being chained down more than anything.

Though flabbergasted, thinking back on the man's behavior, Geord could see that being the case. It was only after he left and made it back home that he realized he'd forgotten to actually thank the man for saving him. However, that man tended to show up wherever there was fighting, so if Geord was a bit lucky, they'd cross paths again someday. If that ever happened, he would properly thank him then and treat him to a drink. The years passed by before he knew it.

News came that a prince of their new ally had been gravely wounded in battle but saved by an apothecary from the People of the Forest. Not only that, but she had also married the prince, and the two had a daughter. Originally, that girl's half sister had been intended to become the king's new concubine, but the king had been advised he might as well pick someone with additional value. The king wasn't particularly interested in a new concubine anyway,

so if this information was accurate, he was all for it.

The kingdom she was from didn't seem to recognize her value, so if she was real, the king ordered that she was to be brought back at any cost. The rest of the nation's leadership had all agreed, hence Geord being sent in the first place, so it was clear to see how much they valued her potential. Geord thought it was all a pain in the neck, though.

It was true that the man who had saved Geord seemed to have a divine gift, but Geord had seen plenty of lives slip through his fingers too. He was just a man. He was no god, and he could perform no miracles. Geord had learned through surviving multiple battles that everything came down to individual luck. That man could nudge luck a little in the patient's favor, but that was it. When a person's number was up, they died all the same.

And even if this girl *was* the real deal, if she didn't want to go with him, she'd likely be sent back right away. Anything else was taking too great of a risk.

Wait, I'm not going to be held responsible if they do something stupid, am I? Give me a break...

Just as Geord realized that awful possibility, the door to the guest room swung open.

The sight waiting for him beyond that door took his breath away.

Long, platinum-blonde hair tied up in a partial braid and with a pink flower as a hair ornament, eyes the same deep green as the forest staring back at him—both were the same features he had seen in that man years ago.

But she's just a kid!

Her simple linen dress hung on a frame that was anything but mature. It was standard practice in this country for adult women making their debut in high society to wear a dress that covered them past their ankles and to tie their hair up. The girl's dress didn't quite reach her ankles, and only the upper half of her hair was tied up.

She might have had the characteristics of the People of the Forest, but she was evidently a child. Her fairylike beauty and cute face could draw a protective instinct out of anyone, but taking a

child like this as a concubine would do no more than stain the king's honor.

As if to block Geord from continuing to stare at the girl, an old man stepped forward with an elegant bow, introducing himself.

"A pleasure to meet you, sir. I am Lucion de Lindberg. My apologies, but due to my son being yet immobile, I have come as his representative. Please forgive me and my advanced age."

It was then Geord finally realized there were more people in the room than just this girl. Hurriedly correcting his posture, Geord returned the bow.

"My name is Geord Clark. Thank you for hearing out this unreasonable request."

Chapter 10: Judgment and the Future

"I never thought you were such a fool, Rosmaria." Sitting upright in bed, the man turned a cold glare on Rosmaria. "Do you realize how much what you've done has hurt me? Has hurt this nation?"

When Rosmaria learned that her father-in-law and that girl would be departing on a summons to another country, she wanted to burst out into dance. She had no idea what her servant had done, but at this rate that girl would be gone for good—most likely as a hostage to their neighbor. That meant her own daughter was safe. They'd go back to their regular life, and her husband would no doubt calm down and return to being the kind man he'd always been.

"Ah, thank goodness. I cannot thank you all enough," she said to her maids with a bright smile as she took a sip of her fragrant tea.

After a short knock on the door, a butler poked his head inside the room. "The master has called for you. He requests your presence in his room immediately."

The butler said this impassively, so Rosmaria thought little of it, raising her teacup with a small tilt of her head.

"I'm currently having my tea. I will head over as soon as I am finished."

Normally, that would be the end of it, but as much as the butler's expression remained unchanged, he did not bow and take his leave as he usually would.

"My sincerest apologies, but he has demanded your presence immediately. I will have to ask you to finish your tea later." The butler stayed in the doorway, staring at her. It was decidedly unpleasant.

Rosmaria honestly hated the man. He was always running about

outside the mansion doing some work or other for her husband, yet always full of complaints whenever he returned.

A butler that my husband loves but I hate. Perhaps I'll speak with my brother about it.

Though she cursed the butler inwardly, she forced herself up to her feet. He wouldn't have budged an inch until Rosmaria moved.

I wonder if my husband is in a better mood today. His gloominess persisted with that girl around. How fortunate that she's gone.

In any case, this would be their first time in ages having alone time together. Rosmaria convinced herself this was a good thing. The butler's behavior irritated her, but her husband wanting her so urgently was actually a cause for celebration.

"Is my hair in order? Nothing is off?"

After checking her appearance with her maids and taking one last sip of tea, Rosmaria slowly followed the butler out of the room.

"Whatever do you mean, dear? Have I done something wrong?" Rosmaria's bubbly attitude immediately froze under her husband's icy glare. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes.

As she stared moist-eyed at Deenoark, he could only sigh at her pleading expression. How long ago was it that her tears had stopped stirring his heart? He must have really been pushing himself since for quite some time.

"You're the one who told our new allies about Misha, aren't you?"

"I have no idea what you mean." Rosmaria shook her head. She genuinely had no idea what he was talking about.

"Then I don't suppose you know this man?" With a flick of his hand, his knights dragged a man into the room under restraint.

Rosmaria's eyes widened. "Yes, he is one of my bodyguards. Why is he tied up like that?! Let him go immediately!" The servant that had always stood in her shadow, always protected her from everything, stood with his hands bound behind his back. One of his cheeks was swollen, and a trail of blood dripped down from what must have been a split lip.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen him in days. Shock and anger took hold of Rosmaria. Why was he here, and in

such terrible condition?

"It seems he talked to a foreign envoy about Misha for you. That's what made our new ally demand we hand Misha over to him."

"Oh my!" Rosmaria exclaimed reflexively, unable to keep the joy from her voice. That meant Lyla was actually going to be spared that horrible fate.

But her expression of joy only seemed to worsen Deenoark's mood. "I know you're a fool, but do you really not understand what this means?"

"Understand what? If our ally wishes for that girl, we can avoid a great misfortune, can we not? Lyla no longer has to suffer in such an unfamiliar environment. Is this not cause for celebration?" Rosmaria replied, indignant at the obvious scorn from her husband. And as the words came out, she felt it really was a wonderful thing that had happened.

And he doesn't understand that such a simple development is a good thing? Perhaps the fever has robbed him of his senses, after all.

But Deenoark's next words drained all the color from her face.

"True enough. I guess now we'll have no choice but to send Lyla to a convent."

"What on earth for?!" Rosmaria all but screamed, drawing a cold smile out of her husband.

"Even if she did so unintentionally, she killed someone. That would be the normal procedure, no?"

"But... She..." Rosmaria faltered, finding great difficulty thinking of how to respond. "But...when *I* hurt that woman..." When she finally managed to squeeze something out, it was something she never would have admitted before.

Even so, Deenoark's cold smile only widened, his voice turning soft and gentle as he described a past Rosmaria knew nothing about.

"Because back then, Ley protected you. She was worried about you and the child you were about to give birth to. I was planning on divorcing you anyway, but then your father came and begged me to keep you. He said you were only temporarily out of your mind

because of the pregnancy. That you were like a wild animal, so desperate to protect your child that you saw everyone around you as an enemy. He begged me to forgive you just that once to save face."

"My father said that...?"

"Oh, so you don't care about what Ley did for you? Well, no mind. As you know, my brother and I owe a great debt to your father. When my brother also begged me to keep you, I gave in." Deenoark's eyes turned distant as he recalled the events.

Although Rosmaria's father was a great minister, he was far too soft on his youngest daughter, who had been born so late. If it weren't for that one failing, he would have been an incredibly respectable man.

"I regret staying with you," Deenoark continued. "If I had left you like I had intended, I wouldn't hate you nearly as much as I do now, nor would I hate myself. Ley would still be here. She wouldn't have left her daughter behind..."

Rosmaria's eyes slowly widened at her husband's muttering, words that denied all the years they had spent together.

"Dear...please..." Rosmaria found difficulty stringing her words together. The rapid-fire developments left her feeling like her head was going to explode. She wondered if passing out here would improve her situation, but her husband's cold glare kept her alert.

"Even if we didn't send Lyla to a convent, there are no nobles who would take her as a wife with this known about her. Don't you think a life of her being indebted to her younger brother having to take care of her would be a worse fate?"

"What do you mean? She is the daughter of a duke! Anyone would be happy to..."

"Even if unintentional, she still *killed* a woman. On top of that, her mother was so spiteful that she severely injured one of her husband's concubines and drove her out of the house. No matter how good her lineage, only the strangest and the most desperate would take a girl like that. Do you think a proud girl like Lyla would accept that kind of a marriage? If she has a brain in that head of hers at all, the moment she learns we won't send her away, she should be asking to be sent to a convent herself."

Rosmaria's face had turned white as a sheet as she sank to the floor. She had lost all strength in her legs. What took her by surprise most was the lack of any maids behind her to help her to her feet. Thinking it strange, she turned around. The maids who were always only a step behind her were nowhere to be seen now.

Deenoark sneered at her confusion. "I've had your wonderful maids arrested as well. Once we investigated them, we uncovered a great number of suspicious expenditures. They are being questioned in another room."

Rosmaria's support was gone; she could only tremble silently on her own. As she sat hopelessly forlorn, her husband drove the final nail into the coffin.

"So, I have one last decision for you to make—are you going to the convent with Lyla? Or would you like to return to your family? Or perhaps you'll run away on your own? Which would you prefer?"

She had no words to respond to her husband's icy smirk.

Misha stared absentmindedly out of the window of the carriage. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky, making it a perfect day for drying out herbs. She smiled in spite of herself at how reflexive a thought that was.

She was now heading away from the kingdom where she was born. They had prepared a six-horse carriage to take her there, meaning it must have been expected to be a long journey. The carriage itself was full of soft cushions, leaving her fully comfortable despite all the shaking. She would even be able to sleep comfortably on the road if she had to.

What a week...

Toying with her hair, tied up to the side to keep it out of her way if she were to lean on the seat beside her, she thought back over everything that had happened.

Summoned to the castle, she met a young man there with a stern face and a long scar running down his cheek. Introducing himself to her grandfather as a close associate of the king of this foreign country, he immediately took a knee before Misha. The way he knelt, right hand to his chest and left behind his back, was the greatest

form of respect shown by a knight, prompting a wide-eyed look from her grandfather.

Misha had no idea it was such a grand gesture, but she took a step backward at the sight. A grown man getting down on one knee and bowing his head to her flustered her a bit.

"Your people were responsible for saving my life. I failed to give you my thanks back then, so please allow me to do so now."

The man's words only left Misha more confused. "Umm... I, uhh, I don't know anything about those people. I've always been in this country. Only my mom knew about them. I'm probably not the person you're looking for."

Geord finally raised his head with a soft smile. "Sorry. That was a bit of selfishness on my part. I forgot to thank the guy who actually helped me, and I've always regretted it. Seeing someone related to him, even if only distantly, made me lose myself. Please forgive me."



"Oh...okay, but...I *really* don't know anything about where my mom came from. She didn't tell me anything about it." Misha nodded at the man's apology, but she needed to make sure he understood that she didn't know anything about the People of the Forest.

Geord tilted his head slightly. "But your hair and eyes are exactly like his. In fact, I've never seen anything like it outside of your people."

Misha grabbed a length of her hair and pulled it up where she could see. It was a pale gold, and as he said, it was pretty rare in this kingdom, but there were plenty of people with a deeper shade of blond hair in Bluheitz, and plenty with green eyes too. Granted, besides her mother, the only other person she'd met from the People of the Forest was her uncle, who had the same hair and eyes that she and her mother were born with. Still, she'd always assumed that was because they were related.

"It is said to be a characteristic of the People of the Forest. Platinum-blond hair and jade-green eyes. Every one of your people has been observed to share these characteristics—not that we know why."

So, everyone in the tribe has the same color hair and eyes? I guess they're passed down from parent to child?

Misha had been taught that people or animals that lived in small, confined groups started displaying the same characteristics. They'd also start changing to better suit their environment.

I know hair gets lighter when you live in a colder climate, right? So, what about eyes? Do people living in places where the sunlight is weaker have lighter eyes to better take in illumination? Misha stopped despite herself to consider what implications that had for the place where the People of the Forest called home, earning an amused smile from Geord.

As young as she looked, her eyes shone with a bright intelligence. He felt like thinking of her as just some little kid would be unwise.

"If you say you are not of the People of the Forest, that is fine. Even so, we would like to invite you to our kingdom. If the idea of becoming a concubine displeases you, perhaps the thought of studying with us would be more attractive? We have deep

connections with a number of nations. The royal library is also a vast storehouse for all kinds of knowledge. Would that be of interest to you?"

The unexpected offer immediately pulled at Misha's heart. "I...don't have to be a concubine?" she murmured, to which Geord smiled and nodded.

"Just between us, my king is not particularly interested in his concubines. But his advisors are so desperate to have him produce an heir that they are constantly forcing new women on him. He is more than ten years your senior anyway, so there is no need to force you to take his hand."

Ignoring the image of the king in the back of his mind telling him off for speaking ill of his ruler, Geord then turned to the former duke, who had been staring at him suspiciously all this time.

"I have been granted full authority from the king in this matter. I can guarantee you that Misha will be met with no disadvantage. I swear on my name as the Black Lightning."

"*You* are the Black Lightning?" Lucion's eyes widened again as he looked Geord up and down.

A soldier clad in black armor with a pitch-black spear, the right hand of the king that danced freely across the battlefield—Geord was that very knight. Despite being born to a family of low standing, Geord had earned a position at the king's side. Even in his kingdom, which had long been at peace, his exploits had earned him great fame.

Geord gave a small nod, inwardly wanting to stick out his tongue at the way the man's gaze instantly changed. To him it was just an embarrassing nickname, but it came in handy in times like this.

I guess you need to be able to put on a strong face when it comes to negotiations.

His mission was to bring the daughter of the People of the Forest back to his country. As long as he accomplished that, he didn't expect fudging the details of the arrangement would be an issue. In any case, if she really was one of the People of the Forest, forcing her to come against her will would be a terrible move. Geord was well aware of that.

He could tell the old man was weighing Geord's words, trying to determine how much he could trust him. However, Geord knew the current duke's family was getting quite crowded. They wouldn't want to keep one of their precious daughters held back forever. Relinquishing her to Geord would mean she'd have him as her own personal protector and grant her the protection of a large nation on top of that.

Additionally, if she was treated as a traveling student as opposed to permanently becoming a concubine, her family could bring her home if there were ever any concerns.

If that doesn't do it, I'm doomed.

He could tell that Misha found the idea intriguing. As he had hoped, appealing to her hunger for knowledge had been the right choice. Geord only had to wait patiently for the old gentleman to reach his own conclusion.

After speaking to the king of Bluheitz, the adults finally concluded that Misha would live in the kingdom of their new ally. Specifically, she would be treated as a guest, not as a concubine. Apparently, the Bluheitz nobility were the ones to suggest the sending of a concubine in the first place, so there wasn't much pushback from the other side on the arrangement being altered.

However, she was still acting as a member of the duke's family, and so there was a sudden explosion of activity over arranging her wardrobe and belongings to be sent. Having never worn anything except what her mother had sewn for her, Misha found the whole experience of being measured and trying on outfit after outfit a dizzying affair. Since she was to go back with Geord, speed was of the essence.

The kingdom refused to send her without at least one evening dress and day dress that were custom made for her, so the desperate fervor of the seamstresses overwhelmed Misha.

"Why don't they just adjust something that's already been made?"

"It would reflect poorly on the duke's house, on his pride," explained the old maid that had become something like Misha's

attendant. “Of course, there is no time to prepare a proper wardrobe for you, so they will be doing that for a number of your outfits anyway. Still, I suppose they wanted you to have at least one personalized piece for each.”

“What do my clothes have to do with his house?” Misha murmured to herself, causing a burst of laughter to come from the doorway. “Mr. Geord!”

“Sorry. I just happened to overhear.” Still chuckling, Geord casually stepped into the room. For some reason or other, after their first meeting, Geord had gone to meet with Deenoark. Once they formally became acquaintances, Geord had ended up staying at the duke’s mansion.

With nothing but time on his hands, he spent his days there training with the duke’s knights and taking Misha on sightseeing excursions around the area. As much as Misha was effectively just being dragged along, she had to admit she really enjoyed getting to see the city. The meat skewers and fried doughnuts sold by the city street stalls were quite unlike anything she’d eaten at home. Though this was supposed to be her own country, her eyes still sparkled as every street corner held a new discovery, leading to a lot of Geord laughing and indulging her.

“The cities on the way to the capital are also pretty different. I think you’ll enjoy them too. Let’s take our time studying them on our way back.”

Though a bit embarrassed to be treated like a little child, she couldn’t help but look forward to their journey. After spending her whole life growing up in the forest, even just watching the people walking by on the street was fun for her. Imagining the things she’d see in a whole other country sent butterflies excitedly whirling inside of her.

Of course, she was still worried about leaving her father behind, but now that he was finally able to stand with some assistance, he had happily urged her to go.

“You’re not getting married or anything, so learn lots before you return. I’ll do my best while you’re away.”

Misha nodded, giving him a big hug. His arms around her felt so

much stronger now than the day she had been crying over her mother.

And so, they set off. Despite traveling for a mere day, Misha was already starting to feel disheartened. She wondered if it was because she was getting farther away from the forest she used to call home. In the end, with all the preparations, she hadn't been able to visit home.

For now, I guess you'll just have to come with me, mom.

She put a hand to her chest, where under her clothes hung a bag that had become a bit of a good luck charm. It held both the lock of her mother's hair and the strange needles and tube that her mother used. She had wanted to take them back to the forest, but now they served as a reminder of her mother.

Turning to the window again, she looked up at the endless blue sky above. That sky still connected her to her home in the forest, and even to her mother's distant homeland. That thought helped ease the loneliness a little.

"I'll be back," she whispered, the wind carrying her words up into that great blue sky.

Book 2: Travel

Chapter 1: The Pickpocket and the Sickly Old Woman

The world was roughly divided into three continents: the southern continent of Iris, the eastern continent of Sullivan, and the western continent of Carmine.

Of the three, Carmine boasted the largest land mass and was divided into multiple nations that warred for domination. The nation where Misha lived, the kingdom of Bluheitz, was one such country. It was a moderately sized kingdom with a long history. Though war had once been typical for Bluheitz, for the past two hundred years it had settled peacefully under the reign of a string of more moderate monarchs, maintaining cordial relations with its neighbors through the tightrope of diplomacy.

However, after the latest succession, the neighboring Empire of Silva suddenly amassed a newfound strength and attacked. With Bluheitz's army weakened by longstanding peace, they were all but helpless in front of Silva's advance.

Shortly before their capital would fall, Bluheitz managed to forge an alliance with the greater Kingdom of Redford, narrowly avoiding destruction. It would no doubt cause no small trouble for them in the future, but the alliance allowed them to avoid being completely swallowed by a hostile power; it was clearly the better choice.

Redford also recognized that having Bluheitz survive between them and the ambitious Empire of Silva was safer for themselves, rather than allowing the empire to encroach on their own borders. So rather than absorbing Bluheitz, they left it to stand as an independent nation between them and the threat, minimizing the efforts they would need to spend on national defense. Even though there was some danger inherent in an alliance with Bluheitz, they decided it was far outweighed by the benefits.

On the surface, this alliance was enough to bring Redford's might behind Bluheitz's forces, prompting Silva to cool their aggression. It seemed they weren't willing to make an enemy of one of the largest nations on the continent quite yet. And with so much new territory in their hands, internal problems started to sprout all over Silva, forcing them to direct their efforts inward.

With all these developments, Bluheitz offered a princess of their own to be given as a concubine to the king of Redford in order to solidify ties between their nations. Rejecting the offer would have thrown a wrench into the early development of their relationship, so the king of Redford reluctantly agreed to take one, deciding he would just leave her with the rest of his concubines he paid little attention to—but then some interesting news happened to reach him.

There was a nation known as the Ourenge Alliance in the far north of Carmine. It was a number of tribes bound together in one country, having no monarch. Instead, it was ruled by representatives of each tribe coming together to run the nation. It was quite the odd system of government. Among them was the even more mysterious People of the Forest.

They were renowned as saviors of the battlefield, appearing and disappearing across conflict zones like phantoms with extraordinary medical knowledge and abilities. Many lives had been saved by their hands, and many nations had attempted to take control of them to no avail. It had become well-known that those who used force against the People of the Forest met with grisly fates of their own.

The Kingdom of Redford had not yet confirmed the background of this blonde-haired, green-eyed girl, nor had they finalized an agreement over a concubine from Bluheitz, and so they decided to bet on this girl being from that tribe. The king sent word a month ago that he wished for the girl for himself.

Fresh in the king's mind was the irritated expression of his close aide when instructed to verify the rumor and then bring her back if true. Now reading a letter sent ahead by that same aide, the king of Redford, Ryan Lou Redford, broke into a grin.

"Good news, Your Majesty?" asked Tris, another aide to the king,

prompting Ryan to hand over the letter.

"Geord was supposed to be picking up a concubine for me. Instead, he's coming back with a student. One with platinum-blonde hair and jade-green eyes."

"Oh?" Tris frowned as he scanned the letter. "There he goes, deciding things on his own again..."

The sour expression sent Ryan bursting into laughter. The ever serious civil official in Tris never seemed to see eye to eye with the mercenary raised to a military officer in Geord. They were almost always in conflict, though the relationship mostly consisted of Tris scolding Geord for some reason or other, Geord replying flippantly, and thus Tris getting even more angry.

As usual, Ryan tried to smooth over Tris's angry reaction. "Hard to say he made the wrong decision, though. If we forced her to come here as a concubine against her will, then I'd be in real danger if she's actually from the People of the Forest."

There were all kinds of fates one might meet for trying to bend the freedom-loving People of the Forest to one's own will, and none of them were anything Ryan was interested in experiencing for himself. There were even rumors that an entire kingdom had been destroyed as retribution once.

"Even so, she's still a little girl. It should be easy enough to coax her to our side," Tris murmured, his face still in a scowl.

Ryan shrugged. "In any case, I gave full authority in this matter to Geord. I'm sure he knows what he's doing." With that, the king turned his attention to the other documents on his desk waiting for him.

Tris gave a small sigh. To put it positively, the king was quite magnanimous. To put it negatively, he didn't take matters seriously enough. In any case, pursuing the issue further was meaningless.

I suppose I will have to meet the girl for myself and see if she is genuinely of the People of the Forest. If there is value in keeping her, we will still have time to act then. At least we will have her in our hands for now, Tris thought, but one last question rose to mind.

"So, when do we expect the young lady to arrive? We will need to begin preparing a room for her." If she was coming as a student,

they couldn't just throw her in with the other concubines as they had originally planned.

Ryan tilted his head. "Who knows? I certainly don't."

"What do you mean?" Tris replied, confused by the king's answer.

The shortest route between Redford and Bluheitz was a journey of seven days. Even if the girl wasn't used to traveling, they should have at least been able to make a reasonable estimate.

"Geord sent one more letter with that one."

As the king passed over another letter, Tris's scowl deepened further. "That idiot!" he growled, crumpling the paper in his hands. In the curt language Geord always used, the second letter indicated that Misha was enjoying the trip, so they'd be delayed by sightseeing on their journey back.

"Achoo!"

"Are you okay, Mr. Geord?"

After her chaperone found an inn for the night, Misha had decided she wanted to go take a look around the city before it got late. Geord, who was accompanying her, had just had a tremendous sneeze.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm sure it's just someone talking about me."

Geord smiled as Misha studied his face, but internally he was biting back grumbles. It was just about that time that the messenger should have made it back to Redford, so he could easily guess who was gossiping about him behind his back. He was sure one of them was laughing while the other looked about ready to commit murder.

Thinking of the expression that must have been on his straitlaced friend's face right now (knowing full well calling him a "friend" would have angered him further), Geord couldn't help but snicker. He honestly loved seeing Tris react to every tiny little thing. Seeing someone who was always so calm and composed lose it and start angrily yelling was quite entertaining.

I bet he'll be furious when I get back. Maybe I should start thinking of an excuse now.

"You look like you're having fun," Misha said, curious.

"Yeah, I was just thinking of picking up a present for a friend. What do you think I should buy?"

"What kind of person is he?" Misha replied, taking the question quite seriously.

The way she got excited over every little thing they saw and every bit of food they ate—the way she wore her happiness on her sleeve was adorable.

Enjoying the time he spent with her, Geord was going out of his way to take unnecessary breaks, stopping early for the day, and overall drawing their trip out quite a bit. On the other hand, he felt a distinct pain in his chest when he saw her struggling to hold back tears every time they passed by a parent and child in the street. It was easy to forget she was a child who'd lost her mother less than a month earlier.

As bright and cheerful as she acted, he knew she spent her nights quietly crying in bed. She tried to hide it, but the walls of their rooms at the inn were pretty thin. Greeting her cheerfully in the morning as if her eyes weren't still puffy from the night before was brutal work for someone with as blunt a touch as Geord, but he didn't let that discourage him. He realized he had taken quite a liking to this brave and honest girl.

Is this what it would be like to have a daughter? the twenty-six-year-old ex-mercenary thought as he watched her scrutinize the goods of a souvenir shop one by one.

"Stop right there, kid. You're going to give that back to her right now."

Fully invested in inspecting the wares before her, Misha was pulled out of her own thoughts by Geord's voice, prompting her to turn around. There she saw Geord, scowling as he gripped the arm of an eight-year-old boy.

"Shut up! I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go! I said let me go!"

Misha blinked in confusion as the boy struggled to break free from Geord's grip.

"Mr. Geord? What's wrong?"

"This kid stole your purse," Geord replied with a shrug.

Misha hurriedly felt around her pockets. "Oh...it's gone!" After confirming that her spending money was in fact gone, Misha, troubled, turned to the boy. "Uh...you took it? Can I have it back, please?"

"I didn't take anything, idiot!" The boy stuck his tongue out at her, earning himself a sharp rap on the head from Geord.

"You're not going to get anything from being nice to him. Come on, cough it up!" As the boy clutched his head in pain, Geord reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small purse. He tossed it to Misha, who caught it out of the air, a quick inspection revealing it was in fact hers.

"Thank goodness..." she murmured, clutching it tightly. It only had a little spending money in it, but the purse itself was very precious to her. She would have been crushed if she'd lost it.

Her mother had made this small, embroidered purse. The pattern, of green leaves and colorful flowers, was apparently a traditional wish for happiness for one's children passed down in her home. Misha held it tight to her chest, fighting back tears once again as she remembered how her mother had smiled when she gave it to her, claiming it was a good luck charm for her.

"Wh-What's your problem? You're both rich, aren't you?! What do you need that little bit of money for?" the boy started to shout, no longer fighting Geord now that the proof of his misdeed was on the table.

"Wow. No guilt at all. How should we deal with him, then? Should I just give him a thrashing, or how about I hand him over to the guards?" Geord sniggered, his eyes holding a vicious light. With how rough his face was, Geord could really look scary when he tried.

Though the boy's face went decidedly pale, he scrunched his mouth and stared back defiantly. The kid had guts—not that Geord wanted to express that out loud—but Geord still needed to think of how to deal with him. If he let the boy go just because ultimately no harm was done, he'd end up stealing from someone else.

What'll it take to make sure he never does it again?

The crowd around them had started watching the exchange.

Geord didn’t like being the center of attention like this. For someone who didn’t know what was happening, the situation must have resembled an adult bullying a child. Because of his refined clothes and the sword at his hip, no one in the crowd was willing to call him out, but the disapproving looks were starting to pour in.

Among the crowd, an elderly woman suddenly called out to them. “Excuse me! Did this boy do something wrong?”

She must have been drawn by the commotion. She was clearly out of breath and her complexion was awful. It seemed like she might collapse at any moment. Seeing how thin her arms were in her sleeves, Misha couldn’t help but frown.

“Granny! Don’t run like that!” The boy tried to run over to support the faltering woman, but Geord held him tight.

“Is this your grandson?” Ignoring the boy’s vain attempts to escape, Geord turned his attention to the woman. Though cowed briefly by Geord’s harsh gaze, she quickly straightened up and nodded.

“Yes. This is my grandson, sir knight. Has he done something to offend you?” Despite the dozens of onlookers, she showed no signs of timidity. There even seemed to be an air of elegance to her. Closer inspection revealed that while her clothes were quite old, the fabric was of a high quality.

A fallen noble, then?

Despite being two heads shorter than him, she looked straight back at him, not averting her gaze. Those were the eyes of someone with a strong sense of justice. Satisfied with his inspection, Geord finally let the boy go. A woman like this would have no problem getting her grandson back on the straight and narrow.

“He tried to steal my charge’s purse, so I was just about to scold him. He wasn’t very good at it, so I bet he’s never done this before. I didn’t intend to report him to the guards, but...”

His words were as much for the audience as for the old woman. He had noticed that ever since she had stepped forward, the crowd’s hostility had been churning more and more. As much as they were just passing through this town, he still didn’t need a reputation for bullying children.

“What?!” The old woman’s face immediately darkened. When she turned to ask her grandson if Geord’s claim was true, the boy looked away guiltily. It was all but an admission. Pushing the boy’s head down, the woman also dropped to her knees and bowed.

“This boy has lost his parents, so I have been tasked with raising him. It is my failing that led him to feel we are too poor to satisfy him, but he should still know right from wrong. It is my fault for raising a boy that would willingly attempt to steal another’s belongings. If you wish to find fault, I will take full responsibility.”

As the sickly woman dropped to her knees, Geord hurriedly reached out and tried to pull her up. The boy, misunderstanding the gesture, immediately jumped in front of his grandmother.

“Don’t touch her! I’m the one who did it! You can punish me!”

Geord stared back at the glaring boy for a bit before sighing. “Fine.”

Although he’d volunteered for the punishment, the boy’s face clearly paled at the thought of what Geord was planning to do. Still, as scared as he was, he didn’t budge. He knew if he ran, the punishment would land on his grandmother instead. That was the one thing he wanted to avoid most of all.

“Please, wait—”

Just as the old woman tried to pull her grandson back, a loud thump resounded from the top of his head as Geord’s fist struck. The crowd, which had been watching with silent, rapt attention seemed to collectively hold their breath as the boy wordlessly dropped to his knees, clutching his head.

“Wow, that looked painful...” Misha murmured, having trouble keeping up with the situation despite being very much involved in it.

It sure did; the frowns from the crowd of onlookers seemed to indicate they agreed with her assessment.

“That’s about as much punishment as a kid’s prank deserves,” Geord said with a snort, lifting the stooping boy back to his feet and spinning him to face his grandmother, who was still sitting on her knees. “If you do bad things, the responsibility falls back on your grandmother. Got it? Burn this sight into your memory!”

The boy, still teary-eyed from the pain, stared at his grandmother.

Someone precious to him was kneeling in the dirt because of what he had done. The sight was like a chain around his heart.

"But... But..." Tears started to fall from the boy's eyes.

His grandmother had fallen ill last spring; ever since then, she'd been unable to do little more than wake up and go to sleep. They had no money to afford a doctor, and they couldn't get any medicine to help her condition improve. At this rate, he was just sitting around waiting for her to die. The thought of losing his last living family had forced him to turn to thievery—but just a little bit.

He would just take a small amount from someone who looked rich. All they'd lose would be a bit of spending money. It wouldn't be such a big deal. As he tried to convince himself of that, he'd seen a girl just a few years older than him prancing around the city happily. Her hair was long and tidy, her fingers clean and soft. Though her clothes weren't that fancy, the boy could tell they were quite well-made.

"I can't let granny die... I just need enough for a doctor...for some medicine..."

No matter the excuse, a crime was a crime. There was no denying that, but once they heard the boy's motivation, it was hard to stay angry at him.

Attention was finally drawn away from the boy as his grandmother got back to her feet. While the boy stood crying, she raised a frail arm and slapped him.

"What value is there in living any longer if it's on the back of stealing?! If you were going to commit a crime, why not just kill me?!"

Despite her sickly demeanor, the woman's words rang with a dignity that overwhelmed the crowd. Even the boy stood stunned, not even wiping the tears from his face. Everything seemed frozen in time...until Misha moved.

Using a handkerchief to wipe the tears from the boy's face, she turned and took the old woman's hand.

"For now, let's go somewhere else. You don't look so good. Let's find a place for you to sit down...okay?"

Chapter 2: The Old Woman's Checkup and Hints of Misdeeds

Once all the excitement was over, the already ailing woman looked even worse. After Misha insisted she find a place to lie down, the old woman somewhat abashedly led them to a small, worn-out residence on the edge of the town. Muttering about having no one to take care of the place as they slipped through the broken front gate, she led them to a building that looked every bit like a haunted house.

The path leading up to the front door had likely been beautiful once, but with no one to maintain it, the plants lining it had taken over. The weeds left barely enough space for a person to walk. The mansion itself was similarly unkempt, walls dark with grime and roof faded. Thick curtains covered every window, giving the whole building a rather gloomy atmosphere. And though the mansion was quite large, there was no sign of anyone else around.

"You two live here alone?" Misha asked casually, getting a small nod from the boy walking quietly at her side.

"But when mom and dad were around, there were a lot more people living here." The boy's determined spirit from his confrontation with Geord was nowhere to be seen, his replies short and quiet. It seemed his grandmother's scolding had hit home.

Rusty hinges squealed unhappily as they opened to let the group into the main building, which was dark and dusty despite it being early in the evening.

She lives in a place like this? In her condition?

As much as she wanted to scowl, Misha made sure to keep her face passive. When she was led deeper into the living room, she almost gave a sigh of relief to see the old but clean and well-preserved furniture there. A mansion this size was far too much for a

sickly old woman and a little boy to clean by themselves, so they must have only been taking care of the parts they used for daily life.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Marianne Karloff. This is my grandson, Kent. My sincerest apologies for what happened earlier."

As Misha and Geord took a seat on the sofa offered to them, the old woman sat down opposite them, bowing her head deeply as she introduced herself. Kent sat beside her, meekly tilting his head down.

"Please, that's enough! You already apologized!" Misha insisted almost on reflex. She hadn't followed them all the way home so they could apologize more. "Umm, actually, I happen to be an apothecary. If you don't mind, could I take a look at you, Miss Marianne?"

Marianne and Kent exchanged a glance, both concerned. The girl sitting in front of them was clearly a child, yet she claimed to be an apothecary? Even if she was a student, the man with her looked like anything but her teacher.

She must have been the daughter of some affluent family, and the man was her bodyguard. That was the assumption Kent had made when he tried to pickpocket her. He had targeted someone who looked rich and spoiled because he figured if he got caught, a few tears would be all it would take to earn forgiveness.

"I appreciate the offer," the old woman replied slowly, "but I am afraid we have no way to possibly pay you for such a service."

Misha quickly shook her head and started waving her hands, cutting off Marianne's refusal. "Please, you don't need to give me anything! It's more, like...for my own satisfaction. We only met by chance, but after seeing that you're sick, I feel I may be able to help, so..."

A young boy and his grandmother. Although Kent's methods had been wrong, they'd clearly shown how much he treasured her. Having just lost her own mother, the whole situation pulled strongly on Misha's heart. She couldn't bring herself to be angry with him. When her mother fell to her death, Misha would have made a deal with any devil if it would have meant saving her.

Marianne noticed Misha fall silent, on the verge of tears. "In that

case, may I ask for your help?" she asked.

At that, Misha's face lit up, awash with relief. Leaving Marianne on her chair, Misha got up and took her pulse. She then checked her eyes and ears, peeked down her throat, and listened to her heartbeat and the sound of her lungs. After a few questions, she began a physical examination using her hands.

The reserved little girl had vanished, replaced by a confident and assertive apothecary. The other three in the room watched the whole thing with no small amount of incredulity.

"Your lungs don't sound right. Your digestive tract seems to be fairly weak as well. That explains your lack of appetite—the constant fever too. But you don't have a cough, and there's no inflammation in the throat. The symptoms don't line up with something like a cold," Misha explained out loud, as much to help herself think as to share what she had found with Marianne. Her gaze grew distant as she delved deep into the well of her knowledge.

Geord watched it all happen from a short distance away. It was his first time seeing her work as an apothecary, so he watched with interest. Despite Duke Deenoark clearly having tried to hide it, casual conversation around the mansion had made it quite clear that Misha was very good at what she did. That the mansion had been overflowing with wounded upon Geord's arrival had made him wonder just how hard they were trying to hide her skills in the first place.

Either way, it seemed the gag orders hadn't made their rounds yet, as a couple questions to the families of the wounded had been all it took for Geord to learn about her.

"Miss Misha saved my husband," one said.

"She noticed the pain in my back immediately," another said.

Everyone excitedly shared their stories of her. Their eyes shone with an almost religious adoration for the little healer.

He'd brought it up with Misha shortly after they began traveling together, and though she'd seemed quite hesitant to share, she'd eventually confessed that her mother had been an apothecary who'd been teaching her.

Actually, she had tried to lie about it at first, but when Geord had

crossed his arms and insisted that someone with no experience likely wouldn't be allowed to look at medical texts from the library, she immediately fessed up.

"Actually, my mother recognized me as a full-fledged apothecary. When we were at my father's mansion, I was in charge of taking care of the wounded. I'll definitely be able to understand those books!" Her entire reason for agreeing to go to Redford was access to that library. There was no point in hiding who she was if it meant her losing that.

It had taken everything Geord had not to laugh when her pleading eyes rested on him.

Come on, that was way too easy. Is this girl going to be okay?

But of course, adult that he was, Geord kept his true feelings carefully concealed as he nodded deeply.

"Ah, in that case, you should be okay. I might even be able to get some of the confidential books released for you to look at."

"Really?! That's amazing!" As Misha threw her hands up in the air in celebration, Geord finally surpassed his limit and burst out laughing.

The difference between the Misha back then and the Misha working in front of him now was like night and day.

Forget apothecary, she's more like a doctor. What kind of upbringing makes a girl like this?

He then turned a look to Kent, sitting by restlessly as he watched Misha work. His distrust from before had vanished, overcome entirely by concern for his grandmother. Although it seemed like he was dying to interject, he held his tongue, watching Misha work with a desperate hope in his eyes. Geord couldn't help but be impressed by that silent trust in the little apothecary. In the boy's eyes, the small, unreliable-looking girl had almost instantly transformed into a dependable apothecary who could be trusted with his grandmother's life.

"Would you mind if I took a look at your skin as well? Obviously not here. We should probably go to your bedroom."

Marianne didn't so much as hesitate. "This way."

Following Marianne out of the room, Misha walked to the master

bedroom deep into the mansion's second floor. As Geord attempted to follow her inside, Misha pushed him back with a stern look.

"I'm examining a woman here. Please stay outside."

She then slammed the door, prompting a sigh from Geord, mostly aimed at himself for being so enthralled by Misha's work that common sense had slipped his mind.

Meanwhile, a young boy started laughing at his side. "Pretty sad for a grown-up. Looks like Misha bosses you around too."

"Is that any way to talk to an adult?" Geord replied, ruffling the boy's hair rather violently. Kent complained angrily at the scolding, and after finally escaping Geord's clutches, he started to mutter.

"Who is Misha anyway? When I saw her in town, I thought she was just some rich girl. Is granny going to be okay?" he asked, his voice growing quieter.

Geord reached for the kid's head again, this time gently smoothing over Kent's now wildly disarrayed hair. "I don't know what's going on with your grandma, but I can tell you Misha is really good at what she does. I guarantee it."

Kent nodded. "Okay."

The door then swung open, Misha popping her head out. "You can come in now."

Stepping inside, they found Marianne sitting in front of a large glass door leading out onto a balcony. Her clothes were already fully back in order, and her expression seemed somehow brighter than before.

"Your grandmother is doing just fine. After looking at her skin, I stimulated some acupuncture points for her. She should take it easy today, resting and drinking a lot of water. If she gets hungry, she can eat normally. The only request I have is that you let her sleep in bed with you tonight, Kent. Don't worry, her condition isn't contagious," Misha explained politely as Kent ran to his grandmother's side. "My herbs are all back at the inn, so I'll make up some medicine for her and bring it back later. Please lie down until then. Kent, make sure she doesn't push herself."

"Got it," Kent nodded, before asking one question. "But what's wrong with staying in this room?"

Misha gave a soft smile. “There’s something bad in the air here. I’ll bring something to clean it out along with the medicine, so until then, no coming in here, okay? Now, let’s go downstairs.”

At Misha’s urging, Kent and Marianne dutifully did as instructed. Geord, bringing up the rear, followed them all out, an oddity in what Misha said pricking at his mind.

It’s not contagious...but it’s in the air of this room? But considering how Misha had smiled when she said it, he was sure she wouldn’t say anything while they were still in the mansion. He also couldn’t help but be curious about the object wrapped in cloth Misha carried out of the room with her.

“Mr. Geord, I have a request.” After seeing Marianne to her bed, Misha and Geord immediately headed back to their inn. Once the haunted house was out of sight, she quietly gave Geord a list of things that she wanted investigated. “I can get back to the inn by myself. Can you look into these while I’m working on the medicine?”

“Got it.” In all honesty he was full of questions, but once he saw the smile evaporate from Misha’s face, he kept them to himself. “I’ll need to go back to the inn with you, though. To do that kind of investigating, I should get more people.” The one thing he wouldn’t budge on was letting her walk around town by herself.

“Also, if it’s possible, could you send someone to protect Miss Marianne?”

“Okay,” Geord responded after a brief pause. Together with the things she had asked him to investigate, the situation was starting to sound awfully suspicious. As much as he wanted to sigh, excitement gnawed at him at the same time.

And so he began racking his brain, trying to figure out how he’d fulfill this little girl’s requests. He didn’t even notice how strangely natural it felt to be doing what she asked.

Chapter 3: The Desire to Save Others

Returning to the inn, Misha set about dividing up the herbs and making the medicine she needed while sinking deep into thought.

Marianne's checkup had left her with a strong sense of unease. When Misha asked about how the illness had started, she got the answers she more or less expected. Everything pointed to bronchitis, but Misha's intuition told her something was amiss.

Wondering if there might have been some symptoms even the patient wasn't aware of, she decided to ask if she could inspect her skin a bit more closely. If Marianne had refused, Misha would have had to leave it at that. A grown woman couldn't have been happy about showing off her body to anyone other than her own husband.

Misha was elated when Marianne agreed to the examination so readily. Partly because it showed how much the old woman trusted her despite having just met her, but more because she was excited at the prospect of solving the mystery of her condition.

Her excitement cooled when she stepped into the bedroom. She immediately picked up a faint scent of something wrong. Despite being hidden behind the scent of flowers, the smell immediately triggered warnings of extreme danger in her head.

Misha immediately stepped past Marianne and threw open the glass door leading to the balcony. She then went around the room, throwing all of the windows open. Once the wind had swept through the room, she finally heaved a deep sigh.

"Umm... Miss Misha?" Marianne said, taken aback by Misha's sudden flurry of movement.

That brought the girl back to her senses, quietly chiding herself. She had reflexively dropped everything to get the air circulating in the room. She could see her mother in the back of her mind,

scolding her for worrying her patient.

"Oh, sorry. I just thought it was a bit stale in here. I know it's a bit cold out, but do you mind?" Trying to sound as lighthearted as possible, Misha moved a small table and set of chairs over to the windows, urging Marianne to sit.

Without a word, Marianne did as she was told, but it was quite clear she had seen through Misha's acting. After dropping her head and sighing deeply, she looked up again straight at Misha.

"There is something wrong in this room?" It was less a question, and more a request for confirmation.

Though hesitating at Marianne's hard gaze, Misha quickly steeled herself. This was Marianne's house, and she was the patient. And if Misha's guess was right, this situation was far more serious than some passing girl could hope to solve on her own.

"My nose is pretty sensitive, partly thanks to my training as an apothecary, but my mother said I was also just born with it. Apparently, my sense of smell is many times stronger than an ordinary person's."

Marianne listened quietly to Misha's explanation.

"The moment I stepped into this room, I smelled a number of things: a floral fragrance, laundry detergent, but among them, something that definitely doesn't belong—the smell of a very rare mineral. It's actually a kind of semiprecious stone, but if you powder it and remove the impurities, it can become quite toxic. The primary symptoms are fatigue, shortness of breath, nausea, and mild fever."

Marianne's face paled as Misha listed the symptoms, each one sounding more than familiar.

"If the poison is administered slowly to a person over time, someone unfamiliar would see it as a gradual decline in health until they finally passed away."

Trembling at Misha's words, Marianne loosened her clothes to allow Misha to look at her back.

Misha bit her lip. On the pale skin of her back were numerous faint, small purple marks like bruises. Though she had only heard of them in theory, Misha recognized what they were immediately.

"The bruises are still quite faint. If I make an antidote for you,

you should be fine."

"Oh heavens..." Marianne murmured, covering her face with her hands as she trembled. Misha quietly helped the old woman get dressed before stepping back.

"My son and his wife died from the same illness," Marianne said. "They grew sick at the end of autumn, then slowly weakened more and more. No medicine seemed to help. The doctors were entirely perplexed. Rumors spread that this mansion was cursed, and so people started to leave. Unable to maintain the business we used to run, we had some friends take over for us..."

As Marianne quietly explained her situation, Misha stepped over to the fireplace in the room. The ashes were already white, no sign of any flame, but just to be sure, Misha covered her face with a handkerchief as she leaned in to inspect the interior.

"Found it."

Though hard to see through the soot, on the upper part of the fireplace just behind the lip that jutted out into the room, she saw a faint glimmer. But more than that, the smell she had picked up on as soon as she stepped into the room was much stronger here.

The powdered mineral had to have been applied here. By leaving the poison here, when the fireplace was lit to keep the room warm at night, it would vaporize the powder and fill the room with a toxic gas. That poison would slowly eat away at the body of the room's owner.

"How often have you been using this fireplace this winter?" Misha asked, face grim as she turned away from the hearth.

Marianne tilted her head slightly, thinking for a moment. "As embarrassing as it is, not often. We do not have the money to afford lighting fires all the time. When it gets really cold, we light the fire in the living room, and I sleep on the sofa with my grandson there."

Despite Marianne's shame in her reply, Misha breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good. If you *had* been lighting this fire every night, your health could've been beyond saving."

Marianne's face filled with terror. "Are you saying someone actually put poison in there? And my son and his wife fell prey to the same thing?"

Misha spoke slowly, still organizing the information in her head. "I can't say anything for sure about your son, as I didn't see him personally, but if they were using this room when they grew sick, it is a very real possibility. Still, there's one thing that doesn't quite add up yet." Misha inspected the incense burner placed above the fireplace, taking it in her hands. "How long ago did your son pass away?"

Marianne seemed a bit perplexed by the question, staring at the back of the girl who seemed strangely invested in her room's decorations. "It would be just about five years ago now. Why?"

"Have you been using this room for the last five years?" Misha asked, turning to look at her.

Marianne shook her head. "No. It was my son's room, after all. It held too many painful memories. But someone told me that as the head of this house, I had a responsibility to use it—to make sure it wasn't abandoned. Besides, this is the best room in the house. It has no drafts and is quite warm, plus that person was kind enough to clean up all the dust for me."

Marianne looked questioningly back at Misha, who replied with a shake of her own head, "It's nothing. I just thought your symptoms were awfully mild if you had used this room for so long. Only a few times this winter you said, right?" Misha gave her a bright grin as she walked back to Marianne's side. "Okay, I know what you need now. I'll head back to the inn and make some medicine for you. Besides that, do you mind if I borrow this incense burner? It looks perfect for making the medicine."

It was a large burner, holding a small candle at the bottom to heat a larger dish holding incense above it. If you changed the dish on top of the candle, it could certainly be used for boiling water.

"Of course not. I have used it a number of times since receiving it, but if you don't mind that, then please go ahead."

"Someone gave you this? It's not something with sentimental value, is it? Like any connections to your son?"

The exquisite engravings on the burner made it evidently intended as an ornamental piece in addition to its practical function. It seemed like a rather expensive piece, so Misha wanted to make

sure, but Marianne appeared wistful.

"No, it's fine. My son used to use one like this all the time, but the one he used was dropped and broken when the room was getting cleaned. This one was a gift, as an apology. But every time I light it, it reminds me of him..."

Deciding it was best to get to work right away, Misha took the incense burner, tasked Geord with a few requests, and then started making the medicine. But rather than using the incense burner for the purpose she had explained, she instead left it on the table beside her window. That was only natural; the medicine she was going to make didn't need to be heated at all.

She had taken the incense burner for the cruel trap she had found in it. The holder for the candle on the incense burner had a beautiful gleam to it. Her hands coming to a stop, she shot a dejected look at the incense burner.

She had no idea who had gifted this burner to Marianne. Maybe the mastermind was entirely different, using the person who had given it to her as part of a grander plan.

I sure hope so.

It was clear to her that Marianne trusted the person who had given it to her a great deal. She didn't want to discover someone Marianne liked so much wanted the old woman dead. She had already lost her precious family.

But Misha knew that malice struck in many ways. Turning ill intentions like that aside was no small feat.

Misha squeezed her eyes tight, trying to suppress the pain in her chest. Memories of her mother came to mind, the older apothecary limping a little but smiling as she enjoyed her trek through the forest. Her father followed her with a gentle look on his face. It was the greatest happiness Misha had ever witnessed, and one she'd never see again.

"I hope I can protect them."

The little boy and the old woman had no one else but each other. Shaking the thought from her head, Misha returned to working on the medicine.

Chapter 4: Hands That Save

After bringing Misha back to the inn and telling her she wasn't to step outside until he was back, Geord left to go take care of her requests. While he didn't like traveling with so many people as it slowed things down considerably, he had brought a number of soldiers with him to escort Misha back to Redford, so he had no shortage of hands for the task before him.

Being in a foreign country, they had limited access to information, but as they say, "set a thief to catch a thief." They'd figure it out somehow.

Picking a pair of his subordinates who were relatively smaller and didn't stand out quite so much, he sent them to guard the Karloff estate. With how overgrown the yard was, they'd have no issues finding a place to hide.

"This really turned out interesting, didn't it?" He never would have expected that catching a pickpocket in the market would lead all the way here.

Misha had asked him to do three things: to learn the reputation and current standing of the Karloff family; to discover who was meddling with the Karloff family and what their relationship to the Karloffs was; and lastly, to find out who was in charge of administering justice in this region.

When Geord asked why, Misha replied that Marianne's symptoms were all indicative of poisoning. The poison in question wasn't a naturally occurring one. It was, in fact, quite rare.

"Clearing the poison from her system is easy enough, but if we don't deal with the source, the same thing will happen all over again. I don't want that," she muttered, eyes downcast. There was something bitter in her voice as she vowed to stand in the way of whatever evil was aiming for the old woman's life.

Remembering that the same kind of irrational malice had taken Misha's mother from her put Geord in a gloomy state of mind too.

Setting his men to work on what Misha asked, Geord quickly learned it was a pretty standard takeover conspiracy at play. A mysterious illness took the lives of a wealthy merchant and his wife. At the same time, rumors about a curse started floating around. The rumors said that some of their staff began to grow sick, but once they left the Karloff residence, they immediately recovered. Word started to spread that the Karloff family must have wronged someone who had then put a curse on them. Unable to maintain their business under the suspicions of such a curse, the Karloff family handed the reins over to their friends and quickly collapsed.

The servants left, and before long, Marianne and Kent were the only ones left in their enormous mansion. Initially, it seemed like whatever ill intent had taken the lives of Marianne's son and daughter-in-law had been content. However, it soon bared its fangs at the remaining two in the mansion.

The original producers of the textiles from which the Karloff family's business had drawn most of its profits had risen in revolt against the merchants Marianne had left the business to.

The ornate fabrics were produced in what was originally a small village that Marianne's husband had happened across some decades ago. The land there was barren, so they couldn't raise good crops, and winter snows would trap them in their own village. With nothing else to do, they turned their hand to textiles. The Karloff family's large purchases saved the village from a sad history of starvation and strained resources. Otherwise, villagers might have sold their children into slavery.

The textiles they produced had taken some time to gain popularity, so many around the previous family head had criticized him for overpaying and driving his own business into the ground. He had just laughed at that, insisting it was an investment for the future, and he had continued supplying the villagers with all the money they needed.

More grateful than any amount of money could account for, the

villagers had borne with the heavy-handed nature of the new merchants out of respect for Marianne, who had apologized to them in person for the sudden and drastic change in circumstances.

But even if the villagers could stomach the merchants failing to pay the amount of money they'd agreed on, when the merchants' subordinates started getting rough with the young women of the village, the villagers snapped. Shutting the gates of the village, they refused to do business with anyone, saying they would only sell to those with Karloff blood. This had caused no small amount of panic among the merchants.

But of course, the merchants to whom Marianne had left the business couldn't just beg her for help—that would cut into their earnings. Instead, they decided to wipe out the family for good. If the villagers were unable to sell their merchandise, the village would suffer the most.

Anyone who stopped to think about it for a brief moment would realize that such a plan had no chance of working. The village had spent decades supplying clothing for the Karloffs, their work even used occasionally by the royals. They weren't the same destitute village they once were. Each family there had built up wealth of their own. On top of that, the Karloff family had sponsored a number of the village children for higher education, teaching them the know-how of the mercantile world. They already had all they needed to break into the business world on their own. Their continued support for the Karloff family hadn't been out of financial need, but out of gratitude to the Karloff family head of two generations ago. If anything were to happen to Marianne and Kent, they'd cut ties with the merchants entirely.

Of course, trying to explain feelings of duty and respect to someone who would hurt others just to save their profits was like telling a child that candy was bad for them. They'd snort a laugh at best, and it was in one ear, out the other.

After about two hours, Geord was back to give a rough explanation of the information Misha had asked for.

"So, it turns out the party who worked on the Karloffs' fireplace

was the same one who gifted Marianne that incense burner. They also have a connection to that suspicious merchant from the south, so that's probably where they got the poison. The incense burner that Marianne's son liked so much was a present from them as well. That must have been how they were poisoned."

The culprit was in fact the one who stood to benefit most from the collapse of the Karloff family, but not so much so that their fall seemed unnatural. Some did, in fact, look on the whole situation with some measure of suspicion, given the culprit's reputation for being a bit two-faced, but since the Karloff head and his wife had died from illness, there was nothing anyone could say.

"So he was an apprentice of the family head two generations ago..."

"When the Karloff family head retired, he offered them some support in setting up their own shop, though he didn't let them borrow the Karloff name. It seems they were on good terms with Marianne's son as well."

Misha's face clouded over. It seemed like Geord had unearthed the worst possible truth.

How do I tell Marianne about this?

A child she had looked after and taught since their teen years had grown up to kill Marianne's son and daughter-in-law—and had even made an attempt on the lives of herself and her grandson. How painful a revelation would that be for her?

As Misha frowned with a sigh, a heavy hand patted her on the head. "I can deliver the news if it'll be too rough for you."

As much as she would have loved to indulge in Geord's kindness, she shook her head. "She's my patient. I should tell her myself. I have to deliver her medicine anyway."

Geord knew she was acting much more confident than she felt, but he smiled nonetheless. "Then let's get going. That punk kid is probably sick of waiting for us."

At his urging, Misha bundled up the medicine that she'd made and got to her feet. They had collected all the information they needed. All that remained was to find out what the patient wanted to do.

Slow but determined footsteps carried Misha back down the road to the Karloff residence, Geord only a step behind her.

"Oh. So it was him."

When Misha returned with the incense burner and explained the situation, Marianne was not as flustered as Misha had feared she would be. Instead she sat in silence, eyes downcast. Her clasped hands in her lap trembled faintly.

She had loved that boy like her own son. Of course she didn't want to accept his betrayal as a reality.

Misha and Geord watched quietly as she processed the truth. After a great deal of time, Marianne finally lifted her head.

"I suppose I need to apologize to the people of the village. Even if he was skilled enough to do so, we wanted to help him, thinking it would be no easy task for him to break into a market dominated by sly and experienced merchants. It seems our aid to him wasn't warranted in the least. In fact, all our help did was lead to him hurting people. Well... No, it wasn't just about helping him. It would have been too sad for us to just cut ties with that village. Those fabrics were my husband's entire life. It looks like my stupid sentimentality has burdened everyone. I will have to go and relieve that village of its obligation to our family."

Though there were tears at the corners of her eyes, there was no sadness in her voice. Misha couldn't help but admire the old woman's strength. She could only hope she'd be that strong one day.

"That man has committed a crime. Are you just going to leave him be?" Geord asked, bringing a distant look to Marianne's eyes.

"As frustrating as it is, we don't have proof. We only have some traces of powder on the fireplace and the incense burner. It will be quite difficult to prove anything. All he has to do is say he knows nothing about it. He has enough influence to make that believable. In contrast, we are just a former merchant family on the edge of collapse. If we try to make a scene, it will be a mark against our honor at this point. It would only serve to put us in a bad light."

"No way..." Misha's breath caught, taken aback by the injustice

Marianne described. The people she loved had been killed, she herself had been targeted, and yet Marianne could do nothing but cry quietly alone. “Is there nothing we can do?” Overcome by a youthful righteous indignation, Misha turned pleading eyes on Geord.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of people shouting outside.

“Looks like something is happening.” Motioning for the others to stay where they were, Geord dashed over to the window.

By the time he peeked outside, everything was over. The two guards Geord had posted outside had restrained a group of five men.

“What happened?”

“We caught them trying to set fire to the mansion, sir. What shall we do with them?”

Common thieves would have no need to do something so extreme as committing arson. And it wasn’t dark yet—people rarely did such violent work when it was still light out, meaning their employer had felt quite rushed.

Geord turned a wicked smirk back on the room. “Great news, Misha. It seems our culprit has decided to give us all the proof we need.”

Misha and Marianne could only return his grin with puzzled looks.

The rest of the day passed like a hurricane. The attempted arsonists quickly confessed everything to save themselves. In no time at all, they traced everything back to the merchant they had suspected. Apparently, a representative of the village was coming to meet with Marianne personally, so the merchant had panicked and turned to more aggressive methods.

The village had sent letters to Marianne a number of times, but the mail carriers had been paid off to destroy the letters before they could arrive. However, it wasn’t so easy to stop someone from meeting with her directly. If the merchant’s guise as a “good person” were to come down, all his crimes would be laid bare. He had been desperate to stop that from happening.

Misha and Geord’s involvement had also been problematic. Despite traveling mostly in secret, Geord was a high-ranking official

from a foreign nation, and Misha was the daughter of Bluheitz's own duke and Redford's guest of honor. They weren't the kind of people who could be handled with a little money under the table.

Once the local lord got involved, the merchant's hidden crimes were revealed in no time. The merchant's attempt on Marianne's life was only the tip of the iceberg. In rapid succession, a whole string of arrests was carried out, but that was a different story. However, since Marianne had been instrumental in uncovering all the wrongdoing, the lord had set his own hand to clearing up the malicious rumors about the Karloff family, which was a nice bonus.

Among all the hubbub, the representative of the village arrived and was immediately brought to tears witnessing Marianne's situation. Not prone to emotional displays, the representative insisted that she should have relied on them if she was having difficulty. Marianne herself was quite bewildered by the whole thing.

Once things settled down to some degree, Misha was invited to the Karloff estate once again, where she was able to give Marianne another checkup. The mansion looked totally different from her last visit. The place was full of servants, and the building and the gardens were clean and beautiful. Misha could have sworn she was in the wrong place. The villagers had helped out with everything upon hearing Marianne was in distress, the elderly woman explained with a troubled laugh.

As they moved to the beautifully restored reception room for some tea, Marianne and Geord were called out by a city official to help wrap up the case. Left alone, the two children enjoyed some snacks together, a maid waiting in the wings dutifully replenishing anything they ran out of. She had worked for the Karloff family in the past, that connection leading to her marrying into the village. She had returned, bringing a number of other women from the village to take care of all the cleaning and laundry.

"It feels kind of weird for everyone to start calling me 'young master' all of a sudden," Kent said with a shrug. By the time he was old enough to understand what was going on around him, the mansion was basically empty. Having had to take care of himself for

so long, he was quite uneasy having others suddenly looking after his every need. Misha had felt very much the same way on her visit to her father's mansion, so they were able to share a good laugh.

"I'll probably end up moving with granny to Raylan."

"Is that the village that was making those fabrics?" Misha asked, looking toward her feet. Though common enough in the mansion to slip beneath notice, the beautiful carpet in this room was one from that village.

"Yep. They're having a huge argument about it, saying they can't leave granny here alone when they owe her so much. I think she'll cave pretty soon," Kent said with a laugh as he bit into another cookie.

Misha smiled as she took a sip of her tea, picturing that argument in her head. "Makes sense. Have you been there before?"

"Back when my dad was still alive, yeah. It's way out in the country. There's nothing around for miles, but it's a nice place. Everyone's really nice," he replied, a small shadow at the edges of his happy expression as the conversation turned up memories of his parents.

He had thought they'd died from a mysterious illness, but they had actually been murdered with poison. Worst of all, their killer was someone Kent had known, someone who'd lovingly held him when he was little, who'd always had candy and toys for him upon each visit. They'd seen each other less after Kent's parents died, but they'd still met a few times a year. It was no wonder Kent felt conflicted.

Even so, Kent had decided to face forward with a smile. His father had always taught him to face adversity head-on. He'd always said a good merchant needed an iron will and an insatiable sense of curiosity.

"So, when I'm a bit older, I'm going to start working with granny's friend."

Misha's eyes went wide. "You aren't going to go with Marianne?"

Kent scratched at his face in embarrassment. "Well, I am. But I want to be a good merchant. So I need to study a lot. And I figured learning on the job was better than just going to some school." His

eyes were sparkling, reflecting a bright hope for the future.

A boy younger than Misha herself had already overcome his parents' deaths and was bravely walking forward. He was amazing.

"So, thank you. I'm glad I got to meet you," he said. "You saved granny, and I got to figure out what happened to my mom and dad. I'll definitely pay you back someday." Not sure how to take Misha's stunned look, Kent raced to get his piece out, then stuffed the last cookie into his mouth. "Granny's taking too long. I'm going to go see what they're doing." With that, he dashed out of the room, unfortunately a bit too quickly for the bewildered Misha to notice that his ears had started to burn red.

"What a strong kid. I should be like that," Misha murmured to herself, reflecting on Kent's words. She couldn't be happy the way he could. Just putting one foot in front of the other was still tough for her.

"Yeah. I'll keep trying," she told herself, forcing her face into a smile.

"If you want to be an apothecary, you have to always be smiling, even if it's a bluff. If the patient sees you being uneasy, they'll get scared. With all the pain and suffering they're going through, we have to at least make them feel at ease."

Her mother would always say that, stroking Misha's hair. No matter how difficult things were, she needed to look like everything was all right. The unexpected memory of her mother surfacing threatened to rob her of her smile, but Misha fought to keep it in place.

Right, mom? Even if it's fake, even if it's a bluff, I'll keep smiling. Then someday, it'll be real.

In the future, Kent Karloff would grow to become a merchant whose name was famous not just across Carmine, but across the whole world. Everywhere he went, he showed great respect and kindness to the People of the Forest. When asked why that was, he would flash a proud grin.

"Because when I was young, they helped me more than I could ever repay them."

Chapter 5: A Small Life, Red and White Memories

Misha reached out and put her arms under the sunlight streaming in through the window of their carriage, watching it shine against the braided string of multicolored thread and small glass marbles wrapped around her wrist.

"You got that from Kent?" Geord asked, squinting as the light bounced off the glass marbles and into his eyes.

"Yeah. He said he made it from the threads they use to make their fabrics."

The multicolored threads were woven together to make a complex, beautiful design.

"Huh. Looks like it'd make a good souvenir."

Misha's eyes opened wide at Geord's offhand remark before she giggled. "Kent said the exact same thing. It's something the people of that village make just to fiddle with their hands when they're bored. They were pretty surprised I liked it so much. I wonder if they'll start selling them now?"

Earlier, Kent had noticed a similar cord on one of the villagers' wrists, so he'd asked how to make them. The man's young daughter had braided his, so the one Kent first saw was quite simple, but once he learned how to do it himself, he discovered ways to add extra details, such as additional colors and ornaments like marbles. He had called this one his "first prototype," so there would probably be plenty of variations in the future.

"He saw something new and immediately thought about how to improve it. Sounds like a businessman at heart." Geord shrugged with a small sigh. You could never underestimate the imagination or energy of children.

"He's incredible, isn't he? I have to make sure I keep up." Misha

smiled, stroking one of the glass marbles.

After traveling for some time, Misha asked, "Do you mind if I take a bit of a walk?"

They had come to a stop to give the horses a rest, and Geord and his men were breaking out a portable stove to make some lunch.

Geord stopped in his tracks, raising an eyebrow at her. Normally she'd be asking to help out, not to run off on her own. "As long as you don't go too far. What's up?"

"I'm starting to run low on herbs. The forest here looks like it would be the perfect spot to find some." Misha's face was glowing with anticipation; she was barely able to keep her eyes off the thicket growing behind her.

"Hmm, I thought you were surprisingly entranced by the view outside the window. So *that's* what's been on your mind."

All this time in the carriage, he'd been worried that the roughness of the rural roads was making her sick. She was a tough kid, so he didn't expect she'd complain even if that were the case. That was exactly why he'd decided to call an early lunch break.

"Are you okay on your own?" he asked, to which the restlessly fidgeting Misha nodded.

"I'm pretty used to the forest. I'll make sure to stay away from anything dangerous. I'll be back in about thirty minutes!"

"We stopped a bit early, so take your time."

Nodding happily at Geord's reply, Misha practically skipped off into the underbrush. Seeing her go finally reminded Geord that this was exactly the environment she had grown up in.

Even if it wasn't the same forest, it must have felt familiar. She was well accustomed to moving about in the wild. She had shot off into the brush like fish freshly returned to the water.

Misha hummed happily as she collected the herbs she found, pulling them up from the ground. The carriage was quite spacious, so if she tied up some strings from one end to the other, she'd have plenty of space to hang and dry the herbs. Having found exactly what she was hoping for, she resembled a child let loose in a toy

store.

"Oh, there's some bamboo leaves here too. But I'll need to boil them right away if I want to use them. I wonder if everyone will mind waiting..."

Despite her hesitation, Misha nevertheless harvested some of the rare plant. This was the time of year it just started sprouting, which was also when its medicinal properties were strongest. It would serve as a great painkiller. These bamboo leaves could be made into a paste and applied directly to an injury or into a pill and swallowed to treat things like headaches, stomachaches, and other internal pains. She'd love to have a supply.

"Geord and the other knights probably get injured a lot in the line of duty, right? It'll be good to have some around," she murmured as she picked at the plants.

Before she knew it, she'd filled her basket with all kinds of plants, and her time was just about up. Lunch was probably ready.

"I wonder if we can stay the night out here."

In many ways, it felt like she was leaving mountains of treasure behind, but she had to keep her promise. It was one thing if she was a few minutes late, but any more than that and they'd start to worry.

"I wonder if I can go pick some more after we eat. Oh, but I have to deal with the bamboo leaves..." Murmuring to herself as she walked, something strange caught her attention—a faint cry, as if someone were calling for help. It was quiet, high-pitched, and intermittent, like from a baby animal.

"A puppy?"

She hesitated only for a moment before dashing off toward the sound.

"Misha?"

About an hour after Misha left in search of her plants, just as Geord figured it was about time to go looking for her, the girl came dashing back into the camp. In one hand she had a basket full to bursting with plants, and in the other she held her shawl wrapped around something.

"I'm sorry I'm late. You can scold me later, but first I have to take

care of this little guy!”

After Misha showed him the shawl, he looked inside to see a small white puppy. Catching a new smell, the little animal sluggishly opened its eyes and began to growl. Geord didn’t detect it having the energy to struggle, but he could see a wildness in the dog’s guarded glare.

“Its fur is white, but...is this a baby wolf?” he asked.

He scrutinized the little bundle in her arms as Misha stepped closer to the fire, throwing some of the plants she had just picked into a pot with some water and setting them over the fire. Although caked with blood and dirt, its fur was definitely white.

“Probably. I don’t know if he was abandoned or maybe his parents died, but he had fallen in a pit and couldn’t move. If his parents were around, they would have helped him, so I have to assume the worst.”

Geord had only ever seen black or gray wolves, so a white one was almost unheard of. However, closer inspection revealed its bright red eyes. It must have been an albino. Maybe it had been abandoned by its pack for standing out so much in the forest.

“Good boy. Here, let me look at your wound.” Speaking softly to the wolf pup, Misha gently applied some medicine to its injury and wrapped a bandage around it so that the pup couldn’t just lick it off. The wolf pup didn’t resist, but it was clearly unhappy. Its snout was scrunched up, and the poor thing was still growling, but it made no effort to bite or scratch at Misha.

Puzzled, Geord watched as Misha treated the little animal. Even if it was a baby, it was strange to see a wild wolf put up with a human touching it like this. If its legs were hurt, it made sense that it didn’t try to run away, but he would have expected it to bite Misha when she touched it.

Misha plucked some of the meat out of their soup and broke it into small pieces, then fed it to the wolf pup. After eating its fill, it curled up beside her and closed its eyes. It acted like a well-trained dog.

“Did you give it some kind of medicine to calm it down?” Geord asked.

"Of course not. Animals just seem to like me," Misha replied with a laugh as she took a bite of bread, finally able to turn her attention to her own meal.

"But it's a wild wolf, isn't it?" She acted like this was all perfectly ordinary, but this was quite a bizarre scene. It was honestly kind of unbelievable.

As Geord worked on his own soup, Misha gave a troubled smile. As mysterious as it was, she really hadn't done anything special. She couldn't explain the wolf pup's behavior any better than he could.

"Maybe because he's hurt and weak? I think he understands I was trying to help him. Probably. We're not that close, so I've been avoiding touching him as much as I can too." Glancing back to the wolf pup at her side, they saw it had opened its eyes again and was staring back. Which only made sense. Of course it would be wary of them.

"Even so, it's a wild animal. They tend to get more aggressive when they're hurt."

"Hmm. Probably because I don't appear hostile? If I were seriously thinking of eating him, he'd probably run away."

When she'd lived in the forest, Misha's only source of meat had been rabbits and birds that she and her mother caught themselves. Of course, Misha had handled and cooked them herself as well. Carnivore meat wasn't that great, though, and large animals were too much work to prepare, so she generally kept to smaller animals.

Perhaps sensing the ominous nature of the conversation, the wolf pup started to whine softly.

Misha giggled. "Don't worry. If I wanted to eat you, I wouldn't be helping you like this."

Scooping another chunk of meat out of her soup, she held it in front of the wolf pup. After sniffing at it for a moment, it chomped down the tiny morsel. With that, the two were on good terms again.

Watching the wolf pup return to its slumber out of the corner of her eye, Misha asked quietly about their next course of action. "Our destination is the city just past these mountains, right?"

"Yep. There are actually two ways to get back to Redford. We can keep going through the mountains like this, or we can take a bit of a

detour and follow the coast. Which would you prefer?" Geord replied with a smile, sipping at his postlunch tea.

"The coast? You mean, by the ocean?" Misha tilted her head as she echoed Geord's words.

Having been raised in the forest, Misha thought of the ocean entirely as an imaginary place. An ocean was like the lakes she'd seen in the forest, but many times larger, and the water was salty. She had only ever eaten dried fish, but the fish that lived in the ocean were quite different from those that lived in rivers and lakes, and they were quite tasty.

"The water changes color depending on where it is and how deep it is. When the wind blows, it makes waves, which can be quite intense. There are also some strange creatures living there besides fish. Best of all, the sight of the sun setting into the ocean is absolutely magical."

Her mother had talked about the ocean once while they were reading a book. She'd looked like she was having a lot of fun recounting those memories.

"I'd like to see the ocean."

Staying in the mountains to keep collecting herbs was plenty appealing, yet her curiosity for the unknown won out in the end. Above all, she wanted to see the thing that had entranced her mother.

Geord nodded, taking note of her excitement. "Got it. It'll be your first time, so we'll try and get a ship big enough so that you won't get seasick. It's probably still too cold to do any swimming, but you can at least try putting your feet in the water. Sound good?"

Hearing their new plans, Misha gave a celebratory shout for the first time in a *long* time.

As the carriage rattled its way down the road, Misha was inside sorting through the plants she had collected and that now dominated the spacious carriage. While the overpowering smell of medicine would probably be painful for normal people, it was something Misha had long grown used to, and its familiarity helped her relax.

While she worked, she glanced down at the corner of the carriage. The small white wolf pup lay there quietly on top of some cloth, eyes closed, but the way his ears stood up straight made it clear he wasn't asleep.

Only a few hours had passed since Misha had scooped him up. It was perfectly normal for a wild animal to still be on guard. Even if he was small enough that a little girl like Misha could carry him in her arms, even if his pretty red eyes were set in a baby-like face. Misha had wanted to wash the blood and dirt from his fur too. However, she'd had to give up when the pup refused to cooperate. Grooming was a way to express affection between animals.

I wonder when he'll let me do that, Misha pondered absently, hands still working on the herbs in front of her, when suddenly the image of a white figure sprang to mind.

At the same time, the wolf pup's bright red eyes opened and turned toward her, making her stop what she was doing.

Oh, that's *why he seems so familiar. White hair, white fur...and they both have nearly the same color eyes. The boy's were even redder, though.*

Once the thought occurred to her, she could only wonder why she hadn't thought of it sooner. Returning the wolf pup's gaze, she started to smile.

Not just the color—the way he's so on guard is the same too.

With a quiet giggle, hoping not to spook the little wolf, Misha remembered the events of a day long ago.

When Misha turned five, she had finally been given permission to explore the forest on her own. From that day forward, she began slowly investigating the area around their house. After about a year, her search area expanded to places she had never visited with her mother. Places with awkward footing or steep cliffs, impossible for her mother to visit with her injured leg, were nothing more than places for Misha to play when she was on her own.

When she brought back unfamiliar flowers and plants as presents, her mother would always heap loads of praise on her, encouraging her to keep up with her exploration. As a result, Misha began

exploring farther and farther away, and for better or worse, there were no adults around to stop her.

So, when she was walking through the forest humming a tune to herself...

Huh. Something seems different today.

Following a narrow game trail between the trees, she suddenly felt confused. It was hard to put the feeling into words, but the forest felt strange somehow. There were fewer birds singing in the trees, and there were no animals scurrying through the underbrush, but she couldn't tell why that was. Her curiosity drove her onward—to find the source of this anomaly. And when she did, she found something that didn't belong in the forest.

Nestled among the roots of a great tree lay a small person.

"A kid...?" Misha stared from behind a tree at the figure not much bigger than herself.

The child had straight, white hair, long enough to cover the back of their neck, cut straight and clean. Their hair obscured most of their face, but what little peeked through spoke more of the round plumpness of youth than the age that white hair would imply.

Misha herself had been raised here in the forest. The only other people she had met were her mother, father, and her father's friends, so "children" and "elderly" were still little more than nebulous concepts from storybooks for her.

The child was wearing a long-sleeved robe, plain and unornamented, much like the clothes Misha wore when sleeping. The way the child lay curled up, legs hidden beneath the hem of their robe, made it look like they were trying to protect themselves from something.

A small child wearing nightclothes lying alone deep in the forest—the way they were trying to hide between the roots of the tree looked odd to someone as young and inexperienced as Misha.

After observing for a while, Misha determined there was no one else nearby. The way the child lay there entirely filled her with unease, so she approached slowly. Once she was about two meters away, she stepped on a small branch, a resounding crack piercing the air.

The motionless child bolted upright at the sound.

Oh! Red eyes.

Misha couldn't help but stare in awe at the color of the child's eyes, the same bright red as ripe apples. Those eyes, filled with an abundance of caution and a small hint of fear, stared straight back at her.

"They're so pretty..." Misha murmured out loud, shaking the tense atmosphere.

The child's stare wavered.

"Who are you? Why is there a kid in a place like this?" the child asked in a voice, as hoarse and stiff as it was, that indicated he was a boy. His tone was cold, rejecting, but Misha was more confused than anything.

"This is where I live. Who are *you*?"

The boy's confusion grew more pronounced. Unconsciously pushing himself back away from Misha, he scowled and gritted his teeth. At that point, Misha noticed he was using a hand to cover his opposite arm, which was the same bright red as his eyes.

"Wait, are you hurt?" She dashed forward and inspected the injury, not giving the injured boy a chance to retreat. Although shocked by her sudden approach, he wasn't able to escape before Misha held him down, rolling up his sleeve to see a ten-centimeter gash on his upper arm. It wasn't that deep, and the bleeding had already stopped, but it evidently hadn't been treated at all.

"I'm going to call my mom!"

But when she tried to stand, the boy reached out and grabbed her arm. The boy's face twisted in pain as he did so, the sudden movement aggravating his injury, but he pushed past it to shake his head.

"No, you can't call anyone."

"But..." As the boy refused help, now it was Misha's turn to frown. The boy's sudden motion had opened the wound, which started to bleed. It was definitely not something she could ignore.

"If you're going to bring someone here, then I'll just run away the moment you leave."

Misha's frown deepened at the threat. The two stared at each

other for some time.

Oh. He's just like a hurt animal.

And as she stared at him, she realized why this scene felt so familiar to her. He had the same aura as the many injured animals she had encountered in her adventures in the forest: fear, caution, and an iron determination to cling to life.

Once she recognized that in his eyes, Misha felt herself relax. It was no wonder he'd run away if she did something he didn't like—even if that meant putting his life in further danger. Having grown up around the animals of the forest, Misha understood that kind of behavior better than anyone.

Even so, this was a human being. She couldn't just leave him be, so she racked her brain for something she could do on her own.

He's afraid of something, so he doesn't want to see other people. But he's still willing to talk to me. Is it because we're both kids? In that case...

Misha plopped down in front of the boy. "Can I treat your injury for you?"

"You?" the boy blinked back in surprise.

Searching through her backpack, she pulled out her lunch for the day, a bottle of water, and a large cloth. Next, she found a salve for scrapes that her mother had given her and a smaller strip of cloth. Looking at what she had available, she stopped to think for a moment.

"If I fall and cut myself, I'm supposed to wash it and then put the medicine on."

Misha regularly returned home covered in cuts and scrapes, so her mother had given her that medicine and taught her how to apply it, but she had probably never imagined this was how Misha would put it to use. The boy's injury was much worse than anything Misha had ever experienced, but this had to be better than doing nothing.

"This will probably hurt a little. Sorry."

Her face tense, Misha poured a bit of water over the boy's wound. Luckily, there didn't seem to be any dirt or anything in it, but just to be sure, she used her fingers to clean away the dried blood around it. As much as it must have hurt, the boy kept quiet, biting

his lip and stiffening as she did her work.

If he cried and started to thrash, it would probably have startled the young and inexperienced Misha into crying herself, so this was definitely the correct choice of action for him. He wasn't biting his lip and bearing with the pain for her sake, though. His pride as a boy was at stake.

After exhausting her supply of water, she spread some of the salve on the smaller strip of cloth, placed it over the wound, and then wrapped it in the larger cloth to form an improvised bandage. It looked a little messy, but it was Misha's best effort. Once it was done, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thanks," the boy murmured, prompting Misha to lift her head. The two stared at each other for a moment, Misha looking up at the boy in surprise while the boy frowned back at her.

Misha felt something new spring to life in her heart. The gratitude she received from doing something for someone else made her feel a new kind of pride and joy. The way her heart surged brought a smile to her face, causing the boy's eyes to widen in surprise again. She giggled at him.

"You're welcome. I'm Misha, by the way. I live together with my mom in this forest. What's your name?"

After a long pause, the boy finally answered, "Ren."

Unbothered by the curtness of his reply, after repeating the name silently to herself a few times to make sure she'd remember it, she showed him the lunch she'd brought with her.

"Are you hungry, Ren? Why don't we eat together? I'll go get some more water, but you can start eating."

She left a wrapped sandwich on Ren's lap before running off with the empty water bottle. Her heart was racing partly out of excitement at having taken care of someone for the first time, but also out of anxiety that he would run away once out of sight.

Trying to suppress those feelings, she ran straight to the closest source of water and dunked her face straight into it, taking a drink while she did so. The cold water brought the racing thoughts to a halt. As she pulled her head out of the water, she shook the water from her face as a puppy would, then she hurriedly filled her bottle.

Once finished, she dashed back down the path she came, returning to find Ren still seated with his sandwich yet unwrapped, waiting for her to get back.

As she sat down beside him, her breathing ragged, he startled. Having used her cloth to make his bandage, she had nothing to dry off with, leaving her face and bangs dripping wet.

"Here, water. I've already had some." Not sure how to express herself, she settled for just pushing the water bottle toward him and bit into her own sandwich.

Ren stared at her, amazed and concerned.

She was just going to get some water, so why is she drenched? he thought.

He felt it would be better for her to dry off first. Unfortunately, he had nothing but the clothes on his back. Misha didn't seem bothered by her face being soaked, but that was probably just because she had used her cloth to make his bandage. He cast a guilty look at his arm. She had used a small knife to cut a strip from some cloth she had pulled out of her bag.

Well, it's a nice day out. She'll dry off soon enough.

In the end, he didn't say anything, finally taking to his own sandwich. Made with some kind of meat and soft leaves, it was remarkably delicious when coupled with his thoroughly empty stomach.

"Are you sure you're okay on your own?"

No matter how many times Misha invited him to go with her, Ren wouldn't budge.

"I already said I'm not going with you. Animals won't come in here, so it'll be safer than last night. You should hurry up and go home before it gets dark," he replied, making no effort to conceal his frustration with her persistence.

"But..."

Seeing she wasn't about to leave, Ren sighed and smiled. "I'm serious, it's fine. I can rest easy tonight thanks to you bringing me here."

He examined their surroundings carefully. They were sitting in the

hollow of an enormous tree about two meters off the ground. It was a place Misha had found when she first started exploring the forest, spacious enough for the two children to have plenty of room to spare. Deciding to make it into a secret base, she had gradually carved into the hollow to make a flat floor and filled it with leaves and old blankets. It was high enough that four-legged animals couldn't climb up to it, and the thick foliage hid it from below.

"Okay then, I'll be going. But I'll be back in the morning with some food, so wait for me, okay?"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Ren nodded as the reluctant Misha finally made her exit.

When she made it home, her mother scolded her for being late, but Misha was too preoccupied with thoughts of Ren for it to bother her much. After eating dinner and climbing into bed, those same thoughts kept her from falling asleep.

Is Ren okay? Is he lonely? He didn't run away again, did he?

If she focused, she could hear the voices of the wildlife in the forest outside. She had never spent a night out in the forest before —never mind doing it alone.

I hope he's not too scared, she wished, thinking of his beautiful red eyes.

The next day, Misha collected as much food and medicine as she could take without arousing suspicion from her mother, then rushed to the hiding spot, grabbing some wild fruit along the way.

When she saw Ren was still there, she was overcome by relief, but only for a moment. Misha's eyes widened as she noticed his flushed cheeks.

"Do you have a fever?!"

Ren's face scrunched a bit as if pained by her shout. Putting a hand to his forehead, she could tell he was burning up.

"Hold on a second!"

Running to a nearby stream, Misha soaked a towel in cold water and brought it back. As she placed it over his forehead, she saw Ren relax, unclenching his body as he enjoyed the cool sensation.

"I guess one blanket wasn't good enough. What should I do

now...?”

“Relax, I’m fine. I’m used to having a fever.” In contrast to Misha’s mounting panic, Ren was calm and collected. The coolness in his eyes helped with Misha’s growing panic as well.

Fever... When I have a fever, what does mom do?

When it was raining out, Misha would stay home and watch her mother make medicine. She would always explain what she was doing and what the medicine was for while she worked, almost as if she were talking to herself.

I can’t ask mom for medicine, or she’ll find out about Ren. What herbs that grow in this season can treat a fever?

She was starting to regret not listening closer to her mother’s teachings. If she had, she’d be able to help ease Ren’s suffering. Both her agitation at seeing Ren suffering right in front of her and her frustration at her past self for not taking what her mother taught her seriously sent her right back into a panic. She desperately sifted through her memory for anything that might be useful as she dashed back out into the woods.

Finding a plant whose seeds could help against fever, she used a flat rock to smash the seeds, then put them in a rough, handmade cup that she kept at the hideout. To finish, she added water and mixed it all together.

“Drink this.”

Ren scowled as he saw the now unsettlingly green mixture.

“It’ll help your fever. My mother taught me about it, so it’s definitely true.”

With Ren still clearly suspicious, Misha took a swig from the cup. Despite being quite bitter, as far as medicine went, the taste was bearable. Struggling to keep the tears from her eyes, she finished half of the cup and returned the cup to Ren.

“C’mon. It’s not poison or anything.”

Though he hesitated for a while, eventually he relented and took the cup. His brow immediately furrowed as he started to drink. It tasted as bad as he’d expected, or maybe even worse. On top of the bitter, acrid flavor, the seeds used to make it had just been pounded to pieces on a rock, so there were still plenty of hard bits in it, and it

reminded him very much of drinking plants.

Still teary-eyed from her own experience with the drink, Misha handed over a small candy to help him clear the flavor from his mouth. It was one of her favorites, brought as a gift from her father not long ago. It was made from nectar instead of sugar, which—despite the rich flavor—left a delightful aftertaste. She had only a very small number of them, so she strictly limited herself to one a day. Even so, she didn't think twice about giving one to Ren.

While they both sat eating their candy, Misha wordlessly took a look at the injury on his arm. The skin around the cut had turned a bit red, but she sighed in relief to see there was no pus. If the wound had gotten infected, treating it would have been way out of her league.

Exhausted from his injury and fever, coupled with the side effects of the medicine she had just made for him, Ren had already started nodding off, so Misha hurriedly reapplied the salve with a fresh bandage.

Ren slept for about half a day, his fever gradually declining. Relieved he was making progress, she had him drink plenty of water and cut up some fruit in easy to consume chunks. The fever left him in somewhat of a daze, his combative attitude from the previous day nowhere to be seen. She had to admit he was much cuter this way.

By evening, Ren's fever had come down quite a bit.

"Looks like that gross medicine has been helping."

"If you're going to talk like that, then I have another present for you." Misha smiled at Ren's abrasive attitude, handing him another cup. Naturally, it was filled with yet another thick green liquid.

"Uhh...isn't this cup filled higher than it was last time?"

"It looked like it worked well, so I made double for your evening dose!"

"Oh, come on. You can't just give me any random amount!"

Despite his complaining, Ren eventually gave in and drank it down. He had already experienced the effectiveness of this medicine. Actually, he found it had worked much faster than any other medicine he had taken.

If only it didn't taste like death...

After a sigh, he dutifully forced down the contents of the cup, struggle that it was. Misha watched with a gentle smile, handing him another candy as he finished.

As the sun set once again, the two children had much the same conversation as they'd had the night before. Misha was reluctant to leave Ren alone, while Ren quickly grew exasperated attempting to get Misha to go home.

"Thanks to someone's terrible medicine, my fever is mostly gone. It's from the cut on my arm anyway, so it was kind of expected. And you gave me medicine for the pain too, remember?"

Ren shrugged, revealing he had seen through Misha hiding something else in the "doubled" amount of fever medicine.

Misha hung her head as she was called out. She had figured she could trick him into having something additional in the medicine because of how dazed he had been that morning. She'd been afraid he would be on guard again once he was feeling better, so she had wanted to avoid having to go through the experience of drinking it herself again.

"I mean it was even greener, and the flavor was even worse. If you're going to make people drink mystery stuff, at least explain what you're giving them," he said with an exasperated smile.

"I'm sorry. Thank you for taking it anyway," Misha apologized, passing over another candy. She was really happy to hear that he trusted her enough to drink the medicine even without knowing what was in it. "Okay then, I'm going now. Make sure you get lots of sleep, okay? If you get hungry, I've left some fruit here for you."

As Misha reluctantly climbed out of the tree, Ren called out to her again.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Misha stared back, mouth agape at his honest gratitude. There was no sign of his old wariness in his expression, just a bright grin lighting his red eyes.

It's like watching a flower bloom...

His face was even pretty when he made fun of the stupid look on her face—*so* pretty that she forgot to get angry. Shyness pulled at

her instead, which she tried to laugh off.

"See you tomorrow!" Waving goodbye, she ran home, not turning back to see Ren's response.

The next morning, Misha returned with arms full of food to find her hideout empty. The blanket she had left for Ren was folded neatly, and on top of it was a single earring the same bright red as his eyes. Without that, she might have thought the whole experience had been a dream. The piece of jewelry was something Ren had worn. Taking it in her hands, she started to cry a little. It wasn't quite sadness, but the little Misha didn't have the words to express the tight feeling in her chest.

A bump in the road jostled the carriage hard, bringing Misha back to the present. She had apparently spaced out for quite a while, as the plant in her hand had grown soft from the heat of her hands. Hurriedly laying it out on the windowsill, she turned her attention to the small bag hanging around her neck as a good-luck charm.

She pulled out a small teardrop-shaped object from inside, an earring just the size of her fingertip that shone bright red in the sun. It was a simple ornament, just a red stone carved into the shape of a teardrop, but it was something that Ren had left for her that day.

She'd never ended up wearing it. She didn't feel like she could openly wear a gift from someone whose existence she had kept a secret, and it felt strange to wear it without its pair anyway, so she had kept it hidden.

It was a thank-you from her first ever patient. Although she felt embarrassed when she thought back to how crude that treatment had been, she knew that experience was what had convinced her she wanted to be an apothecary. It was a precious memory, one she couldn't share with anyone.

"I wonder how he's doing..."

The earring's only reply was to continue shining with its brilliant red light.

"Sounds like they're having fun again," Ryan Lou Redford chuckled as he read over the latest report.

That was enough to bring a scowl to Tris's face. "So, what has that idiot done now?"

Unfortunately, his position didn't give him the luxury of ignoring the report, so he reluctantly asked the king to share.

Ryan responded by tossing the letter to him.

"That's quite impolite, you know," Tris chided him before opening the letter and scanning it, his face likely to freeze into a grimace. "What does he think he's doing?! Does he realize he's in a foreign country?!"

Geord had stuck his nose in some family squabble that had ended up causing a huge string of arrests across the city. There was an official letter of thanks from the lord of the city too, something that made Tris livid.

"Naturally, he got the lord of the city himself on his side. Must have been a countermeasure to stop you from getting too angry at him," Ryan laughed.

"This is hardly a laughing matter. Now that he's gotten involved in this issue, someone is going to have to clean up after him..."

"And that someone will probably be you, won't it?" Ryan pronounced over Tris's mumbling complaints.

"Looks like I'm losing yet another holiday..." Tris hung his head, defeated.

Feeling bad for him, the king offered some words of consolation. "On the bright side, it wasn't like he did anything wrong. It looks like they're honestly thankful. I don't think it'll be such a big issue."

"Then can I ask you to handle it, Your Majesty?"

"Me? No way. Sounds like a pain in the ass." Of course, the moment it looked like things might get turned around on him, Ryan immediately cut down Tris's hopes that his attempt at consolation might have had any actual meaning behind it.

"So, when is he coming back?" Tris asked with a smirk, imagining the thorough verbal thrashing he'd give Geord on his return.

Ryan passed over another letter.

"Apparently Misha hasn't seen the ocean before, so they're going to be traveling by boat?!" Tris yelled in disbelief. "And they're spending another two or three days in port for sightseeing?! What is

that idiot thinking?! Is he planning on causing even more problems?!”

The king’s office was filled with a lone man’s agonized cries.

Chapter 6: The First Time at the Sea

Misha and Geord spent another two days rattling down the mountain road. By the third day, they had stopped climbing and were instead following a road that ran along the side of the mountain.

"Misha, wake up. You'll be able to see it soon." Geord's voice from outside the carriage pulled Misha from her dozing.

See what...? She was still in a bit of a daze when Geord knocked on the window.

"You can see the ocean now!"

"Really?!" Misha hurriedly threw open the wooden window of the carriage.

A wave of familiar forest scents rushed in to greet her, but as she looked down the road they were traveling, she saw a small city. Beyond that, blue—one that was much different from the sky—stretched onward.

"That's the ocean...?"

It was far enough away to not feel quite real yet; however, it was certainly the sight she had been hoping for. Entranced, she had been staring out the window for a while when a small thump landed on her legs. Looking down, she saw a pair of bright red eyes looking curiously up at her.

In the end, the wolf pup that she had helped a few days earlier stayed with them. His leg injury would take quite some time to heal, and she couldn't wait around for that. She and Geord had considered setting him free once his leg was healed, but they'd be quite far from his home by then. There was no guarantee a wolf his age would be able to survive in unfamiliar territory. He could easily end up wandering into another predator's territory and receiving a

rather violent welcome.

Now that Misha had spent the time and energy to help him recover, she couldn't just send him off to his death. Nature was cruel. Ultimately, after piling up a healthy number of excuses, Misha decided she'd keep the wolf pup with her.

Wrapped in a towel and placed in the carriage along with her, the wolf pup originally stayed huddled in the corner, clearly quite wary of her, but after she had taken care of him for a few days, he seemed to come out of his shell a bit, recognizing Misha as his new protector.

Wolves were already social animals. There were enough examples of them cooperating with humans in the past to prove it was a feasible arrangement.

The wolf, now named "Ren," quickly took to curling up on Misha's lap. Those who witnessed it were about as shocked as they were relieved, but they all received their new traveling partner favorably. Above all, Misha's demeanor became much gentler when she was playing with him, retaking something of the youthful innocence one would expect from a girl her age.

Even though Misha didn't realize it herself, everyone around her was well aware of what had happened to her mother, and the shadow cast over her face from time to time was a great cause of concern for them. Ren might've been an unnecessary mouth they now had to feed, but his presence offering Misha some comfort was enough for the adults around her to accept the burden.

"I heard water in the ocean is really salty! Let's taste it together." Stroking Ren's fur, now fluffy and soft thanks to the daily brushing Misha subjected him to, Misha turned a shining smile on the wolf pup.

Though he didn't know why, Ren could tell his caretaker was in a good mood, so he responded with a happy bark and a wag of his tail.

The seaside town they visited was lively and bustling. It had a large port which took in ships from foreign countries, making it a central trade hub for Bluheitz. The city was filled with people with unfamiliar looks and skin colors, and if she stopped to listen, she

could pick up a number of unfamiliar languages in the air too. Stalls in the street had wide arrays of unfamiliar fruit and exotic ornaments, all things Misha had never seen before.

Watching the city pass by from the window of the carriage, Misha quickly found herself dying to jump right into the middle of it all.

"It's like a huge festival out there!"

Though plenty of the cities they passed through were lively enough, this one buzzed with a whole new kind of life.

Geord laughed as Misha leaned out the window, trying to take it all in. "Relax. Once we get to the inn, we can go exploring a bit. Don't fall out of the window."

Misha hurriedly pulled herself back into the carriage, face flushing. Not from the excitement this time, but from Geord pointing out just how childishly she had been acting. Sitting up properly as if to say her previous behavior had all been in his imagination, she forced a composed expression. Unfortunately, the way her eyes kept darting back to the window meant she wasn't hiding her brimming curiosity in the least.

Doing everything in his power to avoid bursting out laughing at her antics, he kept a close eye on what was catching her attention as he drew up a plan of where to take her later.

"Wow! It's huge!"

The first place they visited was the beach. With the ocean visible from their room in the inn, Misha had been nailed to the window, so it had been an easy choice. The ocean stretched as far as she could see, the place where it met the sky blurring as if the two were dissolving into each other. Taking a deep breath, her nose was filled with a strange and unfamiliar scent.

"Oh, right! The water! We have to taste the water!"

After enjoying the breadth of the ocean for a time, Misha remembered her other objective here, and trotted down to where the waves lapped against the shore. The sensation of the white sand giving way beneath her feet as she walked was unexpectedly fun. Crouching down, she picked up a handful of the stuff, watching the tiny particles flow back down to the ground between her fingers.

Within the sand she found a small shell. She beamed.

"Mr. Geord, can I take my shoes off?"

Watching from a bit of a distance, Geord waved his assent, then he turned to one of his men and tasked him with buying a pair of sandals for her. Her sturdy leather boots were great for traveling, but they didn't suit spending time in a nice city.

Oblivious to the exchange happening behind her, Misha slipped out of her footwear and slowly approached the water again. The sensation of her feet sinking down and the sand pouring in between her toes brought a happy giggle out of her. The early summer sun had lent the sand a pleasant warmth.

As she finally made it to the water's edge, the sand turned much softer where it had started soaking up the ocean. Even that change was something new to Misha, so she proceeded carefully through it.

And then she made it to the water. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight created by the waves reaching up the beach, then receding back into the ocean.

"It's so beautiful..."

The glittering waves rushed up onto the beach, pushing the sand into all kinds of different shapes, only for those beautiful designs to be washed away by the next wave moments later, replaced with something entirely new. It was a brilliant piece of transient art.

Misha was frozen in place, charmed by this new experience, when Geord stepped alongside her.

"Why don't you try getting in the water?"

Misha looked up at him. Geord himself found his breath catching, the slight flush to her cheeks and the bright shine in her eyes making her appear more mature than usual.

"Yeah. I will." Whispering to herself, she turned her attention back to the water, allowing Geord to finally realize he had been holding his breath.

He sighed heavily, feeling his heart racing. He was old enough and experienced enough to know the light sweat he was working up wasn't from the early summer sun.

"Seriously?" he muttered to himself, sitting down in the sand as Misha approached the water.

The sensation in her toes as she reached the waves was quite cold, but she quickly forgot that, lost in play. Every time a wave came it pushed the sand with it, slowly burying her feet beneath it. She would then wiggle her toes, kicking up the sand to dance away with the receding wave and revealing her feet once more.

She repeated the same thing over and over, lost in the sound of the waves. It was her first time hearing the music of the waves, yet it was like a comforting blanket wrapped around her.

Suddenly, she could have sworn she'd heard a voice mixed in with the sound of the water. Her mind surfaced once more, but as she lifted her head, a glint caught her eye. Something in the water was reflecting light, but it wasn't the water itself. Reaching for it, she grabbed what turned out to be a small, hard stone.

"A blue...rock?"

The glittering rock was about the size of her fingertip. The light shining through it was recast in a deep blue, as if trying to mimic the ocean itself. Though the beauty of the little stone held her attention for a while, once again she heard a voice calling out between the sound of the waves.

Looking around, she saw only Geord and one of his guards. She couldn't imagine the voice belonged to one of them, so she strained hard to listen again, but she could only pick up the movement of the water.

"Maybe I imagined it?"

At that point, Geord did call out, asking if it was about time to go see the city. Misha hurriedly stepped out of the water, slipping the stone into her pocket without a thought.

"I was just planning on grabbing something to eat as we walked around town. Is that okay?" he asked.

"Yes! I noticed there were a lot of delicious smells as we were going through the city!" She dried her feet with a cloth offered to her before slipping into her new sandals. She all but danced through the streets as she followed Geord back into the city.

The thought of delicious food completely wiped the mystery of the disembodied voice from her mind.

Meanwhile, in her pocket, the blue stone continued to faintly glow.

"So...lonely..."

Chapter 7: An Encounter with the People of the Forest

Misha came to a surprised stop once they made it to the market's entrance. She'd thought she had a good idea of what it would be like after seeing it from the window of the carriage, but being in the thick of things was another experience entirely.

Tons of people were coming and going. Words from all kinds of different languages filled the air. There were colorful fabrics with mysterious patterns, tools she had never seen before, jars and vases in bizarre, unique shapes—all kinds of things packed in with barely enough room to breathe. Of course, plenty of fruits and vegetables were present too. Taking in the busy sights was quite fun. On top of all that, Misha's excellent sense of smell picked up the tantalizing aroma of freshly cooked food and the exotic scents of foreign perfumes. It was a sensory overload, leaving her very much at a loss.

But she stood overwhelmed for only a brief moment. It took no more than a few seconds for her burgeoning curiosity to take over. The adults following her watched with warm smiles as her eyes began to sparkle.

"So, my lady, where shall we begin?" Geord was first among all of them, lending his voice a dramatic flair and offering Misha an arm.

Misha blinked in surprise, but she quickly and happily accepted the gesture, all but jumping on him. "Food! I want to eat something. If this city is famous for something, then I want to try that!"

"Got it," Geord laughed, unable to contain himself at her energetic response. In short order, he escorted Misha over to a corner of the market mainly containing food stalls.

Seafood skewers, fried meats covered in all sorts of sauces and spices, all sorts of dishes featuring grains, a bright red soup in which

snow-white dumplings floated, a thin dough wrapped tight around piles of meats and vegetables... There were all kinds of foods she had never seen before. After taking a look around, she decided to start with the steamed buns, one of the many things she hadn't seen before. About the size of her own hand, the warm bun was softer than bread. Taking one in both hands, she bit into it to find it filled with a mixture of ground shrimp and fish with some vegetables. The unexpected level of deliciousness had her swinging her feet from atop her seat like an excited child.

Watching in amusement, Geord offered her a drink. The chilled mixture of various fruit juices was refreshing, making a great match to the strong flavor of the steamed bun.

"Here, try this too. It's really good," Geord said, offering her a plate of grilled fish on skewers. A quick bite revealed they were also covered in salt and other spices, though the fatty fish itself had a strong enough flavor to keep up with all the seasonings.

"So yummy!" Misha blurted out with a wide smile.

Her enthusiasm was infectious; Geord's guards started bringing her all kinds of food one after another. Taking a small bite from each dish offered to her, she was full in no time.

"Aww, I couldn't make it to dessert," she groaned, gazing longingly at the stalls selling various sweets.

"I'm sure you'll make room in your belly while we're walking around town," Geord said with a laugh, patting her on the head. That brought another smile out of her as she popped back to her feet.

They walked through the market, looking over all sorts of goods from other countries and piles of rare fruit, when Misha suddenly came to a halt.

Geord glanced at what had caught her attention. "Herbs, huh?"

There was a white tent, in front of which were baskets of dried leaves and seeds as well as some that were hung up, still drying. The inside of the tent was fairly dark, so they couldn't see what was inside from the street.

"Is this an apothecary? I've seen these herbs before, but I don't know this one. They look like gilet seeds, but..." Misha mumbled.

A hoarse voice answered from inside the tent. “Those are laban seeds. They’re good for stomach pain. They look much like gilet seeds, so amateur apothecaries often get them confused. I’m impressed you spotted the difference.”

An amused old woman with white hair popped out of the tent. Her hunched over posture and wrinkled face spoke of many years of experience, but the light in her eyes was like that of a young girl.

Once she saw Misha, the woman smiled and bowed. “Oh, what pretty hair and eyes! I haven’t seen the like for quite some time. Thank you for the blessings of the forest.”

Misha’s breath caught. That was a secret greeting her uncle had taught her when she was very young. He’d told her that if anyone ever greeted her like that, she should try giving the appropriate reply.

“If you do it right, you might just make a new friend,” he had said with a laugh.

But he had also made her promise to keep it a secret from her mother. It had been her first time hiding anything from her mom before, so it had been an exciting lesson. Of course, her mother had picked up on Misha’s suspicious behavior immediately, and so she’d thoroughly chewed out Ryne when Misha wasn’t around. She had probably never imagined Misha would be left on her own so young.

Now that Misha knew about the People of the Forest, she realized that greeting was probably connected to them. Although it was something she wasn’t supposed to know, not having grown up among them, Ryne had taught it to her on a whim, and now that secret lesson was going to bear fruit.

Misha hurriedly returned the woman’s bow, then closed, opened, and linked her fingers together. She had needed to practice a lot to get the confusing, rapid-fire movements right. She then put her hands over her heart and closed her eyes.

“Thank you for the affection of the earth.”

There was silence for a time.

Oh no, did I do it wrong? Or was the woman not doing the secret greeting?

Heart racing, Misha finally opened her eyes to see the old woman

giving her a delighted smile. Making a circle with her thumb and ring finger, the old woman waved her hand twice.

"And for life from pure water. A pleasure to meet you, little lady loved by the forest."

"A pleasure to meet you!" Misha answered after a short pause.

That was the old greeting she had expected, phrases to link the People of the Forest even after they had left their home to travel the world. Those able to complete the ritual correctly were seen as comrades. Excited at the prospect of meeting someone from the People of the Forest that wasn't her own family for the first time, she stared closely at the old woman.

"But...your eyes aren't green," Misha said, confused.

Her hair turning white was one thing, but the old woman's eyes were a deep gray. Geord had said People of the Forest had blond hair and jade eyes, but no matter how she looked, Misha couldn't find the slightest trace of green.

The woman divulged her secret with a sly smile. "My husband had the same jade eyes you do. He passed away a long time ago, though." She then glanced over at Geord over Misha's shoulder. "Despite happening to know a lot about herbs, I didn't learn any of their secret techniques, so I'm unfortunately just a little old lady, nothing special."

Geord grinned sheepishly, releasing the tension that had built up in his body. He had been on guard after seeing the confusing exchange between the two, entirely unable to predict what was about to happen, but the woman's playful banter immediately set him at ease. Still, he couldn't help feeling *a little* excited at the prospect of meeting a third person from that forest.

I guess it was all a misunderstanding, though, he thought.

He relaxed, tuning out entirely from the discussion of herbs that followed.

Misha, on the other hand...

"What's this one called? What does it do?" Looking through the old woman's collection, Misha became a nonstop barrage of questions. This was a port town, after all. Rare plants and herbs from this country and many others were all collected here in one

spot. Misha's instincts as an apothecary were fully alight.

The old woman seemed delighted to indulge the little girl's boundless thirst for knowledge. As Misha's questions sent her deeper and deeper into the tent, neither she nor Geord—watching from the entryway—noticed the old woman craftily leading her away.

Within the small shop, watching Geord out of the corner of her eye, the woman confirmed Geord didn't intend to step inside. She pushed Misha to the side, where they'd be mostly concealed by the large array of herbs. Misha's back was still partially visible, so Geord would likely not panic and come inside.

"Listen, and answer me quietly. Where are your parents? You weren't kidnapped or anything, were you?" Although her face remained calm and gentle, her rapid switch to a serious tone took Misha by surprise.

But the little apothecary could tell the woman's eyes were filled with concern for her, so she shook her head. "My mother has passed away, but I still have a father. I'm on my way to study in another country."

The woman spent some time gauging Misha's reaction, looking for signs of dishonesty. Eventually, she acquiesced with a small nod. It didn't seem like the girl was being taken against her will, and neither her attire nor demeanor indicated anything was amiss. Misha seemed to be telling the truth.

When this girl had first appeared in front of her store, the old woman had doubted her own eyes. Children this young among her people were almost never allowed to leave the village. To the old woman's eyes, Misha should still have been living hidden from the world, under the village's protection. She also seemed entirely defenseless; it didn't look like the girl knew any of the techniques to protect herself. While she did have that sharp-eyed man and his men escorting her, considering the laws of the People of the Forest, things were still quite strange.

"I see. Did your parents not teach you how to hide yourself? Walking around with your hair and eyes visible is begging for trouble."

From what Misha had said, the old woman concluded that Misha's

mother must have been from the People of the Forest. Her death must have been sudden and unexpected too, as otherwise she couldn't imagine a mother leaving her child in the care of outsiders.

She made a small mourning gesture for this woman unknown to her. Those who wandered far from the village often died without anyone knowing. They took their lives into their own hands; with that freedom also came consequences. Nonetheless, the old woman could only imagine the regret that this girl's mother had felt at leaving behind such a young daughter.

"Do you know anyone from there besides your mother? I can't promise anything, but I can try to get in touch with them for you," the old woman whispered, grabbing some random plants and pretending to show them off. From outside, it would have looked like the lesson was continuing.

Misha's eyes all but glowed. There was only one other person she knew from the People of the Forest: her uncle, who visited only once every few years. She knew he would worry when he came to visit their home and found it abandoned, but she had no way to contact him.

She had thought of leaving a letter behind for him, but she'd hesitated to leave such an important letter unattended in the wilderness. Above all, she thought it was unwise to leave evidence connecting herself to the People of the Forest where anyone could find it when Misha still knew next to nothing about them. She suspected her father wasn't actually aware of her uncle's visits.

"I have an uncle. He travels around by himself. He visited us every once in a while."

"Do you know his name?"

"Not his full name. He told me to call him Uncle Ryne."

The old woman's eyes went wide. She narrowly managed to keep herself from shouting. "What?! Wait, does that mean you are Leyas's girl?!"

"You knew my mom?!" Now Misha's eyes went wide. She had never expected to hear her mother's name in a place like this.

"Of course I did..." The woman's eyes started to tear up. She gripped Misha's arms, so hard that it honestly hurt, but Misha was

too focused on the woman's eyes to try and shake her off. After staring at each other in silence for some time, the old woman shook her head. She let go of Misha and apologetically rubbed where she had grabbed the girl.

"I'm sorry. I was just shocked to hear that name after so long. I have so much I'd like to talk to you about, but I don't think we have the time." Following the old woman's glance behind her, Misha saw Geord was starting to get restless with the two of them staying inside for so long. "Come back tomorrow morning. I'll get everything ready by then. Tell your guards anything you like. Maybe you're coming to pick up some herbs. He won't know better anyway." The woman snickered, all traces of tears gone from her eyes.

She then started pushing Misha on the back, urging her outside, but Misha couldn't keep herself from asking, "How did you know my mom?"

"We were friends. We were always together. Right up until she left the village." The woman's whisper was filled with loneliness, a desire for times long gone.

But as many questions as that raised, Misha didn't have the time to ask them. Gently but forcefully, the woman pushed Misha out of the store.

"Looks like you got a bit carried away," Geord said teasingly as Misha was pushed out into the now blinding sunlight.

"Yeah... There was a lot of rare stuff in there. Sorry for making you wait," she mumbled in reply, thankful for the bright light. Now any strange expression she wore would look like it was because her eyes needed some time to adjust.

"I'll have your order ready for you by tomorrow, so come by whenever you're free," the old woman called out after her as she left.

"Thank you!" Misha hurriedly turned and bowed her head.

"Oh, I forgot. One second." The old woman dipped back into the tent, emerging again with a large cloth. "Here, use this to cover yourself." She then used it to wrap up Misha's long hair behind her head, making a pretty headpiece for her.

She then turned to Geord, who had been quite taken aback by

the sudden gift. “We wouldn’t want to attract any unnecessary trouble, would we? You’d better be careful too.”

Geord straightened up at the unexpectedly sharp look from the woman.

“I imagine you can’t do much about her eyes, but surely you can think of something for her hair. Think about it a bit.” The obvious irritation in her voice had Geord at a loss for words.

Of course, if he knew what the People of the Forest looked like, it only made sense other people would too. As the old woman suggested, they could avoid a bit of danger by hiding those features from others. He was a bit disappointed in himself for not thinking of that sooner.

“Thank you,” Misha said, getting a shrug from the old woman.

“My husband struggled quite a bit. He got sick of it, and so he shaved his head, but that’s hardly possible for a young girl like you. That head scarf will serve for now, but you should go find a cute hat while you’re in the market.”

She then waved them off, urging them to leave. As much as Misha had a thousand questions to ask her still, it didn’t seem like the old woman was willing to entertain them. However, she had told Misha to come back the next day, so she’d have had another chance.

Pulling herself together, Misha started searching through the market again. They hadn’t even seen half of it yet. There were plenty of things to grab her interest, and it would be a waste if she didn’t enjoy herself to the fullest while she had the chance.

With that in mind, her steps became a bit quicker, hoping to cram as many new experiences as she could into the remainder of the day.

The old woman sighed as she watched the little girl disappear into the crowd. She had never expected a meeting like this. Slowly stepping back into her tent, she took a seat behind a mountain of herbs.

“So... Ley is gone...”

The soft murmur was similar to—but not the same as—the hoarse voice she had been speaking with earlier. Wrinkled hands covered

her face. Tears poured from between her closed fingers, images of that happily smiling girl stark in her mind.

"I won't regret it," her best friend had said at only sixteen years old, leaving the village with the man she loved.

The two girls had grown up together, learned everything together, and dreamed of traveling the world *together* when they grew up. But just like a dream, it had vanished the moment Leyas had found that man injured on the beach.

"Were you happy? Did you live life to the fullest?"

So often she had wanted to ask her friend that, but she couldn't get over the betrayal she'd felt, and so she'd never managed to honestly face Leyas again. She figured someday she'd fall in love herself, and when she did, she'd understand why Leyas had made her choice. Once she did, she would be able to face her friend again.

But now more than a decade had passed, and Leyas had already left this world behind. Regret overwhelmed her.

"No fair. Why did only you get to visit her, Ryne?" she moaned, thinking of her other childhood friend. Within a village full of those who opposed her decision, Ryne alone had stayed on Leyas's side until the last moment, seeing her off with a smile.

After a good, long cry, the "old woman" lifted her face again. Her bright, youthful eyes had lost their gray, now shining an obvious jade.

"Right. I need to start getting ready." She then stood up straight, the almost ninety-degree bend in her back vanishing. "Ugh, I lost the color in my eyes. Looks like it still needs work. I'll have to pester the researchers again," she murmured to herself, looking into the mirror at her side. "Looks like the makeup is still holding strong. Yeah, it would be problematic if a few tears were enough to wash it off."

The "old woman" stepped deeper into the tent, quick and firm steps revealing her true age. It was like the tears, once shed, had washed away the sentimental regrets overwhelming her. After rustling around in the back for a time, a young woman with brown hair and eyes emerged from where the old woman had disappeared.

Bringing inside the herbs and plants from outside the shop, she

pulled down the curtain, closing the store.

"Okay, I'm off, granny! See you later!" she called back into the tent, stepping outside and quickly disappearing into the market crowd.

Chapter 8: Dance for the Dragon God

It was only a coincidence that she'd heard anything. Sitting in the shadow of a building, Misha had stopped to rest her feet and enjoy a drink that she had bought. As she did, she picked up the sound of distant drums and flutes among the tumult of the market.

"What's that?" Misha murmured, prompting Geord to strain his ears.

"If you're curious, should we go take a look?"

They basically had no plans at all, merely wandering around the market at random, so there was no problem if curiosity took them on a small detour.

"Yeah, let's go see!" She nodded happily, setting out after the noise.

Taking side streets leading off from the market, they gradually made their way through the city. Passing through the streets crowded with residential buildings, they wound around corner to corner based entirely on the direction of the music—until they came up on a sudden embankment.

Taken by surprise, Misha ran up to the side, the unexpected sight of the sea drawing her close. The water was right beside them. Fishing boats of all sizes were lined up along the embankment.

Geord urged her away from the water. "This way, Misha."

Following the embankment down, they quickly came to an open square where a large stage had been built. There were ten or so people in it, and they seemed to be responsible for all the noise.

"What are they doing?" Misha asked, tilting her head as she watched the performance.

The stage was filled with children smaller than she was. They were all playing drums or flutes, and they appeared to know what

they were doing. In the center, two people were dancing, strips of cloth fluttering from their hands.

"Ah, it's that time of year," Geord said, something finally clicking in his head as he watched the performance at her side.

Misha looked up at him. "What time of year?"

"In hopes of excellent fishing hauls and the prevention of accidents at sea, people dedicate a dance to the Dragon God. I think it's supposed to be done by kids that are ten to twelve?" Geord closed his eyes, sifting through his memory. Misha turned her attention back to the stage.

"They're only ten, huh? They're pretty good."

"Aren't they?! This year especially!"

Misha jumped at the sudden shout from behind her. She had been so focused on what was happening onstage, she hadn't realized someone had approached from behind. Spinning around, she found a grinning boy a full head shorter than her.

"You don't have to watch from all the way back here. Come closer! This is the last rehearsal before the real performance, so they'll be in full costume today." With a friendly smile, the boy pushed her closer to the stage. "Someone is here to watch!"

Before she could get a handle on what was happening, she was brought to the front of the stage and given a space like some kind of honored guest.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Misha asked, sitting in the offered chair amid the sea of people busily working. She was clearly an outsider here, so she didn't feel particularly comfortable.

"During the actual performance there will be a lot more people watching, so it'll help to have some strangers here to get them used to having an audience. It honestly really helps to have people watching!" The boy that had dragged Misha there sat down beside her. Misha was quite taken aback by his maturity. "Anyway, that's what our teacher said."

She couldn't help but giggle at his follow-up comment. That was enough to help her relax.

"I'm still too little to participate, but I'm definitely going to be one of the dancers next time. I've already started practicing."

Unbothered by her laughter, the boy turned his admiring eyes back to the stage.

The kids with instruments had moved to the side of the stage, getting ready for their performance. They all wore simple, unadorned white shirts and pants. A white headpiece hung over their heads to mostly obscure their faces, but what few expressions Misha could see underneath were quite serious.

Oh. Standing onstage is a big deal for them, isn't it? she wondered, pleased.

"In that case, I'd be happy to watch."

"Good! It's really pretty."

A single loud thump rang out from one of the drums. The noisy atmosphere around them immediately went quiet. The drumbeat continued in a steady rhythm, and before long that drum was the only sound they could hear. Soon, the sound of a flute was added, then a xylophone. One by one, instruments were added to the performance, each new sound like a wave.

Among the grandiose music, two figures emerged, one from each end of the stage. One was a boy with blue ribbons fluttering from his white clothes; the other was a girl wearing a slightly old-fashioned dress. That said, it had clearly been tailored to make it easier for her to move in. It also had a number of ribbons tied to it, making it so that each time she turned, they fluttered out to look like a blooming flower or like the wings of a fairy.

The two dancers began their routine. After watching breathless for a while, Misha quickly realized that the dance was telling a story. Of meeting, falling in love, and then...

It was plainly obvious why there were high hopes for the performance this year. The quality of the music and the dancing was far beyond what anyone would expect from a group of kids around ten to twelve years old. In particular, the girl dancing had an incredibly artistic way of moving. Though no one spoke a word, her facial expressions, the way she stretched her fingers—each and every small movement of her body spoke volumes. The passion she expressed in her dancing lifted everyone else onstage to a higher level with her.

Misha and Geord murmured over each other.

"Amazing..."

"Impressive..."

The boy at their side swelled up with pride. "That's my sister. She's always wanted to be a dancer, so she's been learning since she was really small. I want to be like her someday, so I'm learning with her," the boy explained, not taking his eyes off the stage for a moment. It was clear how much he respected his sister. Misha could only imagine how happy the girl was to have a little brother that looked up to her.

That thought brought up memories of her own half brother, images which she hurriedly drove out. It felt too presumptuous to make that comparison, never mind how depressing the reality was. They had only met once, and considering his attitude toward her, she could hardly call them real siblings. From Misha's perspective, he was more distant than a stranger, someone who just happened to share blood with her. She could hardly call herself his older sister.

Feeling dark thoughts coming on, she immediately stopped herself from thinking, turning her focus back to the performance in front of her. As she immersed herself in the story unfolding onstage, the murk in her mind gradually started to recede. She allowed herself a small bit of relief at that as she enjoyed the story.

"Amazing. I really don't know what to say. It's amazing!" Misha cheered once it was over.

"Yeah. I've seen lots of performances, but this is definitely one of the best. They could even go on tour."

The children shared embarrassed grins at Misha and Geord's praise. Although they had received plenty of positive reinforcement from their parents and teachers as they'd practiced, having such a glowing reception from strangers was still a big deal. The happiness that gave them inspired a new confidence in them for the real performance.

"Is that dance based on a story?" Misha asked as the thought came to mind.

The children shared glances before explanations started pouring

out of them.

"It's the Dragon God's love story!"

"The Dragon God came up onto land to play and he fell in love with a maiden."

"The maiden loved him too, but other people tried to stop them."

"It's a really sad story."

"It's not sad at all! The two get to go back to sea together!"

Everyone talking over each other made it all but impossible for Misha to absorb any of what she was being told, prompting her to turn to Geord for help. Not wanting to intrude on the conversation the children were having, Geord had stepped away to talk with the other adults, but seeing her confusion, he came back to Misha's side.

"No one can understand you if you talk over each other like that. Who knows the story best?" he prompted.

The children looked back and forth, uneasy at the sudden arrival of an unfamiliar adult. After a short time, the girl who'd been dancing stepped forward.

"It's based on a legend that's been passed down around here," she said, shy and quiet. No sign of the bold aura she had onstage when she was dancing remained. If she hadn't been wearing the same outfit, they probably never would have guessed she was the same person. But if she was able to dance the story so passionately, it only made sense that she knew it better than anyone else.

As quiet as she was, her explanation was clear and precise, and even the noisier kids stopped what they were doing to listen to her.

Long, long ago, when this city was still a small fishing village, there was a maiden, beautiful inside and out. Everyone in the village treasured her dearly.

One day when she had grown up, a young man washed ashore nearby. He was also very beautiful, and the maiden fell in love with him at first sight. The man was injured, and when he awoke, he couldn't remember anything. Assuming he had been shipwrecked in the storm the night before, the villagers took pity on him and decided to help. Naturally, the maiden worked very hard to look after him.

The man quickly fell in love with the maiden too. The villagers were a bit wary of him at first, since they had no idea who he was or where he was from, but once he recovered, he started working hard to repay the villagers for saving him. Gradually he worked his way into their hearts. They all watched as the relationship between the two blossomed. Time passed, and they eventually decided to get married. The villagers celebrated happily alongside them. They would have the wedding ceremony on the next full moon.

At the same time, the local lord's son heard rumors about the maiden's beauty, and so he came to the village; he also fell in love at first sight. In an attempt to win the maiden for himself, he had the man she was to marry thrown into prison for crimes he didn't commit. He then told the maiden that if she were to marry him, he would let the man go.

The maiden cried, and cried, and cried. She didn't want to marry anyone other than the man she loved. But at this rate, he was going to be executed despite doing nothing wrong. In the end, her desire to save him won, and so she agreed to the terms.

The lord's son was overjoyed, and he promised to set the man free. However, fearing that once free, the man would try to take the maiden back, the lord's son had his guards tie him up and throw him off a cliff into the sea.

Oblivious to all this happening, the maiden prayed for the man's safe return as she prepared a wedding dress for herself. Eyes filled with tears, she made mistakes over and over, pricking herself and leaving her white dress covered in little bloodstains.

The day of the full moon arrived, but as the wedding progressed, the maiden found herself unable to bring herself to say the vows the priest offered her. Enraged at her unwillingness to cooperate, the lord's son told her about how the man she loved had been thrown into the sea.

"The man you love is dead."

Shocked by the sudden revelation, the maiden ran out of the temple and to the cliff from which he had been thrown, and she immediately threw herself into the sea after him. The people chasing after her could only cry out in sorrow as they watched it all happen.

But as she disappeared beneath the waves, a miracle occurred. The water below began to shine, and the man rose from the water, the maiden in his arms. The man she had fallen in love with had actually been the Dragon God in human form.

After falling in love with her, the Dragon God had wanted to take her home with him, but after growing so close with the villagers, and seeing just how much they treasured her, he had been loath to take her away from them. Instead, he'd resolved himself to live on land with them.

Seeing the two they thought dead were alive, the villagers all celebrated. After the Dragon God punished the lord's son for his lies, he and the maiden finally married. The two returned to the sea, where they would protect the villagers from the dangerous waters.

"So, to thank the Dragon God for his protection and to celebrate their happiness, we perform this dance." A soft smile rose to the girl's face as she finished her story.

Misha sighed in admiration. "So the Dragon God loves this city, then."

The storyteller nodded happily. "Yes, I hope so. I really love this story, so I've always wanted to do this dance," she replied, eyes shining and hands clasped in front of her chest.

Misha grinned, recognizing that exact same light from the eyes of the girl's younger brother.

They both really have something they admire.

The children invited Misha to watch the real performance they would be giving in a couple days, at which Misha turned to Geord. He was the one in charge of their trip, so it was really up to him.

"Why not? It's not like we're in a hurry."

Geord could practically hear a certain someone screaming back in Redford as he said that, but Misha's face lit up, totally oblivious to what was happening behind the scenes.

"Then I'll definitely be there!"

The children cheered at her proclamation. They invited her to come watch their practice the next day as well, so Misha decided she would bring some kind of present for them. Her plans to get

something the children would like from the market had her in a bit of a giddy mood.

All the while Geord watched from the sidelines.

Kids really do best around other kids, don't they?

Chapter 9: At Sunrise

The world was blue. The wavering light made it clear she was underwater, but strangely enough, she could still breathe fine, giving Misha a vague understanding that she was in a dream.

Hearing the faint sound of sobbing, she spun her head to find where it was coming from. She found someone sitting in the sand, wearing loose white robes. He had long hair that faded into a deep blue to match the water around them. Although she couldn't see this person's face, she could instinctively tell it belonged to a man.

He was holding someone in his arms—a person in a beautiful lace white dress with a matching veil, reminiscent of a wedding dress. Pressing the veiled head to his chest, he held it tight as he cried, as if trying to protect the person in his arms.

Anyone's heart would break at the sight. Between his sobs, the man kept repeating someone's name, but Misha couldn't quite hear it.

Oh... He must have lost someone he loved.

She knew what that was like; she had heard the same grieving sobs from another person recently.

Don't cry, she tried to say, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't get the words to come out. She wanted to walk over and put a comforting hand on his back, but she couldn't move a muscle. All she could do was stand there and watch him in his grief.

As if the man's sorrow were contagious, Misha soon began crying herself, her tears floating away into the sea.

Don't cry... Don't cry...

If only there was a way for her to comfort him, but she was frozen in place and voiceless.

I know what you're going through. It's really hard to face that alone...

But she couldn't do anything. All she could do was stand there

and watch the sad, lonely figure as he sobbed.

Misha's eyes snapped open.

Disoriented from sleep, she slowly turned to look at the side table next to her bed, on which gleamed a small blue stone. It reflected a gentle, beautiful blue. Somehow, it made her feel sad.

Still sluggish, she pushed herself up and picked up the stone. After a bit of glimmering, the stone lost its light.

Were those your memories? Misha asked in her heart, staring at the darkened stone.

There was no answer, but she sensed she was on the right track.

In her dream, she had seen a blue-haired man crying in the wavering light underwater.

"Who was that?"

The stone was silent.

Now fully awake, Misha snuck out of the inn and trudged her way to the seaside before even the sun had risen from its slumber. The sky above the ocean was just starting to change color, so it likely wouldn't be much longer. Ren had woken up and followed her out and was now frolicking around in the waves. His leg still hadn't been in great shape the day before, so he'd stayed behind at the inn. He seemed thrilled to be out and about again. Misha smiled as she watched him play, the small blue stone held tight in her hand.

She had picked it up without much thought, but now she felt like she needed to return it to the water, but something was holding her back. Now that the ocean was in front of her, she hesitated to actually let it go, and so she just watched the waves coming and going.

What am I even doing?

It would be easy to just write it off as an ordinary dream, born from the story she had heard the day before. Realistically, that sounded like the most likely possibility.

After walking down the beach for a time, she found someone else standing there. It was a girl, fairly close in size to Misha herself, staring out at the sea.

"Iris?" Misha called out to her, recognizing her from the day

before. She had been the one who had performed that beautiful dance.

"Oh, Misha." Iris turned to her with a gentle smile. Her soft expression had a way of warming the hearts of those who saw it too. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I woke up and just couldn't get back to sleep. What about you?"

"This is my morning routine. I really like the time just before sunrise," she murmured, turning back to the sea.

"Mm..." Unable to think of what to say next, Misha stepped alongside her and watched as the sky slowly started to lighten.

"What did you think of that old story?" Iris all but whispered, her voice barely making it to Misha's ears over the sound of the waves. "Do you think the Dragon God found happiness?"

Memories of her dream immediately came to mind, then vanished as quickly as they had come.

"I...don't know. If it happened like in the story, then I guess so?"

Iris's eyes twinkled at Misha's noncommittal answer. "The story never mentions the name of the maiden. We have no idea who she was. It was almost like someone was trying to hide something. Every time I hear that story, for some reason it makes me really sad. Ever since I was little." Though there were no tears in the dancer's eyes, Misha somehow got the impression that Iris was crying. "Now that I'm older, I understand. The Dragon God just loved her so much, it hurt... That's so sweet. Though it's probably rude to talk about a god like that," she said, giving Misha a bit of a start.

The grown-up, mature expression on such a young girl's face made her look like an entirely different person for a moment.

"So, I want to tell him that meeting him, falling in love with him, made the maiden really happy. That's what I want people to see from my dance. But I don't know if he'll ever see it," she trailed off, and the two were quiet once again.

Misha was still at a total loss for words. Though Iris was younger than her, Misha still felt as though this younger girl was a grown-up she should aspire to be like.

As they stood in silence, the morning sun slowly rose, stealing Misha's breath away. Night was departing.

Iris suddenly lifted her hands above her head and stretched, then turned to Misha with a laugh.

"Sorry for the weird story. I don't know what brought that on. I've never even told my mom about it," she said, suddenly a bit shy. The strangely mature demeanor had completely vanished.

After Misha promised to watch their rehearsal again, the two parted ways, Iris needing to get back to help with the preparations for breakfast. Calling Ren back from the water, Misha then slowly made her way back to the inn.

Why do I feel so gloomy?

Absentmindedly responding to Ren's attempt to play with her, Misha's mind sank deep into thought.

That old legend, her dream, Iris's story—they all mixed together, becoming a mess in her head. She felt like everything would sit nicely if she could just sort them all out, but there was still one piece missing.

"Misha! Where were you?!"

All of her pondering vanished when she made it back to the inn to find Geord standing out front, obviously angry.

She had been up so early that the staff at the inn hadn't been awake yet, so she hadn't been able to leave a message. In any case, she had planned to be back before anyone else woke up. She hadn't thought her morning stroll would cause any worry.

"Sorry. I woke up early, so I went to watch the sunrise." Misha knew from experience that trying to make excuses to angry people was like trying to put out a fire with oil, so she quietly hung her head and apologized.

Geord heaved a sigh. "If you're going somewhere, you have to tell me. The duke entrusted your safety to me. If anything happens to you, I'm the one who has to answer to him."

Misha looked up at him in surprise. Though she could tell he had plenty more to say, Geord left it at that. She had expected at least an hour of lecturing, so the rapid resolution had left her a bit disoriented. But at the same time, his short reply had drawn a greater feeling of guilt from her than any lecture would have.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Hearing a much more honest apology out of her this time, Geord smiled sheepishly and patted her on the head.

"As long as you understand. Let's have breakfast. The bread they serve here is incredible."

At Geord's urging, they made their way to the dining hall. After apologizing to the other knights who had left to search for her, she was finally able to start eating.

After eating breakfast and taking a quick break, Misha remembered her promise with the old woman the day before. Peeping outside, she saw the sun still wasn't very high in the sky.

"What time do the stores in the market open?"

"Some of them sell food for breakfast, so I'd guess a bunch are already open," Geord replied, confused why she'd asked that. He sipped his tea.

Misha's shoulders slumped.

I guess it's too early to go.

Even if the elderly woke up earlier, she couldn't imagine the woman opening the store this early. Besides, it was an herb shop, not one selling food. One would normally expect it to open up later in the day.

I should have asked her for an exact time to come back. Agh, my stomach's in knots.

Misha knew next to nothing about the People of the Forest. Her mother had been an apothecary, and so was her uncle who visited from time to time, but she had never heard the actual *name* of their people. Everything she knew about the People of the Forest came from Geord. She was endlessly excited at the thought of having an opportunity to talk with someone who had firsthand experience with them.

I guess mom and dad met because she took care of him when he was injured. The old lady said mom left the village...so maybe dad can tell me a bit more.

Misha sighed, shaking the thoughts from her head. Thinking back to how her father had been when she left, asking about her mother now would feel too much like digging into a fresh wound. He would

probably need a bit more time before he could comfortably talk about their past. Honestly, Misha felt the same way.

Geord watched with a pang of sadness as Misha's anxious excitement settled into a quiet stillness, her eyes fixed on the cup in her hands.

Every once in a while, she would suddenly slip into this state—sometimes in the middle of a conversation, sometimes while just chewing the scenery. It wasn't hard to guess what—or who—she was thinking of when it happened.

Geord was a veteran of the battlefield. He had experienced losing good friends and subordinates that had shared all kinds of joys and hardships often enough. It was a terrible thing to experience. But that was among people who knew they were risking their lives, who knew death was always one step away. He couldn't say his experience and Misha's were the same. Having someone so irreplaceable torn away from you without warning was a kind of pain he couldn't fathom.

In that respect, Geord had no idea what he could say to comfort her. All he could do was wait for her to rouse herself from the mire of her own thoughts. The glances his subordinates gave her made it seem like they felt the same way, but they similarly said nothing. As his men returned to their previous conversation, watching Misha out of the corners of their eyes, Geord wanted to sigh, albeit at himself as much as at them.

"We've got nothing else to do, so why don't we go to the market for now? The morning market is more for the local people than tourists, so it'll be quite different from yesterday. I think you'll enjoy it," Geord said, bringing Misha back to reality.

"How is it different?"

"They'll be selling stuff like fruit, vegetables, and fish. It's early, so everything will be really fresh."

"Okay. Sounds good. No point in just sitting around in the inn, is there?" Misha nodded, her interest piqued.

She loved nothing more than seeing new things, and there were plenty of those to discover here in the world outside her forest, and he loved that about her.

"All right, then. Let's head back to our rooms and get ready, then we can head out."

Misha shot to her feet, the thought of what exciting new things waited for her today carrying her back to her room. She scooped Ren off the ground, tired as he was from their morning walk, and carried him back. She hurried her way down the corridor, her previous melancholy pushed aside for now.

Chapter 10: A New Companion

The market was bustling once again. Colorful fruits and vegetables were lined up on display, and homemakers could be seen across the market haggling with the shop owners. The stalls selling prepared food had shifted to things like porridge and sandwiches with ham and vegetables, food that was smaller in volume but nonetheless satisfying.

Misha walked around wide-eyed, taking in this entirely new face of the market. While her previous trip through the market had seen plenty of dried fish, the ones on sale now were freshly caught, gleaming in the sun. Some of them were even still alive, as one began to flail when Misha approached to take a closer look. The sudden movement elicited a small shriek from her and a round of laughter from those around her.

"Boil and salt them, and they're quite tasty. Want one?" a shopkeeper called out to her half in jest as Misha stared, entranced with a bucket filled with angrily snapping crabs.

Misha sighed, nearly despondent. "I'd really like to try one, but we're staying at an inn, so we can't cook for ourselves."

The unexpected reply took the shopkeeper off guard, who previously thought Misha must have been a child of a tourist. He had been expecting a cute response, like "You boil them while they're still alive?!" He hadn't expected such a logical answer.

Misha was well acquainted with the idea of taking the lives of animals to feed herself, so it didn't even occur to her how cruel it might sound. In her mind, good manners dictated that she thoroughly enjoy the meal after catching them.

"These shrimp are huge! They're totally different to what you find in rivers," she said, still grinning wide as she pointed to another bucket. The shopkeeper laughed, accepting his defeat.

"If you take it to that stall over there and say you bought it from

me, they'll cook it up for you. I'll make it cheap—sound good?"

"Huh? Are you sure?" Misha's eyes sparkled as she turned to the stall that the shopkeeper indicated.

I just ate breakfast...but one shrimp is fine, right? But, hmm, one just for me would be unfair. I should get some for Geord and the others too...

Deciding it was okay, she happily began negotiating with the shopkeeper, to everyone's benefit.

"It's so good! We had the same thing yesterday, but this tastes totally different!" She all but cried for joy as she took her first bite of the shrimp that had been cooked right in front of her. It had a fresh tenderness to it, and was much juicier than what she had eaten the day before, not to mention its rich, full-bodied flavor, a sweetness drawn out to perfection by the salt it had been roasted with.

"It's so juicy..."

With one hand holding her shrimp skewer and the other on her face, Misha's ecstatic expression caught the attention of more than one passerby, gradually drawing more people to the stall. Out of nowhere, a huge crowd descended, much to the delight of both the shopkeeper selling the shrimp and the young man doing the cooking. Misha, of course, was so focused on her snack that she didn't notice any of the commotion she had just caused, which pulled a laugh out of Geord as he bit into his own shrimp skewer.

As such, she ended up quite confused when the shopkeeper came out with some boiled crab after she finished the shrimp. She tried to decline the gift, but he was quite happy to insist that she take it, saying he had "taken a liking to her." With some convincing from Geord, she finally gave in and accepted the crab.

Not quite able to peel the shell off herself, the shopkeeper did it for her. She gave an exclamation of wonder as his hands glided over the crab, effortlessly removing the hard shell as if by magic, revealing the tender meat lying beneath.

In no time at all, Misha found herself surrounded by people eating shrimp and crab.

Ah, so this is a pretty popular place, she thought, rubbing her stomach.

"I think I ate too much..." She had only been planning on eating a single shrimp but had ended up getting carried away, rewarded with a stomachache. "Let's go see the old lady. She'll probably have something for my stomach," she muttered as she walked ahead, getting a chuckle from Geord as he followed behind her.

Geord had tried to stop her from stuffing herself, but the crab had been so delicious that she had ignored him, leaving her with no right to complain about his laughter. That said, she certainly didn't enjoy the teasing from him.

When they got to the old lady's shop, Misha was perhaps a bit more forceful than necessary when she asked him to wait outside, saying she and the woman in the tent would be discussing secrets about medicine that he wasn't allowed to hear.

Medicine could be used for nefarious purposes if that knowledge fell into the wrong hands, so while Geord and his knights weren't happy about it, the request was natural enough that they agreed and took up spots outside the front.

Good. Now I don't have to worry about what we talk about, Misha thought, but guilt did still prick at her insides.

Once she passed through the hanging herbs and into the tent, she called out a "Hello? It's me—from yesterday."

She found a path just barely wide enough to walk. The tent was filled with all kinds of plants, and since many of them didn't like the light, sunlight wasn't let in nor was there much light at all.

"I'm over here. Thanks for coming."

Following the voice, Misha rounded a pile of herbs to find a small table with two chairs. The old woman sat in one of them, wearing a black hooded robe.

"Your guards are outside, I presume?" she asked, motioning Misha to take a seat.

Misha nodded as she complied. "I said we had apothecary things to talk about."

The old woman chuckled. "Very good, very good. Ordinary apothecaries and learned doctors have plenty of secrets to keep from common people."

Misha examined the old woman's face in great detail. Her hood

covered it almost entirely, save for her chin sticking out. While the slightly hoarse voice was exactly the same as the one Misha had heard the day before, something seemed off about her. She seemed like the same person, but something was wrong.

The old woman stopped once she noticed Misha's searching gaze. "You've got a sharp intuition. That'll keep you alive for a while." But the voice that she heard didn't belong to an old woman, but someone actually quite young.

As Misha sat taken aback by the sudden change, the old woman slowly drew back her hood. Long, platinum-blonde hair spilled out of it, framing a pair of eyes the same deep jade as the forest.

Misha stared dumbfounded. She had never seen someone with the same color hair and eyes as herself except for her mother and her uncle. But as happy as she was to see it, she was far more shocked.

"But...why? Yesterday..."

The "old woman" chuckled, sounding quite a bit younger. "I was in disguise. These colors stand out a bit too much. They're too famous. See, look." As she said that, the old woman put a hand on her face. Misha gave a small cry as the woman peeled away her skin, only barely keeping it from becoming a scream, understanding that screaming would bring Geord running inside.

As the old woman finished peeling away her own face, she revealed the soft, smooth skin of a young woman that lay underneath.

"Let me introduce myself again. My name is Miranda. I grew up together with Leyas." Something in her soft smile reminded Misha very much of her mother—that same smile her mother took on when she'd surprised her.



"Oh, right. Nice to meet you." Misha was experiencing firsthand how slowly someone reacted when they were entirely bewildered. She could do little more than stare dumbly at the transformation she had just witnessed.

Until her reflexes kicked back in.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

Her curiosity was so much a part of her it had taken on a life of its own, leaving the stunned Misha behind.

"It's a kind of tree root. If you boil it and work it a bit, you can apply it directly to your face to mold another face on top. Basically, it's a really convincing mask. Once it dries, it feels like real skin, and it stays on pretty well if you don't rip it off like I just did. Unfortunately, it doesn't let sweat through, so if you wear it for too long, it'll start to get stuffy. I'll teach you how to make it sometime."

As she explained, Miranda stretched out the mask and handed it to Misha. It was kind of unsettling to be holding the face of the old woman she had talked to the day before.

"I'm sure you could dye your hair or use a wig, but what about your eyes? How did you do that?" Misha's questions continued. After all, Miranda's eyes had been gray just yesterday.

As Misha leaned forward excitedly, Miranda fished out a couple small glass bottles from beneath her desk. "A few drops of this in your eyes and your irises will change to become the same color. Then you add this one, and it fixes the color in place. But this color comes off really easily with water. Tears will wash it away too."

Putting the bottles near the lamp, Misha could see she had blue, brown, and the same gray from before.

"Did the People of the Forest make these too?" Misha had never heard about people being able to change the color of their eyes. On that note, she had never seen someone transform their face by using such a thin mask before either. She couldn't help but feel like these kinds of things far exceeded the job description of an apothecary.

No wonder kings and nobles are so interested in them. Knowledge like this could transform a whole kingdom.

"They're things we came up with to try and keep ourselves

hidden. No matter how much we mix with other people, our hair and our eyes never change. If I were to have four children with someone with black hair, three of them would look just like me. It's almost like a curse."

Despite Misha's strained expression troubling Miranda, she had to continue the explanation for the girl's sake. "What we understand about how people pass down physical traits to their children doesn't seem to apply to us. Or maybe our blood is just that strong. We don't know for sure ourselves. Either way, some people will hunt us down if we walk around showing off who we are. Many people who've left the village in search of new knowledge have been lost that way. Even though all we want to do is learn how to treat injuries and illnesses..."

Miranda closed her eyes, suddenly slipping into a story about their people's history. Misha reflected on the difficulties her ancestors must have faced. Still, even with all that hardship, they had managed to accomplish such extraordinary feats. She supposed it was rude to call that "scary."

Now that she thought about it, it was possible her mother had never told her anything about the People of the Forest because she was afraid a naive child might end up sharing that information with someone she wasn't supposed to. If others could find out where their village was located... Misha didn't even want to think about what kind of tragedy might ensue.

"But if you have such good disguises, does that mean I could have been meeting People of the Forest all the time and just not noticed?"

Miranda shook her head. "Maybe for others, but I don't imagine you would have. You've been traveling without hiding anything about yourself, right? If any of them had seen you, they'd probably have tried to talk to you like I did. Even if they couldn't, they'd have reported having found you, and you'd have a whole bunch of them guarding you by now."

"Guarding me?" Misha echoed, finding the thought a bit strange.

Why would they want to protect me? Just because I have the same color hair and eyes? I'd still be a total stranger.

"The strong bonds tying us together as a people are what have kept us alive thus far. Sometimes they are a bit annoying, but always having a home to return to is what allows us to travel the world so freely."

Misha's heart throbbed. She had never seen that "home" for herself, only heard about it in stories. Had her mother not wanted to go back there?

Sensing the atmosphere was turning dark, Miranda shifted the conversation in a different direction. "Well, I guess there are people who slip through the cracks of our information network anyway. Like your uncle, for example."

Misha stared in shock.

"Ryne is definitely the most free-spirited of any of us," Miranda said. "Normally you aren't allowed to leave the village alone until you're twenty, but he decided he had nothing more to learn at home and went off exploring on his own for the first time at fifteen years old. Especially after Leyas left, he started spending more and more time away, and we heard from him less and less often. But when he came back every few years with plenty of new knowledge to share, no one could bring themselves to stop his travels."

Misha couldn't help but laugh; Miranda's description of her uncle matched perfectly with her memory of him.

"This isn't something to laugh about, you know. Because of the way he is, we have no way of contacting him in an emergency like this. Anyway, I've told the others to tell him what happened if they find him, but I have no idea when they'll reach him. Sorry."

Misha quickly shook her head. "No, please don't worry about it. I never thought it would be possible to get in contact with him anyway! I'm just happy if it can happen someday."

"Oh? That is good to hear." Though she still seemed a bit troubled by it all, Miranda was pleased nonetheless. And with a smile still on her face, she proceeded to drop another bombshell.

"So, getting to what I really wanted to bring up, I was thinking of going with you to take care of you until we can get a hold of Ryne. What do you think?"

This time Misha's surprise was entirely audible.

Chapter 11: Miranda of the Forest

Standing outside the medicine shop, Geord and his men were engaged in casual conversation when suddenly they heard Misha shout from inside. Without a moment's hesitation, he spun and dashed into the shop, heedless of the mountains of herbs he knocked over as he cut through to Misha's side as quickly as possible. Grabbing Misha from where she sat, Geord pulled her back and immediately confronted the woman in the black robe seated opposite her, all before the girl had time to close her mouth. Suddenly staring at the back of her escort, Misha was more than a little bewildered. As two other knights rushed in behind her to protect her on all sides, Misha finally realized what was happening and started tapping Geord on the back.

"Mr. Geord, don't worry! She's not an enemy! She didn't do anything bad!"

She tried to push her way forward again, but one of the knights behind her grabbed her shoulder and held her back. While Misha's panic intensified, Miranda simply laughed, cool and steady.

"Oh my, you all move quite fast now, don't you? Such excellent bodyguards you are."

Geord glared wordlessly at the woman in front of him. Platinum-blonde hair, jade-green eyes—her features were too stark for her to be anything other than Misha's kind. But even if he saw quite a bit of Misha in her mischievous smile, he wasn't about to let a stranger get close to his ward. Recognizing he didn't have the room inside the tent to wield a sword properly, he instead drew his knife and took a guarded stance.

"No need to be so worried. It's just like Misha said. I have no intentions of hurting her. You know how tight-knit the People of the Forest are, don't you? The shopkeeper here told me she met one of our children, so I came running. That's all."

Her expression soft but bright, Miranda spread her hands wide to show they were empty. After hesitating for a moment, Geord lowered his knife.

Meanwhile, Misha's shoulders dropped as she realized Miranda was presenting herself as someone entirely different from the old woman she had been earlier. Just how many faces did she have? And what would she do if Geord demanded to see the old woman?

While Misha's mind raced through these questions, Miranda began to introduce herself again. "A pleasure to meet you, good knights. My name is Miranda. I have come at the old shopkeeper's request as a representative of the People of the Forest to take this young girl into custody," she said with a graceful bow—not that it eased Geord's concerns.

"Take her into custody? We are escorting her at the wishes of her father to the next nation over. Even if you claim she is one of your people, we can't just hand her over to you," he declared.

Miranda nodded. "Yes, Misha has told me a little of her situation. I will not try to take her from you. But in exchange, might I ask that I be allowed to accompany you on your journey?"

The sudden request sent a wave of consternation through the knights.

Geord now had two People of the Forest in front of him. What was he supposed to do? Bringing both of them back home with him would certainly make the king happy, but there was no guarantee this woman was an ally. He knew full well how fickle the People of the Forest could be. And yet, he could very much see her following them even if he refused to take her with them. He sighed inwardly.

If that was the case, it would be better if she was out in the open where he could keep an eye on her, rather than sneaking about in the dark outside his vision.

"Umm, Miranda is a good person!" Misha blurted out the moment Geord opened his mouth, evidently taking Geord's silence as a bad sign. She was determined to help Miranda get permission to join them. "She was friends with my mom. They grew up together. Please, I want to ask her about my mom!"

Misha finally pushed herself in front of Geord, looking up at him

with desperation in her eyes. She didn't want to lose the chance to talk to someone who had known her mother.

Geord sighed, patting her on the head. "I get it. No need to get so worked up. I wasn't going to turn her down anyway."

Misha's face flushed a bit, as she felt very much like she was being treated like a small child, but her embarrassment was quickly replaced with delight at the news Miranda would be traveling with them.

"Thank you, Miss Miranda."

Miranda started to laugh as Misha bowed her head. "Are you sure you shouldn't be saying that to the man who gave me permission to join you?" she replied, gently reaching out and putting Misha's disheveled hair back in order.

After indulging in that pleasant sensation for a moment, Misha spun and gave Geord a bow as well.

"Thank you for letting her come with us."

"My pleasure," Geord replied, unable to stop himself from grinning.

"Now that that's decided, may I ask about your travel plan?"

Hearing they'd be leaving after they had a chance to watch the performance happening the next day, Miranda declared she had some preparations to make before their departure and so would rejoin them at their inn later in the day.

Misha watched her go with an almost longing gaze, prompting Geord to put a hand on her shoulder.

"You'll see her again at dinnertime—no need to make a face like that. Is there anywhere else you'd like to go? Once we see the performance tomorrow, we'll be leaving this city behind."

Misha thought for a moment, remembering her conversation with Iris that morning. "Apparently, the cliff where the maiden from the story yesterday threw herself into the water is a real place. It's supposed to be really pretty, so I'd like to see it."

Geord tilted his head. "It's actually real?"

"I was told it's up a side road past the old temple. It's not an officially recognized spot, but they figure that's where it had to have happened, based on the story."

“Well, I guess we can take a gander.”

The old temple was an impressive stone building standing on the outskirts of the city. Stepping inside, they were greeted with a view of a beautiful blue stained glass window. It was hard to decipher what the geometrical patterns in it were intended to express, but the sunlight passing through it lent a soft blue light to everything inside.

“It’s like we’re underwater,” Misha sighed, taken in by the beautiful sight. Lifting her hand into the light, she watched it cast a blue glow over her skin.

“That is in fact exactly what it aims to express,” a voice called out behind them, giving Misha a bit of a start. Turning around, she found an old man in a priest’s robes emerging from a side door by the altar. “My apologies for startling you. I noticed we have quite the rare guest today, so I came out to greet you.” The deep wrinkles in his face told of his many years.

Seeing the gentle light in the man’s eyes, almost lost beneath all the wrinkles, Misha snapped out of her surprise and dropped to her knees.

“I’m sorry we entered without permission!”

At that, the old priest grabbed her hand and pulled her back to her feet.

“The doors of a god’s house are open to all who visit. No need to apologize.” He then guided her forward to where the altar stood. “Do you know how this city came to be? It is said that after those events, craftsmen built this as an offering.”

Seeing it up close, she could now tell that the altar was covered in complicated patterns and designs formed from different shades of blue glass.

“It’s the ocean?”

“Yes. They were loath to attempt a statue of a god, but the ocean is just as much a part of him, so they thought to make that instead.”

Misha turned to the stained glass again. Now that the priest had mentioned it, she could see some parts that curled and twisted like waves in the sea.

“Is this the temple in the legend, then?” Misha asked, but the

priest shook his head.

"No. Unfortunately the original temple was washed away in a tsunami. A great deal of valuable literature and documentation was swallowed by the sea that day. This temple was built after the fact, so it is not the same one as in the legend."

"But it looks so old..." Misha murmured, getting a small laugh from the priest.

"Indeed, it is. It will soon be three hundred years since it was built, so you could say it's getting on in years."

"Three hundred years?!" Misha exclaimed. This temple had been here watching over the city and the ocean for longer than a person's entire life. She could only imagine what that kind of time was like.

While Misha observed the temple in awe, Geord asked the priest about the cliff, and he kindly guided them to the start of the path leading up to it. The trip turned out to be quite a hike, the path steep and only barely wide enough for a single person to walk up.

What was she thinking when she ran up this road, hearing her lover was dead? Misha wondered as she made her way up, imagining the maiden running past her in her wedding dress. The view opened suddenly, the branches of the trees lining the path opening into a wide clearing—beyond which was nothing but a blue expanse.

"Whoa...!" Without thinking, Misha trotted up to the side of the cliff, where Geord hurriedly grabbed a hold of her. Almost shaking her head at Geord's overprotective behavior, she glanced down and immediately gulped. Far below, waves crashed onto jagged rocks before returning as a white foam back to the sea. If someone fell here, there was no way they'd be okay.

"Yeah, you'd definitely need a god's help to make it back from that..."

Feeling a chill that she couldn't quite blame on the ocean breeze, Misha took a step back. Misha could only save those who were still alive. Once you were dead, medicine couldn't do much for you.

"But the view is *really* beautiful," she said, looking over the sea while Geord thankfully kept her anchored to safety. Checking to her left, she saw the city far below, and that brought another thought to

mind. “If a tsunami took out the temple here, does that mean the city got damaged too? No one mentioned anything like that.”

Even though she couldn’t see the temple anymore through the trees, it was hard to believe a tsunami could take it away without harming the town at all. Or did the city get struck by so many tsunamis that no one felt it was worth mentioning?

There was no one there to answer those questions for her.

Chapter 12: Getting to Know Miranda

After enjoying the view from the cliff for a while, they ate a slightly late lunch before heading to the stage near the port. Unlike the day before, all sorts of decorations now adorned the stage, giving the whole thing a majestic ambience. The area in front of the stage housed a formal seating area, and a part of it had even been sectioned off as if a very important guest would be in attendance. Apparently, the lord of this region would be coming to see the performance, so Misha was starting to wonder if this festival was a bigger deal than she had originally thought.

Maybe it's more like a ritual than a festival, she wondered.

She recognized the temple priest among the adults discussing things on the stage. Once they made eye contact, Misha gave him a small bow.

"Misha!"

A sudden impact from behind sent her staggering forward a couple steps. Catching herself, she turned around to see the boy who had invited her to watch the performance the day before. He was wrapped tight around her waist, face shining as he looked up at her.

"Oh. Hi, Toi."

The boy gave a cute, happy bounce at hearing Misha remembered his name. "You're back!"

"Yep, I couldn't miss it. I brought some treats for everyone too. Do you all have a minute?" As she lifted the bag in her hands, the group of children erupted into excited cheers.

The crowd quickly surrounded her, energetically leading her away to the children's waiting room, a tent set up beside the spectators' seats.

“Aren’t there more of you here today than yesterday?” Misha asked, surprised at the unexpectedly dense crowd.

Toi nodded. “Yesterday was just the main cast. Today the background dancers and choir are here too. I’ll be in the choir!”

As Misha started to worry whether she had brought enough for everyone, Toi pulled her by the hand into the center of the crowd.

“Oh, it’s the girl from yesterday,” one kid said.

As he did, the more familiar faces in the crowd started to collect around her. The way they all moved together made it clear that their extra hours of practice had formed a strong bond between the kids in the main cast.

“Hello, I came to watch again. And I brought presents!” she said, lifting the bag with a smile, but then she realized someone was missing. “Where’s Iris?”

At that, everyone’s faces clouded over. At the same time, Toi’s grip on her hand tightened. Looking down at him in surprise, she saw the happy smile from before had evaporated, replaced by a frustrated scowl.

“Them again...” he muttered, before dashing out a small exit behind the other kids, different from the one they had used to come inside. Misha reflexively ran after him. Less an exit and more just a gap in the wall of the tent, it was much easier for kids to slip through than adults, so while Geord got stuck where he was, Misha kept running.

Peeking into alleys and long grasses as he ran, it didn’t seem like Toi had a particular destination in mind. After searching a few places, he peeked around the corner of a building to find a group of people. It was a small dead-end road, actually more like an alleyway. Iris was there, back against a wall, while three older girls stood in front of her, boxing her in. The girl in the lead, wearing a rather flashy red dress, had just shoved her backward.

“What are you guys doing?!” Toi shouted, bursting onto the scene. He slipped in to stand in front of his sister and spread his arms wide to stop them from reaching her.

“Oh my, the little white knight has arrived,” the girl in the red dress snorted derisively, earning mean-spirited giggles from her

companions.

Misha took that time to make her presence known. “Iris, we’ve been looking for you. The priest wants to talk to you.”

She’d spoken casually, hiding any tension, and her sudden interruption made the girls turn around as one. Seeing an entirely unfamiliar person had arrived, the girls glanced at one another. Deciding they couldn’t handle a new arrival, they marched away.

“Got it? I’m sure you know what’ll happen this time if you don’t!” With one last comment they left, leaving Misha dumbstruck. The way the girl had spoken was so condescending, it reminded Misha of a mean old woman.

“Are you okay, Iris? They didn’t hurt you, did they?” Toi looked up at his sister.

Seeing him on the verge of tears, she managed a weak smile in spite of the gloom she felt. “I’m fine. They just shouted at me a bit. Thank you.”

She gave him a hug. Misha couldn’t help but notice she was trembling slightly.

“What did they want?” Misha asked as the two comforted each other. She was having trouble getting a grip on the situation.

Toi glared in the direction that the group of girls had gone. “They’re awful. They’re not from here, but ever since they turned ten, they’ve shown up in town a month before the dance and tried to steal the role of the maiden.”

“Steal?” Misha got caught on a rather ominous word in his explanation.

“The kids in this town really admire the roles of the Dragon God and the maiden. All the roles are important, but those two are special. The girl who was yelling at me—her mother was born in this city but ended up moving away when she married a noble elsewhere. Her mother also seems to be pretty determined to get her that role,” Iris said, shoulders slumped.

“Normally whoever the best dancer is gets the role, and Iris is *way* better than she’ll ever be...” Toi’s face twisted into a scowl.

The siblings’ reactions were enough for Misha to generally understand.

"But this year, that girl's thirteen. She's too old to be onstage. Everyone was relieved that we'd finally be able to do it without her butting in, but she's still trying to make Iris give up so she can take the lead role again."

Misha was taken aback at the girl's apparent selfishness. "She can do that?"

Iris shook her head. "The dance is a ritual for the Dragon God. Long ago, it was decided only children between the ages of ten and twelve can participate. The adults would never let her break that rule—not that she cares." Iris sighed. Nonetheless, she lifted her head and smiled a moment later. "But I have no plans on giving up my spot this year. I'm twelve, so this is my last chance. I've tried so hard for this since I was little. I don't want it any less than she does."

Misha was taken in by Iris's sparkling eyes and bright smile. She couldn't help but find such single-minded determination beautiful.

However, children like them didn't understand how cruel the world could be. They didn't understand how much joy the cruel drew from trampling on that innocence.

"Rehearsal's going to start soon. Let's go," Misha urged them forward.

"Okay!"

If they had noticed the hidden pair of eyes watching them, maybe things would have turned out differently.

As promised, a brown-haired, brown-eyed Miranda joined them at the inn just before dinner. It was incredible how much a change in color affected her whole appearance.

Since Misha was the only one to whom she had taught her disguise techniques, Geord and his knights refused to believe it was the same person they had met earlier, believing it impossible to change one's eye color. In the end, Misha had to convince them to let her in and wash the color from her eyes before they accepted who she was.

"Was it okay to show them you can change your eye color, though?" Misha asked after she had shooed Geord from the room,

unwilling to let the others see how Miranda actually did it.

Miranda smirked knowingly as she got ready to reapply the eye coloring. “It’s not like they can copy the method just by knowing I’m capable of it. I wouldn’t tell them about the mask, though.”

“The mask, huh?” Misha winced as she peeked at Miranda’s work. She had to admit, seeing Miranda peel off the old lady mask had been a bit gruesome.

“If they learn we have ways to not just change the color of our hair but also our faces, they’ll definitely put more pressure on us to try and learn those techniques.” Using a small dropper, she carefully applied some of the solution to her eyes, then stared hard, careful not to blink until the color had set in. “This is the hardest part. I really need to figure out how to make the color set faster.”

“Are you not supposed to blink?” Misha asked as Miranda stared into her hand mirror.

“You need the solution to dry on the surface of your eyes. Otherwise, the color will run.”

“It needs to dry...” Misha murmured to herself, sinking into thought.

The sudden shift into silence caught Miranda’s attention, who watched from the corner of her eye. Misha’s behavior was likely entirely unconscious. The way she put a finger to her lips reminded Miranda so much of Leyas, she couldn’t stop her eyes from tearing up.

Oh no, not now. If I start crying, I’ll have to start all over.

As she desperately tried to resist for the few moments longer it would take for the solution to dry, Misha suddenly piped up again.

“What about mixing some spikemoss into it?”

“Hmm? Spikemoss?” Miranda repeated in surprise.

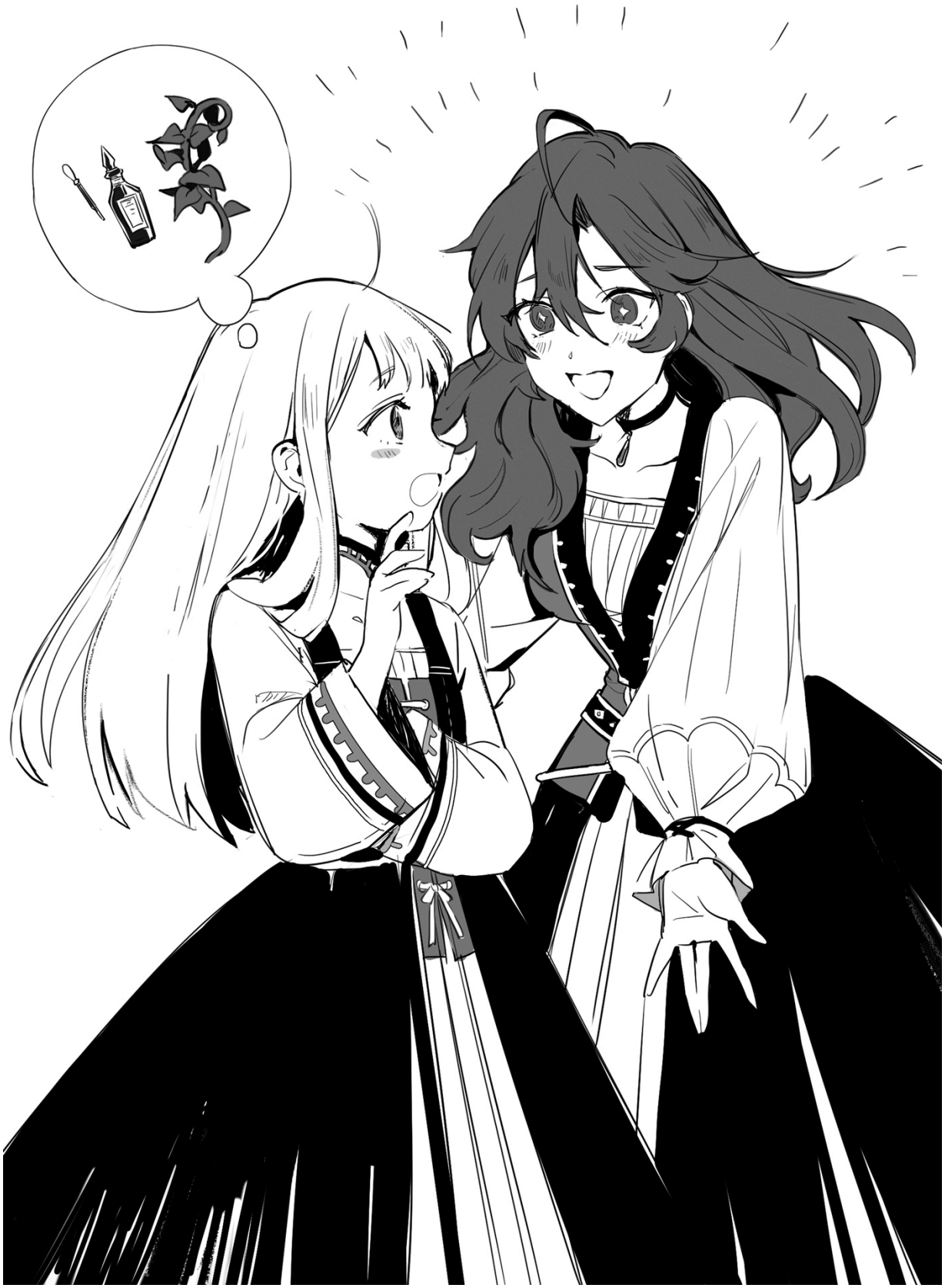
Spikemoss was a plant that grew in abundance nearby. Its young leaves were edible after boiling them, and the stalks could be dried out and woven into things like baskets. It was a commonly used plant in all sorts of disciplines, but when it came to medicine...

“The liquid you get from squeezing spikemoss makes wounds dry out, right? I was wondering if...maybe that would help...” The way Miranda stared so intently at her as she spoke was decidedly

unpleasant, leading to Misha's confidence starting to wane. She had slipped right back into her habit of discussing medicine with her mother, but maybe she had crossed the line.

But as she was starting to get anxious, Miranda suddenly dashed over and grabbed her.

"That's amazing, Misha! I can't believe no one's ever thought of that! I think you're right. That'll probably work! I need to send a letter to the researchers right away!"



Miranda lifted her off the ground and spun her around, which left Misha a little dizzy, but she nevertheless beamed at the woman's excitement.

"If you wait for it to finish growing and for the stalks to turn brown, you won't be able to get as much from them, but the liquid will come out clear and smooth that way. That's probably best if you're mixing it with something else," Misha continued, surprising Miranda yet again.

"You're quite observant, Misha. That's amazing," she said, patting the girl on the head.

The young green spikemoss plant would produce quite a bit of juice when squeezed, so normally that's what one would have thought to use. No one would have thought to wait for it to wither before harvesting it, so it would normally be impossible to compare the qualities of the liquids from a young and old plant.

Good intuition, and strong powers of observation. Looks like she inherited both Leyas's and Ryne's strengths.

Miranda felt a faint throb in her chest as she remembered her childhood friends.

"I'll tell them that too. However, spikemoss doesn't grow around our village, so they'll probably have to grow some from scratch in the greenhouse." She smiled faintly as she combed her fingers through Misha's hair.

Although they had the same natural hair color, Misha's was straight and smooth, while Miranda's was naturally quite wavy and curly. It didn't have the same glossy beauty that Misha's did. Whenever Miranda had complained about it, Leyas had always replied that Miranda's hair was much cuter. The grass was always greener on the other side, they'd joke.

"Here, let me braid your hair for you. I'm quite good at it, you know," Miranda offered.

"Thank you! My hair is really smooth and silky, so while it feels nice, I can never get it to stay! Tying it up is impossible—it always slips out. I wish I had soft hair like yours. You look like you could be a princess."

Miranda's reminiscing had started to feel a little gloomy, but

Misha's excitement rejuvenated her. The way the young apothecary complained about her own hair was so similar to the memory she had just recalled, Miranda couldn't help but burst out in laughter.

"Leyas used to say the same thing. I think you two have way prettier hair than mine." She chuckled happily as she got to work, which made Misha cheery in return.

As someone who could tell her things she didn't know about her own mother, Miranda had quickly become an important person to her.

"Hmm? What's this?"

After finishing tying up Misha's hair, Miranda's eyes happened across the glittering blue stone that Misha had found.

"I found it at the beach. I thought it was pretty, so I brought it home, but..." Misha explained as Miranda picked it up.

When she'd found out the stone gave off its own natural light, she had thought it a bit scary and so had left it behind, but she didn't feel like she could actually share that part out loud, so she went quiet. Miranda didn't seem to notice her odd expression; she was too focused on the stone in her hands as she held it to the light.

"Maybe it's a sea drop? But it's a lot clearer and harder than the ones I've seen before."

"A sea drop?" It was the first Misha had ever heard of it.

Miranda nodded. "You find them occasionally on the beach. They're formed from salt fusing together and crystallizing. We don't know what makes them crystallize in this way, though. You can taste the salt if you scratch it a bit."

"It's salt?"

"That's right. It's a kind of rock salt. Want to try tasting it?"

Misha was stunned. She hadn't expected Miranda to know what it was. That didn't explain why the stone was glowing, but Misha decided not to bring that up.

"Strange..." she murmured, examining the little stone in her hand.

Chapter 13: Iris's Disappearance

Oh, I'm back here again.

Misha once again found herself underwater, in that world of wavering blue light. This time, however, the crying figure was nowhere to be seen.

I thought he had called me here. Was I wrong?

Misha looked around confused, but there was nothing around her save this empty, silent blue world stretching as far as she could see.

Actually, if this is underwater, why are there no fish?

Never mind the fish—there wasn't even any seaweed. The ground was just silky white sand. Digging her toes into the ground, her foot easily sank in deep, but unlike during her visit to the beach, the sensation felt quite disconnected.

"What a lonely place," she murmured.

Much to her surprise, there was an amused reply.

"That's not a very nice thing to say after barging into someone's home."

It was less like she heard it and more like the voice was reverberating inside her own head. She abruptly whipped her head around, but there was still no one in sight.

"You cannot see me. I exist within the water itself. But more importantly, little dreaming one, why have you come here?"

Misha grimaced as the voice scratched once again at the inside of her head.

"You were here yesterday as well, no? You were so loud trying to talk to that illusion that you woke me up."

"Illusion?" Though she knew it was pointless, she couldn't help but rub at her ears in an attempt to wipe away the unpleasant sensation.

"Yes. An illusion born from my dreams. I suppose you could call it a memory."

"Are you that man, then?"

"In a way, yes. In a way, no. That man is a part of me, something I created to break the monotony of my endless boredom. One small part of me, washed ashore on the night of a storm to play mischief among the humans, only to have his heart stolen by a human girl."

It sounded exactly like the story of the Dragon God Misha had heard from Iris.

"Then are you the Dragon God?"

Misha heard a chuckle at that.

"I suppose that would be correct. That is, once again, only a part of me, one of the many names the children of man have given me."

"Then, who are you?"

"You are quite curious, little girl so loved by the land. Well, no matter. For my friend's sake, I will answer you. I inhabit the vast sea, ruling over all that is within it."

The blunt explanation just left Misha more confused. Was that different from the Dragon God?

"Now, I have answered your question, so it is time for you to answer mine. For what reason have you come here?"

Misha could only shake her head. "I didn't try to come here. I don't really have an answer for you. I thought someone else had brought me here."

Misha's answer was met with a period of silence. Not sure where to look, she started feeling a little anxious.

He exists within the water? He rules over the ocean? Then I guess I'm actually inside him right now?

As Misha strained to make sense of her situation, the voice returned. *"I sense something of the ocean in you, yet it is not my own blessing. Have you perhaps found something?"*

"I found a blue stone in the water," Misha answered honestly, earning a sigh from the voice.

"That would be enough. It must have dropped it before returning to me. So that is what brought you here..."

Misha got a strange feeling from the exasperation in the voice. If the "it" the voice referred to was the Dragon God in the story, why had the stranger been crying like that? Had the maiden he fell in

love with gone away somewhere?

"Humans lie to cover their own mistakes. The young maiden in that story returned to the cycle of reincarnation before the two were able to be married. Though it returned to me, it never gave up, continuing to wander endlessly in search of her. It seems after being broken off from me, returning is not so easy for it. Its incessant mourning while wandering within me was too much for me, so I have been asleep for these past hundred years," the voice explained, trying to dispel Misha's confusion.

"Does that mean I woke you up by coming here? I'm sorry."

Another chuckle. *"It is no matter. You are as much a victim as I am. Besides, the dance offering will be held tomorrow, no? The waters quiver with anticipation. It shall be a good opportunity for me to gaze upon the human world once again."*

Misha was a bit relieved that this mysterious entity seemed to be kind. Having grown up isolated in the forest, she felt a bit closer to these kinds of strange beings than she was to most people. Whether you called them gods or not, she knew from experience that nothing good came from getting on their bad side. They could be quite fickle and mischievous. A young girl running alone through the forest was apparently a prime target for such beings, so she had often found herself falling victim to their pranks. Though she would have had to admit she had been saved by their help twice as often.

But wow. This is the first time I've been able to have a clear conversation with one of them.

If this being ruled over the entire vastness of the ocean, it had to be much stronger than the entities she'd encountered in the forest. In that case, this one being able to speak made sense, she told herself.

"I am afraid if you linger here for long, it will have ill effects on your body. I suggest it is about time you return."

"Okay...but how do I do that?"

As the voice brought Misha back to reality, she found herself in a bit of a conundrum. She had appeared here suddenly and without warning, so she had no idea how to leave.

"Oh my. You are quite the handful, aren't you?" the voice

murmured.

Misha felt the water around her start to whirl. It was like something warm had wrapped itself around her. The sensation was very much like being held in her mother's arms again, which drew a deep sigh out of her.

"This may be a bit disorienting, so you may wish to close your eyes. Farewell, daughter of the forest. I have enjoyed your company. Give the forest my regards."

Misha felt her body suddenly lift into the whirling water. She could have sworn she was spinning as if she were being sucked away—until her consciousness snapped off.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on her bed in the inn. She was hit by a wave of dizziness as she tried to sit up, prompting her to give up and lie back down.

Closing her eyes tight, she thought back over the exchange she'd just had. The memory was too vivid for her to consider it a dream, especially because she'd seen the same place the day before. On top of that, she was left with a sense of exhaustion that hadn't followed her to the waking world the last time. It was a bit annoying that just having a conversation had been so taxing on her.

Turning to her side table, she saw that the small blue stone still sat there. Miranda had put a small white handkerchief under it, giving the impression of a tiny little shrine. Just as the day before, Misha picked up the faintly glowing stone, checking it over in the predawn gloom.

The Dragon God from the story must have dropped it. It looked very much like a teardrop to Misha. She thought back to the story the voice had told her.

If she went back into the cycle of reincarnation, that means the maiden died, right? If the Dragon God was left alone, that must have meant he didn't make it in time. I guess the maiden died when she jumped into the ocean? That would explain why he was crying while holding a person in a wedding dress. I wonder if he destroyed the city with a tsunami out of sorrow? Especially since a tsunami washed away the temple like I was told. Maybe the people feared

the Dragon God's wrath, so they rewrote the story when they rebuilt the town...?

Misha quietly mulled over what she had learned as she turned the rock over in her fingers. If that's what had happened, all the strange oddities in the story started to line up. It didn't seem all that unlikely either. Humans tended to fear things greater than themselves.

"So why do you come to me? Why did you take me to that place?"

The stone's only response was to continue glowing dimly.

Misha had gone back to sleep after her experience underwater before she went to breakfast. Once she'd finished eating and was drinking her tea, Toi burst into the room, taking Misha by surprise.

"Has anyone seen Iris? I can't find her anywhere!"

Misha immediately jumped up and ran over to his side. His shoulders were heaving from the exertion of running, and his face was terribly pale. Putting a calming hand on his shoulder, she gave him a cup of water and urged him to drink. She could tell he'd collapse any second now from the chaos between his mind and body.

He must have been parched, as he gulped down the water so fast it triggered a coughing fit. Misha gave him a forceful pat on the back.

"It's okay, Toi. Calm down. Can you tell me what happened?"

His anxiety pulled down by Misha's calm voice, Toi took a few deep breaths before turning a pleading expression on her.

"Since the dance today is part of a ritual, Iris and the dancer playing the Dragon God had to do a ceremony this morning. They got up before sunrise to go to the temple where they enter a spring for purification one at a time. Iris went in and didn't come out for a while, so the priest went to check on her, but no one was there. They searched the whole temple but didn't find her...and..."

As Toi broke down in tears, Misha wrapped him in a hug.

"No matter where we look...we can't find her... That mean girl said Iris got scared and ran away, but there's no way that's true. I know how hard Iris has been working for this..."

Misha nodded as Toi managed to explain between sobs. Anyone who'd seen the light in Iris's eyes would have felt the same way Toi did.

"Something must have happened. There's no way she'd run away. Misha, please help! You have to find her!" Toi's cry echoed throughout the dining hall.

Misha turned to Geord before giving another firm nod to the boy. "Of course. We'll find her together. Don't worry." Misha nodded, determination clear as day on her face. "First of all, searching at random won't help. Let's start at the temple. We might find something there, right?"

Toi nodded as Misha rubbed his back. He tried to stand, but he'd been running nonstop since he heard the news his sister had gone missing. His knees collapsed under him, dropping him back into his seat.

Staring at his own useless legs, before he could even make a second attempt, he felt himself lifted into the air.

"I'll give you a lift—so long as you don't wriggle around." Geord grinned affectionately at the stiff boy.

"Thank you..." Toi replied, finally relaxing. Although he was embarrassed to be carried around like a small child, he knew it wasn't worth the time arguing over it, and so he let Geord carry him.

We need to find her as soon as possible. I don't care if they make fun of me after! he thought.

He didn't hesitate to throw away his pride as a young boy. That said, a small part of him still hoped that none of his friends saw him being carried around like a baby.

Understanding the boy's feelings, Geord wasted no time with chitchat, immediately setting off for the temple. The speed with which he ran wasn't just from the urgency of the situation.

When they arrived at the temple, they found it in an uproar. The ritual dance was to start at precisely noon, yet the maiden who would be at the heart of the whole thing was nowhere to be found.

"Come on! I'm telling you, I'll do it for her! There's no point wasting time looking for a coward!"

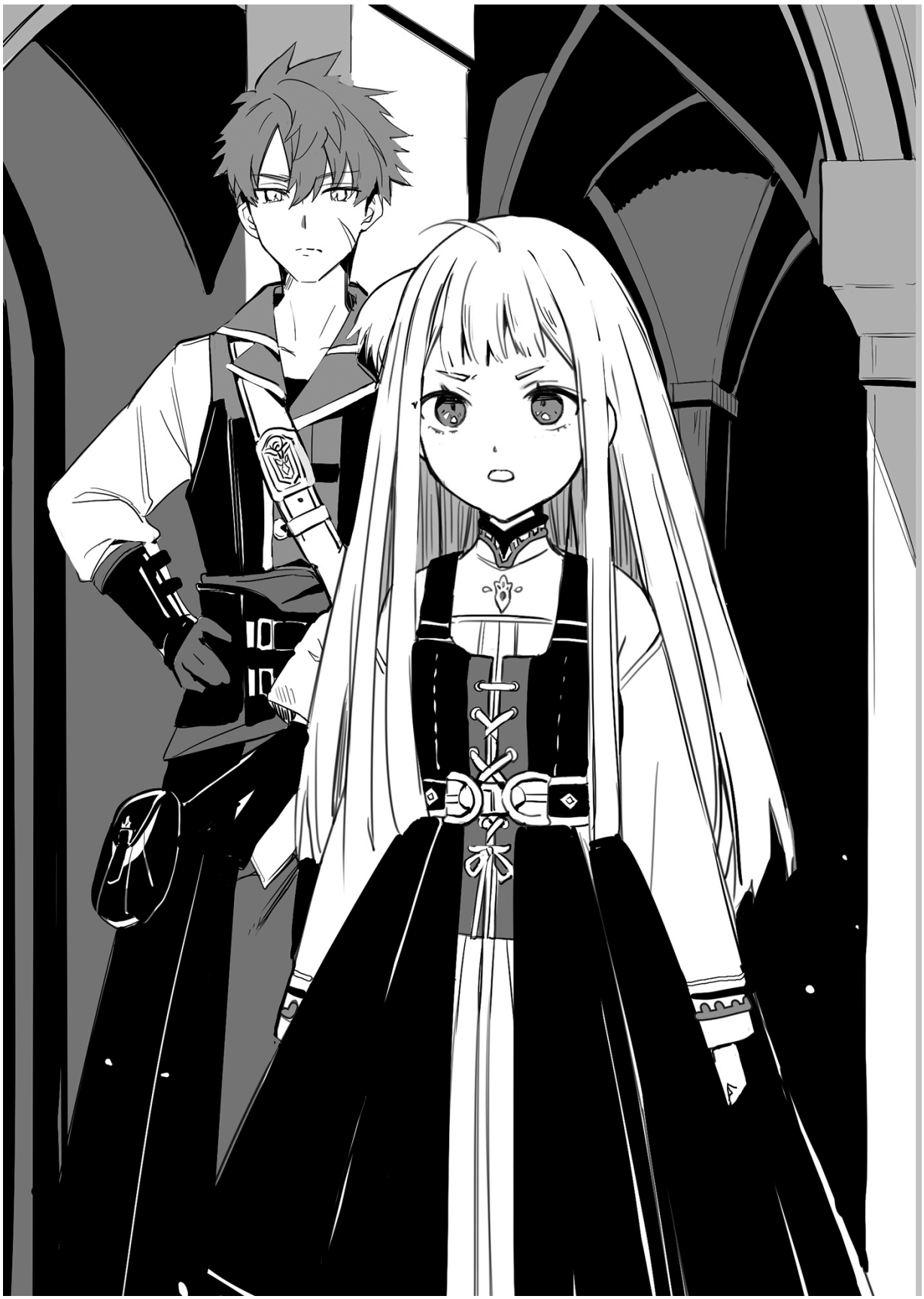
Misha frowned at the girl shouting in the midst of all the tumult. It was far too convenient for her to be here right when Iris had disappeared.

"Shut up! You don't belong here! You're not even from this city!" Toi shouted from Geord's arms. As the one most worried about Iris, he was the most infuriated by her attitude. "I bet you did something to her so you could take her place! Give me back my sister!"

Fear briefly flashed over the girl's face but was quickly replaced by a derisive sneer. "What, you have proof I did something? Stop with the false accusations. You sound like a fool!"

But Misha didn't miss the wavering in her eyes as she spoke. A stubborn, prideful girl like her shouldn't have been so shaken by a lie. Misha was all but sure she was involved somehow. If she hadn't been, that accusation should have infuriated her.

"Oh? Then why are you here?" Misha asked, her voice calm and collected.



“Why...?” The girl hesitated.

“You’re a total outsider, right? You’re not related to the temple, and you’re not in Iris’s family. So why are you here? Who told you that Iris was missing?” Misha’s voice and gaze grew steadily colder, and as it did, the chaos around them started to quiet.

“B-Because...I noticed the temple was really noisy, so...”

As the girl tried to come up with an excuse, Misha stepped up to her. “I heard there was a purification ceremony held early in the morning. Outsiders wouldn’t be allowed in at that time, right? Even Iris’s own little brother had to wait at home. And this temple is outside the city. How would you have ever noticed the temple was noisy?” Stopping a single pace away, Misha stared hard into the girl’s eyes. “It’s almost like you knew Iris was going to disappear.”

The girl gulped, tensing up under Misha’s glare to the point that she couldn’t move. She was terrified. She didn’t know why, but something about those jade-green eyes felt like they were seeing right through her.

“I... I don’t know anything! All I told them was that she’d be alone in the morning...!” The girl’s hands immediately clapped over her mouth as she realized what she’d said, but it was too late.

Misha’s eyes turned distant. “Meaning someone else was after her too.”

The moment Misha looked away, the girl dropped to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“Just to be sure, is your family really rich, Toi? Enough that someone could expect to get a ransom?”

Toi shook his head vigorously. “No, we’re just fishermen. We don’t have that kind of money!”

Misha nodded once. “That’s what I thought. The timing would be too strange anyway. Why would they kidnap someone when it would be so obvious?” Misha closed her eyes, murmuring to herself. “In that case, this must be specifically to disrupt the ritual. But why?”

Everyone standing around watched silently as the young apothecary sank into thought. Somehow everyone in the temple had been caught up in her rhythm, but lost in her head as she was, Misha didn’t even notice.

Dancers were selected for their skill. Iris was the best in years. It was the morning of the ritual. The priest had said it had been almost three hundred years since the construction of the new temple...if the myth was true. But Misha had learned from the ruler of the ocean that the story had been distorted.

Misha turned to the priest. “Why was the temple rebuilt?”

The old priest blinked in surprise, hesitating a moment before replying, “We were told a tsunami struck the city, destroying it. Is that detail important?”

“Is there a record of when that tsunami happened?”

The priest shook his head. “I am sorry, I am not a local. I was assigned here from the main temple, so I do not know the details. I heard that half of the city was destroyed by the tsunami, though. It was a chaotic time, so the records of it are quite vague.”

Misha shifted her gaze away from the priest to another elderly man nearby.

“Do you know?”

The man was clearly uncomfortable with her staring at him. “It was so long ago that I can’t say for sure, but I believe I heard it was the year Dawn Moon 956. What does that mean?”

“That’s what I thought—it’s been exactly three hundred years. This year is the turning point.” Misha’s gaze turned sharp. Then she said to Geord, “I think Iris is in real danger.”

Her declaration sent a ripple through the crowd once again.

Chapter 14: Searching for a Clue

Seeing Toi freeze out of the corner of his eye, Geord turned to Misha. "Can I ask why you think she's in danger?"

"I don't have any proof, but this timing is too suspicious. This was supposed to be a ritual offered to the Dragon God. It's a story about overcoming hardship and finding happiness. That's what the dance is trying to express—that, prayers, and thankfulness. But is that story *true*?"

Darkness passed over the faces of the locals as Misha cast doubt on the legend that underlaid their prosperity as a city, but she continued, heedless of them.

"Don't you think it's strange? There was a tsunami big enough to wash away half of the city, which also washed away records. But if this city was under the Dragon God's protection, why was it hit by a tsunami in the first place? And you can't say that the tsunami happened before the legend, because the priest already told us that wasn't the case."

That was what had sounded so off about the story. The wedding ceremony had happened here, but the original building had been destroyed by a tsunami. This temple was built after the fact. It made no sense that a tsunami would strike a city that the Dragon God was protecting.

"Someone told me that the legend was made up. That the maiden was 'returned to the cycle of reincarnation.' If that's true, then everything would line up. The Dragon God sent the tsunami because he was devastated by the loss of his loved one. Afraid of his wrath, the people began holding rituals to appease him. They created a happier version of the story, hoping that would be some consolation to him..."

Silence settled over the temple. With the records of that time lost, there was no way to prove or disprove her argument. Three hundred

years was just too long a time frame. Even so, Misha's words resounded with the listeners, echoing with every semblance of truth.

"Okay, so what? What does that have to do with my sister?!" Toi shouted, breaking the silence. Squirming out of Geord's grip, he stomped up to Misha.

"Any religion has its fanatics. This year you had a dancer so skilled that she could have been the reincarnation of the maiden, and it's been exactly three hundred years since the events in the story. I think that's more than enough reason to spur them on to action."

"But Iris is..." Toi was at a loss.

Ignoring him, Misha continued her explanation as she vacantly stared into the distance. Her usual bright, cheerful nature was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a steely mask.

"None of it makes sense. If it's a love story, why do they only let children do it? I wonder if long ago, the dancers were actually sacrifices to the Dragon God, replacements for his lost wife. That's why they only allow girls who are too young to be married to participate. They wanted to stop replacing his wife."

Misha's monologue was cut off by the sound of a loud clap, drawing her back into the real world. After a few confused blinks, she returned to her usual self, whatever was possessing her seeming to have lifted.

"So, you're saying she was kidnapped by fanatics, then?" Geord asked as he yet again lifted Toi, who was on the verge of tears.

Misha stared back at him stunned for a moment before giving a small nod. "Back when we were watching the rehearsals, there were some others in the audience who looked kind of suspicious. They seemed like ordinary people, but there was something in their eyes that felt wrong. They weren't paying any attention to me, though, so I didn't think much of them."

Though relieved to see Misha was back to her usual self, Geord nevertheless frowned. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I only saw them for a moment. Besides, they weren't there the next day, but maybe I didn't notice them again in the crowd..." Misha shrank back at Geord's scolding tone.

Sighing, suppressing the whirlwind of emotion that engendered, Geord turned to the priest. “Any idea who she could be talking about?”

“Well...I suppose I cannot say for sure they don’t exist...”

Conflicted, the priest glanced at the other adults around, the ensuing silence broken only by Toi as he started to sob. This was probably too much for the boy. Geord handed him off to one of the nuns and turned back to look over the adults.

“Either way, whether they’re fanatics or not, the little lady harassing Iris admitted to having talked to a stranger, so we know someone was targeting Iris. Please ask around to see if there were any reports of suspicious people. Also, could I take a look at the spring they used for the purification ceremony? I want to see how they got her out of there. We are quite accustomed to investigations like this, so if you want Iris back safe and sound, it would behoove you all to cooperate with us.”

The confidence in Geord’s tone finally pushed the crowd of hesitating adults into motion. No one complained about an outsider taking charge. The city was a peaceful place; the largest incidents they dealt with were drunken fights and squabbles over lending. All this talk of fanatics and human sacrifices terrified them. If someone was willing to take charge with such confidence, they were more than happy to cling to them.

“This way.”

Feeling the same way as all those present, the priest in charge did as Geord instructed, leading him to the spring. After sending one of his knights off to gather information, Geord quickly followed after the priest. Leaving the main hall of the temple, they took a number of turns through the corridors before descending a staircase leading underground.

They ended up in a room, bare of any decoration, save some windows near the ceiling to allow light in. The floor was made from the same stone as the walls and ceiling, and it dropped in the middle into a large square that was filled to the brim with water. Though the water was perfectly clear, it had the same distinctive briny smell of the rest of the city.

“This is seawater?” Misha asked, dipping a finger into the water and popping it into her mouth, to find it was indeed as salty as she expected. Looking into the water, she could see holes at each of the corners of the square, each about the size of her hand.

“That’s right. The water flows in here from the ocean. I do not know exactly how it works, so I can’t explain it any further than that, but every day fresh water flows, so it is used for ceremonial purification before various rites,” the priest explained.

Meanwhile, Geord and the knights inspected the walls, finding a small door in the corner that led into a bit of a waiting room, filled with towels and clothes.

“This is where she got ready?” Geord asked.

“Yes. The girl taking the role of the maiden is led here, then performs the purification rite by herself. Once finished, she is to return to the main hall on her own, but when she didn’t arrive at the expected time, we thought something might have gone wrong...”

“And she was gone,” Misha murmured, staring intently into the water. “Does the dancer playing the Dragon God use this place too?”

“No, he does his purification outside.”

“So, Iris was actually entirely alone. Is there any way to get outside from this room?”

“Not that I am aware of. The staircase we took to get down here is the only way in and out. The nun in charge of her was waiting at the top of the stairs, so there shouldn’t have been any way for an intruder to get in,” the priest said, growing steadily more bewildered.

Satisfied the priest was telling the truth, Misha began a slow walk around the water. She then found something of interest, kneeling down to get a closer look. There was a small depression in the stone floor of the basin. It was hard to tell through the water, but it seemed like there was some kind of design etched into it.

“Do you ever drain the water?”

“No. Even when cleaning the room, the water is left in the basin. It is said if the basin is ever empty, something terrible will happen, so we never drain it.”

“I see.” Misha nodded to the priest’s words...and then jumped into the water. The basin was unexpectedly deep, so she ended up

sinking past the top of her head at first, but when she struggled back to her feet in a panic, she found it came up to only her shoulders.

"Misha?!" Geord and the knights rushed over at the sound of her hitting the water, while Misha felt around the bottom of the basin with her feet. Then, after hesitating for only a moment, she took a deep breath and dove in.

The water was clear, so she could see quite well. Reaching the bottom right away, she inspected a small section of the floor of the basin. Although it was quite faded, there was definitely something drawn there.

But something wasn't quite right. It looked like little more than a child's doodle, but it probably depicted the Dragon God. But strangely, the head and the tail weren't lined up with the rest of it.

Finally reaching her limit, Misha popped back up to the surface, gasping for air after holding her breath for so long.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"Wait... Wait..."

Geord hurriedly tried to pull her from the water, but Misha slipped away from him, trying to get her breathing back under control. Geord froze where he was, kneeling at the edge of the basin.

"There's something drawn on the bottom. I'm going to take another look, one second."

"Okay, I'll go with you."

Misha shook her head as Geord moved to jump in alongside her. "You don't have to get wet. I'll just be one second!"

Before waiting for his reply, Misha dove back in, looking at the picture once more. This time she noticed one of the corners was a bit higher than the others. With a soft touch, a section about two centimeters across came off.

Wait...

Pushing the pieces of the picture again, she saw them start to shift around.

It is! It's like a puzzle!

Once again out of breath, she stood up, barely waiting to catch it again before dunking herself back in. After shifting the blocks around

for a bit, she managed to get the dragon's head and tail back in their proper places. Finally, she returned the small stone block she had removed at the start to its place.

The picture now showed a dragon holding something small and round. When Misha pushed on the small object it was holding, something changed. The whole wall beside the picture slid to the side, and the water in the basin immediately began to rush out.

Uh-oh!

Feeling herself being pulled in, she kicked hard off the bottom of the basin. Just as she was worried that she wouldn't have the strength to keep herself from being sucked under, someone grabbed one of her flailing arms and pulled her to safety, where she began coughing up the seawater she had swallowed in her panic.

"What did you do?!" Angry scolding quickly descended on her.

Unable to lift her head in her coughing fit, she did what she could to lift her hands in an apologetic gesture.

"Give me a break..." Geord sighed.

While watching her fiddle around underwater, he had begun to panic when a section of the wall shifted with a strange sound. He felt that his instant reflex to reach out and grab her arm before she was sucked away was deserving of at least a little praise.

By the time Misha's coughing had subsided, the basin had entirely drained, revealing a small passageway just large enough for a person to crawl down.

"I never knew there was something like this..." The priest stared in wonder down the newly revealed corridor, evidently as surprised by the discovery as the rest of them.

"If she was taken out through here, the nuns wouldn't have known anything," Geord noted. "The sound of the stone moving and the water rushing out weren't all that loud."

Jumping into the now empty basin, Geord peered down the small shaft with a scowl. "I don't know why this was built, but if even the temple doesn't know about it...I can't imagine it's for anything good." Geord stood up again with a sigh, looking over to the priest. "Do you have anything I could use as a light? It looks like it opens up farther in, so I'd like to see how long this stretches on."

"Me too!" Misha immediately volunteered, earning a hard glare from her bodyguard.

"Absolutely not. There's no telling what could happen in there. Go get changed and wait for me. You'll get sick otherwise."

Misha's shoulders slumped. Unfortunately, he was right. Her clothes were thoroughly soaked, and as clean as the water was, it was still seawater. As it began to evaporate, she'd feel sticky in no time.

"Besides that, I think it's best if you delay the ritual for now. After finding something this significant, I doubt we'll have Iris back very soon," Geord warned the priest as he took the lamp offered to him.

The priest nodded gravely. "The Dragon God is quite magnanimous. I am sure he would prioritize the life of this young girl well above the timing of the ritual. Please, be careful."

Leaving one of his knights behind to guard Misha, Geord took his remaining two men into the shaft.

After seeing him off with an unsatisfied look of her own, Misha was led to a bath by one of the nuns. After scrubbing the salt off with some hot water, she changed into a simple white dress they gave her. It was the same as the outfit Iris and the others wore during their rehearsals. The silky fabric was surprisingly comfortable.

Led on again to another room, she found Toi lying on a bed, tended to by none other than Miranda. The herbal aroma in the room was likely something Miranda had cooked up to help Toi relax.

"Is everything okay?" Misha asked, looking at Toi's pale face while he slept. Miranda nodded, leading Misha to a table a small distance away from the bed.

"When I first arrived, he was in a terrible state of confusion, so I gave him something to put him to sleep. His family has apparently joined the search for the girl," she whispered as she poured a cup of tea for Misha. "Drink. There's nothing we can do until Geord gets back."

Misha nodded, taking the cup of tea. Its gentle aroma helped soothe her fraying nerves.

"Geord's team is made up of skilled knights, famous even in this

foreign country. Everything will be fine," Miranda spoke softly, gently drying Misha's long, golden hair.

Relaxing into the sensation of Miranda combing through her hair, Misha suddenly spoke up again.

"Orchid, redna, isu...and then something I didn't recognize, but it smelled a bit like mint. It's a strange, exotic kind of smell. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Was this in some kind of perfume? What about it?" Miranda tilted her head at the odd change in topic.

"Something I smelled while we were at the spring. The salty smell covered most of it, but it was still faintly there. I'd smelled it somewhere before too. Probably at the rehearsal..."

"Maybe it was something the culprit was wearing? But if it was a mixture of those three with mint..." Miranda's face darkened.

"Do you know it?" Misha asked nervously, to which Miranda nodded.

"If my intuition is right, it's a kind of drug talked about in the old literature. Those who smell it feel intoxicated, and they lose the ability to think clearly. If one is exposed to it for long enough, it can even be used for hypnosis."

"Hypnosis?"

"Yes. It can be used to make people believe anything they are told, and also make them follow simple instructions."

Misha sank into thought for a while before turning to look at Miranda. "Could you check if you can smell that on any of the people in the temple? The mechanism in the spring had to be opened from inside. If no one went in after Iris, that must have meant someone was hiding in there long before. There has to be someone who's guiding people."

Miranda thought for a moment before nodding. "I can't make the exact same thing, but I can make something close enough. Let's use that to see if anyone recognizes the smell."

Idly watching Miranda pull out some ingredients from her bag and get to work, Misha finished her tea. As she swallowed the now lukewarm liquid, she looked out the window. The sky was a brilliant blue, as if the weather were entirely unaware of the chaos unfolding

within the temple.

"Please be okay, Iris..."

Chapter 15: A Blue World

The sound of the sea.

Ever since I was born...no, even before then, I could hear someone's voice interspersed among the waves. Not always, but just often enough to make me doubt my ears.

Sometimes it sounded like someone crying, sometimes like it was calling for someone. But *every* time, it was sad and lonely.

If only it had called *my* name. Then I would have thrown everything away so I could go comfort that voice.

Please don't cry. Just call my name...

Geord and his men returned an hour after entering the shaft in the basin. As they made their way deeper in, after about five meters the shaft quickly widened, allowing them to walk properly, albeit a little hunched over. The corridor was initially made of stone walls, and though reinforced from time to time, it eventually transitioned into a natural cave.

The path branched in a number of places, but by following the path carved in the stone by the water, they were able to find their way out to the ocean.

"To be precise, the cave opened up at the bottom of the cliff. The tide was out, allowing for some space between the cave opening and the water, but I could imagine it would be underwater at other times of the day. And there were a number of branches along the path, so there could be more exits as well."

Geord's explanation brought sighs from around the room.

"Meaning it's going to be pretty hard to find out where they took Iris," Misha murmured, prompting a middle-aged woman to begin crying. The people around her immediately started trying to console the woman, who was apparently Iris's mother.

"Misha." Geord shot a disapproving glance her way, but Misha

could only shrug in reply.

"While you were gone, I thought of something else." Struggling against the oppressive atmosphere of the room, Misha pulled out a small ceramic bowl. "Does anyone remember someone having this scent on them? It doesn't have to be exactly this, just something close."

The bowl contained a small amount of green paste, which had a sickly sweet and yet somehow sharp aroma.

"What's this?" Geord asked, taking the bowl and sniffing its contents before passing it on to the next person.

"I think it's something the culprit used to kidnap Iris. Miranda tried making a copy of it for me," Misha mumbled as she watched the bowl being passed around.

"Huh? Isn't this...?" After the bowl was passed around to a few people, one person seemed to recognize the scent—Iris's mother. Still tear-stricken, she blew her nose and then sniffed at the bowl again. Closing her eyes for a moment, her head suddenly snapped up. "The young nun that came to get Iris this morning smelled like this. I thought it was a pretty strong perfume for a nun, so it left quite an impression. You were there, weren't you? Do you remember?"

Iris's mother turned to one of the women at her side who was trying to console her. After smelling it for herself, the other woman nodded as well. "You're right, but I don't think it was something the nun was wearing. The whole carriage smelled like this. I thought it was for keeping bugs away, or maybe covering the smell of the horses. I remember thinking, 'City people are so stylish.'"

"Carriage...?" The priest frowned at the woman's words.

"That's right. I was at their house early to see Iris off. On my way there I saw a carriage just outside. A nun came out of it and was talking to the driver about something. I was wondering if they were going to take Iris by carriage this year, but when the girl left, they just walked. I thought it was kind of strange." As the woman spoke, the priest's face grew darker and darker. "Wh-What's wrong?"

"I made no arrangements for any carriage. The nun that went to get Iris left on foot."

“Where is that nun right now?!” Misha all but shouted, causing an elderly nun to inch forward.

“Sister Rosetta was in charge of taking care of Iris. I believe she retired to her room to pray for the girl’s safety after all that happened...”

“I want to see her. Can you show us to her room?” Geord asked.

One of his knights followed the old nun as she hurried out into the corridor. They returned a few minutes later with the knight’s report.

“The room was empty, but the smell was still quite strong inside. I don’t think there can be any doubt.”

“Wait—you can’t possibly mean Sister Rosetta is responsible!” the priest exclaimed. “True, she is new to this city and still quite young, but she is very serious about her duties and exceedingly kind. She is not the kind of person who could participate in a scheme like this.”

Misha gave a disquieted nod at the priest’s vehement defense. “I don’t have solid proof, but apparently the actual form of the thing you smelled can be used to hypnotize people and control them to some degree. It is quite possible Sister Rosetta was just being used.”

“In that case...” A hopeful light filled the priest’s eyes at Misha’s explanation, but the man quickly paled once Geord finished his sentence for him.

“In that case, if they’re done with her, she’s in just as much danger as Iris is.”

“And you were mad at me for being too blunt earlier...” Misha glared at Geord, who could only reply with a silent shrug.

“We have a clue as to where that nun went,” Miranda said, dashing into the room. “Some kids playing outside saw her leave from the back of the temple. They say she went up the mountain.”

Misha and Geord shared a glance. “The place where the maiden threw herself into the ocean?”

“We already checked. Regrettably, there was no one there.” As Geord shook his head, the priest stepped over to him, still pale.

“You checked the place I informed you of the other day, yes?”

“Yes?”

“Then that is not the right place!” The priest’s sudden shout made

Misha gulp. “That place is merely a place we send tourists. The real location is considered sacred ground, so it is kept a secret...”

“You have to take us there!”

Everyone ran, following the lead of a young novitiate up the treacherous mountain trail, but the group rapidly began shedding members. Those still gathered at the temple were mostly higher ranked people associated with the temple itself. Most of the young, more able-bodied people were out searching for Iris. The steep slopes and hard running were too harsh for most of the elderly and the women.

But at this stage, every second counted. They had no time to wait for those who couldn’t keep up. Ultimately, the young priest found himself surrounded only by Geord’s knights, well trained and accustomed to this level of physical exertion, followed not far behind by Misha, used to traveling such difficult terrain in the forest.

They passed by the spot where they had looked out over the sea the day before and kept heading higher up. They continued on past rugged rock faces up to the summit of the mountain, jutting out over the water thanks to the way the sea had eroded the mountain.

And on the edge of that cliff...

“Iris!”

There stood a young girl wearing a white wedding dress. In front of her was an altar covered in numerous offerings. Aside from her, there were around twenty people wearing deep blue robes, chanting a song ominously in unison. Over it all roared the sea itself. The wind howling in from the ocean brought a sharp scent of salt, twisting Misha’s face into a scowl.

As Geord led his knights in rushing forward, a man who appeared to be the leader of those gathered and two of his guards stepped in front to block the way, swords in hand.

“We will not allow you to interfere with the divine wedding. You stand before the Dragon God himself!”

Geord snorted but remained calm as he came to a stop. “Some wedding. I don’t see any Dragon God. This is no more than kidnapping and attempted murder. That’s a crime in my books.”

"We will destroy all those who attempt to interfere!" the leader bellowed, glaring.

As the blue-robed men charged, Geord clicked his tongue. "Try not to kill them. It'll cause trouble for us later," he instructed as he drew his sword.

Including Geord, there were three armed knights ready to fight. The young priest who'd guided them there shrieked as he scurried away to safety. Terrified as he was, he still moved to guard the even more defenseless Misha, behavior worthy of praise even if he was trembling too much to protect her.

Sticking her head out around the priest, Misha surveyed their surroundings. Though greatly outnumbered, Geord's group showed no sign of distress as they crossed swords with the blue-robed men. Even someone with zero experience in combat could tell the knights would likely have the fanatics suppressed in no time.

But while they fought, the "wedding" was still happening. The sinister chanting was continuing to crescendo. Meanwhile, Iris began to spin, dancing to their song. As elegant as the dance was, her movements seemed shaky and unstable. Misha worried that she might stumble off the side of the cliff at any moment.

How can I get over there...?

Misha looked around, trying to find a path around the fighting. Thankfully, Geord and his men were a big enough problem that none of the others had attention to spare for her.

She snuck out from behind the frozen priest. This was nothing new to her; she had practiced moving quickly and quietly while hunting in the forest at home. After jumping into the thicket behind her, Misha ran a wide circle around the fighting. She managed to make it around to the altar, but just as she jumped out of the tall grass, the singing came to a halt.

For a brief moment, everything was silent. And then Iris, dress fluttering in the wind, stepped toward the edge of the cliff.

"Iris!"

Misha ran forward, but her fingertips were only able to brush the girl's sleeve, trailing behind her as she fell. With her eyes closed, almost in a smile, Iris tumbled off the side.

The rest happened in the blink of an eye. Misha had no idea why she did what she did. Pulling the blue stone from her pocket, she hurled it after Iris.

"You've got to save her this time!" Misha screamed.

Iris's eyes flittered open, her gaze still sleepy and disoriented. She found the glimmering blue stone falling toward her and reached for it.

The moment it touched her hand, it began to shine. At least, Misha swore it did just as Iris vanished beneath the waves. The roar of the sea drowned out the sharp splash of her hitting the water. For a moment, it even looked like the waves had risen up to take hold of her.

"It's a miracle! The Dragon God has received his bride!"

Misha jumped at the hoarse voice from suddenly beside her. At some point an elderly man in a blue robe had fallen to his knees at her side and begun praying. The way he stared at the ocean was vile, and Misha flinched backward.

"Misha! Where's Iris?!" Geord ran up to her side.

Looking back, Misha saw they had successfully dispatched the blue-robed fanatics, who were now bound, with the ivy growing nearby functioning as makeshift rope.

"I don't know, but I saw her hit the water! We have to go help!"

The others following them up the mountain arrived just in time to hear Misha, and they immediately turned around, running back to arrange for a boat. Each one of them held despair in their eyes. The cliff from which Iris had fallen was thirty meters high. It would take a miracle for her to have survived.

Iris's mother staggered up to Misha's side at the edge of the cliff, dropped to her knees, and began shouting her daughter's name. Over, and over, and over...

Geord reached out and grabbed the woman as she leaned forward, at risk of falling in herself.

Not even the sound of the waves could drown out her wails.

Iris opened her eyes in a dream, gently floating through the water. She figured she must be underwater, but she didn't have any

trouble breathing.

Is this heaven? It's so nice here...

Wrapped up in the ocean's waters, she felt like she was being held in someone's arms. She breathed a sigh at the bizarre sensation.

The morning of the ritual, she'd followed the nun to the temple and had begun the purification rite as instructed. Stripping off her clothes, she changed into the simple white dress they had given her and stepped into the cold seawater. She then began to recite the prayer, slightly trembling, nervous about making any mistakes, but doing so earnestly and intently. The prayer had a peculiar rhythm to it, giving her young voice an odd sense of beauty as it echoed in the otherwise silent room.

Focused so intently on what she was doing, she didn't notice the oddly sweet smell that started to fill the room. Little by little, her nerves started to relax, then a pleasant sensation overwhelmed her...and she lost all sense of where she was.

Everything after that felt like a dream. The next thing she knew, she was surrounded by unfamiliar men, standing where the maiden in the legend had thrown herself into the sea.

"You are going to be the Dragon God's new bride," she was told as she was given a beautiful white dress, making her feel happy in a way she couldn't explain. She was instructed to jump into the water once the prayer was complete; it felt like the natural thing to do.

Yes. I am going to be his bride. There's nothing to be afraid of...

And when she jumped, she heard someone shouting after her. Instinctively, she opened her eyes to see a shining blue stone falling toward her. It was something extremely important, extremely precious. She didn't know why, but the moment it touched her hand, she was overwhelmed by a sense of relief.

My precious, lonely Dragon God. We're finally together.

"This time I made it..." A gentle voice echoed inside her head.

The words came from her lips without her thinking. "We finally meet again. Sorry for leaving you alone."

And the moment she felt that presence at her side, the fog in her head cleared and everything snapped into focus.

Iris blinked.

"I'm...underwater?"

She found herself lying in the sand, her veil still on her face, and pushed herself up to a seated position. She could feel the water moving and see the light dancing in it all around her. As a girl who had grown up by the sea, she had seen the sky from underwater plenty of times, but for some reason, she could actually breathe this time.

Beyond that, all around her was nothing but water and white sand. There were no signs of any fish or plants, something very strange when she thought of the ocean she knew.

"It's beautiful...but also kind of lonely."

As her voice shook the water, she felt like she heard a quiet chuckle in reply before she then heard, "Because there's nothing here."

The deep whisper had a gentle softness to it. She felt her heart skip a beat. Something told her she recognized this voice. This was the voice of someone very precious, someone she had been searching for all along.

As her heart began to race, she turned slowly to look. There was a person standing behind her. His long hair floating around him was the same deep blue as the water that carried it. But most beautiful were his equally blue eyes, lit both by concern and a joy that threatened to spill over into laughter.

How had she forgotten? How could she ever have forgotten the person she loved more than anything?

Iris leaped into the man's arms.

Chapter 16: Goodbye, and to the Future

"Bye, Misha!"

"Come visit again some time!"

"Bye-bye!"

Misha waved back at the crowd of children waving at her from the wharf.

As if those voices were pushing them out, the ship slowly made its way out of the harbor. Their departure delayed by two days, they ended up having a remarkably large crowd to see them off.

Just as she was about to board, Misha suddenly found herself showered in gifts, being told "Here, eat this on your trip!" or "Play this to kill time!" as people handed her all kinds of food, board games, and card games. They then gave her a big hug and demanded she promise to visit sometime.

Misha nodded, deciding she could just come back this way when she decided to head home. Unbeknownst to her, it would be quite a while before she could make good on that promise.

The faces on the wharf grew smaller and smaller, becoming indistinguishable from one another. Misha didn't stop waving until she couldn't see them at all. As they finally disappeared from view, she sighed, dejected, using her arms to prop up her head on the ship's handrail. But as sad as she was to say goodbye, that melancholy couldn't compare to the warm, fuzzy feeling in her chest.

I'm so glad Iris was okay, she thought, her hand reaching unconsciously for the necklace she was wearing.

It was handmade—crafted by Iris—with a bright blue stone set in it. Just before Misha had boarded the ship, Iris had placed it around her neck with a shy laugh.

"That's half of the stone that kept me safe. It belongs to the

Dragon God, so I'm sure it'll keep you safe on your voyage too," Iris whispered in her ear, showing her the other half set into her own necklace.

Misha could only offer a thank-you, wrapping her arms around the smaller girl in a big hug.

After all of the chaos from before, the men of the city put out a boat to look for Iris's body at the bottom of the cliff. However, the rough waves made it impossible to tell where she might have washed up, so they spent a good two hours searching in vain. Not being allowed to aid in the search, Misha was forced to wait at the temple. Geord wasn't with her, running here and there in the aftermath of the fight with the fanatics. That being the case, Misha was strictly forbidden from going anywhere.

With nothing else to do, she sat in Toi's room and watched over him as he slept. Apparently, whatever Miranda had given him was pretty strong, as there was no sign of him waking yet. Then again, maybe that was from the stress of losing his sister more than the medicine.

In the back of her mind, Misha kept replaying that last scene of Iris falling into the water. She definitely remembered the stone starting to shine and the water moving strangely, but she had no idea what that meant. All she could do was pray that Iris was safe. She didn't want Toi to have to suffer the same pain she had in losing her mother.

As she thought that, Toi suddenly shot up in bed.

"What's wrong, Toi? Do you feel okay?"

Without giving Misha so much as a glance, he slipped out of bed and walked off.

"Toi?"

"Iris is coming back," he murmured as Misha hurried to follow him. His voice was quiet, his eyes still unfocused as if he were still asleep. His behavior led Misha to believe he might be sleepwalking, but she hesitated to stop him, instead choosing to see where he was going.

The temple was strangely empty as the two walked through the

chilly corridors to reach outside, where a sweeping view of the ocean greeted them. Because the temple had been built on the edge of the sea, there was a stone road leading from the temple down to the waterfront. Slowly and purposefully, Toi made his way down to the beach, continuing until he was ankle-deep in water. Then he pointed ahead.

At that moment, someone floated up from between the waves. It was strange—as if something were guiding the body ashore.

Dashing past Toi, Misha leaped into the water. "Iris!"

As Misha pushed her way through the waves, Iris was slowly approaching. She was lying face-up, her face above the water, unconscious. Despite that, it really did seem like some kind of force was pushing her closer and closer to shore, so Misha stopped where she was and held her arms out to catch her.

The moment Misha touched Iris, whatever that strange force was disappeared, and Iris immediately started to sink. Misha panicked, grabbing the girl. With the water supporting most of Iris's weight, it wasn't so difficult to get the girl onto the beach, but once they were out of the water, carrying a girl so close to her own size became an impossible task. On top of all that, for some reason while she'd been retrieving Iris, Toi had also passed out on the sand.

Once she had dragged the two of them safely out of reach of the waves, she quickly examined both of them. Confirming they were both breathing and had a strong pulse, she then ran back to the temple to call for help.

Iris and Toi woke up soon after. Iris's memories after the kidnapping were quite blurry, but she was entirely uninjured and was thinking clearly now. The people who had all but accepted Iris's fate cried for joy at the miracle of seeing her unharmed. Relief flooded Misha's heart as she watched Iris's mother tearfully reunite with her daughter. And as Iris returned their hugs with a bit of a confused smile, Misha couldn't help but feel a little jealous at how happy they all seemed.

Afterward, at Iris's strong insistence, the previously canceled ceremony was held a few hours later than its original scheduled

time. The ceremony was supposed to have started at noon, but because it didn't begin until almost sunset, the actual dance happened in the dark, illuminated by firelight.

Just as the ritual began, the full moon rose over the sea, casting its silver light across the water, granting a mystical quality to the maiden's beautiful dance. The audience watched in rapt silence as the performance concluded with Iris sending out to sea a wreath of blue flowers she had made.

The moment the wreath touched the water, it vanished beneath the waves as if anchored by a huge weight—or so they thought, only to see the wreath pop up to the surface far out in the water...and then for a brief moment, a massive sea creature rose from the depths, took the wreath in its mouth, and sank back beneath the waves.

No one in the audience could so much as move a muscle until the creature's long shadow faded from view.

Wait... Was that...?

Just before someone could raise the question, Iris's voice broke the silence.

"The Dragon God has received our dance offering with pleasure. No doubt, the fishing this year will be bountiful, and our ships will find safety at sea."

It was the expected declaration to be made at the closing of the ritual, but this year it seemed to hit everyone especially hard.

It was an auspicious omen. The town had managed to offer its thanks to the Dragon God again this year. Things would be good. The children quickly made their way offstage, replaced by the priests for the ritual prayers. The ceremony continued as if nothing extraordinary had happened, and the people lost the chance to bring up the incredible thing they had just witnessed.

And so, one more legend was born in the city.

In the morning's darkness, before the sun had risen, Misha felt the urge to once again take a walk by the seaside. Of course this time, in deference to her previous scolding, she had a bodyguard with her.

"Good morning." Just as she expected, she found Iris standing by the beach, looking out over the water.

"Good morning." Iris smiled, glancing at Misha as she stepped up alongside her.

The two of them looked out over the water in silence. Little by little, the horizon was starting to brighten.

"When I was in the water, I met the Dragon God. He was crying, like he was really happy that he was able to save me," Iris murmured without turning. Her smile was so gentle, and she looked beautiful, even mature beyond her years. "He said that my soul was the same shape as the maiden's from the fairy tale, that I was her reincarnation. Of course, I had no idea what to think about that. I find the story quite sad, and it's even angered me sometimes, but I'm just *me*. Still, he seemed *so* familiar."

The soft expression on Iris's face belied her troubled words. Nonetheless, Misha was enchanted.

"Having a grown man crying in front of you is kind of strange, isn't it? I had no idea what to do! So, I just patted him on the head like I do for Toi until he stopped crying." Iris giggled.

Now that Misha thought about it, the Dragon God had been crying when she first saw him too.

Iris continued, "He wanted me to stay with him, but I couldn't. I have my own dreams, after all. And I didn't want to worry my family. Besides, I don't really understand the feelings of the maiden in the story yet. I don't know why she'd want a thing so badly that she'd throw away everything to get it."

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't really understand it either."

Misha thought of her mother. She had left her home, giving up everything she knew to live in an unfamiliar land with her new husband. Although she had always seemed happy while they lived in the forest together, after meeting Miranda, Misha was starting to wonder if there might've been a better way for her mother's happiness. Maybe in a different future, Misha would have never existed, but at least her mother would have still been alive.

"Then another part of the Dragon God showed up, saying, 'If you want to stay with her so badly, go live with her on land.' But

apparently, it was going to take him some time before he could survive on land, so he sent me back by myself and promised to come visit when he was ready."

Iris's words dragged Misha back to reality just as she was about to sink deep into her own thoughts. "Wait, then..."

He said that the Dragon God had gone back to being a part of him. Can he just split him off again that easily?

Misha recalled the being she knew as the Ruler of the Sea had created the young man from the legend, something like a puppet, out of part of himself. He had said after the maiden died, he had reabsorbed that part of himself, and it was really loud and annoying.

He must have been trying to get rid of that part of himself again because the Dragon God was so annoying. What a pain.

It sounded rude, but it *was* bad enough that the Ruler of the Sea had gone to sleep for a hundred years to get away. If he had a chance to get rid of that part of himself again, Misha imagined he'd jump at it. Especially now that he had a direction to push the Dragon God in. She didn't know whether he was a god or a spirit or whatever, but she believed him when he said he could do that.

But that wasn't really the problem.

"Does that mean the Dragon God is going to force himself into your life?"

"Probably," Iris murmured. She finally turned to look at Misha, her face troubled. "He said we didn't need to be lovers, that he just wanted to live alongside me. When I tried to decline, he started crying again..."

"*That's* how he was trying to convince you?!"

As Misha gaped in shock, Iris turned back to look over the sea. "I don't really understand the idea of love all that well...but I did feel a little happy."

"So, he got you in the end?"

"Well, I've got lots of time to think about it."

It was no surprise Iris had been a bit flustered at suddenly being confronted by a character from a fairy tale. And even if she was told she was also one of those characters, with no memories of the events herself, that would hardly feel real.

“Maybe it was all just a dream. Who knows if it was actually real?” Iris wondered aloud.

I mean, he was still in love after three hundred years. He sounds super persistent. He’ll definitely show up. His feelings were so strong, he put the Ruler of the Sea to sleep for that long...

Misha wisely decided to keep the reply that came to mind to herself. Iris was confused enough as it was. She didn’t need to throw fuel on the fire.

“So for now, I’ll just keep living my life as always. My dance teacher is even gonna introduce me to a professional dance group when I grow up.”

“That’s amazing! You’re going to be a professional dancer?” The two smiled, recovering from their odd conversation.

“Yes. If you ever see me again, make sure you say hi!”

“Of course, I’ll definitely come to see you perform!”

As the morning sun rose to cast its rays upon them, the two girls swore a promise that day.

“The weather’s so nice.”

Misha reached a hand toward the sky, still leaning against the railing of the ship.

The gentle sea winds had pulled the ship's sails tight. It was her first time at sea, and she'd be there for three days and two nights. The large ship slid smoothly through the gentle waves. It seemed like everything would be running on schedule.

"Reincarnation, huh?"

If such a thing was possible, did that mean she might be able to meet her mother again someday in the far future? Misha closed her eyes at the thought.

Ah, but even if we met again, there's no way we'd know if we had no memories.

Even so, the thought gave Misha a small bit of comfort.

If at all possible, she hoped she'd be born again as her mother's daughter someday. If only...

Misha's eyes snapped open, taking in the bright blue sky and deep blue sea. They seemed to stretch on forever, but there had to be something on the other side. For now, she had her present goals to keep her occupied.

She stretched her arms overhead, taking a deep breath of the clean sea air.

◇◇◇

Geord listened to the gentle sound of the waves on the hull as he enjoyed his nighttime drink. If things went according to plan, they would arrive back in his home country shortly after noon the next day. It would then be about three hours by carriage to get back to the castle.

He knew they had been pretty lax in their journey so far, taking quite a few detours, so he couldn't delay things any longer. Rather, he could fully see a certain enraged prime minister coming right to the docks to bring them back to the castle in person.

Now, how am I gonna smooth things over with Tris?

As Geord downed another mouthful of his drink, a knock sounded on his door. Expecting some kind of problem, he popped his head outside to find a brown-haired, brown-eyed Miranda. With her

characteristic eye and hair color hidden, she looked like any average village girl. Well, that wasn't quite true. Anyone who looked a little closer could tell she was definitely on the more attractive side, but for some reason, she still had a tendency to slip beneath notice. He doubted anyone who happened to pass by her on the street would even remember encountering her.

"Sorry for disturbing you. We need to talk. Do you have a minute?"

Though it was hard to tell on the ship, it was pretty close to midnight. Despite his initial hesitation to invite a young woman into his room that late, he quickly decided it was fine. The ladies of high society weren't around to spread rumors here.

Letting Miranda take the cramped cabin's single chair, Geord sat down on the bed. Miranda shot a glance at the half-empty glass on his table.

"Sorry, just a bit of a nightly ritual for me," Geord shrugged, getting a smile out of her.

"What you do in private is your own business. A bit of alcohol is a great way to relax."

"Would you like a drink, then?" Sensing something of a comrade lurking deep within her, Geord offered her a glass, and she happily accepted it.

Geord's particular drink of choice was a strong distilled liquor, something that could be quite an unpleasant experience to someone who wasn't good friends with alcohol. Miranda took a quick sniff of the glass before swallowing a mouthful.

"It smells great. Is this from your country?"

"Yeah. They make this stuff around my hometown. It's great with a bit of ice." The two then fell into something of an amiable silence, enjoying their drinks.

After getting about halfway through her glass, Miranda spoke again. "Why exactly are you taking Misha with you?"

The blunt question struck him mid-swallow. He nearly choked. He had completely relaxed in the quiet, comfortable atmosphere between them. If Miranda had been calculating when to broach the question, he had to say he was impressed with her timing.

“Sorry, I don’t know anything. I’m just the messenger boy here,” he replied curtly before taking another drink. “But my boss isn’t so dumb that he’d put a noose around his own neck.”

“I see.” Miranda nodded, sensing Geord’s deep trust in his king. “Well, some of our people did make it into Redford during the last war. I suppose it should all be fine.” Swirling the remaining fourth of amber liquid in her glass, Miranda continued to murmur. “That girl is still so young. And dangerous. I would really prefer to take her back to the village...”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d at least let the king see her first,” Geord interjected, only half joking. If Misha were to run away after all the detours Geord had taken them on, he’d be toast. Tris would be furious with him.

“Misha seems to trust you. As frustrating as it is to admit, more than she does me.”

“Ah, yeah. We have been traveling together for over a month now,” Geord said, taking a drink at Miranda’s sad tone.

“At the very least, it seems you don’t have any ill intent. No matter, I’ll be keeping an eye on her anyway. Sorry, but the People of the Forest are watching Redford now. Please remember that.” She smiled, downing the rest of the liquor. “Thanks for the drink. It was quite good.”

With an almost feline dexterity, Miranda slipped out of the room, leaving Geord with nothing but a wink.

Geord watched the door close with a soft click, only then realizing he was holding his breath. That last wink and smile had made the forgettable aura surrounding her feel completely fabricated. No doubt she changed her mannerisms to stand out less just as much as she did her hair and eyes.

“That’s pretty intense.”

And her last words had been a very thinly veiled threat. If the Kingdom of Redford made one wrong move, they’d be enemies. The way she spoke made it clear that she expected him to give her message word for word to the king. She could hardly have been a few years older than Geord himself, but she was such a master with words.

"Yeah, that's a bit too heavy for my shoulders. It's all yours, Tris."

Geord had never considered himself well suited to negotiating or navigating high society. He was well aware that he was just some manual laborer who'd been brought up through the ranks. This was exactly the perfect situation for someone accustomed to more intellectual work, and he had no hesitation throwing Tris to the wolves on this one.

Imagining Tris's expression if he ever heard what Geord had just murmured, the knight swallowed the last of his drink and placed his empty glass on the table alongside Miranda's before plopping himself flat onto the bed. The moment his eyes closed, sleep came knocking.

Eating and sleeping were absolutely essential to survival, and Geord believed very much in embracing both wholeheartedly when the time called for it.

No one could say who was the last person to cross his mind before sleep finally took him.

Miranda returned to the room she shared with Misha. Despite how cramped space was on a ship like this, their room was exceptionally spacious. The extravagance they offered Misha really spoke to Redford's respect for the girl.

Looking to one of the two beds lined up in the room, Miranda saw Misha fast asleep, a ball of white fur tucked snugly in her arms. Resisting the temptation to reach out and stroke the girl's hair, she quietly retired to her own bed.

The drink she'd enjoyed with Geord had affected her much quicker than she expected, leaving her quite drowsy already. She wasted no effort resisting it, thinking back on the last time she had seen Leyas as she lay down.

I'll take your place with Misha for a little bit. I promise I won't let anything bad happen to her, she whispered to the shadow in her memories as she let go of consciousness.

Side Story: The Little Wolf's Feelings

My name is Ren. My favorite person in the world, Misha, gave me that name.

I am a full-blooded gray wolf. It's kind of strange that my fur is so white, but my mother and my siblings are all gray wolves, so there's no doubt I'm one too.

But the others in my pack didn't like the color of my fur. They teased me a lot. One time while they were chasing me around, I ended up falling in a hole, where they abandoned me.

My mom tried really hard to save me, by the way! But in the end, she couldn't get me out, so the pack took her and left. My leg was hurt and I was so lonely, I cried out for help. Misha is the one who saved me.

At first I was scared. Everyone always said, "Humans are bad." They'd told me, "If humans catch you, they'll turn you into a rug," so when she reached out toward me, I instinctively growled at her.

She just smiled and told me not to be scared. When I saw her bright green eyes, the same color as the forest, my fear melted away. I understood she wasn't a scary person. Then she fixed my leg and shared her meat with me.

I ended up joining her pack. There were tons of humans around, so I worried about when they'd turn me into a rug, but I soon came to love Misha, and so I did my best to stay by her side. The pack was all adults. Misha and I were the only kids, so we always stuck together.

The pack leader was a male with red hair who looked really strong. He always took good care of Misha, and he even shared his meat with me a bunch of times, so I knew he was a good guy. He was probably my second favorite in the pack—after Misha, of course.

But every once in a while, he very rudely pulled on my tail. Maybe he was a bad guy after all.

One day while I was sleeping, a really sad voice woke me up. When I realized it was Misha, I looked over to see that she was crying in her sleep. She was calling for someone. I could tell, because I had done the same thing when I was stuck in that hole.

Did her mother leave her behind too? Misha was so smart and such a good girl, so I couldn't imagine why anyone would abandon her. And humans have all kinds of different hair. I didn't think her mother would have left her just because she was the wrong color.

I licked at her face a bit, and it tasted really salty. Her voice was so sad as she called for that person that it started to make me sad too. I crawled into her arms, sticking close to her. No matter how sad we were during the day, my brothers and sisters had always calmed down when we did this. I hoped it would help Misha too.

See, my fur is really warm, isn't it? And you're always brushing it for me, so it's really white and fluffy now, right?

I used to hate my fur for being the wrong color, but Misha was always saying how cute it was, and she spent lots of time brushing it. Maybe my fur wasn't so bad after all.

Hey Misha, stop crying. I'm still small, so I can't protect you like that red-haired guy, but I'll grow up really fast. And us gray wolves are super strong. I mean it!

After that, Misha finally stopped crying. Her face was still covered in tears, so after licking it clean for her, I closed my eyes.

When morning came, she had completely forgotten her tears. She was super surprised to see me in her arms. But I felt it was better she didn't remember something so sad. That's why when she asked me if *I* was the one who'd been lonely, I let her believe what she wanted. But then the red-haired male made fun of me for still acting like a baby! I made sure to give him a good snarl for that.

I may be small, but I'm no baby! This means war!

Soon after, when Misha wasn't around, he apologized to me with "Thank you for staying with Misha," so I accepted his offer for peace. It definitely was *not* because he shared some jerky with me! I was

just trying to help out—if he had some to spare, I was always happy to take it off his hands.

Whenever she was crying in her sleep, all the grown-ups outside became nervous. It looked like they didn't know how to make her feel better. Well, as strong as that red-haired male was, he didn't have the soft and fluffy fur that I did, so I guess there was just nothing he could do.

I'd be at Misha's side whenever she felt lonely, whether I was asked to or not. After all, we were family now.

After a while, we came across a huge lake. They called it the "ocean," and when I tried to drink some of it, I was surprised to find it was really salty, just like Misha had said. My feet sank into the sand when I tried to run, and the waves came and attacked me if I stayed still. If I let my guard down for an instant, I'd be soaked through and through.

I dodged most of the attacks quite gracefully, but I also failed a couple times. Before I knew it, I was soaking wet and covered in sand. Misha laughed when she saw me, and then she gave me a bath. But with all the excitement, my leg started to hurt again. Just after it was feeling better too.

After that, I spent most of my time in the inn. Misha brought me toys to play with, like balls and these strange dolls that made noise when I bit them, but with her and the red-haired male always going out, I was pretty bored.

At some point, Misha brought back a strange rock that glowed in the middle of the night. I thought it was annoying, so I always knocked it off the table and hid it under the bed, but it would always end up back on the table. In the end, I just tried to avoid looking at it. Eventually, it disappeared altogether.

And then Misha told me about what happened while she was out. Apparently that stone had been glowing with the color of the ocean. I came from the forest, so I didn't know much about the ocean place. Yeah, of course I hadn't sensed anything from it. If it had been something from the forest I would have realized it right away. I'm serious!

That's how I knew Misha wasn't scary—because she was from the forest too.

Today I boarded a ship for the first time. Carriages run on the land, but ships run on the water. Did you know that?

I knew carriages were pulled by horses, but what pulled ships? When I looked around outside, I didn't see anything attached to the ship, so maybe it was something in the water?

"Careful, you're gonna fall."

I tried to look and see what was in the water, but Misha grabbed me and picked me up.

Come on, I'm not that stupid.

I liked it when she held me, so I wasn't going to complain, but still.

"Misha, we're boarding now."

"Okay!"

Miranda waved at us from the ship, and Misha started running toward her, still holding me in her arms. Being jostled around while she was running felt really strange! Putting my paws on her shoulder and trying to stabilize myself, I looked one more time into the water.

I saw a huge shadow passing underneath the surface. I didn't know why, but it reminded me of that rock. Misha didn't notice it...but it didn't seem like an enemy, so I guessed it was fine.

Us gray wolves can sense danger with our noses. My mom always said, "Trust your instincts."

My instincts had never been wrong so far! Things would definitely be okay.

Misha ran aboard the ship. From the deck, we could see the ocean stretching out really, really far.

I wasn't able to help much this time because my leg was hurt, but I had rested properly in the inn, so now I was okay. I would definitely be joining Misha on her next adventure.

She was going to see the king of another country. A king was the most important person in the whole country. Misha had to be pretty incredible herself to be meeting with a guy like that!

Geord—that was the red-haired male's name—looked at some

paper and laughed, saying something about a request from a priest for his health and that it was funny how they wanted to test something out, but I didn't really know what he meant. Miranda frowned too, saying she had a bad feeling. I wondered if she had intuition like us gray wolves.

The ship gave a loud cry and then started moving slowly.

"See you again!" Misha reached out over the railing of the ship and waved.

I heard she had made some friends. She was leaning so far over the rail I was afraid she was going to fall in the water, so I grabbed hold of the hem of her skirt just in case.

"Looks like the tables have turned," Miranda said with a chuckle, but Misha was too busy waving to her friends to notice.

Misha liked the kids in town a lot, but now they were saying goodbye. I, however, would stay with her. We were family, after all.

Sure, my fur was white instead of gray, and Misha's eyes were the same color as the forest, but that didn't matter. We would always be together.

And once I got bigger, it would be my turn to protect her!

Afterword

Hello, nice to meet you! Thank you for picking up *The Tiny Witch from the Deep Woods*. I am the author, Yanagi. I was quietly living alone in my little corner of the web novel world when a kind fairy came along and brought me, unworthy as I was, all the way here.

This is a story that came from a dream I once had of a young girl running through the forest. She looked so happy and carefree that it left quite an impression on me even after I woke up. I started to wonder about what kind of girl she was. Before long, a vivid, striking picture of her had come to life.

And thanks to one offer I received, the story of Misha that had only existed in my head has now emerged as a novel, both her and her friends brought to life through wonderful illustrations. Honestly speaking, it was quite a struggle to undergo all the necessary revisions alongside my usual job, and I complained about it more than once.

But! The moment I saw the first rough sketches of Misha and the other characters, I was through the roof! I didn't care how worthy I was or wasn't anymore. I was just so glad that my work had struck a chord! Those images were absolutely bursting with a cuteness that my clumsy efforts at writing could never express. Thank you so much for your amazing illustrations, Mr. Hihara. *(Prostrate bow)*

With all that excitement, I added quite a bit to the sections that weren't finished yet. Since the web novel version hasn't been changed at all, it may be fun to go back and compare the two. By the way, I got so carried away that I ended up adding an extra thirty thousand characters of text compared to the original manuscript. I have fond memories of how much my editor panicked when they saw it (ha ha).

Finally, I'd like to express my sincerest thanks to my editor, who kindly and gently guided me through the whole process despite my

inexperience, and for my family, who kept my tofu-headed self in check through all my whining about how the work was never ending.

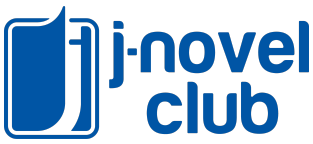
And of course, to all of you readers who made it this far. Thank you for joining Misha on this journey.

I hope we can meet again soon.

Yanagi







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by Yanagi

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