

## Chapter 4



The rain had let up by the time you reach Lavish. The skies are still grey, but at least for a moment you get a break from the rain. There's no slush on the ground anymore, just wet pavement. As depressing as this weather is, the smell of fresh rain is always nice. There are fewer people in the town centre now than the last time you were here. Though, last time it had been nice and warm and sunny. It feels strange seeing the town square so empty. "Look!" you chuckle and point towards a tall fountain in the town square, right next to the market stalls. "This is where I first met you."

"Was it," Mira responds with disinterest, which fuels the annoyance you got from her lack of excitement for the potion earlier.

"Yeah, you were standing right there trying to gather an audience for that shadow-puppet show," you chuckle, trying to play it off. "What is up with you conning people by a fountain?"

Mira shrugs. "It's a good spot where people tend to gather." She looks around the area, her eyes landing on the market stalls. Tent roofing has been set up over the stalls to protect the wares from the rain. Just like last time you were here, the stalls vary with different types of wares: gems and jewellery, vegetables, fish, some delicious smelling treats. A glogg and hot chocolate stand has

also been set up in honour of the festive season, but it's closed. There are barely any people browsing the stalls, and the ones who do look like they are there out of necessity.

"Are you going to be like this the entire journey?" you ask, unable to hold back your annoyance anymore. You're usually more patient than this, but maybe it's the curse making you more irritable.

"Like what?" she asks defensively. You approach the market stalls and Mira casually looks at the items on display. She was admiring the pretty gemstones which were lined up in a variety of deep and vibrant colours.

"Like you have no interest in anything at all. You didn't care when I was excited about the potion. You don't care now when I'm excited about our first meeting."

Mira steps away from the stalls and puts her hands in her pockets, her eyes locked on yours. You can see her temper is rising. "Do you really think I didn't care about the potion? That I wasn't grateful for the gift? That potion is going to save our asses when we inevitably get lost. But that doesn't mean I'm going to match your excitement level for everything. I'm not exactly feeling all that excited about this whole situation." She breathes, trying to calm herself. "And I talked to a lot of people that day. You said so yourself, I was trying to gather people. I don't remember every single person I talked to."

Her words sting. Maybe you should've brought a guard. At least they'd be nice about it. "You're getting coal for Christmas this year," you respond. It's a childish response, but you don't care. She looks at you incredulously for a moment before she bursts into laughter.

"I'm sorry, of course I remember the day we met. I just don't remember you from when I was gathering people. I remember you from when I was trying to escape the guards later."

"When you held your dagger at my throat," you say, crossing your arms.

Mira smirks. "You hurt about that, princess?" she asks amused. "Take revenge then."

"Maybe I will. When you least expect it," you put up an offended front, but internally you're glad you managed to lift her mood, if only slightly.

"Looking forward to it," she smiles. "Now come on, you wanted to meet Lisa and Don's son, so let's get it over with," she says as if it's a chore on a to do list. And to her it probably is. She starts to make her way towards the university entrance.

"No, wait," you say, and she stops and turns to look at you. "Put it back," you say firmly.

"Put what back?" she asks innocently. You fix her with a stern look, pretending to be a responsible princess. Mira rolls her eyes and heads back to the stall. Just as another person walks by it, Mira kicks a stone which makes a "clack" sound as it lands. She bends down and when she stands back up there's a green gemstone in her hand. "I'm sorry, people can be so careless these days," she says to the woman behind the stall and hands it to her. The woman thanks her, and Mira walks away. Why admit your crime when you can blame someone else and be thanked for it? When she approaches you, she says, "there goes your Christmas gift," and walks past you in the direction of the university. Damn it, you shouldn't have said anything.

The university is a large, grey stone building, looking like an old castle. It is the only university in the kingdom, and you have to either be very skilled and smart, or very lucky to be accepted in. You enter the common hall, not really knowing what you're looking for. In contrast to the town square, the common hall is littered with students. Some are eating and chatting with friends, others have their noses buried in books.

"Have you met him before? Do you have any idea what he looks like?" Mira asks, looking around at the various students, probably trying to find a guy who looks like a Lisa and Don hybrid.

You shake your head. "Nope, no idea." You stop the first person you see who doesn't look too busy. "Sorry, I was wondering if you could help me with something. I am looking for a Jimminy..." you look to Mira, suddenly not sure what his last name is. Mira shrugs.

The woman looks at you curiously. She's got a round face and beautiful, wavy, dark brown hair tied up in a half-updo. She's wearing smart clothes, a pink blouse tucked in a black skirt. Her presence is warm and welcoming. "Jimminy Halpero?"

"Yes, that's it! Do you know where we can find him? We're friends of his parents," you say, hoping it really will be this easy.

"I'll see if I can find him," the woman says and disappears down the hall.

"The first person you ask happens to know him? How convenient," Mira comments.

Eventually, she reappears with a tall man by her side with messy brown hair and hazel eyes. Like the woman, he was dressed smartly in a suit and tie. "Can I help you?" he asks, trying to see if he recognises you.

"Hi," you smile politely. "We're friends of your parents. We just came from their farm, and they asked us to drop by and bring you something." You take your bag off your shoulder and take out the little bag Lisa gave you.

"Ah, that's... nice," he replies, almost uncertain. "How do you know Tim and Ally?"

Your heart skips a beat as he says the names. "Oh, I'm sorry, we must have the wrong Jimminy."

Mira cuts in. "No, he's testing you." She faces him and says, "Lisa and Don helped us out a while ago, that's all." She puts extra weight on the names when she speaks.

"Wait, you're Pernille?" He asks, looking surprised, and you nod in response. "My parents have talked so much about you. Well, they've talked so much about how they helped the lost princess."

Your cheeks heat up as you hand him the food from Lisa, and he accepts it with a thanks. He turns to the woman to his side. "This is Pamellara, my girlfriend. My parents haven't met her yet. I was supposed to introduce her when we go back for the holidays, but..." he trails off, and you know what he was probably going to say. Stupid curse.

“I think you should!” you say, trying to get morale up. “We are hosting a Christmas party in the capital at the end of the month. You should both come! I’m pretty sure Lisa and Don will be there too.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he responds unconvinced. Pamellara looks like she wants to go though, despite the lack of holiday spirit. You have a feeling she’ll be convincing him to go after you leave.

“It was nice to meet you, but we should get going,” Mira says, turning to you. “We have a forest to get through today.”

Pamellara looks between the two of you. “You’re going through the forest? Are you sure? There’s been a lot of unnatural activity there recently. Animals have entered, and none have come out alive,” she says, genuine concern and sadness clear in her eyes.

Jimminy nods. “A hunter went in a few days ago to investigate, but he hasn’t come back yet. Almost makes me feel bad for hiding his net thing.” He said that last part more to Pamellara than to you. You have no idea what the “net thing” is, but you don’t have time to ask before Mira speaks.

“Thank you for the warning, we will keep that in mind. But Pernille, we really should get going.”

You all say your goodbyes, and you once again urge them to attend the party. Then you exit the university and head for the forest.