

## Chapter 10

You and Mira walk away from the hut, chatting about random things.

“Oh no!” You halt. “I forgot to invite him to the Christmas party!” Mira looks at you and frowns.

“Who? The man from the hut?”

“Yes,” you say, feeling a pang of sadness hit you.

“I think he’ll manage,” she gives you a not very comforting pat on the shoulder and moves on. But this is going to bother you more than you would like.



“Come on, get the ball!” you hear a man’s voice as you approach the cosy little farm that is Backslide. Three small houses surround a short hill, each house having its own farming patch. Not too far from them, you see a larger house which could have easily been two separate houses moulded into one. Down by the hill are also some docks the farmers use to ship their produce to other kingdoms. It is right by the docks and the hill that you see the source of the voice you heard earlier. A dark-haired man is playing fetch with an adorable little corgi. Immediately, you feel the urge to pet it. The dog notices you before the man does and runs happily towards you. It gets on its hind legs and places its front paws on your thighs. “Hi, little buddy!” you say as you sit down and

give it a good scratch behind the ears. The dog pants and waggles its tail, not dropping the ball it's got trapped in its mouth. As you pet it, you notice a pink bow tied loosely around its neck.

"Who are you?" the man asks as he approaches you. He doesn't look sceptical to the strangers petting his dog, just curious.

You stand up and face him. "Hi, I'm Pernille, this is Mira. Your dog is adorable!"

"Thanks! I found him wandering around all lost and alone, so I took him in. I'm Joeeh by the way."

The dog doesn't seem to know what to do with himself. He keeps running back and forth between the three of you. Too much excitement, too many people. Joeeh bends down and takes the ball from the dog, then pets him. "I named him Pup."

Mira gasps dramatically. "And he is a puppy!" Joeeh nods excitedly, not seeming to pick up on her mocking. "Exactly!" He stands up again. "I haven't seen you around here before. Do you have business here?"

"A birdie told us that we might find some homemade ale here," you say, silently wishing that Pup will come back to you so you can pet him more.

Joeeh looks at you sceptically, then he laughs. "Noo, birds can't talk."

Mira snorts, but masks it as a cough. "Then how do you explain how we knew about the ale?"

Joeeh's eyebrows furrow, as if he's trying to solve a very difficult math problem in his head. "That is strange," he concludes. "But if you want ale, you'll want to head over there to Monnika and Chanandler's place," he points towards the large house. "I'll come with you. We can tell them you know me," he winks. Then he walks off excitedly, almost as excited as Pup. If he had a tail, it would probably be wagging too.

"How adorably gullible," Mira whispers to you as you follow him. "What's the craziest thing you think I could make him believe?"

"Don't be mean, Mira. He doesn't deserve your antics."

The large house looks very new, like it was recently made. Joeeh opens the door and invites you inside. The house smells of cleaning products, and it's probably the cleanest place you have ever seen. There's no clutter as you can see, and the decorations that are there look so perfectly placed, you're sure a ruler was used to place them.

"You have to take off your boots and place them there," he points to a rug in the corner dedicated to putting away shoes. You'd expect to find dirt or something to indicate the shoes have been used outside, but there's nothing. You almost feel bad for dragging dirt in from under your shoes.

"Mon!" Joeeh shouts from the hallway. "We have visitors!" A woman appears from around the corner, wearing a white apron and a panicked expression. It quickly turns into a smile though, and she greets you. "Hello, I'm Monnika. How can I help you?" She gives a quick, scolding glance to Joeeh, then smiles at you again.

“Hi, sorry to bother you. We were informed about some ale here, and I was wondering if maybe we could buy some? It’s for a Ronn Duckson,” you say and Monnika immediately recognises the name.

“What’s going on?” another man appears from around the corner. You assume that’s Chanandler. “I didn’t know we were expecting guests.”

“We weren’t,” Monnika says through gritted teeth, still smiling. “They’re here to get ale for Ronn.”

“Oh!” Chanandler’s face lights up. “Then I have a deal for you. We have too many orders for Christmas Ale this year. More than we can manage. If you help us brew some, then we’ll give you some bottles of Ronn’s ale for free.” You find it strange that they have so many Christmas ale orders, considering everyone wants nothing to do with Christmas this year. Well, almost everyone.

Monnika looks at chanandler like she wants to object. “Honey, can we talk?” She then pulls him and Joeh around the corner. You don’t know if she realises how loudly she’s talking, but you can hear everything she’s saying.

“They are strangers! We don’t know if they’ve made ale before. What if they mess it up? They don’t know the routine! And you. You know how I feel about being unprepared for guests! Look at this place! It’s a mess! How do you think they feel walking into such a disorganised house!”

You and Mira look at each other. “If she thinks this is a mess, then she should never look at my place,” Mira says.

“Or maybe she should. I have a feeling she would love to clean it for you.” You both laugh, and the three of them reappear from where they were talking not so quietly.

“So, are you ladies up for brewing some ale?”

You are led into a dimly lit room with a furnace, some large wooden barrels, two large steel pots, and some sacks of grains. “Okay,” Monnika says, heading over to two large bowls, filled with grains. “We start off by making mash, which is just malted grains. Lucky for you, that’s already been done.” Both you and Mira nod along trying your best to follow her instructions. “Actually, the first thing we do is sanitize everything, but I’ve already taken care of that,” she says. You’re not the least bit surprised. “So, what we need to do now is steep this mash.” She hands you both a large net each with small enough holes for the grains not to seep through.

In the corner, Chanandler and Joeh are doing something with grains and water. You’re guessing they’re doing the malting process for the next brew. Pup is resting on a cosy blanket by the fireplace. “So, we could just pour the grains straight into the pot to steep, but we want to make it easier to filter out the liquid later.” She grabs some cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves and hands some to each of you. “This is what will give the ale that wonderful holiday warmth. Put them in with the grains and then gather the ends up and tie them in a knot. Leave some length at the end, we’re going to hang them up later. Yes, just like that! Good job!” Monnika is closely watching your every moment to see if you’re doing it exactly the way she wants it. That’s probably why you feel proud when she says you’ve done a good job. You put the mash and spice into the barrel filled with water and you help each other carry it over to the furnace. “Now we’re just going to bring this to just below boiling.”

A few minutes later, it's time to take the barrel away from the flames. You hang the net with the mash from a support beam in the ceiling, to let the water filter through. "Now it's very important to just let it drip. Don't squeeze or try to make it go faster in any way. This liquid we're making now is called wart, and once this filtering process is done, we're going to add the yeast and let it ferment for a couple of weeks." Monnika explains as she watches the wart drip into the barrel.

"Great, so it's a waiting game," Mira says, relieved for a chance to sit down. This was fun, you didn't think you'd ever be brewing ale. You sit down next to Mira, which conveniently is also next to Pup. Obviously, you pet him, and he lets you.

"Thank you for showing us how to do this. I had fun!" you say.

"How do you know Ronn?" Chanandler asks.

"Oh, we don't know him. We need his help to sail out from Fomo," you explain and take your hand away from Pup for a second to tuck some hair that was tickling your cheek away. Pup looks at you offended, and you immediately get back to the petting.

"Why do you need to sail out there? It's just a big empty lake," Monnika asks, cleaning up after you both. You had offered to help her clean, but she said you'd only get in the way. It doesn't sit right with you that Monnika is cleaning up after you, but she was also a little bit intimidating, so you didn't argue with her.

"We have boats, why don't we sail you out?" Joeh says, proud of his idea. Chanandler tries to explain to him that their docks are on the other side and they don't have access to the lake from here. It takes a while for Joeh to understand, but he gets there eventually. You think.

"Hey, Pernille. It's getting late. Maybe we should think about heading out soon." Mira says, always the impatient one.

"You're going out now? You know it's dark out, right?" Joeh asks. No, you don't know that, because there's no window in here to tell the time. Apparently, it's because the fermentation process requires a dark room. "You can stay here for the night."

You and Mira look at each other, and Mira shrugs. "I guess it's better than sleeping outside."

"That would be very nice of you, thank you," you say.

Monnika and Joeh walks off to prepare the guest room for you. You give pup a few more pets before standing up to head out of this room yourself.

"Joeh loves that dog, you know," Chanandler says, looking sadly down at him. "He was so excited when he brought Pup home. He thought it was just a stray dog, he didn't understand that the bow probably means he belongs to someone." You had looked at the bow earlier, but there's no name on it or any sign of who he might have belonged to.

"And you haven't told him?" Mira asks, now petting the dog in your stead.

Chanandler shakes his head. “We didn’t have the heart to tell him. We’ll tell him if we find the owner one day, but so far, we’ve had no luck.”

“Don’t you think he’ll be sadder if he suddenly has to give him up? Wouldn’t it be better to tell him?”

“You’re probably right,” he sighs, then changes the subject. “Let’s go see if your guest room is ready.”

The guest room is just as neat as the rest of the house, with two beds, some essential furniture like a closet and a desk and chair. The curtains in front of the windows are drawn for privacy. You both thank them for letting you stay, then you get ready to tuck into bed. The bed is so warm and comfortable, and you wish you could stay in this bed forever.

“What are you going to do once we get there?” Mira asks, and you assume she means where the X is.

“I don’t know,” you say honestly. “Hope he keeps his word about lifting the curse once we find him.”

“And what if he doesn’t? What then?” She turns in the bed, now lying on the side, facing you.

“I don’t know, Mira.” You don’t want to think about that right now. All you want to do is go to bed and sleep until all of this is over. Mira senses your discomfort and drops the subject. She turns back around and closes her eyes. You do the same, and sooner than you thought, you drift off to sleep.