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Mia and the
Forbidden
Medicine Report 2

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Mia and the Forbidden Medicine Report Volume 2

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Prologue

“**SO...THIS** is the data for the recent experiment, is it? Hmm...still a long way to go. This won't prove effective at all. I need you to make it much more precise.”

The demanding visitor put down a gold coin and left. The man sighed and muttered a curse under his breath. “Fool...you have no comprehension of this data's quality.”

A moment later, however, the man smiled. Seeming all of a sudden to be in much better spirits, he resumed his work.

In the inky blackness of night, the red eyes of the test subjects glowed from behind the iron-wrought bars of their cage. Without care, they ate their food.

All empathy for these creatures was long lost.

Indeed...the man had lost any ability to care for the creatures since he had descended to their level. The most he could muster now was a vague feeling of pity.

His one meal a day had consisted of stale bread leftovers from the local tavern. Hunger and thirst ravaged him. Then a man with the face of a savior had given him food and promised him great power if he agreed to follow him.

So he had agreed for his own survival. And indeed, he had gained power. But it was all a sham. When he'd complained, he had been discarded, tossed aside.

But he didn't want to return to the garbage heap. Instead, he trampled on others to gain status. That was how you got ahead in life, or so he thought, for a brief period.

Because no matter how high you ascended, there was always another, higher level. No matter how you stretched, you could never touch the sky. You just found yourself standing on top of yet another garbage heap.

How he longed for that clear, blue sky. He wanted to break through the gray clouds and reach those true heights. And he was prepared to sacrifice others for his cause.

He alone mattered. He alone should survive.

Humans have always been selfish creatures, living only for their own unquenchable desires.

Yes...my way is just. One day, I shall reach dizzying new heights.

A large glass case sat right in the center of the adjoining room. It was a sterilized workflow cabinet with an upper filter and ventilation system to protect against contamination.

The occasional puff of steam escaped from old pipes echoing through the walls. These pipes provided both heat and power for the entire building.

The red-tinged eyes glared at him with resignation. Glaring back, the man disinfected his hands before donning a mask and gloves.

Inside the cabinet, the smallest test subject trembled. Its food dish remained full. How many more operations could it endure?

The man placed his hands inside the cabinet. It was warm inside. Steam heating kept the temperature constant, but the body was quite cold. Its ability to regulate its own body temperature was failing fast.

As he stroked the bony creature, its now-colorless eyes looked back at him.

Those eyes were emotionless. Save for the vaguest hint of resignation.

Resignation to its fate as prey.

“Sorry about all this.”

But the words lacked conviction. The man held his breath and stabbed the thin needle into its half-starved flesh.

Chapter 1: The Beginning of Second Year

LIGHT, fluffy clouds hung high overhead. But the skies over the Kingdom of Isea were the same unchanging gray hue.

Mia stretched, raising her hands high towards the sky.

Today marked the start of Mia's time as a second-year student. She wasn't a freshman anymore. And tomorrow was the entrance ceremony, which would welcome the new crop of first-year students.

Mia's first year had been filled with thoughts of nothing but medicine, so everything else had passed by in a blur. She'd never really thought about becoming a second year. It'd seemed so intangible. But now she was one, and she finally had the breathing room available to start noticing the other second-year students.

Each of the four departments in every year group held forty students, making 160 second-year students in total. The academy ran for six years, so the entire student body comprised 960 students. Of course, there were dropouts, so Mia had heard that the current tally of students was around 900.

Mia looked around her, eyes widening with recognition as she spotted the slight-framed young man with the commanding aura about him. He had platinum-blond hair and verdure-green eyes. She'd always thought of him as naturally gifted, but his smarts were boosted by his efforts as a diligent student.

His name was Henrik Vigant, and he wore a blue tie neatly around his neck. The color of the tie signified his status as a medical student. His family operated a major medical clinic, and he was aiming to become a doctor to continue the family legacy. He was talented, yes, but he was also given to making sarcastic remarks. He had a very dry sense of humor when it came down to it.

As Mia's feet kept propelling her forward, she was careful to avoid the steam-powered horseless carriages on the main road while making her way through the throngs of students. Off to the side, she spotted another familiar boy. This

one had short, jet-black hair and bright red eyes.

But perhaps ‘boy’ wasn’t quite the right descriptor for him. He seemed more like a grown man with his tall stature and broad build than a young student. This was Mathias Weiss, wearing his trademark resting frown. No other student seemed willing to engage him in conversation while he was wearing it, and he wore it always. But Mia knew that Mathias had many different sides to him as well.

A figure crept up behind Mathias, giving him a hearty whack on the back. Mathias leaped into the air in shock, head whipping around.

“So we made it to second year! Good for us, right, Mathias?”

“It’s a miracle that *you* even made it at all.”

“Hahah! Did I scare you just then? Gosh, that was funny! You’re awfully jumpy for such a big lug of a fellow!”

The other boy’s smile was radiant, like sunshine.

Mia’s heart skipped a beat as she watched him laugh, utterly unconcerned about who might’ve been watching him.

His hair shone golden like sunshine, too. And he had eyes as blue as the ocean. This boy’s name was Felix—Felix Keyserling.

Mia found herself wincing ever so slightly as she gazed at him. He was almost too dazzling...

“Mia! It’s been too, too long!”

Felix suddenly noticed Mia then, catching her observing his and Mathias’s easy banter. Within seconds, he closed the distance between them. The expression on his face reminded Mia of a faithful dog rushing to its master’s heel.

Realizing that he was opening up his arms to enfold her in a hug, she took a hasty step backward.

Felix’s brows drooped down as he clocked her hesitance.

Henrik, the studious boy with the green eyes she’d spotted first, came over to

join them.

“Long time no see...although, I suppose it hasn’t been long at all for us, right, Mia?”

“...Oh, I guess it hasn’t.”

Mia chuckled back.

“Hey! Hold on a minute, Henrik. That’s no fair, trying to sneak in an advantage with Mia!”

Felix was scowling. Henrik rolled his eyes and snorted air through his nose.

“Sneak in an advantage? I merely kept up with my studies at the library during the school break. Mia happened to frequent it daily, too.”

Henrik was correct. But more accurately, Mia had no home to return to during school break, so she had no other choice but to spend it on campus.

“Darn it...if I’d known, I would have come by as well...”

Mathias sighed with annoyance as Felix muttered to himself, chewing on his lower lip.

“Felix, listen. All this fawning is going to do your image zero favors, ya know?”

Mia nodded in quiet agreement with Mathias. Several of the nearby female students were watching Felix, their smiles twitching with confusion and disillusionment.

It’s a shame. He’s terribly handsome when he manages to keep his mouth shut...

Unfortunately, Felix was one of those super good-looking guys who ruin it for themselves with an overeager personality. In short, his looks suffered from his character.

Students gathered with their respective departments and years in the auditorium. They went through the various start-of-term formalities, followed by a few words from their respective department heads, and then the students dispersed.

Now it was time to prepare for the entrance ceremony that would be held the

following day. There wasn't a great deal to be done, though. The second-year students only had to assist with cleaning and decorating the auditorium and other random odd jobs like that.

After the work was done, Mia and the boys headed to the library for a meeting. They needed to discuss what their next step was going to be before classes got underway.

Felix cleared his throat before getting down to business.

"So, then. We've all made it through to the second year..."

"You made it, yes...by the skin of your teeth. Just don't let your grades slip again. You're done for if you have to repeat second year as well."

Henrik interrupted Felix in a sobering tone of voice, which made Felix grimace.

"Don't change the subject. Besides, I'm not *going* to repeat second year."

But Felix didn't sound completely confident about that. Henrik's words seemed to have rattled him.

Ignoring Felix's consternation, Henrik plowed on.

"Also, we're not going to make much progress with you leading this meeting. Leave it to someone more suited for the job, in other words, *me*."

Mathias nodded in agreement with Henrik. Felix turned to Mia, his big blue eyes seeking her opinion. She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile, but it was really just a tool to placate him with. Clearing her throat, she changed the subject back to the issue at hand.

"Erm, so then...last year we made it as far as discovering the source of the disease itself, right?"

Last year, Mia's team had won the Special Award from the academy for the Grand Plan they'd spent the whole of first year researching.

Their thesis proposal, "*Is Demon Claw Really Contagious?*" had been accepted, and they'd even been awarded research funding.

Mia's mom was currently sick with *Demon Claw*. Mia had studied like mad to

enter the academy, all to try to find a cure for the disease. Now that there was a real chance that a cure could be found to save her mom, Mia was experiencing a rare oasis of relief. At least, for now.

The real fight still lay ahead, however. All Mia had really learned from a full year at the academy was the true nature of the disease itself.

Henrik nodded then, continuing where Mia trailed off.

“The root cause of the illness is the lack of magical energy in the body...”

Felix rubbed his chin, putting two and two together.

“So that means we’re looking to find a medicine that will cure this lack of magical energy in the body, right?”

“...”

Everyone fell silent for a moment. Mia was sure everyone was thinking the same thing she was—making a medicine which would supplement magical energy—how could such a thing even be done? She had no idea where to even start.

“But what *is* magical energy in the first place? How and where is it created?”

Felix tipped his head to one side, gazing at Mathias. Mathias was a mage student and had the strongest magical power of anyone present. Mia and the others had their own innate magical aptitude, or so it seemed, but none of them were on a level where they could actually use magic, like Mathias.

But even Mathias, with his great reserves of magical power, didn’t know the specifics of how such power worked. He, too, tipped his head to one side in confusion, mirroring Felix.

“But actually synthesizing a medicine isn’t the only issue ahead of us.”

Henrik pointed out the further flaw in their nebulous plans with a sour expression, which made everyone sigh in unison. But Henrik wasn’t done yet. He turned his attack on Felix instead.

“To actually enter clinical trials, we’re going to need a lawyer. That’s where you come in. Make sure you study law as hard as you can, so you can prove useful to our cause when the time comes.”

Henrik didn't sound as if he had a great deal of faith in Felix's scholastic abilities. Felix's eyes narrowed.

"What the heck's your problem? You've been needling away at me since we got back. Grades this, study that. What, are you trying to start a fight with me? Because if that's what you want, then bring it on!"

"We four are a team, a single unit. It's going to take all of us working together to pull this off. So don't be the weak link, that's all I'm saying."

Henrik glared back at Felix, who clammed up for a moment, sulking.

"I'm gonna study, all right? But not for the likes of you—I'm doing it for Mia!"

"Oh, grow up."

Henrik laughed coldly as Felix's eyes bulged apoplectically.

"I'm older than you, you jerk!"

It wasn't a very good comeback when you considered the circumstances that led to Felix being a year older. Namely, the fact that he'd ended up having to repeat the entirety of first year. The others all sighed from second-hand embarrassment.

But it was Mathias who quelled Felix in the end.

"Pipe down, will ya? You're holdin' up the meeting."

"If this is overstepping my bounds, then my bad, but I need you to study hard too, Mathias. We'll need all of your mage skills at our disposal. You're pretty much all the magic we've got, you see."

Mathias blinked his red eyes. They were the color of fresh blood, a sign of the strong magical powers he possessed. He'd been born to belong to the very best of the kingdom's mages.

"Mm-hmm."

Blushing, Mathias clammed up. Felix shot him an amused look, a smirk playing about his lips.

Henrik turned to Mia then and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Mia, we're going to go ahead and try to create a new medicine. Then, once

it's complete, we will need to test it to find out if it works. But before we even do that, we're going to need to test it to make sure it's safe. Now, how do you think we go about testing it?"

"...!"

Mia brought her hand to her mouth in reflex.

She knew how, of course. She'd always known. But being forced to really consider the implications for herself...made her break out in shivers.

Testing a new drug to see if it's safe...there's only one way. It was something Mia was going to have to come to terms with. Until now, she'd only ever dealt with drugs that had already passed safety tests, so she'd never had to come face to face with it before. She didn't need Henrik to enlighten her. Everyone knew the only way to test drugs without endangering human life was to put them through animal trials.

"Animal trials were designated as a legal prerequisite to clinical trials a decade ago. You'd better prepare yourself for this, Mia."

Mia flinched. Henrik had seen right through her. He'd seen that she wasn't prepared—not at all.

Henrik kept on talking, but Mia was still thinking a mile a minute.

Henrik didn't seem troubled by the concept of animal trials. Perhaps because his chosen field already involved dealing with lives that were hanging in the balance.

Amazing...

Mia watched Henrik, feeling a deep sense of respect for him. Seeming to notice her gaze upon him, he angled his face away self-consciously as he spoke. Then he was suddenly interrupted.

"Sorry to interrupt, but what about *you*, Henrik? You've been issuing orders left and right, but what's your part in all this going to be?"

Felix pursed his lips with dissatisfaction as Henrik's shoulders stiffened. His expression was incredulous. It said: *what more could you possibly want from me?*

It was true—Henrik had steadily maintained his status as the top student in their year. Mia knew he worked harder at his studies than anyone else.

As Henrik continued to stare Felix down, this realization seemed to dawn on Felix too. He fell silent, cowed. Mathias sighed with resignation. Even Mia was getting frustrated with the way this conversation was going nowhere fast.

Why is Felix so determined to keep jumping down Henrik's throat?

Mia looked to Mathias for backup, but he just heaved a huge sigh.

“For my part, at least, I’ll do what I can. Now, can we get back to the first hurdle we’ve already identified? Namely, how are we going to actually make a new drug?”

“Hmm...so we know the cause of the illness is a lack of magical power.”

Henrik nodded along with Mia.

“In other words, the question before us is: how to supplement insufficient magical power in the body by administering medicine? We don’t know how the magical power present in the body is even made or what magical power really *is* in the first place. I’ve been thinking about it constantly during school break, and I haven’t even got the first idea how we can even begin to make a medicine for this.”

Henrik fell silent, drawing his brows together. Mia felt at a complete loss as she mulled it over.

Analeptic medicines could be used to stimulate the central nervous system in the case of a lack of physical strength, but a lack of magical power was a different issue altogether.

Felix, however, rubbed his jaw thoughtfully as he spoke. “If lack of magical power is the problem, then what if we administered magical power directly to the patient?”

Mia’s head came up, her eyes focusing on Felix. Henrik was gazing at him too, his jaw hanging loose with amazement.

Like Henrik, Mia had been thinking of magical power as something made naturally in the body, a process that could be stimulated by administering

medicine. This new approach was a revelation.

“But how?”

“Hmm?”

Felix blinked several times, rubbing his jaw again. Then he fixed his gaze on Mathias as he spoke.

“Powerful mages have plenty of magical power, right? So much that they could surely spare a little skimmed off the top. Why not inject that excess directly into a patient?”

Felix’s theory was basic, his conjecture a simple matter of subtracting and adding. But if things were that straightforward, they wouldn’t need to be agonizing over the specifics like this.

“Like I said, how? And what *is* magical power, in the first place?”

“Like I said...”

Mia gazed at Felix hopefully even as he trailed off. If only he had the answer, it would solve everything...!

But Felix simply shrugged. “I thought it was an inspired idea, that’s all...” he said, at as much of a loss as any of them.

Oh Felix...do you always have to be so...Felix-y?

There’s a thin line between genius and insanity—that cruel saying popped into Mia’s head. She had to bite her lip to keep from saying it out loud.

Felix *was* smart. Whenever Mia did her homework with him, he often arrived at an answer without even having to go through the steps of working through a problem. And yet, his answers were always correct. His brain just seemed to be wired differently from most people. Mia figured most geniuses were wired like that.

She found herself sighing with a mix of envy and jealousy.

Sometimes, it seemed so implausible...

The fact that Mia, the very definition of normality, could be standing shoulder to shoulder with people this smart, simply as a result of her hard work and grit.

Henrik was muttering something under his breath. “You really are more than just an average idiot, after all...”

Felix met Henrik’s wry smile with a scowl of his own. “Who are you calling an idiot?”

“It was a compliment.”

Felix blinked in surprise even as Mathias physically restrained him from leaping at Henrik. Had Henrik really meant to compliment Felix, even in a roundabout and sarcastic way?

“We’ve been too fixated on medicine. There *is* a way to administer magical power directly to humans. We already know there is. And as a result of it, it’s not only *Demon Claw* patients who are suffering right now, is it?”

Henrik’s words sank in for a moment. Then all four of them gasped in unison, eyes darting back and forth from one to the other.

“*Angel Tears?!*”

Chapter 2: The Angel Tears Approach

RESEARCHING *Angel Tears* was already the main focus of the Academy and its resources. Mia and her team had been treated almost as heretics for deviating from this and announcing their intention to study *Demon Claw* instead.

“It might seem a little late in the game for us to turn to this now, but focusing our efforts on *Angel Tears* might be the most worthwhile course of action for us.” Henrik nodded thoughtfully as he spoke. “But we need to take an entirely novel approach. Mathias, you’re a mage student, but you don’t know how to use *Neu-Aera*, do you?”

Mathias shook his head in response. “They don’t teach us that.”

Neu-Aera was the practice of creating magic stones by concentrating magical energy into rock. It was an old practice invented and pioneered by King Leonard.

Following the king’s passing, however, the practice fell into nefarious use, and people began using it to transfer magic directly into other people, creating so-called “man-made mages.”

“Bringing forth the era of the mage, Magira-Aera, is an absolutely necessary technology for Isea Kingdom!”

Mia’s breath caught in her throat as she heard a sudden ghostly mental echo of Einz’s words.

Magira-Aera. Two diseases had been born as side effects of that doctrine. *Angel Tears* and *Demon Claw*. *Angel Tears* caused the body’s magical powers to explode and go haywire. And *Demon Claw*, conversely, caused the body’s magical stores to become vastly depleted, tanking the immune system.

If they could only find out the way to transfer magical energy directly into a person, as Felix had so casually suggested, then they might be able to cure *Demon Claw*.

After so much time with what felt like doors constantly slamming shut in their faces, there was finally a light ahead of them.

Ah, and yet...

Mia suddenly realized something which dampened her enthusiasm, and she shot a quick look at Felix. The last time this topic had come up, he'd been triggered into reliving painful memories of his childhood friend who'd tragically died. The wounds on Felix's psyche wouldn't be healed quite so easily, Mia knew.

But he seemed distracted with other thoughts and was gazing off into the distance. His expression hadn't changed.

Mia breathed a quiet sigh of relief, her gaze locking with Mathias's. He looked somewhat relieved as well. He'd probably been following the same train of thought as her.

Chris...that was the name Felix mentioned, wasn't it? A boy's name. Or could it have been a girl?

Mia often wondered what Chris had been like. The thought made her chest constrict painfully every time, and she had to brace herself through it.

"So then, how do we go about investigating this?" Henrik broke the silence. "And where are *Angel Tears* patients to be found, anyhow?"

Mia blinked, feeling exposed. It was almost as if Henrik had picked up on her discomfort... She focused hard on his question, hoping that her expression appeared pensive rather than perturbed.

"That boy, at last year's entrance ceremony..."

The mere mention of *Angel Tears* always made her think of that traumatic event.

What had happened to the boy who'd gone on an insane rampage at last year's entrance ceremony? She couldn't recall seeing him around campus, not even once.

"He was a mage department student, right?"

Henrik pointed his question towards Mathias, whose lips were set in a tight

line.

“He took a leave of absence from the Academy. As far as I know, he’s still hospitalized.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you two were in the same department.”

“His name’s become taboo. He was an untouchable. Nobody wants to be reminded of someone like that. Besides, that happened a whole year ago. No wonder everyone’s forgotten about him. After what he did at the entrance ceremony...I’d be surprised if he had a single friend here.”

Mathias’s expression showed empathy.

It made sense, though. The boy had done such terrible things and all before he’d even had the chance to start trying to make friends at the academy. Even if he’d been cured, who could blame him for not wanting to return to the academy after that terrible business? And yet...

“He’s been in the hospital without being discharged for an entire year? But there *is* a treatment for *Angel Tears*, isn’t there?”

Professor Rueger had said something about a medicine existing, Mia remembered that clearly. It was called Anacphis. She’d been shocked to learn that it was the only medicine that had ever been created at the academy.

As Mia chewed her lip, Henrik shook his head.

“That part confuses me, too. There isn’t actually that much easily available information out there on *Angel Tears*.”

“There isn’t? Even though they’ve made a medicine for it?”

Mia had heard that the majority of graduate research was on *Angel Tears*. She’d assumed that data on *Angel Tears* was widely available throughout the academy.

“Yes, but the composition of the drug hasn’t been made public, and access to the data on it is restricted. After all, the cause of *Angel Tears* and *Demon Claw*

are both the same thing, but the army isn't about to let just anyone get a peek at all the details. And if we start probing too much, someone's bound to notice what we're up to."

Mia was surprised by this.

"Huh? But what about conducting graduate research? You need to be able to read the existing research, right?"

"For that, what we need to do is get special permission from a professor. But even that may prove tricky."

Henrik frowned, looking tired.

"Professor Rueger was away on a research trip at the time, so I asked my academic advisor, Professor Bralle of the medical department, but he turned me down. Said it was research that had nothing to do with our chosen study."

Professor Bralle...Mia recalled his nickname instantly.

"Professor 'Fair and Square' Bralle...?"

She muttered the name, her voice going up questioningly at the end. The nickname had always made her think that he must have been a decent sort of professor.

But Henrik sighed deeply.

"He's tough to handle, in an entirely different way from Professor Rueger. You'll find out what I mean soon enough."

THE team borrowed the key from Professor Rueger and headed to the library to research *Angel Tears*.

The musty-smelling room seemed unchanging, as if time had stopped. The sound of steam hissing from different light fixtures echoed throughout the room as the compressed air powered each light individually with spinning flywheels providing power through the dynamos and then the lights through the room.

The high bookshelf stacks formed narrow passageways for people to walk

down in single file. Mathias kept bumping his shoulders on the corners.

Yikes...it's so cramped in here.

Mia was worried Mathias was going to end up snagging his uniform.

It was ironic and kind of funny that he was a mage and had no need of all the brute strength that he had come by so naturally. Mia tried to avoid looking at Mathias as much as she could to keep from bursting out with laughter.



After gaining access to the Closed-Stack Archives, the four of them began searching for the graduation theses among the silent stacks.

“There are graduation theses on *Angel Tears* present in the Closed-Stack Archives, but I find it very funny indeed that these are the only ones to be found anywhere on campus.”

As Henrik muttered under his breath, Felix’s head suddenly jerked up.

“Incidentally...to invent a new drug, you first need to patent it.”

“What do you mean, patent?”

Felix smiled with delight, excited to share his legal expertise with Mia, whose own knowledge of that field was sparse at best.

“Patents protect inventors. By patenting a new drug, you can make sure that only you have the right to synthesize and market it.”

“Although *Angel Tears* patients aren’t exactly numerous, so you wouldn’t expect there to be huge profits involved...”

Henrik frowned pensively.

Then...what’s the point?

As they all mulled it over, they finally reached the section where the graduation theses were kept. The guard who had accompanied them cleared his throat suddenly.

“It is strictly forbidden to remove materials from this area, so please look through them here.”

His eyes were sharp and fixed on Mia and her accomplices. In other words, they were being watched.

They’d used the Closed-Stack Archives before, but security seemed much stricter this time around.

Last time, we looked at patient charts, as I recall.

Yes, it had been *Demon Claw* patient charts. Perhaps nobody cared if students looked at those. After all, any sections hinting towards the cause of the disease had been redacted from every chart.

“Usually, students have to submit a viewing request and pass an inspection to view these files. Ostensibly so they can keep track of who’s viewing them in case any important files go missing. But I suspect that there’s an ulterior motive to keep track of who’s viewing them so they can crack down on any leaks to outside parties. It’s just like the patents—someone doesn’t want data on *Angel Tears* becoming public knowledge, and they made up these rules and regulations to prevent that.”

But who? Henrik rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Mia was deep in thought, too.

Angel Tears and *Demon Claw* were two sides of the same coin. Through researching *Angel Tears*, the connection between the two would become apparent. Then it wouldn’t take too big of a mental leap to realize the army’s part in all this, with their inhumane scheme.

But if anyone figured it out, then...

Mia felt her heart sink as it always did when she remembered their old professor.

Students were under constant observation. And who was better placed to observe the students than their own professors? The thought made Mia’s back stiffen.

She didn’t *think* that there was any new army mole among the professors assigned to replace Professor Einz. But what if there were other army loyalists present among the faculty from way back? That possibility couldn’t be ruled out.

Maybe even the attendant on duty right now...?

Mia kept pawing through the thesis files, ruminating on it. She was looking specifically for any theses on the development of the medicine used to treat *Angel Tears*.

The files were arranged chronologically by year, so she should probably focus on the year of the medicine’s announcement. That should make her search nice and easy. However, when she opened up the first file she found...

“Huh?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

The file was filled with nothing but blank pages. The text itself seemed to have been removed from the paper by some special force.

The group split up and began searching in earnest. But there was no file to be found that offered any academic examination of Anacphis—the *Angel Tears* drug.

They asked a nearby attendant about it, but he merely frowned and opened up one of the files, muttering, “There’s no way that’s possible.” When he realized the pages were indeed blank, he paled and quickly excused himself.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

Vital research data was seemingly missing from a highly monitored and restricted area.

Who doesn’t want us to see this?

Mia felt herself growing suspicious. If someone was trying to hinder their work, then who could it be?

She looked at Henrik, frustration bubbling up inside her. He sighed. “I had my suspicions, and it looks like my hunch has just been confirmed.”

“What do you mean?”

Felix frowned at him, and Henrik shrugged in response.

“It seems there’s more than a few parties who’d prefer this information to remain hidden. If I was in Einz’s shoes, I’d certainly have tried to make sure not a scrap of data remained. But it’s been a long time since she left. Someone would have noticed the tampering in the meantime. All this tight security, they wouldn’t have let something like that slip past.”

As he spoke, Henrik kept his gaze fixed on the attendant from before, who looked highly agitated.

If Einz was involved in this, then they were screwed. The fanatical professor had risked everything to tear their Grand Plan to shreds and scrub it from

existence, even knowing how much of their blood, sweat, and tears they had poured into it.

“So, what do we do?”

Felix was unable to keep the frustration out of his voice.

Just when they’d finally gotten a hint, it had led them to a dead end. Mia felt like crying hot tears of frustration. As she stood there at a total loss, Henrik suddenly pulled another thesis file from a different shelf.

“Let’s just focus on doing what we *can* for now. Research on *Angel Tears* is still ongoing.”

Henrik began reading through the thesis in his hands. Mia grabbed a nearby file and followed suit. He was right. They didn’t have time to stand around in despair.

Mia cast her eyes down the page, swallowing her feelings of turmoil and trying to perk herself back up. Felix and Mathias were also looking through the files with solemn faces, even though this wasn’t even their field of study.

Eyes quickly scanning the text, Henrik began muttering under his breath.

“I see, I see... Yes, I had an inkling... Next is... What? They’ve moved into the area of preventative medicine already?”

“Preventative medicine?”

“Look at this. The most recent of the graduation theses.”

Everyone leaned in close as Henrik pointed to a particular passage.

“The benefits of tranquilization weighed against the dangers of anesthesia...? And then, onto methods of prevention?”

Henrik nodded.

“These seem to be nothing more than palliative measures if you ask me.”

This wasn’t what Mia had been expecting at all. All four of them had just been discussing the true qualities of magic and the kind of shadowy organizations that might be involved. She’d thought there must be tons of research available on how to cure the root cause of *Angel Tears*.

“But what does this mean?”

Mia’s voice was high and trembly.

“It means they aren’t trying to cure the root cause of the disease. All they’re doing is managing it. And thinking up preventative measures to prevent further cases. I don’t know if such measures are effective or not, but the number of infected patients has definitely declined in recent years.”

Henrik pointed to a page of statistics on *Angel Tears*’ patient numbers. One year, in particular, marked the start of a drastic reduction in cases.

“It corresponds with when the army backed off on injecting so many people with magical power. Here it shows they figured out the projected dose of injected magic that an ordinary person could handle. So maybe there’s no need for a drug for curing *Angel Tears*, after all. Maybe no one cares anymore. Maybe that’s why no one even noticed the missing theses.”

“But...but that means...”

Mia couldn’t get the words out. If she didn’t say them out loud, maybe they’d stop being true...but she forced herself.

“That means the currently infected patients have been abandoned? It means that infected kid from last year isn’t going to be leaving the hospital at all?”

“...”

Henrik’s silence was as good as an answer. Besides, he wasn’t the type to sugar-coat things anyway.

Felix and Mathias were both silent, their faces solemn and sad.

They were both thinking about Mia’s mother, too, their hearts aching for her.

Mia had believed that *Angel Tears* patients had been prioritized. She believed that drugs for the disease had been developed. It hadn’t seemed fair. But the truth was much crueler than Mia could have ever imagined. The mages who developed *Angel Tears* became so deranged and violent. All just for the army to use them as disposable tools of war?

Perhaps the army had always planned to use them and then discard them. All of them—not just the *Demon Claw* patients, but the *Angel Tears* patients, too...

Mia could feel her skin crawling with horror.

“Using people up and casting off whatever’s left. Isea Kingdom has been guilty of that for centuries. And all the while they glorify the ‘might’ of the Kingdom, with which they overthrew Radius.”

Felix turned to leave, muttering darkly under his breath.

“Hey, wait! Felix!”

Mathias yelled out as Mia immediately sprang into action, quickly chasing after him. Everyone was afraid that he was going to have another of his attacks.

FELIX was out of breath, wheezing with harsh gasps. The perceived lack of oxygen would soon lead to panic and trigger one of his attacks. But he just kept on running.

Then, at long last, he fell to his knees, lifting his chin, eyes scanning fast.

He was in the rotunda, a building located in the center of campus. It was circular in shape, ringed by smooth walls upon which ranks of portraits hung. Felix’s gaze stopped on one portrait in particular. A man with golden hair and ash-colored eyes. It was Isea Kingdom’s wise and handsome king.

“King Leonard...”

King Leonard was a king of days past who had pioneered the *Neu-Aera* technology. He was a hero who had embarked on scholarly research above and beyond his duties as king to save the kingdom from peril. And nowhere was he more revered than here at the Isea Royal Academy, the kingdom’s premier bastion of academic learning.

But his story was a cover, more like a fairy tale. One told to every child born in the Isea Kingdom.

King Leonard had fallen in love with the crown princess of the great neighboring nation of Radius, and in order to win her hand, he had sought to improve the fortunes of his own lowly kingdom. *Neu-Aera* had been the means by which he sought to achieve this.

But the cute innocent fairy tale didn’t end there.

Neu-Aera brought unprecedented prosperity to Isea. The kingdom grew altogether too mighty. Soon, the army crushed the nation of Radius underfoot, no longer caring that it was the beloved homeland of the wife the king claimed to love.

Perhaps Leonard had foreseen this. And despite that, he had wanted her for his bride anyway.

That king's cruel and treacherous blood was flowing through Felix's veins.

It wasn't only the abominable *Neu-Aera* technology that was causing Mia's mother to suffer so much.

It was the fault of the man who had pioneered and weaponized it. The king of Isea, whose sins were Felix's inheritance.

"You ought never to have lived at all!"

Felix crumpled to the ground. He was soaked in sweat, his lungs too tight to breathe.

No matter how many times Felix went through these attacks, and no matter how often he'd been told how to handle them, he always found himself paralyzed by panic each time.

He wanted those warm, soothing hands. He wanted to hear that sweet voice in his ear. He wanted her to tell him he was going to be okay.

Just as he was beginning to blackout, he felt a warm hand rubbing his back.

"Felix. You're all right. Don't worry about trying to breathe right now. Don't even think about it. Look at me. Let's just have a chat, okay?"

The feel of her hand rubbing his back. It was as if she was reassuring Felix that his contribution was something she needed. He felt like bursting into tears.

He lifted his face to her obediently. Through the blurry haze of his tears, he could see her eyes, so filled with gentle concern for him.

Her sweet, earnest eyes made him wish he could absolve himself of his sins.

The reason your Mom became like that...it's the fault of the weak king who couldn't go against his own army. The weak king...who was my direct ancestor.

So you see, Mia, the blame now falls on me...

But Mia was sharp. She probably already knew this. And she probably knew that Felix's contributions, however much on the fringe they might be...wouldn't be of any use to her in the end.

But she's still here...

Yes, she was still there. Soothing and reassuring him, the cowardly, undeserving prince.

Chapter 3: Helmut Bralle, aka Professor Fair and Square

THE smoke belching from the smokestacks was stained orange with the glow of the setting sun. From far away, bells were ringing.

The library was closed now, as Mathias and Henrik arrived at the rotunda in their search for Felix.

The four of them together again, they set off walking as a group, the orange sun hanging low on the horizon at their backs. The twilight corridor was silent, save for the sound of four sets of footsteps in unison.

When they arrived at Rueger's office to return the key, someone else was there already. And when Henrik saw the person's face, his own expression suddenly grew stiff and blank. Mia picked up on a hum of tension in the air.

So, this is Professor Fair and Square...

It was the Medical Department professor, Helmut Bralle. Unlike Rueger, he was gentlemanly, with a slender face and a medium-sized build. He wore a perma-frown that suggested he spent his days in bad humor and a state of constant low-grade anxiety. He looked like the type to suffer from chronic low blood pressure and constantly cold hands and feet. Standing next to Professor Rueger did nothing to help this impression of him.

He kind of reminds me of a...lizard.

Mia handed the key over to Rueger, a tight smile on her face.

"Um, thank you for lending us the key."

Watching this, Professor Bralle smiled, his lips curling.

"Ah, the Closed-Stack Archives? What in the heavens were you looking for in there?"

Mia blinked. The professor's tone was cold.

"Oh, uh...today, we were researching the medicine for *Angel Tears*—"

Bralle immediately interrupted Mia.

“As I recall, the research theme for your group was: ‘Is Demon Claw Really Contagious,’ wasn’t it? Why are you researching *Angel Tears*? That has nothing whatsoever to do with it.”

Mia gazed at Bralle in wonderment.

True, that had been the title of their Grand Plan. But the connections between *Demon Claw* and *Angel Tears* should be readily apparent to anyone who read it.

“But that’s...I mean—”

Before Mia could explain, Bralle started talking over her again.

“Contagion still hasn’t been proven *or* disproven. I haven’t read any research theses on that...”

“Research theses? But surely you know it’s an army plot, Professor, if you’ve read our Grand Plan?”

Felix was raising his voice in annoyance.

“How do you intend to prove such a thing?”

“Prove it? Well, I didn’t get infected, did I?”

“Perhaps you’re a rare exception. Immunity hasn’t been researched, after all.”

“Well, we were there at the same time, too!”

Mia jumped in then, but Bralle simply snorted with derision.

“There’s absolutely no data in existence to prove that you were.”

“That physician will back us up.”

Felix’s voice came out sounding strangled.

That physician...in other words, the elderly doctor who’d taken Mia’s side back at the Sanatorium. With the Sanatorium patients being held captive, the doctor watched over them with a strong sense of justice, compelled to live trapped inside the Sanatorium walls with her patients.

What with all the commotion, Mia hadn’t had time to ask the doctor’s name before they’d had to leave. But yes, surely she would cooperate with them. As

Mia cast her mind back over the doctor's dignified manner, Bralle further cornered them.

"I wouldn't be so confident if I was you. I heard at the Medical Association that that doctor has been transferred to a different Sanatorium."

Mia blinked, interjecting, "Another Sanatorium? Where?"

"I don't know. I'm not cognizant of all the little details."

Mia shuddered. There was almost no chance the army would've let that doctor get off with only a simple position transfer. Mia could feel goosebumps spring up on her arms, a disquieting premonition taking hold of her.

But wait...what about Doctor Letts? He tried to make the truth public, and then...

Doctor Letts, Mia's childhood guardian, had died of a heart attack, or so she'd heard. But they always chalked it up to a heart attack whenever there was a death of unknown causes, didn't they? At the time, Mia had suspected nothing, oblivious as she was to the country's methods of truth concealment and suppression.

What if he was...oh, please, no!!! If that's true, I'm not going to let them get away with it!

Mia was enraged. But Felix gently put his arm around her shoulder and leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"Mia, calm down. I'll track down that doctor, I swear it. We won't let our hands be tied on this one."

The warmth of Felix's big hand soothed her, making her realize how close she was to blowing her top.

All right. Even if it does turn out to be true, there's no point getting mad now. And there's no point getting mad at Bralle. He had nothing to do with it, after all.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, and Felix removed his hand as if to say that his role in calming her had been fulfilled. As if to sweep her almost meltdown neatly under the rug.

“Anyway, you kids secured research funding for the theme you submitted.” Bralle kept on talking, driving the point home. “You have an obligation to follow through with your proposal. Otherwise, that funding can and will be withdrawn.”

“But, Professor...”

What Bralle was saying made sense, of course. But his stubborn resistance was maddening. Why couldn't he try to understand?

“Professor Bralle. Be that as it may, I don't think it's fair to say that the *Angel Tears* approach is without merit.”

Rueger had just thrown them a life preserver. But Bralle merely shrugged.

“If you say so. Well, kids, I'll be expecting something impressive from you.”

With those parting words and an icy smile, Bralle exited the room after shooting one last glance at each team member.

“Henrik, now I know what you mean by ‘Professor Fair and Square...’”

Everyone's spirits were low.

If they changed their theme, they could kiss their research funding goodbye—that was basically what Professor Bralle had said. Without funding, they couldn't conduct any research. And it was going to take a ton of money to actually come up with a working drug.

Proof or no proof, however, it was obvious that the disease wasn't contagious. *Demon Claw* patients were only isolated from society to keep the truth of the disease's origin from getting out. It was all a huge cover-up by the army. Felix had risked his health to prove that, and the doctor at the Sanatorium had vouched for it, too.

But *Demon Claw* patients were also isolated for their own safety, since the disease trashed their immune systems and left them vulnerable. They had heard that with their own ears.

Bralle hadn't been there, even though he'd clearly heard the whole story from Rueger and the other professors. And here he was, demanding that they provide proof.

“There’s nothing I hate more than a man who’s unwilling to be flexible when it comes to theories.”

Henrik was muttering darkly under his breath. The others all grunted in agreement. Rueger looked around at them all, smiling.

“He’s a doctor first and a scientist second, you know.”

“A doctor...”

But Henrik seemed unconvinced. Mia was with him. A doctor ought to be more concerned about helping out *Demon Claw* patients and open to seeking a cure, shouldn’t he?

“That still doesn’t sit right with you?”

They all nodded, and Rueger grinned wryly.

“He’s an easy man to misunderstand. But his argument is sound. The onus is on the four of you now to make this inconvenient truth become accepted by the oblivious public. The way you are right now, you come across as nothing more than a bunch of rowdy students causing a ruckus over nothing.”

Mia didn’t like this, not one bit.

“So what, you’re on Bralle’s side too, Professor?!”

“If a side must be picked, then I’d be on his. But morally, I’m with you four. I’m cheering you on with everything I’ve got, at least on the inside. But I’m not about to publicly renounce the army until you kids have got a compelling argument to present—until you’ve got a completed research thesis. I’ve got big hopes for you all. You can believe me on that one.”

“So, in other words, you’re not going to actually help us at all...”

Professor Rueger’s harshness from the start of the previous year was still fresh in Mia’s memory. He’d rejected their Grand Plan submission over and over again.

“Thinking about giving up, are you?”

Rueger arched one eyebrow as they all stood there feeling defeated.

“...Never!”

Give up? The phrase wasn't even a part of Mia's vocabulary. Her rebuttal just burst out but saying it felt good and gave her courage.

Right. There was no way they were going to give up that easily.

I have to find a way to get Mom back!

Rueger smiled back at Mia with satisfaction.

"Listen here, kids. All you have to do is put your best foot forward, and the rest will follow smoothly. Trust me."

Then, Rueger ushered them out of his office.

Chapter 4: Deep in Thoughts of Their Own

“YOU there. Young master Vigant.”

After splitting off from the others, Henrik heard someone speaking to him and turned around. Bralle was standing there. Professor Fair and Square himself. Henrik struggled to keep a neutral expression, looking up evenly at the professor.

“Was there something you needed me for?”

“It’s about the future aspirations questionnaire you submitted the other day. I was wondering if I could convince you to reconsider.”

Unable to keep up his poker face, Henrik found himself frowning.

The questionnaire was distributed soon after the commencement of second year. Medical students were to choose one of three options for their future. The first was to remain at the Academy as a physician-scientist. The second, to work as a physician at a major hospital. And the third, to work as a private physician at one of the free city clinics.

Since the upcoming curriculum directly correlated to these three choices, they needed to work out student numbers for the upcoming classes.

Henrik had put down that he planned to become a physician-scientist.

He’d been expecting there to be pushback against his choice, but not this soon. And he had hardly expected the pushback to be coming from Bralle.

“Why?”

It was a simple enough question, though quietly spoken. Bralle paused for a second before answering.

“You’re an outstanding student. After all, your family runs the Grantz public medical clinic.”

“...What of it?”

The Grantz Free Clinic was the largest free clinic in Isea's metropolis, located on land that once belonged to the capital of Radius. It was as large as the kingdom's own Royal Clinic and held just as much authority.

Henrik's father was a respected doctor, on friendly terms with even the royal family. He was very well connected and respected in select circles.

So everyone who knew anything on the subject assumed Henrik was at the Academy to one day inherit his father's medical business. But that wasn't Henrik's intention at all.

"Your family runs a public clinic, so I'd recommend working in a private practice or hospital. Do your residency elsewhere for the experience, and then take over the family clinic."

"Why are you trying to counsel me right now?"

Henrik's tone was thick with suspicion.

He'd been expecting resistance from his father. But to hear the same lecture from a stranger...

Bralle simply smiled.

"Your father and I are old friends. Perhaps he never told you? We were classmates here at the Academy."

Bralle seemed about to embark on a nostalgia trip, but Henrik cut him short.

"Oh, I get it. So Father's having me monitored, is he?"

"No, not at all. I've just taken a personal interest in you. That area of the country needs doctors."

Why doesn't his smile reach his eyes? Henrik thought to himself.

"You said you're old friends? In that case, you should know all about the bad blood between my father and me."

Bralle raised one eyebrow.

"Which is all the more reason I refuse to choose the path that would most please my father."

And with that parting remark, Henrik turned to leave. His poker-face smile

was back, but it resembled Bralle's. It didn't reach Henrik's eyes, either.

THE following day, Mia was sitting in Pharmacology class.

It seems obvious, but the content of the second-year classes was much more difficult than the first year. Education was cumulative, and students were expected to use the skills and know-how they'd built in the first year to advance their studies at a more rapid pace in the second.

Struggling over textbooks during first year would come back to bite you in the butt and hold you back in the second.

Mia sighed, facing off against her newly acquired textbook.

Rueger was standing behind the teacher's lectern, writing on the blackboard with chalk. With Einz gone, the other teachers had to cover the extra workload, but not without a good deal of grumbling.

There hadn't been enough time to hire a new teacher for the start of the new school year. Besides, background checks for potential teachers had gotten a lot more stringent after that horrible business with Einz.

The topic of today's class was "Radius Fever."

"Put our best foot forward, eh?" Mia muttered under her breath as she stared at the back of Rueger's head.

She was still hung up on what Rueger had said to them the previous day.

Mia wasn't feeling so confident in her own abilities these days. Her sense of pride over the medicinal know-how she'd accrued so far seemed to be crumbling.

She also had no idea how to go about making a new drug, armed with nothing but her knowledge of current drug effects.

The steps towards creating a new drug were also far more difficult than Mia had ever imagined.

First, they had to start by discovering the source of the drug's components, identify the cause of the disease, and think of how to support the body's

internal workings through the drug's application.

All medicines really are, after all, are tools to support the body's natural healing systems.

Take the common cold, for example. It's impossible to destroy the source of a cold. All we can do is control the symptoms and wait for the immune system to clear the virus.

"But back to what I was saying about Radius fever... Custer, care to enlighten us?"

Mia's classmate, Custer, jumped to his feet in a panic. Flipping through the textbook in front of him, he cleared his throat.

"Um...Radius fever is a kind of cold virus that spreads in the winter season... unlike a cold, however, it's terribly infectious..."

Relieved to be done answering, Custer sat back down with a plop, unfortunately missing the chair completely. One of his friends snorted with laughter.

Custer always seemed to be in a nervous tizzy about something. Every now and then, he'd let out a high-pitched squeal in class, irritating his professors. Secretly, Mia thought he was even more of a weirdo than she apparently was.

Rueger sighed with a put-upon air.

"Radius Fever is unbelievably contagious and known throughout the world. Ten years ago, it ripped through the land, taking countless lives."

Mia knew all about Radius Fever.

The disease ravaged the weaker immune systems of the elderly and children, stealing away their lives. The name had an interesting origin, too. Long ago, the disease tore through the Isea Kingdom's royal family, cutting the bloodlines short. With the scars of war still fresh in everyone's minds, blame turned to the citizens of Radius Kingdom. People claimed the disease was a curse on the Isea royal family, sent by Radius.

Of course, there was no scientific basis for this. But you could almost understand the thinking there.

“Is there any treatment?”

Another student posed that question.

“No,” said Rueger shortly. “Only palliative measures exist.”

Mia was still intimidated by Rueger’s severe personality, but most of the class seemed to have gotten used to him by now. Maybe it was just his harsh expression that freaked her out the most...

“As there’s no real treatment, the government enacted laws to curb the spread of the disease.”

At the first signs of a spread, the public was banned from large gatherings, and wearing a face mask was made mandatory. Noncompliance was punishable by law. These were the most effective measures for preventing wide-scale infection.

Rueger wrote those details on the board, and Mia jotted them down in her notebook.

“A cure is being sought globally, not just here in Isea. Research is ongoing, both at home and abroad. Baumann, how long does it take for a cure to be developed for a given disease, generally?”

Mia leaped to her feet. Darn it, she’d been zonking out at her desk.

“The minimum development period is generally ten years... Ten years until practical application is possible.”

“Right, which is why a cure won’t help if we’ve already reached widespread infection rates. That’s why we need preventative and palliative measures.”

Rueger went on to list the palliative measures available on the board, but Mia had ceased taking notes.

Those are the same methods we used to handle the disease back at the clinic...

Mia was disappointed. She’d hoped to learn about cutting-edge medicine by coming to the Academy.

She felt like she was getting nowhere at all. As she sighed, Rueger turned and shot her a grin.

“The laws were enacted to cover for the delay in medical advancement. The health of the people isn’t the responsibility of medical science alone, you see. But it’s no good to rely on the government to maintain the public health over the long term, now is it?”

It was faint, but a hint of expectation was visible in Rueger’s gaze.

“Are you going to lose faith and give up?”

She had the feeling that’s what he was asking her. Mia sat up straight and lifted her chin. She didn’t have time to wallow in despair.

“OUR best foot forward, eh...?”

Mathias was standing on the campus grounds, muttering to himself as he gazed at the backs of his fellow students in front.

Rueger’s words had stuck with him like a fishbone in the throat.

Mathias wasn’t sure what strengths he brought to the table. Last year he felt like he’d been nothing more than baggage the team was dragging along with it.

Sighing, he continued gazing out at the assortment of other students conducting various activities. In the distance, some were even using the new steam-enhanced roller boots. Steam hissed from their shoes as it pushed the wheels under their feet at incredible speeds.

His gaze returned to the many variations of hair color—blond, brunette, redhead. Lots of bright colors. He could also see the different ways their hair parted. It was a different perspective, looking down at the tops of other people’s heads.

Mathias was the tallest boy in the year. No, in the entire school.

Up on Mathias’s level, you spent a lot of time looking down on the tops of people’s heads. You got used to never getting a good look at their faces. Besides, that made a lot of things easier for him.

Felix often chuckled over the mismatch between Mathias’s bulky frame and shy personality. He’d always hated talking to people he didn’t know that well, and the years had only made that worse. Maybe that’s why he felt so at ease,

spending time with the other three.

They didn't look at Mathias any differently. They all acted like his appearance was totally normal. Like the red color of his eyes was just another feature, the same as his height.

I guess in the end, my strengths lie in—

"Next up, Mathias."

"...! Yes, I'm ready."

They'd called his turn. Mathias was currently taking his Foundation of Magic class and was the last one to be called on.

They were all lined up according to their elements, and Mathias was at the back of his row. The row to the right consisted of fire element students. The left, earth elements. Then to the left of that, you had the water element students. Starting with the second year, classes were taught by element since the curriculum became much more specialized than before.

Mathias's teacher was named Assistant Professor Trout.

"You're an air element student, correct?"

Trout was male but had a sultry voice that was reminiscent of a witch. He blinked rarely and often looked like he was on the verge of falling asleep.

Mathias had heard that Trout had been teaching at the Academy for two years already. Trout ought to have been a veteran air elemental magic teacher, but it was odd how he never tried to advance his career and stayed an assistant professor.

As Mathias went to join his rank, the girl at the back of the line shuffled a few steps forward with mild alarm.

Clearly, nobody wanted to get too close to him.

Mathias still didn't have a single friend in class. Spending all his time with Felix and the others probably hadn't helped, but the real nail in the coffin of his social life was the fact that everyone still suspected him of being a *Demon Claw* carrier.

In other words, he was treated like a walking disease.

So absurd. So irrational.

But he understood how they felt at the same time. If he hadn't been there with Mia and the others, he'd probably share the other students' horror of *Demon Claw*.

Still, the looks of fear and disgust etched deep wounds on Mathias's heart. As if the blood-red eyes he was cursed with weren't enough to have to deal with.

Mathias sighed, feeling gloomy, just as Trout raised his voice.

"Mathias Weiss...what's the matter? Come on, get out your wand."

Mathias jumped a little. Scrabbling frantically at his chest pocket, he realized he couldn't find it anywhere.

Darn! I forgot it!

Actually, a gifted mage like Mathias didn't need to use a wand. All a wand does is concentrate the body's magical energy in one place and condense its potency. But Mathias's magical energy didn't need concentrating or condensing to be effective. He really was naturally gifted.

"I...forgot to bring it."

A cold bead of sweat slid down his back as he answered.

"You forgot to bring your wand to a practical magic session?"

Trout was incredulous.

"What are you telling me here? That you're not really motivated to be in this class? Or is it that you're so exceptional you don't even need a wand? In which case, perhaps you'd like to give us a little demonstration? I've seen those eyes of yours. You've got a rare gift for magic, I'll wager."

Trout smiled, reddish-brown eyes crinkling around the corners. Mathias hated people who smiled at you while they were trying to embarrass you in front of others.

The students standing in front of him had all turned around to look. He could feel himself trembling slightly under the pressure of so many curious glances.

“How about conjuring up a heat haze for us? That should be a cinch for you.”

Trout had named a high-level magic spell. It was advanced magic, only mentioned in the higher-grade textbooks.

A heat haze was a handy spell that could be used to disguise one’s appearance. Mathias had been planning to master it at some point. But lower classmen weren’t supposed to attempt such magic at their level. Mathias wrung his hands, feeling oddly raw and exposed.

“I ain’t got...I don’t have much experience. I can’t do magic like that yet. And I don’t even have a wand to try it with.”

Mathias hung his head contritely, and Trout backed off, seemingly mollified.

This year’s gotten off to a terrible start already...

Trying hard to keep from frowning, Mathias retreated back behind his usual safe wall of silence.

ALL the female students were clustered around the desk of only one boy in the law classroom. The ringleader, Angelica, was sitting closer than any of the others.

Thanks to the rumors Felix had been subtly spreading, the girls had honed in on another boy as their target, leaving Felix’s periphery a blissfully girl-free zone.

It’s almost impressive how fickle they are...

Felix was relaxing at the back of the classroom, spinning a pen around his fingertips. The notebook on his desk was white and blank. He had never been one for taking notes. He’d only forget to look at them later, so why bother?

Mia always got her gears in a grind whenever she heard him say that. But all Felix had to do was pay attention in class, and he’d naturally end up memorizing the whole lesson. Actually, taking notes would break his concentration and lead to less learning on his end. Hence, the no-note policy.

Felix yawned hugely, surveying the classroom.

Law classes were complex. They'd mostly covered the basics by now, but classes would split into different focus areas from here on out. Law department students had a lot of options to take in their careers, after all. There was more variety in the Academy's law department than in any other department.

The law was a facet of so many potential careers. Judge. Lawyer, of course. And most of the members of the government were law department graduates.

Not to mention...

Felix cast his unimpressed gaze over at Angelica. Most of the girls in the law department would go on to marry lawyers. Of course, there were some talented female students. But the rest of them? The way they acted made a lot of people wonder why they bothered coming to school in the first place.

Seeing them treat the school like a high society debutante ball always put Felix in a sour mood. He wasn't even mad at them. He was mad at the fact that technically, he was part of their social circle.

Up until recently, he'd been Angelica's intended prey.

Smiling dryly to himself, he locked eyes with the other boy, who was chuckling away amid the throng of girls.

He was the son of one of his father's friends. His name was Zeke. He was tall and well-muscled with a placid and predictable personality. When Felix had spoken to Zeke with the academy president as chaperone, he'd kept the details light, but Zeke had still been enthusiastic about the plan.

"Anything that keeps the babes coming my way," he'd said.

Felix's request had been simple enough—take over the role of undercover prince attending the Academy in supposed secret. All he had to do was smile mysteriously whenever the rumors spread by Felix came up.

Lack of denial was as good as admitting to it in the eyes of the student body. Felix hadn't been sure at first if Zeke would be able to handle the constant stress of deception, but he'd taken to it like a duck to water.

Also, he really was gifted at chatting up girls. Even girls who hadn't been sure if he was their type or not at first. A few minutes of Zeke's honeyed charm, and

they were smitten. Felix hoped it would last. For now, he was enjoying being completely off the hook.

But whenever thoughts of the future crossed his mind, Felix found himself becoming despondent. He could run from reality for now, but he couldn't run from the fact that he really was the prince. The royal family wasn't free to pursue who they liked romantically. *Felix* wasn't free. Even if he'd already decided who his heart belonged to...

Felix wasn't dumb. He knew that his feelings for Mia weren't going to lead to a happy conclusion, not without a huge battle along the way. But he couldn't help dreaming. There was just something so special about this girl...

Ah...

Still mulling it over gloomily, Felix blinked as his eyes fixed on one student's face in particular.

I've seen that face somewhere before.

But not around campus. No, the resemblance Felix was picking up on was that of their parents. Felix happened to know a lot of them through his father.

He ran through his mental list of social movers and shakers. The king had always drilled it into him how important it was to stay well-connected. And Felix was supposed to be paying close attention to the other students, by order of his father as well.

The royal family's habit of sending their children to the Academy in secrecy served the objective of allowing them to identify potentially valuable human resources among the student body. As ordinary student Felix Keyserling, he would naturally be privy to the inside scoop in a way the prince simply would not.

But it wasn't just friends and would-be future allies he'd be able to find here.

Rueger had told them all to put their best foot forward, and Felix had been wondering what exactly he brought to the group. Eventually, though, he'd cracked it. It was his status. He ought to be able to use his royal identity as a trump card to break through any obstacles that were placed in their way. *That* was how he was going to be able to help Mia.

But I won't be able to stick around her forever...

Felix cast his gaze out the window. High in the cotton-candy sky, he could see two birds flying together. His sigh was barely audible.

Chapter 5: Putting Their Best Foot Forward

AFTER classes, the team gathered in their usual spot in the library lounge for a strategy session.

“Felix? What’s wrong?”

Felix jumped. He’d been deep in thought. Mia’s intense gaze seemed to knock him senseless for a moment. Her eyes flicked back and forth, scanning Felix’s face with concern.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Felix shrugged in what he hoped was a casual manner as Henrik returned them to the subject at hand.

“...So anyway, yesterday I think it became clear to us all that we now have another wall to climb over, in the shape of Bralle. Going back and writing a new thesis might be one way to go. If we can convince the others to our way of thinking, then we can move ahead.”

Henrik sighed, arms crossed over his chest. Sometimes Felix really envied his friend—or was he more like a rival? His brilliant way of noticing things, his logical way of thinking. He was a man blessed with all the traits Felix himself lacked.

“But I don’t think we can start from scratch now, not after we’ve come this far... In the meantime, patients are waiting for a cure. Rather than writing theses that will be of zero benefit to those patients, I’d rather go ahead and try to make a medicine that might actually help them.”

Mia had to say her piece. It was all for the patients, after all. There was no way Mia was going to yield one inch when it came to them.

“But if it all comes to nothing, we’ll be rendered completely useless. Isn’t it better to act ahead of time? Trying to convince the general public is one of the hardest things to do.”

Henrik looked thoughtful. Mia frowned, his words doing nothing to sway her desire.

There had to be another way. Henrik always made her feel confident that there was.

She looked at him, her eyes filled with respect and admiration for him.

Felix knew it—he wasn't the one she relied on the most out of their group. The thought perturbed him. It made him feel like he was worthless, rotting from the inside.

"Why are you always so useless?"

Felix jumped, a disembodied voice echoing in his head. His constant inferiority complex was going to be his undoing, more than anything else. He knew that from experience.

His feelings of frustration and inadequacy suddenly seemed to be choking him. He was getting tunnel vision and couldn't breathe. He had to breathe, get in more air, or he was going to die...

Someone lightly thumped him on the back, and he stiffened.

"Are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost. Do you need your *medicine*? It's right in front of you. Act like a dog and go get your pets and belly rubs, go on."

The low voice rumbled in his ear, and the tunnel vision reversed itself. He felt like a cool, refreshing breeze had just blown through his mind.

Mathias was watching Felix with a long-suffering expression on his face.

He knew Felix's weakness better than anyone. He'd noticed the subtle warning signs of one of his panic attacks and jumped in to stop it in its tracks. More than anything, he wanted to spare Felix the indignity of another public attack.

"A dog?"

Felix let out the breath he'd been holding with his words, and the tight pain in his chest lessened. Mia and Henrik were still talking away, having not even noticed Felix's signs of panic. Good. He didn't want them to notice. He didn't

want to look like a weakling any more than he already did. He didn't want anyone worrying about him.

Besides, he was feeling braver now.

"You'd have to be a large dog. I'll give you that much, at least."

Mathias handed him a handkerchief, and Felix used it to wipe the cold sweat off his forehead.

"I'd like to become a dog. Mia's pet."

Mathias gave him a look that was equal parts exasperation and pity. Then Felix realized that Henrik was watching him too, with a disgusted look. How much had he heard? And—oh no—Mia was looking at him as well, her lips a thin line of concern.

Ah, darn it.

He cursed himself silently, but it was too late.

Sometimes his love for Mia went too far.

He smiled wryly. Still, he was relieved to have regained his composure.

"So, at any rate, it looks like we've come to a standstill. Any ideas, Felix? Although I suppose it's foolish to expect anything great from...a *dog*."

Now Henrik had a new insult with which to endlessly needle Felix.

But Felix wasn't to be discouraged.

He tried to think of a snappy retort. It would help his recovery to focus intensely on something else. Felix excelled at comebacks. To stay silent and sulking would give Henrik an edge that Felix wasn't willing to concede.

Did he have any ideas for a plan of action against Bralle, though?

"Dogs have many wonderful qualities, actually. Their superior sense of hearing and smell. And their willingness to help out. They'd do anything for you, as long as it was within their power..."

Felix trailed off. Henrik was blinking rapidly all of a sudden.

"Within their power... Yes, yes, of course..."

“Hmm?”

Henrik had agreed with something Felix had said...how unexpected.

“Remember what Rueger said? ‘Listen here, kids. All you have to do is put your best foot forward, and the rest will follow smoothly. Trust me.’ But I’m a med student. Mia is a pharmacology student. Mathias is a magic student, and you’re a law student. We all have such different skills. And now we’re second years, none of us is a newbie in our field anymore. Rather than working as one, it would be better to act independently. That will get better results, for sure. And we could stick to our original theme.”

“Independently?”

“We could split the workload and pursue different aspects to reach a conclusion faster. For example, Mathias would be the best person to investigate what happened with that student who came down with *Angel Tears* and who’s been off sick. They were classmates, right? Someone must know which hospital he’s being kept at.”

“Ah...I get it. But I don’t want to make anyone upset by asking too many questions. Hmm, it just seems like too high of a wall to scale, in my opinion...”

Mathias was hedging, but it was obvious he wasn’t keen on the plan. Felix had to swallow back a knowing smile.

He knew better than anyone how shy his childhood friend could be.

And yet, he had such a responsible, rugged-looking exterior. It was so strange how little his personality matched the outside.

Seeing Mathias cringe with discomfort, Felix felt an urge to tease him, mixed with a pang of pity.

“A wall to scale, hmm? Instead of thinking of it that way, why not see it as an opportunity? You could find out some info and get on better terms with your classmates at the same time. Anyway, up until now you’ve been mostly useless. This is your chance to contribute, so snap to it.”

Henrik was clearly not willing to accommodate Mathias’s hesitation.

Mathias’s eyes popped. Being directly hit in his weak point seemed to have

knocked all the fight out of him.

Mia couldn't help smiling, even though she secretly thought Henrik was being needlessly cruel. "Mathias, I know it sounds tough, but it would really be a big help." She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

Mathias shrugged, giving in. "We just need the name of the hospital, right?" Denying Mia would be tantamount to denying Felix now. Neither of those things would be allowed.

"Now, then, Felix...I'm sure there's simply *tons* of ways you could help, but... anything spring to mind?"

Henrik's eyes were filled with an unspoken challenge. Felix thought for a moment. Then the optimal answer came to him.

It was something he'd already been thinking about back in class earlier.

"I think I'll infiltrate the army."

He should be able to find contacts in the Academy to help make that possible. Army brats were plentiful in the law department, after all.

"..."

The other three fell silent. Felix thought it was a great plan, but perhaps he'd been too enthusiastic. He was often accused of taking things to extremes without ever realizing it himself.

"...Then what about you, Mia? Personally, I was planning to spend some more time going through past graduation theses. It would be great if you could help me with that. The other two can't read academic texts to save their lives, after all."

Henrik had breezed past Felix's announcement as if he hadn't even said anything.

"I *can* read, duh! And how dare you ignore me?!"

Felix shot an incredulous look at Mia, seeking an ally in his outrage. But Mia only looked away awkwardly.

Ouch! But why, Mia? The answers we need lie within the army. They just have

to... My plan is perfect! What gives?!

The questions that had stumped them. What is magical power, anyway? And just how were *Neu-Aera* made? And how was magic “injected” into people? All of those answers were top-secret, classified, known only within...the army.

Shoulders slumping in dejection, Felix went over his plan in his head, again and again.

I mean...that's really all I can do to contribute right now...

Chapter 6: Magic Class and the Old Ruined Schoolhouse

TWISTING pipes poked through the crumbling brick wall. The windows were painted black, rendering the interior obscure. And the door was nailed shut, with ropes hung here and there to dissuade trespassers.

It was once a schoolhouse. There had been some medical or pharmacological-related accident, and ever since, the schoolhouse building had been closed up and shut off. The adjacent schoolyard was of a decent size, though, so it still saw use as a practical training ground for magic students.

Wands whipped through the air, which was thick with the sound of spell incantations.

“Vocale, sceptos, forium! Ventos, flume!”

Magical breezes gusted forth from the tips of wands, sending the long grasses swaying. Elsewhere, piles of dead leaves began to swirl in the air. The students were shouting with joy, excited by their own magic in action.

A Foundation of Magic class was underway, with the students separated into different disciplines. Mathias was there too, standing at the end of the row. His face showed no joy. Instead, he waved his wand in the air impassively, like a conductor leading an orchestra.

Oh yeah...I promised I'd try to ask around about that student...

That was all he could think about. He was in a very pessimistic mood indeed. And he could barely even take in any of the class.

The name of the student who'd been struck down with *Angel Tears* was Oliver Adler. Mathias had looked it up in the student registry from the year prior. But before he could begin asking around about Oliver, he had to get over the hurdle of his own shyness first.

Around a week had passed already, but Mathias kept missing out on endless chances to talk to the other students. He hated himself for his weakness, but he

just couldn't get himself to act.

He heaved another sigh and looked around him.

Classmates who'd already successfully demonstrated the assignment were standing around chatting among themselves.

He'd have the best chance of talking to them in this kind of informal atmosphere.

Mathias scanned the crowd carefully. Since he stood at a higher eye level than everyone, there was no accidental eye contact. If he wanted to strike up a conversation, he'd have to make the first move himself.

Mathias gathered up all his courage. Then he leaned in towards the nearest student and cleared his throat.

"Ahem."

The student, a girl, turned around. Then her eyes traveled up, up, up, until they fixed on Mathias's face, suddenly widening. Just then, a loud, high voice rang out across the practice ground.

"Mathias Weiss! No goofing off!"

Mathias almost jumped out of his skin, hearing his name suddenly bellowed like that. Trout was glaring at him.

Mathias felt a wave of rage wash over him. Darn it! Just when he'd finally plucked up the courage to talk to someone!

"I'm *not* goofing off."

He hadn't meant to respond out loud. Trout's eyes widened.

"What, you pulled off the spell already? Don't lie. I've been watching you. You didn't look like you were even saying the incantation to me."

Darn, he caught me.

Mathias wanted to kick the dirt in frustration. He felt like he'd been under surveillance for a while now. Thanks to Mia and Henrik, he'd been able to keep his grades at a passing level, and he didn't remember doing anything in particular that would mark him as a problem student. But after the incident at

the end of last year, he felt constantly monitored.

“Try it, then.”

Stiffly, Mathias raised his wand.

Then he began to murmur the incantation. The work was simple enough—they had to conjure a slight breeze capable of sending dry leaves whirling into the air. But performing the exercise without causing an incident...that didn't seem so simple to Mathias.

I hate standing out...

As much as he was reluctant to do so, he knew he needed to get on with it.

Luckily the training area was nice and wide, surrounded by sturdy walls for the safe practicing of dangerous magic. The only structure nearby was the abandoned schoolhouse, which was a crumbling, off-limits ruin. Nobody would care if he blew it up by mistake, surely.

Mathias took a deep, reluctant breath.

“Vocale, sceptos, forium. Ventos, flume.”

A strong gust of air began to gather with a dull roar, whirling the dry leaves up into its vortex. The power of Mathias's spell was beyond any comparison to his fellow students.

If the other students had been conjuring mini cyclones, Mathias's could be more accurately described as a mini hurricane.

The whirling air whipped around the training ground, sending the long grasses shaking and rustling back and forth. The dull, painted panes of glass in the old schoolhouse's windows rattled in their frames.

Crack. One of the black-painted panes of glass suddenly fractured. Then all at once, there was a cacophony of crunching and crashing noises coming from within the crumbling structure.

“S-Stop!!!”

Trout was pale-faced with horror.

Mathias lowered his wand, and the storm dissipated instantly with a pop. The

other students all gasped, highly impressed and shocked.

“That was *amazing*! Wow, he’s even better than the teacher...”

But just as one student in particular was singing Mathias’s praises...

“SILENCE!”

Trout bellowed in tones so loud they incited a shocked silence. All of the students were staring at their teacher in astonishment. Trout coughed into his closed fist, seeming to struggle to regain his composure.

“Today’s lesson is over.”

Then, still pale-faced, Trout stormed off. Mathias watched him go, deep in thought.

Something tells me I’m not going to get away with this...

Trout struck Mathias as a man who was ruled by his own pride.

Just as Mathias was sighing with self-pity, he found himself suddenly surrounded by the other students. And they were all looking at him with what seemed to be expressions of curiosity and interest.

“That was amazing!”

“How did you *do* that?”

At first, Mathias was struck with the urge to run away from their curious eyes. But then it hit him...this might be his best chance to ask about that mystery student.

“Uh, does anyone know what happened to Oliver?”

“Oliver?”

The students exchanged puzzled glances. Mathias felt himself becoming annoyed with them. Wasn’t Oliver supposed to be their classmate? But then he ought to blame himself too, he supposed. He couldn’t even remember the kid’s name at first. And it had all happened only one year ago.

“The kid who went crazy with *Angel Tears* during the entrance ceremony?”

As he prompted them, fear began to color their expressions.

“Um...hello?”

The sense of interest seemed to deflate from the crowd. One boy looked down awkwardly, and then the rest followed suit. One by one, students began to break out of the circle and walk away.

It was almost like Mathias had broken a taboo.

He'd been too hasty, too straightforward with his question. He'd forgotten how easily the mere mention of *Angel Tears* struck fear and panic in the hearts of mages.

But it was too late to go blaming himself now.

“H-Hey! Get back here!”

He managed to grab the arm of the last of the students to disperse. At Mathias's touch, the boy froze, his voice sounding weak and strangled as he spoke.

“He's at the army hospital, I think.”

Then he broke free and dashed after the other students, away from the training ground and Mathias.

Left alone in the middle of the silent training grounds, Mathias stood in a daze.

It didn't make any sense. Only mages could be afflicted with *Angel Tears*, and it wasn't said to be contagious like *Demon Claw*. Also, the true cause of it wasn't public knowledge. So why did everyone react that way?

“The heck is going on?”

Just as Mathias was mumbling to himself...

A black lump of...something zoomed by, close to his feet.

He leaned forward, focusing. He could see two eyes looking back at him from behind a clump of grass. Then the black lump hopped up in the air for a moment.

As Mathias leaned in even closer, the thing, whatever it was, leaped up at him.

“The heck is that?!”

He grabbed it off his shoulder, where it had hopped onto. It was soft, covered in glossy fur. On close inspection, it was obvious it was a rabbit.

It was just the right size to sit on Mathias’s open palm.

It wasn’t actually black, but a very dark brown. It looked like a normal enough rabbit, but there was something different about it, which Mathias quickly identified. It had red eyes.

Also, one of its legs was covered in blood. It had cut itself somehow. Mathias remembered how he’d shattered the old building’s windows and felt a rush of regret.

“Where did you come from?”

Of course, the rabbit didn’t answer. It twitched its little nose and then began to struggle against Mathias’s grip. When he placed it gently onto the ground, it started nonchalantly eating grass.

The Academy had no facilities for raising animals. Besides, it was forbidden for students to keep pets. So it must have found its way into the grounds from the town. But that was odd, too. There weren’t any wild rabbits in town. The little rabbit’s owner was probably out there somewhere looking for their pet.

He knew he should leave it alone, but the injury to its leg... Mathias thought it over, sighing.

Then he got out his handkerchief and started mopping up the rabbit’s bloody leg.

Finally, he scooped the rabbit up and held it close against his shirt; then, he hurried off quickly in the direction of the library.

He needed to consult his friends about what to do next.

Chapter 7: The Big-Framed Student and the Rabbit

“**IT’S** been a whole week—how can you not have a single idea?!”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me! You haven’t made any progress either, Henrik!”

“I’ve already found an avenue to pursue. I’m *nothing* like you, you first-year-repeater!”

“Me repeating a year has nothing to do with anything!”

“Both of you, put a sock in it! You want to get us all kicked out of the library?!”

Mia, Henrik, and Felix were locked in a furious argument in the library lounge after school. It seemed like none of them had made any progress on their project.

“Ah, Mathias...”

Mia turned, sensing Mathias’s presence. Then her eyes widened. Henrik leaned around her to see what she was looking at.

“Woah, what’s that...thing you’ve got on your shoulder?”

It was Felix who just blurted out what they were all thinking without any preamble. He had zero social awareness. It was kind of a mental block with him.

Mathias was used to Felix’s ways by now, but both Mia and Henrik’s shoulders started shaking with suppressed amusement.

Mathis shrugged in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner.

“As you can see, it’s a rabbit.”

“Why’ve you got a rabbit on your shoulder? You’re such a giant, I barely even spotted it up there!

Henrik snorted with laughter.

“It seems to like it up there. Is there a problem with that?”



It's not as if Mathias was trying to make himself look conspicuous, carting a live rabbit around. He'd wanted to hide the rabbit initially, but it refused to stay in his pocket. It preferred his shoulder, and once it found its way up there, it dug its claws in and refused to come down. Trying to tug the rabbit down would only tear his uniform, so he'd had no choice but to leave it be.

As Mathias sulked silently, Mia reached up towards the little rabbit.

"Are you hurt, poor thing? Come here."

The look in her eyes was identical to the way she looked at Felix when he was having one of his attacks. It was such a caring look. So warm, so comforting. Mathias was starting to realize why it had such a soothing effect on Felix.

The rabbit's ears perked up. It trembled for a moment but soon began to relax. Then it stretched its legs and hopped down from Mathias's shoulder.

Mathias was relieved he'd chosen to come here first. He wasn't sure how much longer he'd have been able to play babysitter to an injured bunny.

"Aw, you had a nice comfy perch up there, didn't you?"

Chuckling, Mia stroked the rabbit's back. She seemed to be at ease around animals as well.

Quickly whipping some first aid items from her bag, she began patching up the rabbit's wound.

"You're good with animals."

Henrik said aloud what Mathias had just been thinking.

"You think so?"

Mia tipped her head to one side, still stroking the rabbit. Her hand moved with a practiced, confident manner. Something about it seemed so familiar to Mathias...

That's the way she strokes Felix's back...

Grinning a little, Henrik looked up at Felix. Clearly, the same thought had occurred to him.

Meanwhile, Felix blithely chuckled and exclaimed, "Even the bunny can sense

how kind Mia is inside!”

As she finished patching up the rabbit, Mia muttered, “Its eyes are...red.”

Mathias nodded. They were red, yes, but not as red as his own. They were more of a reddish-brown. They reminded him of Trout’s eyes.

“It’s a rabbit. Red eyes are kind of normal for them, I thought?”

Felix shrugged. Mia thought it over for a second before shaking her head.

“Red eyes are common for white rabbits, but this one’s fur is black. That’s an odd combination.”

Felix grunted.

“So, what are we supposed to do with it?”

“I think we’d better try to find its owner...” Mathias trailed off midsentence. He had a feeling their little bunny brainstorming session wasn’t going to get wrapped up so easily.

“Who could its owner be, though? Pets are supposed to be banned from campus.”

Mia frowned, and Felix frowned along with her.

“Then maybe it’s a secret pet? In which case, there’s no guarantee we’d find its owner even if we did go public about it.”

Mathias nodded. Then Henrik stopped brooding and suddenly spoke up.

“There’s always the chance it’s not a pet at all. Even more reason for us to keep shtum about it, I’d say.”

Mia blinked, looking thoughtful.

“Hey, where did you find the bunny, anyway?”

“It was out in the middle of the magic training area.”

“Really? Not in one of the medical or pharmacology buildings?”

Mathias shook his head. Henrik and Mia both turned to look at one another.

“Maybe it escaped, then...”

“But it must have covered a vast distance...”

As the two of them murmured back and forth, Mathias frowned. He couldn't follow their conversation at all.

He often found himself wondering what these two top students were talking about. Their brains were wired completely differently from his, and he had a feeling he was never going to get it.

So Mathias turned to Felix, seeking a reliable ally.

But then Mia turned back to Mathias.

“Mathias, could you do us a favor? Henrik and I want to follow up on a hunch, so could you carry on taking care of the bunny in the meantime?”

Mathias took a step backward.

“Wh-Why? It's forbidden to keep a pet on campus, ya know?!”

“Yes, it's the same rule for everyone. But Mathias, you can use magic. And the bunny seems to like you. Please take care of it, just for a little while.”

Henrik's tone was even and soothing.

“Well, I...okay.”

Mathias thought about the heat haze spell Trout had forced him to summon.

“What's babysitting one little bunny going to hurt you? We'll find its owner soon enough. And you've made zero progress gathering info on that absent student, thanks to your chronic shyness. This is your one chance to make yourself useful.”

Felix's dig hurt Mathias's feelings. *You're the only one not contributing. You do your part.* That's how Mathias took it. But he knew Felix was right.

Mathias looked at the helpless bunny's glassy eyes. Then he looked at Felix, who was gazing at him with that same sort of innocent expression.

It's not like he would ever have expected Felix to be any good with animals, anyway.

The bell rang to mark the end of the day's classes. Their meeting over, they all gathered up their stuff and proceeded to leave the lounge.

“Felix, how about grabbing a bite to eat?”

Mathias turned to Felix. Maybe it would still be easier to care for the bunny if there were two of them. But...

“Ah, no, sorry. Other plans. You go ahead and eat.”

Sidling off, Felix began casually hurrying away in the direction of the law building.

Sometimes, Felix had things he needed to do under his *true* identity. Maybe he’d gotten a summons from the royal offices.

Man...I’ve brought a heap of trouble down on myself.

Left standing there alone, Mathias chewed his lip. As he too began to wander away—

“Hey, Mathias.”

Henrik quietly called him to a stop.

What do you want now? Mathias thought, turning around reluctantly. But Henrik was carefully watching Felix until he disappeared around a corner out of sight.

Henrik’s behavior made Mathias immediately suspicious.

So, Felix was the thing he wanted to discuss?

“What?”

“Have you made any progress, grilling the other students?”

“I heard he’s being cared for at the army hospital. Nobody would tell me any more than that...” Mathias trailed off.

To him, it seemed likely that none of the other students even knew any more than that. The army wasn’t going to let information like that leak out. Maybe that’s the reason why the kid was being held at the army hospital in the first place.

Henrik sighed.

“It’s as tricky as I expected. We’re going to have to go ahead with the last-

ditch resort.”

Last-ditch resort? The unusual turn of phrase made Mathias pause. Then Henrik hit him with a question that nearly floored him.

“What can you tell me about Chris?”

Mathias gasped for breath. He felt like he’d just been punched in the gut.

“I don’t know anythin’ about...about that.”

His answer came by reflex, but Henrik seemed unimpressed.

“In that case, perhaps I should just ask Felix instead.”

Mathias sucked on his teeth with annoyance. This guy was a true devil. He wouldn’t put it past him. He was clearly the type to do anything, no matter how underhanded, to achieve his aims. He was dangerous.

“Chris was his—our childhood friend...”

Mathias cast his mind back to when he first met Felix.

Mathias and Chris were both brought along to befriend the young prince, as ordered by their families. Each boy came from a respectable family and was considered suitable friend material.

Usually, friends are people you choose yourself, rather than having your parents choose for you. But politics colored every aspect of Felix’s young life. Despite his tender years, he seemed to understand that all too well.

After the onset of his panic attacks, Felix’s face had grown pale and thin.

He was like an anxious, skittish stray cat, and Mathias had no idea how to approach him. But Chris...Chris just shot Felix a carefree smile and asked, “Hey, wanna go play outside?”

Chris was that kind of guy. He didn’t care for gauging the atmosphere of a given situation, he just wanted to do what he wanted to do at the time. Felix was used to people always peering nervously at him, trying to read his feelings. Chris didn’t do that. And Felix found that immensely refreshing.

Felix was a completely normal boy when he wasn’t having one of his attacks. Perhaps normal isn’t the right word, though. He was unusually gifted but as

prone to japes, tomfoolery, goofing off and causing trouble as any other boy his age. In other words, he was pretty much just a healthy kid. He and Chris soon became great friends.

Mathias, meanwhile, with his painful shyness, simply watched from the sidelines as Chris and Felix became the best of buddies. Mathias always saw himself as tertiary to the group, simply a backup for Chris.

But for whatever reason, the two of them saw Mathias as a part of their group. They seemed to understand that Mathias needed time to warm up to people, and they made allowances for his turtle-slow social pace.

It wasn't too long until the three of them had formed an unbreakable friendship.

But their relationship was destined to be short-lived. Mathias was blocked from taking a place at the Royal Academy. Born with red eyes, he was shunted along into a future as a mage.

Everyone told him it was his duty. The more he heard that, the more resentful he became.

It felt like everyone was telling him that the only thing of worth he had was his magical powers.

In rebellion, he trained his body up and aimed to go into the army as a regular soldier, abandoning the path of a mage. He planned to excel in the combative arts, to become Felix's right-hand man. In that way, he'd be able to prove that he had more to offer than just his innate magical power.

Chris, however, knew even better than Mathias what it meant to accept one's lot in life. He used to scold him about it. Tell him he wasn't living up to his potential.

"You're just being needlessly stubborn, Mathias. You can protect Felix just as easily by becoming a mage. Why would you waste your gift this way?!"

"..."

Lost for words, cowed by Chris's attack, Mathias could say nothing in his own defense. Felix burst out laughing, however.

"It's Mathias's life. Let him live it how he sees fit."

But Chris was inflamed and wouldn't back down.

"So who's going to protect you then, Felix? All right then. In that case, I'll become a mage myself!"

"Don't be a fool. You haven't any magical power."

"I'll just have to go out and get some then, won't I?!"

Both Mathias and Felix laughed dismissively at Chris's bravado.

But maybe at that time, Chris already knew a way to become a mage. That's what Mathias had been thinking recently.

Since they'd lost him, though, the truth was lost to darkness. No one, not even his parents, knew the details of how Chris had become a mage.

It was all Mathias's fault. Chris becoming a mage, contracting *Angel Tears*, all of it. Whenever he thought of Chris, he felt guilty, like he was the lowest of the low. But Felix was suffering so much more than him. Compared to Felix, he was just breezing through life.

Whenever he watched Felix suffering through one of his attacks, Mathias always felt like he was the most cold-hearted person alive. He hated himself.

He wanted to do whatever he could to at least prevent things from getting any worse. That's why he stuck so loyally to Felix's side. He would protect Felix in Chris's place. It was the only way he knew how to make it up to Chris's memory.

"I'm telling the truth. I really don't know much about...about what happened to Chris. Nobody knows it. He just suddenly announced one day that he planned to become a mage to protect Felix. An' then...he did it. Became a mage, I mean. If we'd known the method he was going to use, we woulda stopped him..."

Every time he revisited that day in his mind, the pain came back to him as if it was still fresh. He felt like his psyche had been forever damaged by what had happened.

As Mathias trailed off, Henrik seemed to silently back down. It was as if he was realizing for the first time that Mathias had experienced trauma, just as

Felix had.

“I understand.”

“Sorry.”

“We’ll just have to think of something else.”

“...Like what?”

Mathias found himself questioning Henrik.

“You said no one knows the truth, right? But that’s impossible. Someone has to know. Someone must have done it, right? Made Chris a mage? And we know the army has the means to do that to people. So there’s a high probability there’s some link there, between Chris and someone in the army.”

Henrik had a good point there.

“Someone must have brought Chris into the army.”

Mathias looked at Henrik, his eyes growing wide, the possibilities opening up before him. Henrik smiled.

“I understand why it might be hard for you to see that situation clearly.”

“So, you’re saying it could be possible?”

“Anything’s possible.”

Henrik shot Mathias an enigmatic smile. It made him think of bright little flowers budding up from the snow. But for all Henrik’s magnetism, Mathias’s heart still felt heavy and dark with foreboding.

Chapter 8: Adults Who Lie

THE following day, Mia and Henrik both went out separately to do some research.

The rabbit hadn't simply gotten lost, and it sure as heck wasn't anyone's pet. The most likely scenario was that it was a medical or pharmacological test subject that had escaped.

Mia didn't know about the medical side of things, but in pharmacology, animal trials were a given in order to test medicines for effectiveness. Rodents and rabbits were easy to care for, so they tended to be used the most.

"Henrik, was it a medical department rabbit?"

"No. All of them were present and accounted for. What did you find out on your end?"

"All present on the pharma side, too."

Rueger was in charge of pharmacology. When Mia had asked him about any missing bunnies, he'd grown very solemn-faced and serious. Bralle would be the one to answer to if such a thing occurred, and he was apparently a real stickler for the rules. Realizing that Rueger also found Bralle a pain in the backside made Mia feel an increased sense of camaraderie with her professor.

"So, where did that rabbit spring from then?" Henrik was muttering, a deep frown on his face.

The Academy girls had a nickname for him—the Ice-Cold Aristocrat. Mia could see it. Henrik could cut sharper than any blade made of ice. Mia knew the harsh side of his tongue all too well.

"Seriously. It's not a med or pharma department bunny, so where the heck is it from? If it was a pet, someone would be looking for it... And I can't imagine it wandering inside the campus."

Mia clenched her hands tightly together, picturing the bunny owner's hypothetical plight. Henrik rolled his eyes.

"We're not *looking* for the bunny's owner. There clearly *is* no owner. Why are you getting so sentimental?"

Mia shrugged, smiling wryly back at Henrik. He was right. But Mia did feel bad for Mathias. She wanted to help him out as much as she could, since he seemed so awkward with his role of bunny-sitting.

Mia thought back on what happened after their little convocation the other day.

"Henrik, what did you mean when you said you'd found an 'avenue to pursue?'"

Yes, those had been Henrik's exact words, just before Mathias showed up with the rabbit and distracted everyone. Henrik had a plan, it seemed.

Mia had gone through the same past papers as Henrik, but there was nothing there on any treatments that weren't just palliative ones. Mia had been seriously disappointed.

Henrik pressed his lips together in a tight line before letting out a little sigh.

"It's Chris."

Mia blinked. Every time she heard that name, it resonated in her heart. Chris...the cause of so much pain, the dark cloud over the sunbeam that was Felix. The name that was etched eternally on his heart.

Mia was frowning. Watching her, Henrik raised one eyebrow.

"Chris was an *Angel Tears* patient. There's a huge lead for us to pursue right there."

"Yes, but..."

Mia chewed her lip, recalling Felix's panic attacks. Chris was one of his biggest triggers.

"That's why I didn't say anything in front of him. I decided to ask someone else who would know about Chris...besides Felix."

“So you asked Mathias?”

Mia screwed up her face. It seemed to her that Mathias was dealing with a megadose of trauma from what happened to Chris, as well.

“Yes, I asked him about it. It seems like he doesn’t know any details, though. But he’s blinded by pain. There’s probably a lot more that he knows but simply doesn’t have mental access to.”

Henrik looked grave. Like Mia, it was clear he’d noted Mathias’s trauma. Mia pictured Mathias, his face contorted with pain. She really didn’t want to probe either Felix or Mathias for info, no matter what they might know.

“So, what do we do?”

“I have another option in mind.”

“Another option... What—*who* do you mean?”

If there was someone else involved, who wasn’t quite so emotionally invested, then that would be the perfect person to talk to. Mia gazed expectantly at Henrik, who frowned.

“The Chairman of the Board.”

“**SORRY**, I don’t really know much about that.”

Randolph Meyer, the chairman of the school board, sucked his teeth as he reclined on a splendid leather sofa.

Ugh! What a blatant liar!

It was clear from his smug, smile-suppressing expression. Mia felt like she was surrounded by adults with such odd idiosyncrasies about them. Although that wasn’t limited only to the adults she knew...

“You’re lying. You’re the one who arranged for Felix to repeat the first year. So you must know all about the circumstances related to that.”

Henrik had ignored the chairman’s response completely and just bulldozed right past it. Mia was equal parts impressed and intimidated by Henrik’s moxie.

Just cool it, Henrik! This guy’s part of the royal family! He’s an elite!

Felix had treated Meyer with a familiar, casually disrespectful air that made sense, considering their connection. But surely Henrik had no right to mimic that kind of attitude towards him?

Mia began to panic. What if Henrik's insubordination angered Meyer? But oddly, Meyer seemed unconcerned.

"All I know is that the kid came down sick."

"But how did Chris contract *Angel Tears*?"

"I just told you, I don't know... You're an obstinate one, aren't you?"

"We're conducting research on *Angel Tears*. We need a breakthrough. Can you just cooperate with us?"

Meyer sighed, a sour look on his face.

"A breakthrough, eh... About Chris, all I can say is that / can't say anything. However..."

Mia frowned. What did he mean? But Henrik was nodding shrewdly.

"However...?"

"Vigant. Have you talked to your father yet?"

"...What?"

Henrik looked lost for a moment. Then his eyes brightened with understanding. Immediately he whirled around and took off. Mia blinked, watching him go in astonishment. Then she turned back to Meyer, the chairman of the school board. Her eyes entreated him to give her another clue, anything at all. But he simply grinned back at her.

"*Angel Tears* patients always seem to end up at the army hospital, but one wonders where they go at the first onset of symptoms..."

Mia gasped. Right. Except for serious illnesses, most patients don't go straight to a major hospital when they get sick. Usually, they go to their local clinic's doctor first.

"Thank you, Sir!"

Mia yelped with gratitude as she turned and dashed off after Henrik.

“WHY did you hide, Emil?”

“I told you not to call me that. You never know who might be listening.”

Felix emerged from behind a curtain in the corner of the room.

Never could he have imagined that Mia and Henrik would come here. Or that they would ask about Chris...

They were tiptoeing around his feelings. That was sweet of them. But it made him feel pathetic. Felix was torn between conflicting emotions.

“Can I ask you the same question, then?”

Felix stared at Meyer, his gaze challenging.

Throwing up his hands, Meyer sighed.

“Are you sure you want to go there? Your little walking wonder-drug has already left.”

“...”

Felix took a deep breath, nodding. Even without Mia’s presence, he had to know.

“Chris went to talk to your father to get permission to enter the Academy.”

“My...father?”

Felix’s father was his Achilles’ heel. Ever since Felix had gotten sick with his attacks, his father had shunned him. They only saw each other face to face around once a month, if that. His two brothers were the same. Then when he’d ended up having to repeat the first year, they’d told him he was the family embarrassment and had stopped talking to him almost entirely.

Felix felt choked by his family’s presence. His uncle was the only one who’d never said anything cruel to him. He was the one warm spot Felix had left in the coldness of his family circle. He too had been the youngest prince in the family once, so perhaps he understood what it was like for Felix better than anyone.

“It was back when you were getting ready to enter the Academy. You needed a bodyguard your own age to accompany you, but there was no one suitable.

There was talk of bringing back the Weiss boy, but that fell through. The other boy—Chris—acquired magical power and entered the Academy with you in an effort to compensate for his family's low social standing and economic circumstances."

His uncle trailed off, sighing for a moment.

"At any rate, if you want the real details, you're going to have to ask my brother directly. Also, regarding that favor you asked me the other day...I can't help you with that either. Again, you'd better ask my brother."

"..."

Felix found himself unable to suppress a scowl. His emotionally absent father had given him one very firm warning—that if he was going to ask for something, it had better be something important.

Felix knew what had to be done...he just hated the thought of doing it.

Isn't there anything else I can do, though...?

When their Grand Plan had gone suddenly missing last year, Felix had realized how little power he had over, well, anything. He was supposed to be the prince, but he was effectively useless. He couldn't even protect the girl he loved. Apart from the royal blood running in his veins, his life had zero value.

He felt so pathetic. And he hadn't even been doing his job as a prince properly, either.

But now there was something Felix wanted. And he knew that he would have to offer something big in exchange to get it.

Felix heaved a huge sigh.

"All right."

His uncle's eyes widened in surprise.

"I'll attend an evening party. Per father's command."

"But...but you'll be offered up on a platter..."

"Even so. I'll still attend."

"You're really going to go? To the royal court banquet?"

Felix blinked back hot tears. He dreaded the thought of being around his father and brothers again, and no doubt they wouldn't be pleased to see him. Not the way he was now.

"No, no, to one of the less fancy events. Tell me which one would be best. I'll write a letter. You'll deliver it for me, won't you?"

"...All right."

After hashing out the plan, Felix left the chairman's office with a grim expression on his face.

"It sounds like this might be the real deal..."

Meyer was muttering to himself.

"Ah, the impunity of youth. The road ahead for him will be a treacherous one for sure."

Politics and romance...it is a difficult thing indeed to balance them both.

Chapter 9: A Winter Break Promise

MIA burst out of the chairman's office in pursuit of Henrik. But he was much too fast to catch.

It would've been the polite thing for him to wait for her. But she had the feeling that would be asking too much of Henrik. His brain had already moved on to the next thing, and he'd forgotten about Mia altogether.

"A free clinic..."

Mia sighed.

The first thing that came to mind was the little free clinic she once worked at. After her benefactor, Dr. Letts died, Mia had been forced to leave the clinic. Since then, personnel changes had taken place, so even if she went back there, nobody would welcome her anymore.

Which reminds me...

Thinking about the clinic led her to think back on what Bralle said the other day. Was Letts' death really caused by poor health? Mia had no way to know the truth, either way...did she?

When she entered the lounge, she found Mathias alone with the rabbit, stroking its fur. The table in front of him was strewn with books on rabbit care. Mathias was clearly giving this his best shot.

Mathias looked so funny, caring for a small fluffy rabbit. But the disconnect didn't seem to register with him.

In fact, he was slightly smiling as he stroked the soft fur.

Mia looked away quickly, suppressing a smile.

Mathias looked up, frowning a little.

"Where have you been?"

Mia hesitated for a moment. If she told him she'd been visiting the chairman, Mathias would want to know why. Then she'd have to mention Chris.

As she was still debating how to answer...

"What are your plans for Winter Break, Mia?"

Mia whirled around to see Henrik standing there. As she was still processing the situation, Henrik continued talking.

"I'd like to invite you to visit my family home."

"Whaaat?"

Mia gawped at him.

"What the heck is going on here?!"

They all whirled around to find Felix standing in the doorway, fuming.

Henrik, however, remained unruffled.

"...As we were saying? My family home?"

Mia jumped, blinking rapidly as Henrik turned back to her.

"Er...what are you talking about?"

"My family. We run a major public clinic."

Oh yeah, the chairman mentioned that.

Henrik was the eldest son of a famous doctor who ran a big public clinic. Mia had been so busy thinking about her own past. But now, things clicked into place for her.

"Oh, I get it! That's what the chairman was referring to!"

"Precisely." Henrik nodded nonchalantly. "Actually, it would be great if you could help out. The end of the year is always extra busy with cold and flu patients, and we never seem to have enough staff."

"Yes, I'd love to go!"

Mia was delighted. This could be a major step.

"We won't be able to show you a fancy time, I'm afraid. Just a few home

comforts.”

“That sounds wonderful!”

Last year Mia had felt so left out when everyone came back and talked about what they did over break.

“M-Mia...you’re going to Henrik’s house? You do realize what that implies, don’t you?”

Felix looked stricken and shook angrily. Behind him, Mathias seemed to be holding his breath, watching Felix anxiously.

There seemed to be some misunderstanding here. Mia quickly explained.

“We got a big clue from the chairman. At first, both *Angel Tears* and *Demon Claw* were seen as new, unexplained ailments. You don’t go straight to a big hospital when you’re sick with something unknown, right? You go to your local physician for a diagnosis first. There might be some old patient charts or something!”

But Felix was unconvinced. In fact, it didn’t look like he’d even processed what Mia had said. She blinked up at him.

“What’s wrong, Felix?”

“I mean...Mia. What about our promise?”

For some reason, Felix’s eyes were glistening with tears.

“Promise...?”

They’d made a promise? Mia thought back, but nothing came to mind.

“Well, Felix, do you have plans over Winter Break? Wanna come along?”

“Huh?”

Henrik twitched as Mia casually invited Felix, too.

“He can’t. It’s impossible. As I recall, there’s a royal court banquet for the Winter Solstice.”

Mia was reminded of Felix’s true identity. She gazed up at him.

A banquet at the royal court? How splendid!

Felix was just standing there, pale-faced and silent. Then he blinked several times. All at once, he was beaming.

“Of course! I’d love to come! And you come too, Mathias!”

“Leave me out of it.”

Mathias got to his feet, fighting back a smile. The rabbit lolloped down from his shoulder, diving into his pocket. A second later, its furry face popped back out.

“Let’s all ring in the new year at Henrik’s home, then!”

With his trademark disrespect for social etiquette, Felix cheered. Mathias, meanwhile, launched into a lecture.

“What are you playing at, Felix? Don’t just drag me along with you. I have my own things to take care of, you know. I’m busy. And you can’t just invite extra people.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure it’s a ‘the more, the merrier’ type deal.”

“Yeah, right!”

Henrik turned his back on their argument, his shoulders drooping.

“Agh, what a pain. So it’s ended up like this, has it?”

Mia peered at him.

“Oh dear...you never intended to invite Felix and Mathias?”

Mia thought they were all a team. She’d just assumed they’d spend the break together, as they did last year. Why were things different now?

But Henrik had only invited her. Going alone to stay at the home of a member of the opposite sex—Mia *did* know what that implied. She gasped.

Is he planning to...introduce me to his parents?!

If so, Felix’s horrified reaction would make sense.

No, it couldn’t be! Henrik isn’t like that! Besides, he asked me to help out!

She peeked at Henrik fearfully. But he wore his usual expression and shrugged at her.

“It’s not that. I just...assumed they’d be unable to make it. It would definitely help the investigation to have extra hands on deck. Although I doubt they’d be of any use at a medical facility. They’ll probably eat more than what they manage to earn by working. Ah, Mia, I should warn you...things will be very hectic at home. You should really come prepared.”

There was something a little odd about him, but he was the same old Henrik, wasn’t he? Yes, of course, he was...

Felix worries too much! Anyway, what promise did he and I make? None, right?!

In Felix’s mind, he’d already decided that once Mia’s mother was cured, that would be the green-light for him and Mia to start dating for real. At least, that seemed to be what he was thinking.

No way!

Just thinking about it made Mia blush. She shook her head, trying to drive out thoughts of Felix. Then she turned to Henrik again, making her voice sound extra perky.

“I’ll come prepared, for sure! In fact, I can’t wait to get involved with some honest work!”

Then she followed it up with a cheesy grin and a double thumbs-up.

She heard chuckling and turned to see Felix giving her a wry grin, shaking his head.

Next to him, Mathias smiled at her too. It looked like he’d given up on lecturing Felix on social graces, at least for the moment.

Chapter 10: Grantz, The Former Capital of Radius

MIA and the three boys headed straight to Henrik's family home the moment Winter Break started.

Henrik's house was located in Grantz, which was once the site of Radius's capital. Their journey there took about three hours by steam engine from the city.

As they emerged from the old station building, Mia's eyes widened in wonder.

There was a circular rotary area in front of the station, where little round horseless carriages were neatly parked.

Streets led off from all angles of the rotary like it was a massive sundial, and each road was paved in cobblestones of bright colors, including red and yellow. Little flower shops and restaurants were clustered along both sides of every street.

It was clear that this used to be Radius territory. The culture of Radius was still alive and well to this day. Here and there were unusual buildings to be seen, the likes of which Mia had never encountered anywhere before.

The little houses crammed along the streets had quaint triangular roofs, and the walls were all painted with different colors. The overall effect was completely charming. Little white puffs of smoke chugged out of the various chimneys and floated off into the bright blue sky.

The streets were paved with the same kind of stone as in the capital, and each house had the same type of chimney. But how different it all was from the dull brass and ashy gray tones of the city!

The blueness and clearness of the sky were the same as that of Mia's childhood village, but everything here seemed so well-tended and cared for in ways Mia's village hadn't been. The whole town seemed like something straight out of a fairy tale.

“It’s so colorful and adorable!”

As Mia gazed around with delight, Henrik began filling them in on the area’s history.

“Isea has a lot of stone buildings, but the old Radius used to be the heart of forest country, so you’ll see we have a lot of wood buildings. All Isea has is rock and stone, right? So that’s why they build with stone. If you spot any stone buildings, that’s a sign they’ve been built more recently.”

“That’s really interesting!”

The phrase ‘the old Radius’ gave Mia pause. It immediately made her think of the great war—the Bruckstadt Conflict.

They were gone now, but the old Radius Royal Family built their capital city here. Then the land came under the ownership of Isea’s Royal Lohenstein family, and a long time had passed since then.

Mia had learned about those days during history class, but it seemed the scars of war still ached to this day. There were still many who remained loyal to the Radius royal family and waited for their revival. Mia had even heard that there were rebels who were secretly amassing power in the hope to one day overthrow the Isea Kingdom.

A cold wind whipped around Mia’s ankles, but the chill in her heart wasn’t from the weather.

She stole a quick glance at Felix. Considering his true identity and the position he held, Mia was concerned that being confronted with his family’s past deeds this way might be upsetting him.

He certainly had a gloomy expression on his face.

“So, in other words, that stone statue of King Leonard over there was built recently, huh?”

Felix was gazing at the stone statue standing in the center of the rotary. The statue was holding an oddly shaped stone in its hand. Clearly, it was meant to depict the king’s discovery of *Neu-Aera*.

The tales say that penniless King Leonard pioneered the *Neu-Aera* approach in

order to seek the hand of Luludia, the princess of Radius. It was ingenuity, not riches, that won him his bride, or so the story went. What a cute fairy tale. Happy ending, right?

And with the power he gained, he destroyed the princess's kingdom...

What kind of a horrible fairy tale is that?

King Leonard's stone face looked like it was crying.

Mia and her friends weren't alive when the Bruckstadt Conflict took place. In fact, there were none left living who had experienced those times.

But even with their country gone, its people remained. Life endured. And so did the truth, passed down over time.

Yes, there were scars on this land, all right.

And Mia was one of those who were still suffering because of those scars.

As she closed her eyes painfully, she felt a pair of hands clamp down on her shoulders from behind.

"Let's get going, shall we?"

Henrik's face was as impassive as ever.

"Are you all right?"

Felix was peering at her with concern.

"I'm...I'm fine."

She blinked, focusing on the faces of her friends. Even Mathias looked concerned. She took a breath to steady herself. Yes, she was okay.

They headed north from the rotary, and soon a large building with a dome-shaped roof came into view.

"This was a church once, during Radius times. It was well built, as you can see, and so it remains standing."

Each wall was decorated with a mural of glimmering turquoise. It was quite a splendid building indeed.

As Mia gazed up at the building in front of them, Henrik reached out to push a

button beside the heavy front doors. Then with a clunking of gears and a hiss of steam, the huge doors began to slide slowly apart. On the wall above the entryway, a series of gears clanked together, helping to winch the doors apart.

Mia was taken aback. These doors were automated. She'd never seen anything like that before.

As the doors slid open, a gust of warm air swept invitingly around their ankles.

The interior was plushly carpeted. Once inside, they looked up to see holy images painted on the domed ceiling overhead. The circular walls were ringed with brass pipes, heating the building via the ingenious use of circulated hot water. This modern piece of engineering seemed at odds with the traditional splendor of the old church building.

As Mia gazed around open-mouthed, Henrik strode forward.

"Er, is it okay for us to just stroll into a church unannounced?"

Henrik turned to stare at Mia uncomprehendingly, then just as his expression changed...

"Welcome home, Master Henrik."

A sophisticated-looking gent in a dashing frock coat walked smoothly forward to bow before Mia and the others.

"Sebastian, how many times have I asked you to drop the master-servant schtick?"

"Nonsense, Master Henrik. I do apologize for the delay in greeting your party. I am the Vigant family's chief butler, Sebastian. It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

Mia almost fainted.

A butler? But they're doctors, not members of the landed gentry! Hey, wait a minute!

"Th-This is *your* house, Henrik?!"

"No, this is the clinic. The house is situated elsewhere on the property. It wouldn't be comfy to live here, too cold, what with the high roof and all."

There's a whole other house, too?!

Henrik's family had an old church and a butler. They were clearly wealthy, far beyond anything Mia had been imagining.

"W-Wow..."

She quickly glanced at Felix, wanting someone to share her shock with. But he seemed unsurprised. Then she remembered...

Oh yeah. He's a prince.

There was no point expecting someone who lived in a palace to share her surprise over Henrik's wealth.

She turned to old reliable Mathias, but he didn't seem surprised either. It looked like Mia was the only commoner among the bunch after all.

"The Doctor is waiting."

"..."

Ignoring the butler, Henrik waved a dismissive hand. "Show my guests around," he ordered imperiously. The butler raised a single eyebrow and nodded.

"Please allow me to take your bags."

The butler looked around at them all. He gave Felix a dashing smile and nodded politely to Mathias. Then when his eye fell on Mia, he seemed to struggle to withhold a grin.

Huh?

Mia was confused for a moment. Then she looked at Felix in his silk hat and frock coat. And at Mathias in his bowler hat and lounge suit. Then she looked down at herself. At the sight of her shabby dress, she felt her cheeks sizzle with sudden, red-hot embarrassment.

But of course. This wasn't the academy. She'd forgotten that she was in high society company right now.

I should have at least bought a new dress for this trip...

But the only dresses Mia could afford would still look shabby in a setting like

this. It wouldn't have done her any good.

Feeling downcast, Mia hung her head. "Sebastian!" Henrik barked. The butler stiffened immediately.

"This way, please. A meal has already been prepared for your refreshment."

Remembering his manners, the butler bowed sweepingly before leading them off.

THEY left the clinic's donut-shaped lobby and walked through a garden to see a large wood-framed mansion up ahead.

The walls glittered with turquoise embellishments, and it was clear to see that the big house had been built to complement the clinic's original design. It was very cleverly thought-out and implemented. Mia was feeling more and more surprised by the moment.

"This is the Vigant Residence."

The butler ushered them all inside.

"...I apologize."

Henrik leaned in to speak to Mia under his breath. She immediately knew he was apologizing about Sebastian's snobbery towards her back there. Mia just shrugged in an "it is what it is" type of way.

"Actually, I found the inappropriate staff behavior refreshing."

Felix grinned wryly. Clearly, he hated the special treatment that came as standard with being a royal.

"Well, you can blame 'the Doctor's' influence for that."

As Henrik spat out his retort, the butler raised an eyebrow and sighed audibly as he continued to lead them along.

The dining hall's table was spread for a grand feast.

This is what Henrik meant by home comforts?!

The large, oval dining table was covered with a pristine white cloth, and

sparkling silverware and glittering glass plates and bowls were set at every place. In the middle of the table was a sprawling centerpiece of fresh, colorful flowers.

On the far side of the table, a gentleman was seated. It only took a brief glance to see the clear family resemblance Henrik bore to his father. The man radiated an aura of competence and sternness.

Henrik didn't say anything, and neither did the man. For a moment, the air was thick and heavy with tension.

Finally, the man cleared his throat.

"Oh dear, it seems the prodigal son is in one of his famous moods. One would hardly think he was next in line to succeed me."

"..."

Henrik was frowning so hard a crevasse had opened between his eyebrows. And yet, he remained silent. It was clear there was no love lost between father and son, but whether it was caused by simple teenage rebellion or something more serious, none could tell.

"Welcome. I am Henrik's father, Rudolf Vigant. Henrik, why don't you introduce your guests? They seem a little perplexed."

Henrik blinked, looking around at the others. Then he began to speak in a reluctant tone of voice.

"Fine, I'll introduce them. This is Mia Baumann. Top student in the Pharmacology Department. She shows incredible promise as a future pharmacist."

Mia blushed and looked at her feet. She wasn't used to being praised so publicly.

"H-Hello. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Mia was used to people trying to drag her down a peg or two, but being lifted up like Henrik had just done was a completely new experience for her.

She attempted a curtsy, almost knocking into the dining table as she did so. Rudolf gave her a cool smile that resembled his son's. With his smile, the

atmosphere in the room seemed to warm up and grow a little lighter.

The effects of that smile were so like Henrik's, Mia could scarcely believe it.

Henrik continued introducing his guests.

"And this is Felix Keyserling and Mathias Weiss, both sons of barons. One studies law, the other magic. Although neither does either particularly well, as their grades make perfectly evident."

Felix and Mathias both lowered their heads politely, their expressions stiff but twitching.

Ack, Henrik! Is that really necessary right now?!

What was Henrik's deal, anyway?

"Henrik. This rudeness ceases now. I do apologize for my son. Thank you, all three of you, for becoming friends with my son despite his...personality flaws. Now, please relax and make yourselves at home."

Rudolf smiled dazzlingly. Then he muttered an aside to Henrik:

"Henrik, come to my chambers later. I have something to discuss with you."

"Pass."

Henrik sniffed dismissively.

"All right, then you leave me no choice. Shall we discuss it right here, right now?"

"Suit yourself." Henrik shrugged, his tone icy. "I know what it's about, anyway. My future, right? But no matter what you say, I'm still going to become a physician-scientist and help people with incurable diseases that modern medicine has turned its back on."

Mia blinked, taken aback by the sudden fervor of Henrik's speech. Felix and Mathias exchanged surprised glances as well. Where had this impassioned determination been hiding behind Henrik's perma-cool façade?

Rudolf laughed bitterly.

"Nonsense. You've a clinic to run."

“No, Father. Unlike you, I won’t turn my back on any patient. Unlike you, I’ll never become a doctor who’s only in it to line his own pockets.”

Henrik’s words were shocking, but Rudolf didn’t even flinch.

“Your whimsies aside, the clinic is your birthright. If you don’t succeed me as director, then you’ll be turning your back on all the good people in town who need our medical care. You want to save all the patients? Good. You can start with our own, you little hypocrite.”

Henrik was silent, hands bunched into fists by his side.

Suddenly, Rudolf broke into braying laughter, then clapped his hands loudly.

“Hahaha! I must apologize again for my son. Now then, shall we all enjoy a pleasant meal?”

As if on cue, the doors flew open, and various dishes were brought to the table.

Mia supposed it was Radius-style. They were all served portions from heaping platters. Chicken salad, tomato soup, river-fish ceviche, sautéed lamb...there were so many unique, varying dishes being loaded onto the table.

In the awkward silence of the dining room, however, nothing seemed to have any flavor.

After the meal, which had filled their bellies but left them feeling somehow empty, Rudolf got to his feet with a smile and left. Finally, Mia could feel her shoulders relaxing as some of the tension drained away.

Talk about daddy issues...

Mia felt exhausted from the oppressive aura cast over them all by Henrik’s father. She was also shaken by the fact that someone actually existed who could intimidate Henrik.

She looked over at Henrik to see that he hadn’t touched a single bite of food on his plate. His lips were pressed tightly together, as if he was trying his hardest not to cry.

Then all of a sudden, Mia realized why Henrik had invited her here. He hadn’t wanted to face his father by himself over Winter Break.

Just as Mia was wondering how best to try to comfort him...

“Hey, are you a complete idiot? Why’d you have to argue with him? Weren’t we supposed to ask him for permission to check out the old patient charts?”

Felix crossed his arms over his chest. Mia realized she had actually forgotten why they’d all come until Felix mentioned it just then.

“Doesn’t matter. We can’t rely on his help, anyway.”

Henrik’s tone was subdued, a frown still deeply etched between his brows. Felix shrugged, trying to lighten the tone.

“Well, anyway, it’s a relief to know there’s at least one person out there you can’t bend to your will, haha!”

Henrik turned a glassy, rage-filled gaze on Felix for a moment. Then he muttered, “Oh, shut up,” and began stuffing his face with food. Mia relaxed a little as she watched Henrik cram food into his mouth, his frown line finally smoothing out.

“You know, Felix, sometimes...and I mean only sometimes...I envy that ability of yours to say what everyone’s thinking without the slightest hint of social awareness.”

Mathias was shooting Felix a grudgingly grateful look that mirrored how Mia was feeling.

Felix blinked back uncomprehendingly, but Mia nodded to herself. She was glad she’d invited Felix along. She had the feeling she would’ve been of no help to Henrik by herself.

Chapter 11: Head Nurse Mary

THE following morning, Henrik was back to his usual self, much to everyone's relief.

"Mia, I'm going to need your help right away after breakfast."

Mia nodded, her expression solemn. She was keen to make herself useful here.

Then Henrik turned to Felix and Mathias. "You two can just kick back until this evening. There's actually a festival going on in town."

But Felix wasn't about to be fobbed off so easily.

"We're here looking for clues, aren't we? We'll come along with Mia."

"Fine. Access rights to the old charts are contingent on us being useful around here. If you really want to help us nurse sick and injured patients, then go nuts, but don't go fainting at the sight of gushing blood or oozing boils or anything, got it?"

Felix paled visibly at that, suddenly remembering his limits and instantly retracting his offer to help.

THE treatment area was located beyond the front reception desk, in the "hole" of the donut. White-clad nurses bustled around the wide space busily, several of them engaged in a heated discussion.

The brass pipes encircling the walls gave off various noises. It was clear the central heating system had cranked into motion to coincide with the clinic opening, heating the entire building before patients came.

The air felt clean and sterile and somehow heavy. Beside Mia, Henrik cleared his throat.

"This is my friend, Mia. Show her the ropes, please."

One of the nurses in the center of the group whirled around with a smile. Mia rocked back slightly on her heels as she took her in. The nurse gave off an aura of extreme competence and was prettily plump.

“Hello! I’m the Head Nurse, Mary.”

“Mia Baumann...nice to meet you! I’m here as a clinic volunteer!”

As Mia nodded politely, Mary suddenly grabbed her hand and shook it heartily, her lips curving into a big smile.

W-Woah...she’s friendly!

“Let’s get right down to it, Mia! How about cleaning the reception area?”

“C-Cleaning?”

Mia had just assumed she’d be helping out with patients. She couldn’t stop herself from blinking rapidly in shock. She thought about the reception area and how it encircled the treatment center. It was...a pretty big area.

“Oh dear, is that too difficult for you, pet?”

There was something challenging in Mary’s grin that made Mia yelp defensively.

“Not at all! I’ll get right to it!”

“Wonderful! A tidy reception desk puts our incoming patients right at ease! Now, mind you, don’t miss even a single speckaroo of dust!”

“I...I won’t.”

Mia was trying her hardest to hide a sudden urge to burst into tears. She hadn’t expected to be doing mindless grunt work here, not when she had her own skills to offer. She looked over at Henrik for help, but Mary had already got him in her sights, too.

She pointed imperiously at the rows of medicine cabinets lining the walls. “And your job is to put those cabinets in order. We want to see those bottles sparkling, don’t we?”

Henrik closed his eyes for a moment, looking pained.

Head Nurse? More like drill sergeant! But Mia quickly forced herself to adjust

her own attitude. She was only here as a volunteer and had no right to expect to be allowed to treat patients right from the outset.

Besides, it would feel good to do something physical after so much studying. The clinic setting reminded her of her days living and working with Dr. Letts and made her feel warm and sentimental. She quickly put on a work apron and tied her hair neatly back.

Let's get to work!

She felt oddly pumped up for the first time in a while. But as soon as she picked up a nearby mop, Mary pounced on her, tsk-tsking and wagging her finger.

Instead, she brought Mia to the storeroom, where there was a curious round machine with a long metal hose attached. Mia stared at it, eyes wide.

"You need to attach it to the pipes to make it go. Then you use the steam to sterilize and clean, you see? Oh, but don't scald yourself on it. Wear these gloves."

Mia did as she was told and put on a pair of thick gloves before attaching the machine to a valve on the wall. Immediately, white steam began to chug forth from the end of the hose. It seemed to work on the same principles as a steam iron for pressing clothing, except this was used to clean the floors.

Wow, that's amazing...

The dirt and grime melted away to nothingness right in front of her eyes. In seconds, the section of the floor she was working on was sparkling clean. Mia soon became absorbed in the enjoyable and novel task.

Just as the cleaning session was wrapping up, patients began to trickle in. Mary leaped into action. Index finger jabbing the air wildly, she began issuing barked commands to her nursing staff.

There were all kinds of patients. People with injuries and others who were sick. There were people with symptoms of both mild and serious diseases.

Mia had never worked in a big clinic like this, and she could barely process what was going on. It was so busy!

Spotting a child with a high fever, Mary waved them ahead to the front of the line. Then when an elderly man tried to shuffle ahead of the others, she scolded him and shooed him back, barking “You’re fine! You can wait!” at him as he visibly shrank in the face of her sternness.

“Mia, we need a bandage applied here right now!”

“Certainly!”

“Henrik! Bring the antiseptic!”

“All right.”

Mary’s eye was keen, her decisions were sharp, and her hands were swift and skilled. It was clear that she was the sun around which this entire hospital’s operation orbited.

THAT evening, once clinic hours were over, Mia sank to the floor, exhausted.

Henrik was already sprawled on a nearby sofa, fast asleep.

Mary, however, was still bustling about, full of beans, tending to after-hours cleanup.

Is Mary even human, or is she an automaton?!

The Head Nurse’s stamina was amazing. As Mia was gazing at her with absent wonder, Mary turned to them, brushing off her hands.

“Now then!” she barked, ushering both Mia and Henrik in the direction of the residence, “It’s time for the festivities to begin!”

Mia was directed to return to the guest room she was staying in.

When she walked in, she found a large potted plant sitting in the center of the room—a miniature fir tree. It certainly wasn’t there that morning.

The fir tree was about the same height as Mia and was decorated with various ornaments, like stars and bells.

“Wow! When did this get set up?!”

Mia was deeply moved. She’d never celebrated a proper Winter Solstice

before. Her memories of life with her mother before she was taken away to the sanatorium were hazy. In fact, the most vivid memory she had of her childhood was of the day her mother was taken away.

There were several large boxes placed underneath the tree. Mia leaned in curiously and could make out the writing on the card attached to the nearest box. It said: “For Mia.”

Mia opened up the big box, her eyes widening. There was a green dress inside. It was velvet! And very, very fancy!

“Wh-What’s this for...?”

“It’s a Winter Solstice gift.”

“W-We’re exchanging gifts?!”

But Mia hadn’t brought anything...she wrung her hands for a moment, then froze. Something was odd...she turned around quickly.

Wait, who was that speaking just now?

It had sounded like Mary’s voice, but Mary was nowhere to be seen. Instead, another woman was standing there, her curvy form resembling Mary’s, and yet...

“Huh?”

Mia did a double-take. Out of her nurse’s whites and with her hair down, Mary looked so different. But there was no mistake, this was the same woman Mia had spent the day working alongside.

“Now then! Help the young lady get dressed!”

At Mary’s command, the door opened, and several women dressed in maid uniforms trotted in.

“You were such a big help today, pet! It’s just as Henrik said—you’re a real hard worker! Thank you for everything.”

Mary beamed, her voice as perky as ever.

“But you must be tired. Sorry, I was a bit of a drill sergeant to you today, but this place needs people who can keep up, and I had to test you a little. Well,

you exceeded my expectations, and then some! We were all a fluster when our naughty son announced he'd be bringing a girlfriend home for the holidays! You know, I've always wanted a daughter, and I've often thought about how much better it would have been if Henrik had been a nice, sweet little girl instead..."

Mia blinked rapidly as Mary continued to chatter away.

"Um...Wait..."

It couldn't be, could it?

As Mia stood there licking her dry lips, unable to speak, Mary guffawed.

"Oh dear, pardon me! I forgot to mention! I'm Henrik's mom!"

"M-Mom?!"

Nobody told me that! And there's zero family resemblance! ...was what Mia wanted to yell, but her throat felt paralyzed somehow.

"We don't look a bit alike, do we?"

Oops. Mary had obviously been able to tell what Mia was thinking. She guffawed again, a dimple showing adorably in one cheek as she smiled. *Zero! Family! Resemblance!*

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry! Thank...Thank you for today! It was very hectic, but it was a great learning experience!"

As Mia scrambled to make amends for her ignorance and rudeness, one of the maids reached forward and unpopped her top button.

"Wh-What?!"

"You can't wear that to the festival, you'll be frozen! We're much farther north than the capital, you know."

"P-Please! I can change clothes by myself!"

But Mia stopped protesting as she saw the green velvet dress being brought over to her. Mary wanted her to wear it now?

"Now then, this is only one of my old hand-me-downs, so you mustn't fuss about accepting it!"

“But...But I couldn’t possibly!”

“You could, and you should, and you shall. You know, I was a skinny little thing too in my younger days! But I just couldn’t part with such a charming dress as that.”

Mia felt a fleeting sense of panic that Mary might have misinterpreted her protests as a roundabout way of commenting on the older woman’s figure. There was nothing she could say that wouldn’t sound even worse, though, so she bit her lip instead.

Mia obediently allowed the maids to slip the dress over her head. It was a winter-wear dress, pleated from the waist with a modestly high neckline and a very simple design, just some light, charming embroidery work. It suited Mia’s personal aesthetic sense very well. The mossy green color of the dress even made her red hair seem to glow like the embers of a fire. She felt amazing.

“I had it shortened a little to achieve the modern look. The old length would have looked just a tad bit drab.”

Mary was right. The dress was cut to a modern, stylish length. It would look super cute with boots. Mia fingered the soft velvet material. It felt so slinky, swishing around her legs as she moved this way and that.

This had to cost a fortune!

Mia felt another rising wave of panic.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t accept such a splendid gift!”

“Oh, do it as a favor to me, please! It’s always been my dream to get my hands on a girlfriend of Henrik’s and dress her up like my own personal doll!”

Mary’s eyes were sparkling. Mia bit her lip. Should she correct Mary about her and Henrik’s relationship? Or would that be presumptuous of her?

No, no, she couldn’t let Mary get the wrong idea!

“Um, Henrik and I are just good friends. There’s no need to do all this for me...”

“You shy little thing! You know, Henrik said as much himself. You two are just as cute as two blushing peas in a pod!”

Mary grinned, her eyes crinkling. Mia's effort to clarify the situation was clearly a misfire.

But in society, it was simply a given that bringing a girl home to meet your family meant she was your special someone. Even though Mia was really only here to help out, the optics of the situation were the same.

I'm going to have to get Henrik to explain things seriously to his mom later...

Still chewing her lip, Mia meekly allowed the maids to finish adjusting the dress.

His mom is going to be so disappointed...

But as she looked into Mary's sparkling eyes, Mia knew she couldn't bring herself to spoil the older woman's special moment.

Chapter 12: The Radius Festival

EVENTUALLY Mathias managed to drag Felix out of the house to go into town, per Henrik's suggestion. A whole day spent lounging around the mansion was sure to put Felix in the foulest of moods.

Besides, even if Felix helped out in the clinic, he'd be a complete third wheel to Mia and Henrik. Mathias wondered how well he'd have handled that. His guess was "not well at all."

THE town was bustling with festival atmosphere, and there were people everywhere. They gave the two young men a wide berth, though, probably trying to evade Felix's scowl and angry aura. Mathias felt nervous. It was bad enough to be on guard duty, but Felix wasn't exactly trying to blend in.

"Hey, get it together. You're stickin' out like a sore thumb."

"I think it's your rabbit that's making us stand out, actually."

Felix smiled wryly, and Mathias looked down at his coat pocket. The bunny's head suddenly popped out. Mathias had been forced to bring it along, not wanting to leave it unattended. But they weren't on campus, and there was no need to try to hide the rabbit using magical means. Besides, it was small and dark-colored, so it hardly stood out all that much.

"No, I hardly think so."

"Sure, you keep telling yourself that."

Felix scowled. The way Mathias kept anxiously looking all around was making him feel seasick.

It should be all right...my fake identity has been maintained perfectly.

Still, Mathias continued to scan the crowds around them.

"Tch. Why did I even come here in the first place?" Felix muttered under his

breath as they walked down the cobbled streets.

“You tell me!” Mathias snapped, losing his temper. He was only there to guard Felix. “Did we come all the way here for you to just lounge around and waste an entire day? This is the busiest time of the year! You blew off the royal court banquet for this. Last year we were able to excuse it with your illness, but you passed the school year this time, so that excuse has worn itself out.”

“I told you, that’s all in hand. Besides, as I *keep* telling you, my father only invited me to keep up appearances. He doesn’t actually *want* me to go.”

Felix was clearly in a terrible mood. Mathias fell silent. It was true, he knew full well the extent of the familial discord that existed between Felix and his father.

“Hmph! I want to know what Mia and Henrik are doing right around now. He’d better not be putting the moves on her in my absence...”

Felix’s scowl was growing fiercer and fiercer. Mathias dreaded to think about what might be going on in his head.

“Henrik isn’t the type to disregard Mia’s feelings, I don’t think.”

*Unlike you...*is what he wanted to add. He was secretly impressed by Mia’s firm resolve against Felix’s constant advances.

“Mia is frighteningly naïve with stuff like that. That’s why the situation is so dangerous.”

Mathias had to agree there. Otherwise, she’d never have accepted an invitation like this so readily.

“I didn’t even get to give her my present, either.”

“You can give it to her after the workday is done.”

“Henrik’s bound to have beat me to the punch. What am I going to do if he’s screwed me over?”

Young love was so depressing.

Felix had always been smart as a whip, but he became a complete and total idiot where Mia was concerned.

Mathias tried to think of something that could snap Felix out of his funk. Then he remembered something Henrik had been talking about.

“Right...the Frog Festival.”

“Frog Festival?”

Finally, Felix was listening.

“It’s Radius tradition, apparently.”

“**HUH?** Frog Festival?”

As the dressing session wrapped up, Mia parroted Mary’s own words back to her. She’d been telling Mia about the legend of the Frog Festival, where young people were said to be able to meet their soulmates.

“Yes, it’s a festival recreating the start of the romance between King Leonard and Princess Luludia, who went on to become his wife. You know the fairy tale, don’t you?”

Mia nodded.

The tale was known across the land. Naturally, Mia knew the basic story.

She just hadn’t realized a frog was such a big part of it.

As a pharmacologist—a specialist in biology—Mia perhaps should have been ashamed of the truth: she hated frogs. Once, some local kids had pelted her with live frogs while bullying her about her mother.

The frogs had died from being thrown so forcefully at Mia, and she remembered weeping over their limp little bodies, crying with pity for them, crying with pity for her mother.

After that, frogs had gotten mixed up with bad things in her mind. Even looking at drawings or depictions of frogs made her skin crawl, and she couldn’t even bear the thought of touching one.

As she grimaced, Mary chuckled.

“We’ve got a version of the fairy tale in these parts that’s a bit more detailed. The first *Neu-Aera* was made in the shape of a frog. It contained a magic spell

that would transform you into one!”

In the days of King Leonard, Isea and Radius had actually enjoyed friendly relations, although the rupture between the two was all that anyone seemed to remember. It must have been a very peaceful and happy time, though. Mia figured that was why the festival was still celebrated to this day.

As Mia mulled it over sadly, Mary continued with excitement.

“So, the tradition is for boys to give a plush frog toy to the girl they have a crush on! And then, if she likes him back, she’ll give him a kiss!”

“A kiss?!”

All sympathy for King Leonard suddenly evaporated in a haze of panic. As Mia gasped, Mary roared with laughter.

“Oh my, you young folk these days certainly are bashful! See, the tradition comes from the legend, which says that King Leonard gave Luludia a kiss of true love after she accidentally transformed into a frog. And the kiss returned her to her original form. You know, I was wearing that exact dress when Rudolf confessed his feelings for me!”

Mia felt like her cheeks were burning with embarrassment and awkwardness.

Henrik’s mom was absolutely nothing like her son. Maybe she was really only his stepmother or something? But Mia could never ask her something so prying and rude.

“The other two boys have already gone out to the festival. I wonder who’ll be the one to capture your young heart?”

“What, Felix and Mathias will be at the festival too?”

“Of course! It would hardly be fair, otherwise. Ooh, I wonder if my boy will be the victor in love...”

Mary looked like she hadn’t been this entertained in years. But at the mention of Felix’s name, Mia felt like running far, far away.

UNABLE to deny Mary’s wishes after she’d been so kind to her, Mia wore the

dress and reluctantly headed out into the evening air of the town to attend the festival with Henrik.

This was Mia's first time going anywhere so dressed-up. Like any girl, Mia felt excited to be going out wearing such beautiful clothes. But her nerves were fighting her excitement for superiority and coming out on top.

The boys give a frog to the girl they have a crush on...

The custom horrified her, and not just because of her phobia of frogs. She couldn't help remembering what Felix had said to her at the end of last year...

"My reasons aren't logical. They won't get through to you unless I clearly tell you..."

Her heart beat oddly in her chest as she recalled the look in his eyes as he spoke those words. The thumping sensation felt like she'd developed an arrhythmia, a pulse irregularity.

But Mia couldn't accept his feelings. She'd thought it over from every angle, but it just wasn't an appropriate time for romance right now.

They had to keep pushing forward, every chance they had, to cure her mom's disease. She tried to never let herself think about it, but on some level, she knew there was every chance her mom would never be cured and that there would be no reunion for them. Their parting would remain permanent.

Mia believed that Felix understood how she felt about everything.

But Mia was afraid. Afraid that she'd unwittingly walk right into a trap. That she would fall under the spell of love and forget what she needed to do.

Mia would never, ever forgive herself if she let that happen.

So, she'd locked up her heart securely so that she would never be swayed by anyone's temptation.

And that's why I don't need this right now.

She was afraid this silly traditional event might end up busting open the lock she'd placed on her heart.

Please, please let Felix know nothing of this festival...

She repeated her wish over and over to herself as they walked along. A cold breeze whipped around her ankles, and she shivered.

Looking up at the night sky, her eyes widened. The skies were so much clearer here than they were in the capital. The stars looked like they were just about to fall out of the skies above.

But the one drawback to the clear skies was harsher cold. Mia's dress was thick and warm, but she was still coatless and beginning to grow chilly.

I should have brought my old shawl with me...oh, but it would simply ruin the effect of the dress.

As she was lamenting her discomfort in her mind, she felt something being placed over her shoulders. It was a thick woolen shawl.

Its muted beige color complemented her dress, and it felt very soft and warm. As she was about to thank Henrik for the shawl, she paused.



Huh? Why would Henrik have a shawl?

She gazed at him in surprise. This was a woman's shawl, surely? But Henrik just smiled dryly.

"It's my Winter Solstice gift to you."

The last thing she'd been expecting was a gift from Henrik. This area's customs were so different from those of Isea, even though it belonged to the same country.

"But I didn't get you anything!"

"It doesn't matter. It's our tradition to give gifts. And by the way, Mom says it's rude to not accept a gift."

"It does matter! Please, let me return the favor later, at least!"

"Well...if you insist."

Henrik shrugged, and they started walking again. He was walking with short strides, and Mia realized he was keeping pace with her and her shorter legs.

"The town looks so pretty! Just like in the fairy tale."

"Yeah."

Henrik had grown quiet. He was usually quiet, but this was a different kind of quiet to his usual quiet.

Ack, talk about awkward!

Mia thought desperately of a topic of conversation. Then it came to her.

"So Mary's your mom, huh?"

"Didn't I mention that?"

Henrik grinned with amusement. Clearly, he'd neglected to mention it on purpose. Just to enjoy her reaction.

Mia grimaced.

"No, you did *not* mention it! I was completely caught off guard!"

"We don't look much alike, huh?"

“...Nope.”

Mia was about to say “*you look just like your father,*” but bit her tongue to stop herself. It was too late, though. Henrik had read her expression, and his own face froze.

“Can we...talk about it?”

Sometimes it was better to get these things out in the open.

“He seems like a decent father... What’s the problem between you two?”

Henrik sighed and paused for a moment before speaking.

“The thing about my father. He’s always given different prescriptions to rich folk. The common people come in and ask for certain medicines, but he won’t prescribe to them. When I asked him why, he just said ‘those medicines aren’t right for people like them.’ I used to respect my father, but those feelings turned to hate.”

Mia recalled the medicine that Felix had administered to her. It wasn’t widely available. It was expensive medicine that only the aristocracy could get prescribed.

Even the poor would try to buy health if they could. But Henrik’s father wouldn’t sell to them. It seemed some lives were worth more than others.

Once you left the Academy, the disparity between the classes was everywhere. It was choking, oppressive.

Mia felt a heavy weight begin to settle over her heart. But Henrik wasn’t done.

“If I’d never met you, I think I’d have probably followed in Father’s footsteps without questioning anything. I’d have just gone along with the different meds, even though it rubbed me the wrong way. But now, when I look at the faces of the suffering...I just refuse to become the kind of doctor who looks the other way when people need his help.”

Henrik came to a stop. Mia stopped beside him, looking up at his face.

“After a year spent researching with you, I looked at myself and didn’t like what I saw. You opened my eyes, Mia. And for that, I thank you.”

Mia felt a swell of emotion bubbling up within her.

“I’m grateful to you too, Henrik. Without you, I’m sure my dream would have already fallen apart. Thank you.”

“Let’s...let’s keep doing our best, together.”

Henrik offered her his hand, and she took it as if to shake it. Chuckling a little, Henrik let go of her hand and grasped it again, holding it in a different way.

“Huh?”

Then Henrik started walking again, holding Mia’s hand in his.

Wait...what?

Mia was taken aback, but Henrik was leading her along insistently.

What am I supposed to do with my hand?!

As Mia stumbled along uncomfortably beside him, Henrik shrugged.

“The plaza will be crowded. And you’re such a daydreamer, you’re bound to get lost.”

The plaza was visible up ahead, crammed with people like Henrik said. She could see a group of them beyond the big gates made of fir tree wood.

“Oh, right. I get it.”

That made sense. Kind of. And Henrik’s expression was so casual, Mia felt silly for overthinking it.

Unable to protest about it anymore, Mia let Henrik hold her hand as they walked forward to join the crowd.

Chapter 13: Frogs, Kisses, and Presents

ACCORDING to Henrik's family butler, Mia and Henrik had also decided to attend the festival once evening fell.

Felix and Mathias headed to the station, where the butler had suggested they all meet up. The statue of King Leonard they'd noticed the day before made a good landmark.

Excited, Felix had decided to wear his frock coat and top hat to go out, but Mathias had forced him to reconsider, saying he would stand out too much. Eventually, Felix agreed to wear the same thing as Mathias—a simple tweed bowler hat and lounge suit ensemble.

The town was extremely crowded on the way to the plaza. The streets extending from the central hub were quite wide—as wide as Isea's King Street. But with festival stalls and booths crammed along both sides, and horses and carriages trotting in both directions, and with all the sightseers...it was hard to move at anything faster than a snail's pace.

People in front of them kept stopping to buy things from the stalls, which held up the foot traffic even more.

Felix was growing increasingly agitated when he spotted an interesting stall. He frowned.

"It's all frog ornaments?"

Felix, who had few real friends, had often played with bugs and frogs. Perhaps that was another reason why his father and brothers looked at him like he was some sort of simpleton.

But these frogs, they were quite intricately made. Some of them looked so lifelike, he wouldn't have been surprised if they'd started to jump and croak.

Felix leaned in, curious.

"Young Master! How about this lovely frog brooch?"

The stallkeeper suddenly called out to Felix.

“That’s more of a lady’s accessory, isn’t it?”

Felix shrugged and got moving again, but the next stall made him pause again. This one sold frog-shaped glass earrings.

“No, no, no, it’s all about hair accessories this season!”

A stallkeeper across the way called out to him, mistaking him for a potential customer.

“...What’s with all the frogs, anyway? I mean, I know they’re cute and everything, but this seems like overkill.”

Felix turned to Mathias, who raised an eyebrow. “Er, I’m not sure I’d call them cute,” he disagreed.

Another stallkeeper caught their conversation and roared with laughter.

The stallkeeper had a frog sitting on his shoulder. Just as Felix was thinking that it was a very lifelike ornament, it suddenly moved. So it was real? But it was winter—wasn’t it too cold for live frogs this time of year?

As Felix peered at it with curiosity, the stallkeeper grinned.

“Ah, not from around here, are you? So, you don’t know about the romance of King Leonard and Princess Luludia, eh? Well, listen to this...”

Felix was embarrassed. These were his own ancestors the man was talking about. He didn’t want to think about his ancestors’ love lives. Felix cut him off before he could say any more.

“I know the tale. But my question is, why all the frogs?”

“King Leonard gifted a frog-shaped *Neu-Aera* to Princess Luludia, which sparked their romance! This festival celebrates that event.”

“Romance...”

Felix’s ears perked up. His eyes gleamed.

“Ever since, we fellows have expressed our romantic intents with frog-themed gifts. Per tradition, the gift is returned with a kiss from the lady, should she be agreeable, that is.”

“A kiss?!!!”

Felix took a step forward, grabbing the stallkeeper’s sleeves. The man reeled back in alarm.

A few hours later, Felix’s arms were laden down with all manner of frog paraphernalia, including a brooch, earrings, a necklace, and a hair accessory.

Several of the items spilled onto the floor as Felix walked. Mathias scurried to pick them up, muttering curses under his breath.

“I can’t believe you bought all this junk! You’re only going to embarrass yourself. You’ll be laughed at, mark my words!”

It was true. Passing girls giggled behind their hands, and one even remarked: “Loser alert! What a shame, he’s so handsome too.” But Felix didn’t care what anyone else thought. Except for Mia, that is.

“I had to buy it all. I don’t know Mia’s preferences, after all.”

“Listen, Felix. Frog accessories aren’t really a thing normal people wear. It’s clearly just symbolic, a little festival fun, silly romantic stuff. Why are you taking it so seriously? Those stallkeepers made a fortune off you.”

That registered with Felix a little. He’d definitely contributed to those stallkeepers’ year-end stock clearance. Their clever sales pitches had all led to him opening up his wallet. In the end, he’d bought everything they thrust under his nose.

“It doesn’t matter how hard you try, it’s not going to work with Mia.”

“Yeah, I know that.”

“No, I don’t think you do. Even if she accepts all your frog junk, that won’t automatically mean she’s agreeing to be yours.”

Truly, if Mia didn’t know the frog custom, she’d probably accept the gifts. Not as symbols of Felix’s feelings, just as gifts.

But if, on the other hand, she knew about the frog legend...

Felix pictured it. He could almost see Mia’s face...looking extremely

uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, but..."

He could almost hear her voice. She was bound to say something like that, wasn't she? The answer would never be yes, not until Felix helped make her heart's biggest dream a reality.

"But still, I feel like I have to let her know how I feel. I just have to."

He had to get his feelings across. There were so many times he wanted to tell her things like: *"Hey, I still have the same feelings for you,"* and *"Just so you know, I'm still waiting. I'll be here, waiting,"* and *"please, don't forget about me in the meantime."*

Sometimes, his patience failed him and he felt frantic. He just couldn't stand to leave things the way they were.

And on top of that...

Henrik's face flashed before his mind. Mia was with *him* right now. And Henrik was a local. There was no way he didn't know about the frog custom.

If Henrik gave a frog to Mia, would she accept it? What if it was made clear to her that it was a symbol of romantic intent? What if Henrik insisted?

Thoughts like that made his frustration even worse.

Felix's innate selfishness was rearing its ugly head.

I need to make her mine immediately. I want her to be my Mia. And no one else's.

But doing so would damage who she was, take away her Mia-ness. Felix would never forgive himself for doing such a thing.

He was trapped between his own wants and the raw truth of the situation.

I need more power. But what will it cost me?

Felix came to a halt, hands bunched into fists by his sides. Just then, a horse carriage rolled by. Struck by a sudden odd wave of déjà vu, Felix swept his feelings of disappointment into a corner of his mind, to be dealt with later.

He turned around. The horse carriage was heading away from the station,

toward the west end of town, and traveling at quite a speed. Felix recalled that a certain building was located in that direction.

Not really sure what he was doing, Felix began to follow the carriage. However, his progress was soon blocked by a seemingly popular stall surrounded by a large group of unruly children.

Giving up pursuit, Felix looped around the back of the stalls and headed back the way he'd come.

"What was all that about?"

Mathias was trotting after Felix, still intermittently picking up the frog items Felix kept dropping. Felix lowered his voice.

"Did you see who was riding in that horse carriage just before? It was MacDonnell and Rankin."

They'd provided security detail once for Felix at some royal parade or other. It was definitely them—Felix never forgot a face.

"Wow, I didn't even see them! Wait, MacDonnell? The commander of the Mage Army?"

Aside from a regular army and navy, Isea also had a mage army, a special military corps comprised of only mages.

The army commander, MacDonnell, and the lieutenant colonel, Rankin, both belonged to the Mage Army.

Top brass in the army...they must know the answers to the questions we seek.

Mathias's expression stiffened.

He was getting a bad feeling about this. He wasn't sure why, exactly, but he decided to follow his intuition. The two young men headed to the west end of town, where a sprawling residence was located. To call it a residence didn't exactly do it justice, however...

"I knew it. Castle Rigel."

Castle Rigel was one of the castles once owned by the Radius royal family. The actual former Castle Radius had become the property of Felix's family, but the

other holiday homes and various properties belonging to the fallen Radius crown had been seized and redistributed as spoils of war.

Felix recalled who owned the castle now.

“It’s the residence of Lord Lipsett, of the Lance Party.”

The Lance Party was a political group that called for the reduction of power held by the royal family.

And Lord Lipsett was the party leader. His strong connection with the army made Felix, who knew relatively little about politics, feel unsettled.

“...That’s creepy as heck.” As Felix muttered under his breath, Mathias grimaced.

“You’re not plotting anything crazy, now, are ya?”

“Hahaha...”

“Don’t think you can fob me off by laughing!”

“Ah, let’s just drop it, all right? We have to find Mia! I’m not going to let Henrik sneak in an advantage before me!”

Felix turned his back on the huge residence, acting as if he’d already forgotten what they’d seen. Then, as he’d insisted, they headed back to the town center in search of Mia.

Chapter 14: Unexpected Confessions

WHEN you looked closely at it, the statue of King Leonard located in the center of the plaza had a handsome face and was well-carved. He wore a robe and was holding a staff in his right hand.

The statue was majestic. Clearly, the king had been loved and revered far beyond the level of any of his descendants. As Mia gazed up at the statue with wonder, someone bumped into her.

“Eek!”

Mia stumbled, but Henrik grabbed her arm and prevented her from going flying. The man who’d bumped into her tsk-ed loudly, barking at her to “Watch where you’re walking, girly!” before stomping away.

Oh no. I’m really terrible with big crowds.

As Mia was about to call after him with an apology, Henrik suddenly reached out to grab the man’s shoulder.

From the furious look in Henrik’s eyes, it was obvious he planned to chase after the man and confront him. Mia was shocked. She hadn’t thought of Henrik as the violent type.

Is he serious?!

“It’s fine, really!”

As she tugged on Henrik’s coat sleeve, she spotted someone behind him. A very familiar someone.

Oh yikes, this looks bad!

Felix was standing there.

It was odd, though. He seemed to have a lot of space all around him. Then Mia realized it was because people were giving him a wide berth and a lot of suspicious looks. His arms were full of...strange objects.

Mathias was standing behind him, looking quietly exasperated. With his height, his head was higher than the general height of the crowd. And there was also something else odd about him...

Wait, why are there ears coming out of the top of his head?

Mia peered closer. Ah, it was the rabbit, perched on top of Mathias's head. But Mathias was so tall that most in the crowd hadn't even noticed his bunny passenger.

Besides, they were all too busy staring at Felix.

Don't tell me all that stuff he's holding is for...

Mia grimaced, gazing at the mound of green objects Felix was struggling to hold.

As Mia looked away in embarrassment, Henrik turned, noticing the other two young men. "Oh," he said flatly. "So they're here."

Then he grabbed hold of Mia's hand and started tugging her.

Got to get away from Felix!

Mia was clearly alarmed by Felix's bizarre arrival, and Henrik seemed to instantly pick up on it.

He led her quickly away, cutting through the station building to enter a park situated behind it.

The park's narrow paths were like a maze. Herbs and flowers were planted neatly along the paths. Everything was dusted with a fine layer of snow, but it really reminded her of the academy's medicinal herb garden.

And with no street stalls or other attractions like the plaza had, it was completely uncrowded.

Henrik quickly led her along one of the little paths. As he did so, he began telling her about the park.

"These are the gardens King Leonard had planted for Luludia."

"..."

Amid her anxiety over Felix, Mia couldn't help thinking that there sure was a

lot of talk about King Leonard going on around her these days. You barely heard that name in the capital, but it seemed like all anyone could talk about here was the legendary king.

“During his reign, he was always telling everyone we had to use *Neu-Aera* safely, for the sake of his wife whom he loved. But once he was gone, those sentiments were lost, too. But his words have still been deeply ingrained on this land and all who live here.”

Henrik kept walking as he spoke. Waist-high shrubs lined the path they were walking along. Mia wondered where it would lead them.

“The fairy tales, the Winter Solstice festival, all of it is connected to that. We set them all up so that King Leonard’s devotion wouldn’t be forgotten. To remind us to question the ways power is used. To remind us that King Leonard used his powers of innovation for the sake of love and that we should never misuse the power he discovered ever again.”

Mia walked beside Henrik, surprised by how talkative he was being. She felt she needed to show the proper attention to what he was saying, but at the same time, had he just forgotten about Felix? Mia could barely focus on what Henrik was saying, she was so concerned about the scene they’d just fled from.

They reached the center of the park, and finally, Henrik came to a halt. There was a statue there. It wasn’t another regal and majestic statue of King Leonard like the one in the plaza, though. This one depicted the king on his knees, offering his love to his wife.

“We need to remember King Leonard’s devotion always, all of us.”

The king was holding a frog in one hand. That must have been the fabled first *Neu-Aera*. How true to the fairy tale this statue was. But Mia was distracted by awkward thoughts of the things Mary had told her.

He’s not hiding behind the bushes right now, is he?

Mia looked this way and that, searching for a glimpse of Felix. But the park was big. They were *probably* safe. Just as Mia began to relax, she realized Henrik was taking something out of his pocket.

“Here, Mia.”

It was a glass brooch. Mia's eyes widened suddenly as she took in its green hue, its animal-like shape.

"Uh..."

"You and I see the world in the same way. I want us to be on each other's side, supporting each other always."

Henrik's tone was casual, his expression impassive as usual.

It would be easy enough for Mia to misunderstand, wouldn't it? Surely he meant supporting each other's research work, right?

But Henrik had used the word "always." And the brooch...was shaped like a frog.

"Are you serious?"

Henrik chuckled as Mia took a step backward.

"You really are naïve. Remember last year's Winter Solstice? When Felix asked you on a date, and you invited us all along?"

"Last...Last year?"

Mia thought back. Yes, the Winter Solstice. The four of them had gone on an investigative trip to the Sanatorium.

Wait, that was originally meant to be a date?!

Now that she thought about it, Felix did seem a little disappointed. The realization was a year late, and Mia was shocked. She'd never dreamed...

"B-But, I was distracted at the time, what with the Grand Plan and everything! I didn't have the mental space to notice things like that!"

But her protests didn't register with Henrik.

"And you came along to my house without a second thought. Zero sense of awareness."

Mia could feel the blood rush to her cheeks.

"A-Awareness? But...?"

Mia took another step backward, completely flustered. That's when she felt a

solid structure against her back. A wall? Or was it a firm hedge? Before she could turn, something fell on the floor at her feet and rolled away from her. It was an earring...shaped like a frog.

And the hedge wall, or whatever she was backed up against, felt warm. Alive.

Wha...?

Slowly, fearfully, Mia turned around to see Felix, white plumes of steam coming from both nostrils, his eyes fixed on Henrik with a look of boiling hatred.

“So you *were* trying to beat me to the punch, huh?”

“The early bird gets the worm. Nobody ‘beat you’ to anything. And besides, I have no obligation to give you a heads-up on any of my intentions.”

Henrik was meeting Felix’s glare head-on. Gnashing his teeth, Felix stomped over to stand shoulder to shoulder with Felix, facing Mia.

“Mia. If you’re going to accept any gifts, let it be these.”

Felix held up his armful of frog junk.



Brooches, earrings, stuffed toys.

And the biggest eyesore of all, a large, lifelike frog ornament on the top of the pile. It looked like it was ready to pounce at any moment, and the sight of it made Mia's skin crawl. Frogs...

I...HATE...frogs.

But Felix's eyes were so insistent, so full of determination. Mia's heart thumped painfully in her chest.

Despite her horror, her hand was reaching out, as if by its own accord.

No...Nooo!

Mia snapped out of it, snatching her hands away and clasping them behind her back.

Then the frog from the top of the pile sprang, landing neatly on Mia's head. *Ribbit*, the frog croaked, putting its slimy little paw on Mia's forehead.

"...What the?"

Everyone was staring, wide-eyed with shock. Mia took a deep breath, filling her lungs with cold night air, before letting forth an ear-shattering scream. The next moment, everything went black.

ON the way back to the mansion, Felix was muttering away.

"It never occurred to me that Mia might have a frog phobia..."

She hadn't flinched at caring for injured patients and didn't seem squeamish at all, so Felix had just assumed it would be fine.

It turned out that Mia wasn't as much "one of the boys" as Felix had thought. She'd be mad as heck if she heard him say that, though.

Everyone seemed to share the same sentiment. Even Henrik seemed subdued.

Mathias was transporting an unconscious Mia carefully as they went. Felix and Henrik had fought at length over who would have the honor of carrying

her. The situation seemed deadlocked, so Mathias had intervened and used a carefully applied air spell to transport her without physically touching her, so as to satisfy everyone's concerns. Anything to avoid getting involved in this complicated love triangle.

He kept studiously ignoring frantic eye signals from both that said: "hand her over to me to carry for a bit."

Henrik couldn't manage the job, anyway.

He didn't have the strength. But whatever else Mathias lacked—and he felt like he lacked a lot—he at least had pride in his physical strength.

"Tch, you're such an obstinate oaf."

Henrik sighed with disgust, but Mathias knew Henrik was really only mad at himself.

Felix, meanwhile, was still mired in disbelief over what had happened.

"Why...and *how* did you manage to mix a live one into the pile of gifts?"

"The stall might've been selling pet frogs. I must have accidentally picked up one that had escaped..."

Mathias felt terrible about it, truly.

"Pet frogs?!"

"Yes, remember that stall that was really crowded?"

Solemn-faced, Mathias blindly revealed a key piece of information. In that case, he really was responsible for this, since he'd noticed the live frogs and still hadn't been careful with what he was picking up. Realizing this, Mathias grew even paler.

"Pet frogs?! In winter?! What about, oh, I don't know...*hibernation*?!"

"Yes, they sell hibernating pet frogs at the Winter Solstice...but sometimes frogs wake up early by mistake."

Henrik joined the conversation, muttering in subdued tones.

Felix recalled the frog he saw sitting on the stallkeeper's shoulder. So that was a real one, too.

As they walked through the gates of his family residence, Henrik sighed.

“Oh well. This is what I expected to happen. Mia only has eyes for science, after all.”

Henrik seemed to have the same intentions as Felix. He wanted to make his feelings known to Mia too. Everyone needs to confess their feelings at a certain point.

But even so...

“Seriously, though. Quit trying to get ahead of me with Mia, got it?”

Despite feeling a new sense of affinity with Henrik, Felix growled out a warning again. He felt it needed to be repeated out loud once more, just in case.

The team needed to be kept together, for Mia’s sake. Felix would never be able to get the results they needed by himself.

Henrik pursed his lips, looking annoyed.

“What gives you the right to issue orders to me? You do whatever you want. I’m the one that needs to hold back? How is that fair?”

“You don’t want to get in the way of Mia’s objective either, do you? Feelings, all that stuff...that’s just extra baggage in Mia’s eyes.”

He recalled the look of awkward horror on Mia’s face. It was just as he’d expected. The same answer as last time—it was written all over her features.

“You’re one to talk.”

Henrik shot a scathing look at Felix’s armful of frog goods, raising an eyebrow ironically.

Felix swallowed a retort, knowing that Henrik had a point. Felix had made up his mind to offer the gifts to Mia as simple presents, tokens of friendship, but when he saw Henrik trying to get in there first, he lost his cool.

As Felix stood there hanging his head, Henrik squared his shoulders for a moment before muttering and extending a hand towards Felix.

Silently, Felix grasped Henrik’s hand in his.

Their handshake represented a silent truce, an agreement to a temporary ceasefire.

Chapter 15: The Vigant Residence's Medicinal Herb Garden

WHEN Mia awoke, dawn had broken.

There were two letters placed by her pillow. One was from Henrik, and the other was from Felix.

Mia sank back against the sheets, pulling the comforter over her head. So it wasn't a dream. Her head felt fuzzy and she didn't feel like getting up.

She wished none of it had happened.

She closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. Then she picked up the letters. After a few moments of consideration, she opened Henrik's first.

"I was only kidding. Just teasing you. You really are a dummy, aren't you?"

The breath she was holding came out in a whoosh.

"...Seriously?"

But Mia felt more relieved than angry to discover it had all been a joke at her expense. All the same, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Why was she cursed with such a lack of self-awareness?!

"He's right...I really *am* a dummy for taking it seriously!"

She felt the frown on her forehead smoothing out, and her breathing came easier. Now she felt ready to confront Felix's letter.

"I'm so sorry, I had no idea you were frog-phobic! In my defense, I had no idea there was a real one with the other stuff! This time I tried to make sure to give you a decent gift! They're only Winter Solstice Festival souvenirs, so don't think too much about it!"

This letter was so frantic, she had to laugh. Classic Felix. He was like a big clumsy dog, terrified it had accidentally offended its beloved owner. Mia giggled a little, picturing Felix with a frantically wagging tail.

Well, it looked like the team equilibrium remained in balance.

Mia let out a little sigh of relief, but then when she spotted the gifts on the bedside table, her eyes widened.

One of them was a brooch. There was also a hair accessory. Both looked fairly distorted but were unmistakably frog-shaped.

Ah, I see...

Now the meaning of the letters was clear to her. They knew that Mia didn't have the time or mental space for their feelings right now, so they were both trying to smooth things over, pretend like yesterday never happened. For her.

She was moved, tears prickling her eyes.

Thank you, Henrik. Thank you, Felix.

Mia picked up the two little frog items, two matching tears sliding down her cheeks.

WHEN Mia went down to help in the clinic, she found Henrik already put to work by Mary.

"Good morning!"

Mia announced her arrival in a loud voice. She didn't want Henrik's kind consideration of her feelings to go to waste. She planned to act just like her usual, chipper self.

Once Mom's cured, if the both of them still feel the same way about me...then I'll think about how to answer their feelings.

Before giving any real thought to the feelings of potential romantic suitors, she needed to take care of her own business first. And that went for Felix, as well as Henrik.

There would be no second chances. And Mia was determined not to be left with any regrets.

Steeling her nerves, she forced herself to look at Henrik. He raised an eyebrow at her, then wished her a good morning with a mild grin.

Unfortunately for them...

“Oh my!”

Mary looked back and forth between Mia and Henrik, her face stricken. “She turned you down?!” she yelped in dismay.

Mia’s “nothing whatsoever out of the ordinary happened” mask suddenly faltered.

Mary! Please!!!

Mary was ruining all the self-resolve Mia had managed to muster. As she stood there wringing her hands, Henrik cleared his throat. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

Both Mary and Mia looked at him with alarm. Henrik never laughed like that.

“I guess I got rejected!”

Finally, Henrik stopped with the phony laughter. Mary’s shoulders slumped, and she muttered “Oh, what a shame,” under her breath, looking dejected.

“Just when I was starting to get excited about having a hard-working young daughter-in-law around the place...well, these things can’t be forced, I suppose...”

D-Daughter-in-law?!

Her choice of words made Mia freeze, but Mary quickly clapped her hands, getting down to business. “Now then! I need some medicinal herbs from out back. Hop to it!”

Mia had no more time to stand there fretting.

The medicinal herb garden was extremely large. It covered a plot of ground several times larger than that of the sprawling residence. It was neatly divided into sections by little pathways. Each section was protected by glass greenhouses. And each greenhouse was full of all kinds of vibrant medicinal herbs and plants.

The garden seemed to be tended by a lone gardener, an old man working away with a watering can in his hand. It seemed it was time for the plants to get

their daily drink.

Mia set out looking for herbs, a list clutched in her hand.

The water droplets dangling from the leaves of the just-watered plants sparkled in the sunlight.

First, we need Naustica and Amurensis. Cough medicine and an analgesic...for colds, huh?

Thanks to all the experience she gained with Dr. Letts, it only took her a few moments to locate everything she needed. Mia gathered up the clippings, thinking warm thoughts of her time living and working at Dr. Letts' clinic. She was happy to be putting her skills to good use.

Um, now I need Motana shoots, then Efdora stalks, uh, Cimmon bark, Jijiba berries...

Mia had never heard of any of these plants. Not knowing where to locate them, she asked the elderly gardener, who showed her to a large greenhouse in the center of the garden.

The gardener told her his name was Bruno.

He also advised Mia to change her shoes.

Mia soon discovered why. The plants in this greenhouse received a different kind of care. While the others thrived on the heat generated by sunlight, the plants here were nourished by a coal stove in the corner from which brass pipes snaked around the walls.

It was incredibly humid inside, and Mia almost swooned.

"We have to order these from the south; it's hard to cultivate them in these parts. They're sensitive to cold and tend toward disease, so we have to be careful not to harvest too much from them at once."

Mia nodded, carefully pruning only the amounts she needed.

Mia pulled on her gloves and began digging up the Motana shoots, plucking the Efdora stalks, and peeling the Cimmon bark. She only took a little bit from each plant. They wouldn't be able to make much medicine with this.

Then all of a sudden, Mia recalled the “expensive” medications that Henrik had been so upset about.

Rare medicine...could this be it?

The medicine that only aristocrats could get their hands on?

Feeling her stomach drop, Mia carried the medicinal herbs back to the clinic.

There was a medicine preparation room located in the clinic. It was stocked with all kinds of medicines. Several doctors were busy at work, grinding herbs in mortar bowls and steeping them in bubbling hot water.

The unique, mingled scent filled Mia with a feeling of cozy nostalgia. It was a scent she'd smelled every single day, working for Letts, and she found herself reluctant to leave the room. Still, she didn't want to get in the way, so she put down her ingredients and made to leave at once. But someone called out to her as she was leaving.

“Excuse me, do you think you could lend a hand in here? We're short-staffed.”

It was Henrik's father, Rudolf.

“Oh, but I...”

Mia hesitated. Surely they didn't want an amateur like her to help?

“Henrik said you're a fine student. Don't you want to give it a try?”

Mia nodded wordlessly, a nervous lump in her throat.

She didn't like Rudolf much at all, but she was swayed by the chance to work in a major clinic like this and to see what kind of medicine would be made with the rare ingredients she'd harvested.

Rudolf continued to mix herbs and tinctures as he spoke to her. Apparently, they were low on medicines due to a nasty cold that was going around, which was why Rudolf was here instead of seeing patients.

“The Winter Solstice Festival only increases the spread. Last year was bad, but this year we've more patients than ever before among the aristocracy. They think nothing of having doctors called out to their bedside, but it leaves us

critically short-staffed.”

The aristocracy. Mia suddenly pictured Henrik’s anguished face. Clenching her fists tight, Mia knew she had to say something. For Henrik.

“Um...why are there different prescriptions for aristocrats and commoners?”

Rudolf raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve been speaking with Henrik. Opened up to you about his weaknesses, did he? Interesting. Very interesting. So that’s why Mary’s been so excited.”

Rudolf was gazing at Mia, looking emotional.

What? What did he and Mary talk about? Mia fidgeted awkwardly, and Rudolf cleared his throat, returning their attention to the task at hand.

“Well, perfect timing. Why don’t you have a go at making that medicine now?”

His proposal made Mia blink in alarm.

“What?”

“Come, now. You’re hardly a beginner. Besides, the process is rather easy.”

“B-But this looks like really high-grade stuff!”

Mia pointed at the Motana roots, which she’d been told were extremely rare.

“Just relax. The procedure is all written down there, see? Just follow the instructions.”

Then with a satisfied nod, Rudolf left the room, heading back to the examination area.

AS soon as the medicines they were working on were prepared, the other doctors followed Rudolf in hurrying out of the room. Mia was left all alone.

Feeling confused and lost, Mia opened up the notebook containing the preparation methodology.

She decided to start by doing something she was familiar with, refining the Naustica and Amurense. She rubbed the skins off the Naustica berries in the

mortar bowl. Then she boiled the seeds to make a concentrated syrup. This would make a fine cough medicine.

Then it was time for the Amurense. Mia crushed up the leaves and steeped them in alcohol, then strained away the leaves, retaining only the liquid. This made an antipyretic analgesic, a painkiller that would lower fevers, too. Both of these were common medicines that had been used for centuries.

Now...next up is...

With trembling hands, she moved onto the next task.

The main effects of the aforementioned high-grade medicine were written down, along with the refinement method.

“...Huh?”

The effects struck Mia as oddly familiar. She leaned in closer to the page.

Motana made a cough syrup similar to the one she’d just made with Naustica. And Efdora made another antipyretic analgesic, just like the Amurense.

What the heck?!

Mia flipped the page. It seemed the effects provided by the high-grade medicines were no different from those of the traditional medicines she was used to. They were interchangeable. And none of them seemed to have any special ability to treat currently incurable diseases.

What does it all mean?

Why bother making different varieties of drugs that had the same effects? The clinic where Mia had worked only had one type of drug for each condition. They would just adjust the dose depending on patient needs.

Mia assumed the existence of different drugs for aristocrats and commoners had to be because the more expensive one had different effects. But that didn’t seem to be true at all. They were just made of rarer ingredients that did the exact same thing.

“What’s wrong?”

Henrik walked in, interrupting her from her thoughts.

“Ah! Perfect timing!”

Mia quickly told Henrik what she’d just learned.

As soon as she mentioned his father, Henrik began frowning, but once she told him about the drug effects being identical, he quickly went pale.

“...Henrik?”

Henrik turned around and walked right down the hall into the examination room, interrupting Rudolf, who was in the middle of seeing a patient. It was a young boy with a fever, and he was lying on the bed. His parents were standing nearby, looking very worried.

From their basic attire, it was obvious they were commoners.

“Doctor, please. Can’t you give him any drugs that work better?”

“Just relax. The usual treatment will be just fine.”

“We’ve all heard about how you save the good stuff for the rich folk! The cutting-edge medicines! Please, doctor, we need some of that!”

Rudolf heaved a sigh.

“This nonsense again? As I’ve said, this is perfectly functional medicine.”

“But...the sickness just keeps coming back! If it’s money you want, we’ll pay!”

“It’s not a question of money. If you’ve got money, then feed the boy a more nutritious diet, and let him rest. And remember to give him his meds regularly. There’s no more effective medicine than what I’ve already given you. Now, please take care.”

Rudolf handed the bag of medicine to the parents and shooed them all out of the room.

Then he turned to Mia and Henrik, standing mutely in the corner.

“Word of the new drugs has spread too far, it seems... That’s a big problem for us.”

“Is it true that there’s no difference in effects between the drugs?”

“Oh, has my obstinate son finally decided to listen to reason?” Rudolf laughed

as Henrik blinked.

“But why would you do that? When it’s so easy for your actions to be misinterpreted?”

“Because, of course, I want to make new drugs.”

“What are you talking about?”

As Henrik frowned and Mia blinked uncomprehendingly, Rudolf sat down on his chair heavily and sighed.

“Every year, patients die because we don’t have the right medicine. And I’m not just talking about the incurable diseases. Radius Fever’s a good example. There are plenty of well-known sicknesses we still don’t have effective drugs for.”

Mia frowned, thinking back to her pharmacology classes. Radius Fever was a feared disease, but it couldn’t be called incurable. Despite its high infection rate, it came around rarely, causing devastating seasonal outbreaks.

“Do you have any idea how many die from that? When the body lacks strength, the patient dies. Wealth disparity has nothing to do with it. When it comes down to it, it’s strength you’ll wish you’d had more of, not money.”

Rudolf sighed again, a weary grimace on his face.

“All sickness is to be feared. Even the most commonplace illnesses can take lives.”

Like *Demon Claw*. Mia felt ashamed, as if she was being told not to think of illnesses differently based on the treatment methods that did or didn’t exist.

Mia had always felt that her mother’s illness was different because there was no treatment. But even when a treatment method is known, people still die. In that respect, there was no difference.

Mia fell silent, feeling that her narrow-minded way of thinking had been called out.

Henrik’s lips were pressed tightly together, as if he too had felt the same sting as Mia.

Ending his lecture there, Rudolf fetched an old binder from the shelf and placed it down on the desk. It was crammed with a large amount of paper.

Mia looked on with interest, wondering what it was. Noticing this, Rudolf chuckled.

“In prehistoric times, people would chew on the nearby leaves and tree roots when they got sick. That’s how we discovered medicines and learned to heal disease. Even now, with all our advancements in science and technology, we still make medicines in much the same way. We test a staggering amount of different substances and see which ones are effective or not. That’s the only way to do it. After last year, I think you kids ought to have realized—it takes a colossal amount of time and money to create a new drug. If you haven’t got the money, you haven’t got a chance.”

“...”

Mia fell silent, nodding. That was why *Demon Claw* patients, including her mother, had been overlooked all this time.

But where was this conversation leading? Mia went back over it in her mind, trying to piece things together.

Hmm...? It takes money to make drugs...so that’s why Rudolf’s selling different drugs to the commoners and the aristocrats?

Rudolf started speaking again, as if reading Mia’s thoughts.

“In this world, there’s two kinds of people. Those who have money and those who don’t. That’s all there is to it.”

Rudolf’s true motivations were completely different from what Mia had been expecting, but they made sense all of a sudden. Mia sighed. She was both horrified by the ethical ramifications of all this and filled with a sense of begrudging respect at the same time. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so conflicted.

Henrik seemed to share her sentiments.

“So you’re ripping off the rich, is that it? For the sake of funding new drug research?”

Mia smiled dryly over Henrik's frank choice of phrasing.

“They want the fancy new expensive drugs, and they're willing to pay. It's their money, after all. Besides, the more expensive variety *is* harder to source and produce. The cheap and expensive ingredients just happen to have the same effect. Not my fault if the rich want imported ingredients farmed in expensive-to-maintain greenhouses versus what we can collect locally.”

Rudolf gave them both a twinkling smile.

Chapter 16: The Clouds Behind the Smile

“I’M still so inexperienced, aren’t I...?”

Mia sighed quietly.

Father’s revelation had clearly given her a lot to think about. That went for Henrik, too. He’d focused on only one aspect of his father’s policies as a doctor and had overreacted. He’d been so narrow-minded and hadn’t thought to consider the long-term implications of his father’s choices.

“It’s not just you, Mia. I’m still so inexperienced as well. I was far too hot-headed about things.”

Mia chuckled.

“It’s probably because you respect your father a lot. That’s why you were so harsh on him.”

“...”

Henrik frowned silently, thinking to himself how sometimes he didn’t care for the large amounts of blind faith Mia placed in him.

Henrik didn’t think he was that great of a person.

The only aspect of himself he thought worthy of praise was his brain. If he was someone else, he was sure he wouldn’t want to be friends with himself.

No, he didn’t care for Mia’s faith in him. It made him squirm inside. He just wasn’t used to it. But at the same time, it was kind of...nice? And talking with Mia somehow made him like himself more.

It made him want to be better, to live up to the ideal picture of him that Mia clearly saw. If he could only do that, he’d be able to feel more at peace. And maybe catch a glimpse of blue sky behind the permanent gray clouds hanging over his life.

Talking to other girls had never made him feel that way.

That's why I had to give her the brooch.

His offering had been pure and platonic, and so he could only expect such a response in return.

But if he could have a girl like Mia by his side, he really thought he had a chance at chasing those dark clouds away from his heart for good.

Could you call that love? Henrik wasn't sure. But he had a feeling that he and Felix shared the same sentiment towards Mia.

Well, anyway, she turned me down.

Shrugging off a twinge of emotional pain, Henrik focused on the binder Rudolf had left on the table when he'd exited the room.

Just because he didn't expect a response from Mia didn't mean he'd stopped wanting one. But in that case, the only thing to do was to move forward. In other words, his situation and way of thinking were exactly the same as Felix's. How unseemly.

Father said this binder contains what we're looking for. So these are the Angel Tears patient charts, then?

In his rebellion against his father, he'd asked for access to the charts grudgingly and without telling him what he wanted them for.

The binder was thick—there were a lot of charts in there. Henrik had a feeling they'd have trouble finding enough time to go through them all before winter break ended.

Henrik's father, though...he was still someone Henrik respected. And so, he'd always expected him to come through.

He'd known what Henrik and the others were looking for. Their goal—it was so similar to his father's own objective.

Henrik thought that perhaps his father wanted to help them. After all, these were his father's patients. If any symptoms of merit had arisen, surely he'd remember them.

Henrik was desperate to go through the charts. But Mia seemed even more excited than he felt.

“Do you think... these are them...?”

The air was heavy with excitement. Taking the plunge, Henrik opened up the binder. The next moment, though, he frowned.

Unexpectedly, the binder contained information on medicinal herbs.

“Common Rue, for curing madness...a traditional remedy from the Calpas Region...?”

“It seems to be a list of medicinal herbs and the history of their use, but... there’s just so many of them.”

“Father must have gathered all of these himself. When did he find the time to do all this?”

The binder contained information on medicinal herbs from all across the continent. Some of the entries consisted of only plant names. And there were unverified rumors and anecdotes written down too.

What on earth is this for?

As Henrik flipped through it, he kept seeing the same color sticky note appearing. He began making a note of how often it showed up. It was very often.

“Yaron, from the West Astella Region. This one stops bleeding and reduces inflammation?”

Henrik flipped to the next page. Mia was watching over his shoulder and read the next one out loud.

“This one says: Somfella, from the South Indal Region. It strengthens the immune system and acts as an analeptic, a nervous system stimulant...”

Suddenly, Henrik figured out his father’s intent. He’d shown this binder to them to give them a huge head start on tackling the issue they had been grappling with. The issue of creating a new medicine.

But...would this work on...

As he read, Henrik kept thinking about the characteristics of a certain disease, a disease that was never far from any of their minds. He felt excitement build

within him.

“Would this work on *Demon Claw*, do you think? After all, the entire function of *Demon Claw* is to bring down the immune system. If we could mitigate that with medication, patients would be able to safely leave the Sanatorium again.”

There was a strange bubbling sensation in his chest. Henrik realized he was experiencing joy. He turned to Mia, expecting to see the same joy on her face.

...We may actually be able to save Mia's mom!

However...

Hmm?

Henrik blinked.

For some reason, Mia's face had fallen, and her expression had suddenly clouded over...

AT times like this, it's handy not having my face known, Felix thought. Because of his illness and everything, he'd been kept away from public appearances, a choice he was starting to appreciate.

“It's quite the turnout, isn't it?” Felix muttered to himself, peering at the crowd.

There were a couple of familiar faces in the center, around which gathered a bunch of young men dressed in military uniforms.

The army commander, MacDonnell, and the lieutenant colonel, Rankin.

Last night Felix had come to a decision while writing his letter to Mia. He was going to do everything he could, to the best of his ability.

Now that a powerful rival had emerged in the form of Henrik, Felix felt a huge sense of pressure.

If he couldn't help out with Mia in the clinic, then he would just proceed with things while staying within his own, familiar territory.

And so here he was, having infiltrated one of the royal family's parties. He'd been planning to make an appearance at an evening party at some point, but

never would he have expected it would be for this reason.

Mathias had bowed out of serving as Felix's bodyguard for the night, insisting he had to take care of the rabbit. Felix probably didn't need guarding at one of his family's events, so it wasn't a big deal, but he suspected Mathias was just using the rabbit as an excuse to avoid a social gathering. Mathias really hated social gatherings.

"Whatever is Prince Emil to amount to though, eh?"

"How many times have I told you not to use that name?"

"Why not? It's not like I'm talking about *you*, now is it?"

Standing beside him was his coconspirator and the party's organizer, Randolph Meyer Lohenstein. Felix's uncle and his father the king's youngest brother. The current chairman of the board of the Royal Academy, he held jurisdiction over this Grantz residence.

He usually stayed in the capital, but he spent every school break here.

Grantz was under royal jurisdiction now, but with its culture steeped in Radius history and tradition, the king's other brothers had long since grown tired of it. Meyer, however, loved Radius culture.

He always said that it was the prevailing folklore of the region that he liked the most. He was clearly a big sucker for a romantic story.

It was said that the enduring Radius culture had survived because the last queen of Radius had made that one of her conditions for surrendering, along with freedom of faith. All of the lords who had sworn loyalty to the queen followed suit and surrendered to Isea.

The Radius faith was discarded by the invaders, but the culture of the country endured along with its people. So, too, did pockets of resistance. Only the ownership and power over the country changed hands. There had been several rebellions after that, and the land still retained a strong military force.

And yesterday, that military had held a special meeting with...

Felix looked around the room, searching for his target. Locating it, he frowned nonetheless.

“Hmm?”

The man standing next to Lord Lipsett...he looked familiar. Thick eyebrows and sharp eyes like an eagle, and a strong jaw. Felix didn't know his name, but he'd seen him at a parade and thought he must have been military.

But Commander MacDonnell and Lieutenant Colonel Rankin were standing some distance away, which struck Felix as strange.

“Lord Renfield. Mage Army Cabinet Minister.”

“Mage Army Cabinet Minister...”

The men in this room were bound to know the answers to all the questions Felix had. Including...how to turn someone into a mage.

And what, exactly, *Magira-Aera* really was.

No sense asking outright. They'd never tell me. They'll be on high alert, of course...

But the name Renfield stuck out to him. The Renfields were an old dynasty who held a large amount of territory in the south.

Felix racked his brains to try to remember where he'd heard of him before. But nothing came to mind. Maybe he was looking in the wrong place. He just needed a hint. If only the man's title had him on even footing with Felix's fake identity as a member of the Keyserling family, that could have helped, but...

“Uncle, what political party does Lord Renfield belong to, again?”

Meyer shook his head.

“Don't get involved in politics if you want an easy life. My brother knows about the situation. He'll handle it,” Meyer whispered to Felix in hushed tones. His unconcerned way of speaking made it obvious he'd made his way through life without any real turmoil on the way.

Fine, if his uncle wouldn't tell him, then Felix would have to figure things out for himself.

If the man was a cabinet minister, then that must mean he was affiliated with the same government as the prime minister.

Uh, the current PM belongs to the Schild Party...so it follows that he does too. But then why is he buddying up to that man Lipsett?

Felix lacked education about all this. But he did know the prime minister and the governing party.

The Schild party was a group of conservatives dedicated to upholding the status quo and preserving the monarchy. The Prime Minister, Galber, was a fan of Felix's father and had doted on Felix as a young child as well.

As Felix mulled it all over, Meyer rolled his eyes at him.

"Are you sure this is where you want to be right now? If your face is seen here, it could be quite troublesome for you."

"...Why?"

Felix looked quizzically at his uncle, not following. Just then...

"Ah! If it isn't Felix...Young Master Felix?"

Felix froze, the voice familiar to him.

Slowly, he turned around to see a female student he recognized from the Academy, wearing a bright purple gown.

"...You?"

Even Felix, who paid little attention to girls, knew this one's name, such was the impact of her general personality. His face immediately stiffened.

Darn it!

The gathering was being held under the sponsorship of the school, so of course, it made sense. Especially with the law department having so many children of the nobility enrolled.

It's Angelica!

Last year, Angelica had suspected Felix of being the secret prince and had set her sights on him. But thanks to Zeke, Felix had been able to remove himself from suspicion. He felt so safe, he'd almost forgotten about the ruse.

But his presence here posed a risk that Angelica might start suspecting him again. After all, wasn't it a bit odd for the third son of a baron with no peerage

to be at a party like this one?

Young Master Felix, did she say?

She'd started calling him that again. That wasn't good. Felix hesitated, wondering how best to shrug this off. But then he noticed the man standing beside Angelica, and his breath caught in his throat.

It was Lord Renfield, the Mage Army Cabinet Minister Felix had been so preoccupied with mere moments before.

Standing behind him was the young man who had been with Lieutenant Rankin. He was a slender, handsome young man whose features resembled Angelica somewhat.

That's when Felix really thought about Angelica's name for the first time.

Angelica Heidfeld...the Heidfeld Family...

The peerage held by his household came to Felix just then, and he jumped a little. The Renfield peerage was linked directly to the house of Heidfeld.

Angelica cast a shrewd glance at Felix before turning and proudly introducing the two men behind her.

"Chairman Meyer, may I introduce my father and brother."

Angelica's father, Lord Renfield, bowed politely and fixed his gaze on Felix.

"And who do we have here?"

"My name is Felix Keyserling, sir."

"Ah, the Keyserling family. How do you know Chairman Meyer...?"

As the older man narrowed his eyes at Felix, Felix gave him a big smile.

"This is embarrassing, sir, but my grades at the Academy have slipped, so I'm actually here for some extra tuition."

The situation handled, Felix was about to turn to leave when he locked eyes with Angelica and hesitated.

Hmm, getting to the man himself might be too difficult, but if I go down this route...I risk losing a lot...

Even so, Felix hesitated for only a second.

“Since we’ve had the pleasure of running into each other here, I wonder if you might accompany me for a stroll, Lady Heidfeld? We’ve barely had the chance to really talk at the Academy.”

Felix fixed her with the gentlemanly smile he’d been practicing in the mirror for Mia. It hadn’t worked on Mia at all, but Angelica blinked a few times before blushing and nodding demurely.

THAT evening, Henrik invited Mia out to the festival again.

Since he’d asked her to go as friends, she had no reason to decline, and so Mia accepted.

It was a little embarrassing for it to be just the two of them, so she decided to invite Felix and Mathias as well. However, it turned out that Felix had already gone out on business of his own. So, in the end, only Mathias could join them.

Mathias had shot Henrik a look of mingled embarrassment and awkwardness at first, but once he realized that Henrik was acting like his ordinary self, he visibly relaxed.

Now she had a chance to look around calmly, she realized that the open-air market sold many things besides frogs. Delicious scents wafted on the cool air as Mia peered into a nearby shop. Immediately, her feet came to a stop.

“...Frog cakes?!”

This festival just couldn’t get away from frogs, it seemed. Even the cakes were baked in the shape of frogs. It looked like she would just have to get used to it.

Taking her eyes off the frog cakes, Mia turned to Henrik.

“How many days does this festival last for?”

“A week,” Henrik answered her casually.

“That’s a long time.”

“Well, everyone’s got free time on their hands. The workers are all home from the capital, and there’s not much else to do here.”

“Oh, I see...”

Henrik looked at Mia, concern showing on his face. Ever since the discovery in the examination room, he'd been troubled.

“*What's wrong?*”

That was what his eyes were asking.

Mia knew he'd noticed her fallen expression when he'd turned to her with such joy on his face.

She told herself she should be happy they were making such progress. She meant to smile, she really did, only...

Only Henrik had seen through her. That's why he was doing things like asking her to the festival and trying to be extra considerate of her.

The conversation petered out until Mathias spoke.

“So, have we found out anything yet? We came to discover if there were ever any *Angel Tears* patients here, right? We'd better hurry up, or winter break will be over before we know it.”

Mathias was almost babbling. He couldn't stand awkward silences, being so awkward himself.

His words only made Mia feel even more despondent.

After that, they'd dropped all pretense and asked Rudolf straight up about prior patients, but he couldn't recall ever having anyone afflicted with *Angel Tears* at the clinic. So it didn't seem likely they'd find anything in the old patient charts.

Nevertheless, Mia pasted on a big smile.

“We didn't find any *Angel Tears* patient charts, but Henrik's father gave us a huge clue. He told us about all kinds of medicinal herbs that might make an effective medicine for treating *Demon Claw*!”

“What? That's amazin'!”

“Right?”

Henrik raised an eyebrow at Mia, who tried hard to smile back.

The smile faded on her lips, however. Henrik sighed.

“Palliative treatments aren’t what you were hoping for, were they?”

Mia blinked. Somehow he’d identified the heart of her issue. He was right on the money, too.

“Mia, this is a huge step forward.”

“I know. I know that...”

Her voice lacked conviction. She felt ashamed of herself, felt like crying. She was grateful to Henrik and to Rudolf. But this was different from what she wanted. Very different.

Even if they used Rudolf’s medicinal herb index to create an effective medicine to treat Demon Claw, the patients would be reliant upon it for the rest of their lives. They would have to live under the shadow of their illness every day.

What Mia desperately wanted was a complete cure for the disease.

Perhaps that would never happen. She tried to tell herself that this was the best they could hope for. But she just couldn’t let go of her dream of a cure.

“If we could control the disease completely with a new drug, then the patients would be functionally healthy. What’s the difference?”

Henrik seemed angry, somehow. As if he couldn’t understand Mia’s logic.

Mia was being stubborn, and it irked him.

She knew she was being stubborn. She knew that as well as anyone.

She knew she often suffered from tunnel-vision. It was one of the things she disliked most about herself.

“We can’t lose sight of our objective. Our objective is to make it so your mom can live outside of the Sanatorium again, right?”

“Yes.”

Mia looked up at Henrik. *I know*, she thought.

“Then we know just what to do when winter break is over, right? Right?”

Mathias patted Mia encouragingly on the shoulder.

Mathias's reassuring manner made Mia want to cry again. She could barely nod.

She hated herself for not being able to buck up.

I...I wish I could see Felix right now.

The thought popped into her head, unbidden. Why would Felix's face come to mind at her moment of weakness? Probably because he was always the one who was there when she was at her darkest moments.

So why wasn't he here now?

As the thought came to mind...

She suddenly spotted a flash of golden hair out of the corner of her eye.

Huh?

Mia blinked. She thought it was a mirage at first. Now she blushed. She was starting to realize something, something that was coming through late, like a delayed signal.

She looked closer, flustered. And thankful that it wasn't a mirage.

They were passing the grounds of a fancy residence. Beyond the iron-wrought bars of the fence, she could see a garden party in full swing. It was all so glamorous, like something from another world. And there in the center of it all was Felix, walking through the garden.

Mia was captivated by the sight of him.

He was splendidly dressed in a jet-black evening coat. His true form.

That's right...he really is a prince.

As she stood there staring, she had the feeling that he had somehow gone far away from her. She was filled with sudden panic, afraid that he would leave her for good. She opened her mouth to call out to him.

"Fe—"

At the same moment, Mia's eyes widened.

Her voice faded to nothing on the cold winter air.

She noticed the long purple gown first. It looked like it was probably made of silk. It was so glamorous, she could only stare. But then she noticed something else.

The girl wearing the gown looked familiar.

It was Angelica, blushing prettily as Felix took her in his arms.



Chapter 17: A Reckless Strategy

A few hours previously...

This isn't going how I hoped.

Felix was troubled.

Since Angelica's father was the Mage Army Cabinet Minister, he wanted to get whatever information he could out of him. Using his unsuspecting, unguarded daughter as a stepping stone seemed like as good a plan as any.

Felix was starting to regret his plan, however, quickly realizing that he didn't have the smarts for this.

Minute by minute, he was growing more and more uncomfortable. He really didn't have the stomach for using people in this way.

Especially not when it involved seduction techniques.

This is way beyond me...

But now he'd started down this path, he couldn't go back.

"What's made you change your tune? You totally ignored and avoided me at school..."

Good question, Angelica. Felix had already publicly professed his feelings for Mia. It didn't make sense for him to be suddenly setting his sights on another girl.

"It's just a nice coincidence we ran into each other, that's all. So I thought it might be good for us to talk."

A safe answer, but Angelica was unconvinced.

"Oh, really? After you spurned me like that? I totally thought you hated me!"

Her eyes were filled with suspicion.

“Don’t be silly. I just felt like you were unapproachable, that’s all. You’re so beautiful and well-bred, I was sure you’d never be interested in me. I thought you were out of my league.”

Felix wasn’t used to giving compliments. They stuck in his throat. Cold sweat began to bead on his brow.

Cursing himself for what he was doing, Felix thought hard for a way to spin this.

But his opponent was far stronger than he. He would have to be reckless. Use a cunning strategy against her.

It’s odd, me approaching her like this. Can’t deny that.

Last year, he’d spurned every advance of hers and spoken of nothing but Mia, Mia, Mia. The only person his love for Mia hadn’t registered with was Mia herself. Everyone else knew all about it.

But he needed to fool Angelica into thinking his feelings had changed if he wanted that juicy information. Angelica hated Mia. There was no way she’d offer up the info as a favor on her behalf.

Maybe I can say it’s because Mia turned me down?

Would Angelica buy it if he told her he’d decided to move on, post-rejection? But Felix was known for his stubborn tenacity. It wouldn’t track. Besides, a guy who flits onto the next girl following a rejection seems kind of slimy, doesn’t he?

Felix shook his head, panicked.

Anyway, she didn’t reject me! That wasn’t a real rejection, it wasn’t!

As he tried to reassure himself, Angelica chuckled and linked her arm through his. “Well, it IS a good opportunity, I say!”

Felix stiffened. He couldn’t exactly shake her off. Besides, this fit the plan.

Angelica was looking up at Felix, batting her eyelashes. *She’s pretty, but everything about her is calculated to appeal to men*, Felix thought.

Her soft body was pressed up against him, and her arm felt like a dead weight

hanging off his.

He could feel a heavy weight pressing on his conscience as well. A growing sense of guilt and wrongness built up inside him.

“But what about Mia Baumann? You were totally crazy for her, weren’t you?”

Angelica knew exactly where to probe.

“Yeah...about her...”

Felix hesitated. Should he say he’d given up on Mia? He wasn’t confident he could sell that lie.

Mia’s determined face popped into his mind. Until she found a cure for her mother, she wouldn’t even consider her own opportunities for happiness.

Her determination inspired him, spurred him on.

“I’m over her.”

Angelica’s eyes narrowed as Felix dropped that bald-faced lie.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I don’t know anything about pharmacology, so being with her just got tiring. I want to use my time more effectively. I get the feeling you and I could have a lot of fun together...”

There was an element of truth mixed in with the lie. He really didn’t know much about medicines. When it came to pharmacology, Felix was of no use to anyone.

And, while he wanted to be with Mia and felt happy when she was around... he also felt tired out by it all too. Just a little.

When would she face up to his feelings? Felix couldn’t see a future for them together, at least not the way things were. The uncertainty ate away at him.

Fighting back a sigh of hopelessness, Felix looked at the ground.

“Well, I’m pleased to hear that.”

Felix looked at Angelica. For some reason, she was wearing a sharklike grin.

A sense of foreboding washed over Felix.

“Mia!”

All of a sudden, he could hear a familiar voice. He turned and caught a glimpse of whirling red hair. A white-haired boy was chasing after the redhead girl.

“Mia? What is she doing here...?”

Mathias was standing on the other side of the iron-wrought railings, giving Felix a withering *“Just how much of an idiot are you?”* kind of look.

“Don’t just stand there, go after her! And apologize! Before it’s too late!” As Mathias yelled at him, Felix almost stumbled over his own feet.

But Angelica was laughing out loud now. Felix stared at her blankly. “What’s the big deal?” She asked him in a challenging tone.

“You just said you’re over her...right?”

Felix snapped out of his panic haze. He’d screwed up the plan already, and he didn’t even have a shred of usable information. If he chased after Mia now, everything would be ruined. He’d never get another chance at info-digging.

Felix ground his teeth together and manufactured a smile.

He had to hold himself together, do everything in his power to keep from chasing after Mia.

If I run after her now, it’s all over. Aren’t you sick of being completely useless in her eyes?

His mouth tasted like blood.

“Sorry, but I’m leaving the team.”

Felix turned his back on Mathias. He faced Angelica head-on, taking her hand.

“I thought you were better than this. Clearly, I was wrong.”

Mathias spat the words out. Felix didn’t turn his head, but he could hear Mathias walking away.

Felix counted five breaths before turning around.

As he watched his friends disappear into the distance, Felix felt like he’d made

a terrible mistake, one he could never take back.

MIA ran and ran and eventually found herself in Henrik's family's medicinal herb garden.

Her breath was coming in harsh rasping bursts, magnified by the silence of the deserted garden. She forced herself to slow her breathing. The sweet scent of the plants and herbs helped a lot.

I don't...know what to do...

She was in turmoil. She couldn't believe the things Felix had said.

"Being with her just got tiring."

Mia felt like she was being punished for getting too comfortable. She'd just assumed that Felix would always be there, yearning for her, just like he'd said he would.

She'd believed that of all people, Felix would be with her until the end.

Suddenly she heard footsteps behind her. Heart leaping suddenly, she whirled around. But it was Henrik standing there, eyes filled with anger.

The fact that it wasn't Felix standing there filled her with despair.

"Henrik...I don't know what to do now."

As she gazed imploringly at him, he pulled her into his arms.

"I'm right here."

Henrik buried his face in Mia's red hair.

She knew it was wrong, but she had no strength left with which to resist.

She felt like she was about to sink into a dark, deep ocean of despair. Unless someone was there to rescue her.

"It's all right. I'm right here for you."

Henrik stroked Mia's hair clumsily. She could feel how earnest he was.

"You swear?"

You won't leave me all alone?

Mia lifted her head, gazing into his eyes. Henrik held his breath, touching Mia's cheek with gentle wonder.

Huh?

His fingertips were so cold, but the heat in his eyes was intense—then, Mathias's voice broke the spell between them.

"I'm here too, Mia."

Henrik jumped, letting go of Mia. Automatically, she stepped away from him.

Mathias was out of breath, too.

Between gasps, he managed to speak.

"Mia...Felix just said he's through with our group."

Despair flooded her. Knees buckling, she sank to the ground.

Mathias kept talking.

"He must have lost his mind. He'll be back, don't worry. Just...try to cheer up."

But his words rang hollow, and it was clear he didn't really believe what he was saying. Mia gasped, fighting back a sob.

"...Yes, of course."

Mathias's weak reassurances that Felix would return proved more soothing to Mia than Henrik's declaration of solidarity. That was proof that Mia still couldn't bear to give up on Felix.

She fingered the frog accessory in her pocket, her spirits lifting somewhat.

There must be some explanation for all of this.

After all, he had sent her that letter only this morning.

Mia closed her hand tight around the accessory. Then she forced herself to pull herself together and got to her feet.

Chapter 18: An Empty Space at the Table

WITH winter break over, Mia and the others returned to their ordinary routine.

The trip to Grantz had proved extremely fruitful, but morale was low. Not only because they hadn't made any progress towards an actual cure for the disease, but also because Felix leaving the team had been a huge loss.

An empty seat sat at their usual table in the library's lounge. It was a table for four, but Felix was absent.

Just as he'd said he would, he had parted with the team and started hanging out with Angelica and her group.

Mathias had said that Felix must have lost his mind, and Mia felt that there had to be some kind of underlying reason behind his decision. Or, so she hoped.

And so she'd been waiting for him to come back. Expecting it, almost. But the new school term began, and even now, five days in, Felix still hadn't shown his face to any of them.

Mia had gathered her courage and convinced the others to go to the law classroom with her to talk to Felix. Only...

Only Felix refused to come out of the classroom when he heard they were outside. In the end, they had to go in after him. When they asked him to explain himself, Felix looked apologetic as he sat surrounded by Angelica and the other law students.

"I apologize for the abruptness, of course. I just figured I'm not really needed on the team."

Who would accept such a flimsy excuse at this stage? He was clearly lying.

"That's nonsense. We need you, Felix. We can't do this without you."

His excuses weren't accepted. But Felix merely shook his head, shooting a glance at Henrik.

“You’ll be fine. You’ve got Henrik, after all.”

Mia frowned. Felix’s words seemed very pointed.

Wait, is this because of...

Mia never responded to the letter after the frog festival. Instead, she’d spent more and more time with Henrik. Did this mean Felix had assumed she’d picked Henrik?

“I haven’t chosen anyone, though!”

Mia blushed deep red, flustered and desperate to explain things. But Felix’s response never changed.

“Okay. Whatever. I’m still tired, though. Your objective is too difficult. I have my own studies to focus on too, you know.”

He smiled. It was artificial.

Then Angelica flashed Mia a sharklike grin as if to say: *“Well, that’s that!”*

Angelica grabbed hold of Felix’s arm with a triumphant smile and hugged it to her bosom possessively. Mia stumbled out of the law classroom, thinking only of escaping the awful scene.

A few days had passed since that unpleasant altercation, and Mia had managed to calm down. But whenever she thought back on it, she couldn’t help sighing deeply to herself.

She still couldn’t believe it.

But Mia had no right to challenge Felix’s personal choice.

“...I’m tired.”

Despite her very good reasoning, Mia hadn’t been able to earnestly consider Felix’s feelings. What right did she have to go questioning *his* right to a change of heart now?

If Felix had more important things to do than try to save Mia’s mother, then she didn’t need him as a friend, much less as anything else. Besides, Angelica and Felix made more sense as a couple.

He’s a prince, after all. A prince belongs with a princess, not a pauper.

She thought back to when she saw them together in Grantz. Angelica had looked just like a princess in her splendid gown as she snuggled up to Felix in his fancy evening coat.

Angelica was a good match for Felix. A far better match than Mia.

She knew that. Logically, she knew that. Only...

Only...I'm still sad about it.

Last winter, Mia could never have imagined how hard it would be to live without Felix by her side. To live without his warmth.

“Mia, are you even listening?”

“What? Oh, sorry.”

Henrik sighed but didn't give her a hard time about zoning out. The melancholy expression Mia wore told him how much she was hurting without Felix.

Mathias was being his usual silent self as well. He was staring out the window, absentmindedly stroking his rabbit. Winter break had come and gone, and they still hadn't found its owner.

The rabbit had really taken to Mathias, so much so that you could be fooled for thinking it had always been his pet.

“We need to submit an Individual Experiment Application, but because we're using animal trials, we need to pass an ethics committee screening first. We need to draw up the application papers, but Bralle is head of the ethics committee.”

Henrik's dour explanation only brought down the mood further.

Mia and her team had spent the remaining days of winter break working on medicine synthesis. With Rudolf and Mary's help, they'd managed to compose several different medicines, but now they had to test what they'd made for safety.

In the Isea Kingdom, it was a legal requirement to conduct animal trials before human trials.

They needed to draw up application papers for that, but that was a big step. A big step that was hard to take.

“We absolutely need to test on humans at some point. And if something bad happens at that stage, we don’t want that on our conscience, right? So the animal trials are a necessity.”

Safety checks. But Rudolf had already checked their drugs for potential toxicity, and they were clean.

Nobody was going to die from taking their drug. Mia was quite sure of that. But it wasn’t drug toxicity Mia was worried about.

“I know. I know that in order to test the efficacy of our drug, we need to infect an animal with *Demon Claw*. But inflicting that terrible disease on an innocent creature...it’s like poisoning it with our own hands.”

Mia hated it. The thought of taking lives to save her mom’s. The implications chilled her. She just wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do.

“The biggest problem of all is, how are we supposed to infect an animal with *Demon Claw* in the first place?”

Henrik was frowning. Yes, they had to solve that issue. But Mia needed to come to terms with the ethics of the situation first. If they couldn’t get past that, they wouldn’t get anywhere. They’d just end up grinding to a halt.

Wasn’t there some other way? A way *around* this seemingly insurmountable hurdle instead of over it?

“Henrik...what do you really think about animal trials?”

“...It makes me sick to my stomach to think about.”

Henrik met Mia’s gaze head-on.

“We take the lives of others to survive. We’re a selfish, self-serving race.”

Henrik’s gaze was unwavering as he spoke.

His moral stance was clear. And yet, he was able to push through it. But Mia couldn’t push through. She knew this was the only way they would be able to make their drug.

We can't get around this. Someone needs to make a treatment for this darn disease already.

And that person was Mia, wasn't it? So if she wanted this, she needed to take responsibility. She needed to steel herself for the reality of what needed to be done.

But she was afraid.

What would Felix think?

Just pondering that question made her chest ache. Felix was gone. He had gone back to living his own life on his own terms.

That was for the best, though. Probably.

"All right. Okay. I'll write the application."

The words left a bitter taste in her mouth. But Mia had made up her mind.

She smiled at the other boys but couldn't help following up with a sigh. Mathias heaved a huge sigh, too.

Mia glanced at him. He looked so lost and despondent. As if he wasn't sure if he should still be here. His role was to protect Felix, to be his bodyguard.

Bodyguard...the prince's bodyguard. But how can he guard Felix's body if he can't be with Felix? If Mathias continues to fail in his duty and something happens to Felix...

"Mathias..."

Mia hesitated. She was afraid of losing Mathias, too.

"I'm stayin' with the team. I don't care what Felix does."

Seeing the look of desperate hurt in Mathias's eyes, Mia had to wonder if he was the one who'd been most affected by Felix's abandonment, after all.

Chapter 19: The Escaped Rabbit

“WHAT are you planning with all this?”

“Nothing. There’s no ulterior motive behind what I’ve been saying.”

After Mia fled the law classroom, Henrik stopped by Felix’s desk, shooting him a cold glance. But Felix’s answer was clearly fake. Despite the smile on his face, his eyes showed a disturbance he couldn’t mask.

Henrik felt he needed to get to the heart of whatever Felix was up to.

“Oh, really? Well, fine. This is what I’ve been wanting. I’m not going to hold back, you know?”

But Felix didn’t take the bait.

“Go ahead. Knock yourself out.”

Felix smiled, his face no longer showing any hint of turmoil. Henrik hadn’t realized Felix was capable of masking his feelings so effectively. Usually, Felix’s emotions were bubbling right on the surface, ready to overflow any time. This cool detachment didn’t suit him.

Henrik felt a cold chill go down his spine as he realized he wasn’t going to get anything more out of Felix. It was the first time he’d ever had to consider the possibility that Felix might have him beat.

“Henrik? What’s up?”

Mia’s voice broke Henrik out of his thoughts.

“I wanted to ask you about how to write the application file. Do we all need to sign it?”

There was a smile plastered on Mia’s face. A hollow smile that seemed about to crumble at any moment.

Staring at Mia’s smile, Henrik realized that he probably wasn’t going to be

able to fill the hole Felix's absence had left. His predictions were proving themselves to be alarmingly true.

The answer to the legalese question Mia just asked me...the answer to finding a real cure, not just a palliative one...those answers may lie with none other than him...

Henrik had never compared himself to anyone else before.

He'd never thought of himself as powerless.

The first taste of failure was hard to swallow. Henrik sighed, causing both Mia and Mathias to look at him.

He dropped his gaze down to the documents on the table, trying to distract himself.

Oh, yeah. We need to get hold of animal test subjects, too...

But first, they needed to get past Bralle, Professor Fair and Square himself. The evaluation wouldn't go smoothly, that was for sure. There was a big risk Bralle would reject their proposal based on something totally unrelated.

We could leave campus and hunt down wild animals to use...although I hate the thought of doing that. Besides, it's not like there's a ton of suitable animals just roaming around...

As Henrik rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his gaze fell on the red-eyed rabbit, which was looking right at him.

"Well, here's a perfect specimen right here."

Henrik was just thinking aloud. But right after he spoke those words, the rabbit seemed to stiffen. Then it turned and jumped out of the window, leaping down to the gardens below.

"GET Prince Emil at all costs."

That was the order Angelica's father had given her when she entered the Academy.

Angelica had nodded earnestly in response. How could she say no, when this

was vital to her father's work?

An aristocrat's daughter didn't have a lot of choices in life. All she could do was hope that the path laid out for her would lead to her happiness.

But Angelica had dreams, like any young girl. If only the man she was to marry could be someone she liked! In first year, she'd let her sights become clouded. She had begun to wish to herself, *"Please, let it be him!"*

It was something like love at first sight. That's how beautiful he seemed to her.

But after the Sanatorium Invasion Incident last year, Angelica had given up on Felix. A dimwit like that couldn't possibly be a secret prince. No prince would have ended up having to repeat a school year, anyhow.

So, she had no further use for him. That was the conclusion Angelica had forced herself to come to at the end of last year.

Now she had a new target, Zeke. He'd been dodging her flirtations, but that only added credence to the rumors.

So she was only using Felix—who, oddly, had started flirting with her again recently—to further her own agenda.

Ooh, she'd sure ruffled her feathers! That witch Mia Baumann. Strutting around the place, thinking that all the boys were just desperate to attend to her, even though she was as lowborn as they came!

Angelica didn't know if Felix and Mia were just friends or boyfriend and girlfriend, but she was delighted to have caused a rift between them either way.

It was strange, though. She'd fully expected Felix to go running after Mia.

But he hadn't. Instead, he'd announced he was done with Mia, and Angelica had missed her chance to tell Felix to take a hike. Now she was stuck with him.

Is he really done with Mia, though?

Or was this all part of some plan? Why had Felix chosen to get close to Angelica now? Was it because he was attracted by her father's position as the Mage Army Cabinet Minister? For the third son of a baron, such a man's daughter would be a prize indeed. Young men without titles of their own to

inherit could only hope to gain status through a good marriage.

Men live for stuff like titles and social clout. Whoever married Angelica could get access to that through her father. Felix wasn't the first guy who'd approached her thinking about what he could get out of her.

Still, it was weird, though. Felix just didn't seem the type.

He hadn't been at all nice to her before. It just didn't make sense.

Felix had seemed totally devoted to Mia, like a faithful dog. How could he be finished with her so easily? No, there was something else going on here.

After all, it doesn't seem like it's so easy for him underneath it all...

Angelica had the feeling Felix was trying to hold back tears all the time, despite the brightness of his smile. If it was all an act, then what was the act for?

Does he want something from me? My father's social status, perhaps? Or his money? But Felix comes from a rich family, why would he need our money?

She found herself wondering about Felix's background once again. Even though she stopped suspecting him a long time ago, little seeds of doubt were once again beginning to germinate in her mind.

"Your Highness..."

She whispered it. Just to see what would happen. But Felix didn't turn around. The term of address didn't seem to register with him. As Angelica continued to stare at him, he finally turned to her.

"What?"

He wore the expression of someone who hadn't heard what she'd said. The expression of someone who hadn't realized they were being addressed.

His response was so natural. Almost too natural.

He's lying.

He was lying to himself. Angelica, who was a master at self-deception, knew what that looked like better than anyone.

She shot a glance at Zeke, who gave her an awkward smile. Perhaps he had

noticed the uncertainty taking hold in Angelica's heart.

I need to find out the truth.

Making a false accusation could bring embarrassment upon her. So, she needed to make sure.

But how? How can I know for sure?

All of a sudden, there was a disturbance outside the window.

"Open up! Hurry!"

Angelica looked over in surprise to see Mia Baumann's face. She was tapping on the window pane.

"Er...?"

A classmate opened the window for her, and Mia took hold of the frame, hauling herself up to lean through. Then she yelled.

"Have...Have you seen the rabbit?!"

Mia was looking straight at Felix, as if addressing him.

Angelica looked over at Felix as well, rolling her eyes over Mia's pushy behavior.

Felix's expression was unchanged. The same beautiful smile.

"I haven't seen it."

Mia looked pained for a moment, but then she smiled too.

"Oh, okay. Thank you."

As Mia disappeared below the window once again, Felix suddenly clutched at his chest. Angelica frowned, wondering what was wrong with him. Felix seemed to have lost all composure, suddenly.

The sounds of his harsh gasping breaths seemed impossibly loud in the silent classroom. Angelica suddenly remembered that he'd repeated first year due to illness. In the past year, he'd seemed so healthy that she'd almost completely forgotten about that.

Oh no, what should I do?

Then she remembered...back on the day of the entrance ceremony. She'd helped Felix when he was in a similar state...

"That...that girl. Someone get her! Get Mia!"

Angelica leaped across the room, heading for the window. But someone grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. She turned in surprise to see that Felix was holding onto her for dear life.

"I'm...fine. Leave her...out of this. Get...my...uncle."

Felix looked like he was on the brink of death. But he was so insistent.

Uncle?

Angelica was frozen, gazing in alarm at Felix's face, handsome even in distress. She didn't know what to do!

"Has anyone seen a rabbit...?"

A low voice boomed out, and a big form suddenly appeared, filling the classroom doorway.

"You!"

Red eyes, like fresh blood. It was the mage student, Felix's friend. He took one look at Felix gasping for breath and bellowed in alarm, his voice shaking the furniture.

"Felix!!!"

"Math...ias?"

Mathias Weiss barged into the room. He picked Felix up and slung him over his muscular shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"I'm taking him to the infirmary!" he yelled at Angelica, whisking Felix quickly out of the room and away.

"EXPLAIN yourself."

After the attack had safely passed, Mathias turned on Felix.

Mathias had wanted to fetch Mia, but Felix had vehemently disagreed. As a

result, this panic attack had lasted much longer than usual. There was no other medicine but Mia, it seemed.

Felix remained silent, glaring at the ceiling.

“Your panic attacks always come about when you’ve been pushing yourself too far. This is all about Mia, isn’t it?”

Mathias had been over and over it in his mind. The moment when Felix had chosen Angelica.

It never made any sense to him.

At first, he’d been furious with Felix. Then as time passed and he thought about it more and more, he realized it couldn’t be true. Felix, tired of getting rejected? No way. Felix was stubborn to a fault. No way would he just give up halfway.

So this—all of it—had to be for Mia’s benefit. It made far more sense that Felix had a plan, a plan that necessitated Mia being left with the wrong impression.

Felix’s panic attack had only confirmed Mathias’s suspicions.

Felix, however, remained silent. “*You stubborn fool,*” Mathias thought to himself.

“So, it’s something you can’t even tell me about, is it?”

Even after all these years of friendship? Anger bubbled up inside Mathias again but was quickly replaced by feelings of inadequacy. Clearly, Felix felt he couldn’t be confided in.

Felix let out a sigh that sounded like a moan.

“Just wait. I just need a little longer.”

Finally, Felix spoke, still staring at the ceiling. He looked very young, somehow.

Seeing him that way, Mathias was struck by a memory.

Felix had made this sort of tormented facial expression once before, just before breaking into the Sanatorium.

“Don’t do anything crazy. Don’t make Mia cry.”

Crazy...the word hung in the air. Had Felix said something crazy before, during his attack?

Mathias tried to remember, but nothing came. As he stood there sweating, Felix sat up.

“It’s all right.”

Felix smiled, swinging his legs off the bed. As if the panic attack had never happened. He got to his feet and strolled to the infirmary’s door.

“Wait. What am I to you, anyway? You can’t confide in me? Huh?”

The question he’d been pondering deep within himself just spilled out.

Felix was his master, childhood friend, and prince, who he was duty-bound to guard. In the past year, Mathias had let himself believe their relationship was something more. Recently, he’d even started to hope that things might even return to what they had been like before Chris passed away. But clearly, he was wrong about that.

Felix came to a halt in the doorway.

“If things get crazy—I’ll be counting on your help. Until then...”

Muttering the words with his back still turned to Mathias, Felix left the room.

That wasn’t the answer Mathias wanted. But if Felix was counting on his help, that had to mean he still considered him a friend, right?

“What the heck is going on?”

Mathias’s low voice sounded weak and tremulous, amplified by the silent, sterile infirmary walls.

Chapter 20: Let's Make a Deal

CRUNCHY leaves whirled slowly to the ground. The trees were almost entirely bare now, with only a dusting of leaves left, clinging desperately to the boughs as the bitter north wind whipped past.

Angelica didn't notice the cold, however. She was distracted by a mild sense of excitement.

Angelica was lying in wait on the path to the dorms.

There was a cluster of trees where the path to the boy and girl dorms forked. Angelica was huddled under the trees, waiting.

He wouldn't go back to class after that. Probably, he'd go straight back to his own dorm room.

Her predictions proved correct.

As the sound of footsteps grew closer, Angelica slid out onto the path, leaving the cover of the trees to waylay her prey.

Felix stopped short, eyes widening in surprise.

"Angelica?"

He still looked pale. The attack, whatever it was, had been painful to watch, let alone experience. Seeing it first-hand, it made perfect sense now why he'd had to repeat first year.

But now Angelica knew there was a reason why Felix was even allowed to repeat first year.

"Uncle..."

Maybe it was out of desperation, not wanting anyone to fetch Mia. Maybe it was because he was feeling so ill and couldn't think straight. Whatever the reason, it had just slipped out.

Angelica had connected the dots immediately. Felix wanted his uncle, did he?

Angelica knew the name of every aristocrat connected to the school, as well as their relatives. But the *identity* of the chairman of the board's nephew had previously been a mystery. Yes, Randolph Meyer Lohenstein's nephew. Prince Emil *Felix* Leonard Lohenstein.

There was no need for her to juggle two boys anymore.

She pictured Zeke's face for a moment.

The time they spent together was fun, she had to admit. But she had to discard him. Father would hardly be proud of her for snagging a random boy like Zeke.

"Are you all right?"

She imagined herself as a ministering angel, trying her hardest to radiate care and concern.

"Oh. Yes, I'm fine now. It was nothing life-threatening."

"...Your illness still hasn't gotten better, has it?"

"It's more of a chronic condition, I guess. Something I have to live with. Anyway, why aren't you in class? You're an honor student, not a slacker like me. You shouldn't skip class."

Shooting her a mild, apologetic glance, he made as if to walk away.

Quickly, Angelica threw a question at him.

"Why didn't you want us to call that girl—Mia Baumann—to help you?"

The sound of that name made Felix visibly stiffen.

"It wasn't that serious."

Felix turned to Angelica again, smiling. It looked like he was trying to hold back tears. Looking at him made Angelica's chest prickle painfully for some reason.

He looked so noble, so regal in that moment.

But it was clear that he hadn't given up on Mia. And it was also clear that he'd only gotten close to Angelica to serve some purpose or other, something that would ultimately benefit Mia.

The thought made Angelica burn with jealousy.

Why Mia? What's so great about her?

Angelica was furious.

Since early childhood, she had been raised to be the perfect aristocrat's wife. To cast aside her own desires and steel herself to her fate, for the sake of her family, for the sake of her father.

Because what other purpose did Angelica's existence serve, if not that?

So why did Mia, who seemed to do whatever she liked, get to steal everything from her?

Did she deserve sympathy just because she had a sick mother? Well, Angelica didn't even have a mother. Angelica would never see her mother again. Didn't that make Angelica even more worthy of sympathy?

It didn't make any sense to her at all.

"My lord, Felix...what about me? Can't I help you?"

She gazed at him with solemn eyes. Then, throwing herself into his arms, she brought out her big lie.

"I'm in love with you, *Prince Emil!*"

"What?!"

Felix jumped, looking around in a panic, too flustered to even deny it. Luckily, classes were currently in session. No one ought to be around at that time.

Hmm? I sense someone nearby, even though everyone should be in class...

After taking a quick look around to make sure herself, Angelica gazed flirtatiously back at Felix.

"As I was saying, my prince...let's quit all the games and make a deal, shall we?"

"Make a deal?"

Felix hesitated, eyes wide and wild.

"I'll give you what you want. If you give me what I want."

Felix thought hard for a few moments, then responded in a weak voice.

“What is it you want?”

Just then, they could hear footsteps nearby. Felix tried to free himself from Angelica’s embrace, but she clung on.

Panicked, Felix tried to shake Angelica off. Still holding on, she leaned in and whispered right in his ear.

“What I want is...”

It was what she’d wanted for a long time. Something she absolutely had to have.

Felix swallowed hard. “Let me think it over,” he muttered, his face distorted by pain and turmoil.

“I’ll be waiting...with excitement.”

Angelica smiled, letting go of Felix at last and walking away.

FELIX remained standing there in shock.

He felt so...defeated.

But being cornered by Angelica had opened his eyes. She’d done to him what he’d been about to do to her. She was two steps ahead of him the entire time. How he cursed himself for his lack of foresight.

Felix couldn’t exist without Mia.

That one fatal flaw made Felix wholly unsuited to doing battle.

Angelica was terribly beautiful. Any man would go weak at the knees for her. But even so, Felix only wanted Mia.

Flirtation techniques...were wasted on him.

Urgh! I’m such an idiot! I was never going to be able to pull this off!!!

As if he didn’t have enough troubles to contend with, now he’d managed to dig an even bigger hole for himself. A hole he’d never be able to climb back out of.

Felix crouched down on the ground, yelling out loud with frustration.

“Hey! Are you all right?!”

Someone grabbed his arm, almost pulling it out of the socket.

He knew that strength.

“What are you...?!”

Looking up, he saw Mathias standing there with a look of flustered concern on his face.

“Another panic attack? Oh, no...apparently not.”

Mathias peered down at Felix, scrutinizing his complexion for signs of illness. Seemingly satisfied, he nodded. Then all of a sudden, he looked furious.

“You idiot! You complete and total idiot!”

He was yelling.

“Watch who you’re calling an idiot, idiot!”

Felix gave back as good as he got, despite his shock. Mathias had always treated him respectfully as Prince Emil. Right now, though, not a hint of that special treatment remained.

“No, I’m gonna say my piece now! You’ve lost your dang mind, Felix!”

Perhaps he’d been watching. Saw the whole thing. It was possible. Mathias could easily conceal himself using magic if the mood struck him.

In that case, it was also possible that he’d heard that final part.

Felix scrutinized Mathias’s expression. No, it didn’t seem like he’d caught that. If he had, he’d be even angrier.

“I have not lost my mind.”

“Oh yeah, you have! You must be insane to be with that witch!

“Witch?”

Oh yes, she was a witch. Felix was in complete agreement there.

Just as Felix would do anything for love, Angelica would do anything for

status. They were similar in their determination, only the motivation was different.

Felix shivered, recalling the scene just before. Then he found himself mumbling aloud.

“Man, I was so freaked out...thought she was going to eat me alive.”

“Right?! Me too! You get caught in her trap, and she’ll end up gnawing your bones clean!”

“You’re not kidding...”

As Felix murmured softly in response, Mathias suddenly snorted with laughter. Soon he was bent double, clutching his stomach, tears rolling down his cheeks as he guffawed.

“She seriously thought she could flirt her way in with you? Oh man, she’s a complete lunatic!”

Felix was laughing too. Mathias’s mirth was contagious. He felt suddenly lighter than he had in ages. The dark, looming chasm he’d been picturing seemed to have instantly closed up in his mind.

After a few more minutes of companionable laughter, Mathias suddenly grew serious.

“Oh, no!”

“What? What’s wrong?!”

“I totally forgot I was in the middle of searching!”

Felix looked closer at Mathias. Something was missing. As he recalled Mia and Mathias’s sudden appearances in the classroom earlier, he realized what it was.

“Searching for what, the rabbit?”

Mathias nodded, shoulders slumping.

“Oh, that reminds me. While you’ve been gone, Mia and Henrik have come up with a candidate for a medicine! For *Demon Claw*!”

“What?! Then it’s possible? There’s a medicine? A cure?!”

If that was the case, then all of Felix's efforts had been for nothing. But never mind that now.

Mathias nodded happily. But there was a hint of reservation in his eyes.

"But we need candidates for animal testing. Henrik, that monster, started talking about using Luna as a guinea pig, and she up and ran away! We were all in the middle of looking for her when you just had to distract everyone!"

Luna? Since when had they named the rabbit Luna?

Seeing how desperate Mathias was, Felix refrained from teasing him about the bunny. It would be counterproductive. And why was Mathias getting on his case? It wasn't his fault the rabbit ran off.

"Just calm down. I'll help you look for it."

"Darn right, you will! Do you have any idea how worried you've been making me?!"

"You were worried...about me?"

Mathias blushed a deep red, mumbling under his breath, "We're friends, after all."

"Friends? Are we?"

Felix blinked at him in surprise, repeating what Mathias had just said. In response, Mathias exploded.

"You gotta problem with that?!"

Mathias loomed over Felix, bristling. He looked like a grizzly bear. Feeling deeply touched but also suddenly incredibly amused, Felix had to fight back a smile.

Mathias seemed to notice, though.

"Apologize to Mia at once. And to Henrik, too. He's had a lot to deal with, y'know."

"Has he?"

Felix thought back. Henrik probably knew how Felix felt all along. That look in his verdure-green eyes. *"Are you sure you're cool with this?"* That's what those

eyes were asking.

Just then, Mathias set off running across the grounds. "I'll search the school buildings and campus grounds!" he yelled as he went. Shrugging, Felix set off to search for the rabbit as well.

"I'll be waiting...with excitement."

Angelica's parting words floated to the forefront of his mind again.

If they had a cure in the works, then there was no need for him to think any more about that whole entire plan.

But Felix was left with a lingering sense of disgust and unease that wouldn't fade.

Chapter 21: The Truth About the Rabbit

“LUNA! Luna!”

Mia was walking around campus, calling the rabbit’s name as she went.

She’d only just learned that the rabbit had a name. She’d heard Mathias yelling it and realized he must have named it.

Henrik had grimaced but managed not to laugh, realizing that Mathias deserved respect for taking on the rabbit’s care by himself.

Or at least, that’s what Henrik told her. Maybe he really did laugh, though. Knowing Henrik, she wouldn’t put it past him.

Hmm, I was sure it ran off somewhere in this direction...

After it had sprung out the window, the rabbit had zoomed off in the direction of the dorms.

Henrik headed off to the boys’ dorms and Mia to the girls’.

Mia had looked in every potential hiding place with a carrot as bait, but Luna was nowhere to be found.

As she was heading to the boys’ dorm, Henrik walked up, coming from that way. When their eyes met, he shook his head. He hadn’t found Luna, either.

“Oh dear, what are we going to do? Poor Mathias will be so upset...”

“Maybe it just hopped back off to its original owner.”

Perhaps Henrik was right. Mia had forgotten that it wasn’t Mathias’s rabbit to begin with.

Hmm, the original owner...

With everything that had been going on, Mia had forgotten all about the rabbit’s hypothetical owner. And nobody had come forward to say they were looking for a lost pet rabbit.

Keeping pets is forbidden, so they probably couldn’t say anything. Hmm, I do wonder about it, though...

As Mia walked along by the perimeter wall, she noticed the old building standing beyond it.

But it wasn't the sight of the unfamiliar building that brought Mia to a stop.

Two people were standing in a remote corner of the grounds up ahead.

One of them was familiar even from a distance. Black hair and the biggest frame of anyone at the academy.

It was the other person, though, who really caught Mia's attention.

Tall, with golden hair.

Mia felt like she was in a dream.

Mia clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. She was grateful for the pain.

"Felix..."

It was Felix standing beside Mathias, an awkward look on his face.

"Sorry, Mia. Sorry for saying I was tired...and for bailing."

Mia shook her head hard. There was Felix's normal, sunshine smile again. She was so happy, she couldn't believe it.

"Do you think it would be all right for me to rejoin the team?"

"Of course!"

Felix smiled beautifully. It was nothing like the fake smile he'd been wearing lately. It was full, and open, and shining.

Oh, I love that face!

As Mia stood there filled with emotions and wonder, Felix looked guiltily away. Then he turned to face Henrik.

"And you too, Henrik...my bad for causing concern, yeah?"

"I figured it wasn't for real. So your plan ended in failure, huh?"

Henrik grinned as he posed the question. Felix's magnanimous expression faded, and he grunted a bad-tempered "Oh, just shut up."

“What plan ended in failure?”

Mia looked at them both quizzically. Henrik turned to her.

“Isn’t it obvious? The seduc—MMPH!”

Felix suddenly leaped, clamping his hand over Henrik’s mouth.

“Seduc? What does that mean?”

Mia looked at Felix.

“Ignore him! He’s just roasting me again! You know...you suck, you suck!”

Felix was wearing a pasted-on grin, which made Mia blink at him in confusion. Henrik and Mathias both sighed, rolling their eyes.

“Uh, anyway...have you guys found the rabbit?”

Felix managed to smoothly change the subject.

But Mia was still wondering what went on during Felix’s absence from the group. In particular, what happened with Angelica?

There were so many things she wanted to ask him, but it was enough that Felix had returned to the fold.

Despite all the unanswered questions, Mia knew they had to focus on the issue at hand.

“So you’re helping Mathias too, Felix?”

“I’ve checked all the school buildings and the campus grounds.”

Felix nodded, looking relieved that the subject had been successfully changed.

Then he paused, looking up at the nearby wall.

“Hey, what’s that old building there?”

“I heard it was an old school building.”

Henrik supplied this information, and Mathias added to it.

“This is the magic practice area. This is actually where I first found Luna.”

“Really?”

Mia was surprised. This school building clearly hadn’t been in use for a long

time. The high wall blocked most of the view, but it was clear the building was crumbling and falling down, with a big NO ENTRY sign. The building was on the way from the dorms to the library, but Mia had never really thought to try to peek over the high, sturdy wall surrounding it.

I had no idea the magic department used this place!

Mia peered in closer. There were numerous cracks in the walls, through which a bunny could have easily hopped through.

Wait, was that hole always there?

Mia thought back. She'd passed this wall many times, but she just couldn't remember.

"The rabbit fled in this direction. If it's not in someone's dorm room right now, then this is the only place it could have found to hide in. And if this is where you found it, then maybe it chose to return here?"

Everyone nodded. Henrik's guess sounded right to them.

Peeking through the hole in the wall, they could see the building inside. It looked like a ruin.

It was overwhelmingly creepy.

Despite what seemed like once-sturdy brickwork, the building was a mess. Windows busted in, huge cracks in the walls. Rusty pipes poked out of a section of broken wall like gnarled fingertips.

The four of them exchanged glances. Then Felix said what they were all thinking.

"Shall we go inside?"

"**IT** was somewhere around here, I think...ah, there it is."

Under Mathias's guidance, they followed the wall around to find a door half-hidden behind an overgrown mass of ivy.

"There's a door here?"

Mia was surprised. She'd passed this wall so many times and never noticed.

Henrik and Felix both shrugged. Frowning, Mia tried the door.

It wasn't locked.

The other side of the wall was filled with a jungle of weeds and overgrowth. It felt like someone was hidden, watching them. But there was nobody there, of course.

A sudden rustling sound made them all jump.

Looking around, Mia gasped as she saw little brown ears popping out of the undergrowth.

"Luna?"

At the sound of her voice, the ears vanished in fright.

The team moved further into the abandoned area, leaves crunching underfoot. They reached the wall where the NO ENTRY sign was hung with rope.

"Luna, come."

Mia reached out. The next moment, a pair of red eyes flashed. The rabbit leaped out of the long grasses, and Mia felt her hand suddenly burn with pain.

"Ouch!"

Red lines bloomed across her hand. The rabbit had scratched her.

Mia clutched her injured hand.

Was that rabid rabbit really Luna?

Mia watched as the rabbit hopped and leaped away, disappearing inside the ruined building.

"Luna! Wait!"

Mathias called out and was just about to chase after her, when...

"You kids! What do you think you're doing?! This place is off-limits to students!"

A professor had suddenly appeared in the doorway, yelling at them. It was a magic teacher—Associate Professor Bahr.

“Get away from there! If it collapses, you’ll all be killed!”

As they hurried back out of the off-limits area, Felix grabbed Mia’s wrist. Gazing at the bloody scratch for a moment, he suddenly and impulsively brought it to his mouth.

Woah!!!



In a panic, Mia tried to pull her hand away, but Felix would not let go.

Was he trying to lick the wound clean?!

“Stop it! You don’t know if it’s infected!”

Mia was horrified. She knew wild animals could carry terrible diseases. But she also knew from experience that Felix rarely listened to reason.

Just as Felix’s mouth was about to make contact with the wound, Henrik grabbed Felix’s wrist and tugged it away from Mia’s hand.

“Don’t be such an idiot, Felix. That’s not a viable method of disinfection. We need to wash it with soap and water right away or Mia could suffer from infection.”

Henrik’s voice was steady, but there was an angry edge to it that was quite frightening.

The next moment, Felix grabbed Mia and swung her up into his arms.

“Woah! What?! Felix!”

Mia felt the blood rush to her head. Felix had lifted her like this before, when she got frozen solid that one time and spiked a fever. Back then, though, she’d been too foggy from what was going on to really process it.

Felix’s chest was surprisingly broad, and his arms were firm and strong around her. And right above her head was Felix’s handsome face. He was gazing down at Mia with deep concern.

Mia felt a fever coming on then, too. A Felix-induced fever.

“Felix, I’m perfectly capable of walking!”

Mia felt like her cheeks were burning. Unable to bear it all, she squeezed her eyes shut.

“No talking! This is an emergency!”

Barking this order at Mia, Henrik, and Mathias, Felix then began to run, sweeping Mia off to the infirmary faster than the wind could blow.

THEY arrived at the infirmary, and the doctor had Mia scrub her hand with soap and water to disinfect the scratch. It hurt, but Mia knew how bad animal-human transmission diseases could be, so she made sure to do a thorough job.

While this was going on, Felix was pacing back and forth across the room. Meanwhile, Henrik was silent, deep in thought about something. Mathias was moaning to himself.

“Why would Luna do something like that?”

Mathias was rubbing his temples, clearly shocked that the cute rabbit he’d doted on was capable of wounding a human in this way.

“It was crazed.”

Mathias’s head whipped around, his red eyes glaring at Henrik for that remark.

“It’s your fault! Talking the way you were, you freaked her out!”

“Freaked her out...”

Henrik was muttering, Mathias’s rage seeming to go right over his head.

“Red eyes...sudden acts of crazed violence when under extreme stimulus...”

Mia gasped, staring at Henrik.

“Wait, you can’t possibly mean...?”

Felix was gazing at Henrik too, his expression tormented.

A terrible sense of doom washed over Mia. The symptoms exactly matched those of *Angel Tears*. Could this possibly just be a coincidence?

“We still have no idea where that rabbit came from. All we know is...it’s not one of the medical or pharmacological department test subjects.”

Henrik got to his feet.

“There’s something I need to go check...”

“What? Where are you going?”

“I need to see *Professor Fair and Square Bralle*.”

Mia didn’t know what he was talking about.

“But why?”

It was Felix who asked that. With her treatment complete, Mia got up off the stool. There was no way they could let Henrik go alone.

“Bralle’s in charge of keeping count of the rabbit test subject numbers.”

“Can ya speak so that the rest of us can understand?”

Mathias rolled his eyes in frustration. Henrik paused for a moment before elaborating.

“Animal trials must be conducted by law before clinical trials on humans can be held. For *Angel Tears* animal trials, you’ll need to infect rabbits with *Angel Tears*. Right?”

Mia gasped.

Yes, the academy *had* developed a medicine for *Angel Tears*. And if this drug had made it through clinical trials, then it stood to reason that it had passed through animal trials first. And you would need animal test subjects for that. You’d need to purposefully infect those animals with *Angel Tears*...

The answer came to Mia at once.

“You mean Luna...that rabbit...is an *Angel Tears* test subject?!”

“What?!”

Felix and Mathias both yelled out in shock at the same moment.

Henrik nodded.

“But according to my research, and based on current graduation theses, no rabbits were used for *Angel Tears* research... Mia, what did you find out on the pharmacology side?”

“I mean, I checked too, but there was nothing on that topic...”

The students in the years above them seemed to rarely ever pick any new topics, only expanding on topics and research ongoing from previous years.

And, as they’d discovered in the library, instead of formulating new drugs, research was focused mostly on preventative and palliative measures. As a result, most of the experiments were limited to clinical trials on existing drugs.

Mia had been disappointed by this trend, but...

But what if? What if there was someone else out there like her? Someone who really wanted to cure people of *Angel Tears* entirely by making a new medicine? Someone whose goals exactly matched Mia's?

If such a person existed, they would need animal test subjects, deliberately infected, to develop the new drug.

Mia felt a shudder run down her spine.

"So there's a high chance that someone is conducting secret trials. Who could get away with doing something like that at the academy? Someone who has access to the animal test subjects, that's who."

Mia pictured a certain individual's face immediately. She heard Rueger's voice in her head, saying, *"He's a doctor first and a scientist second, you know."*

A doctor would place a higher value on human life than anything else.

It was all coming together now.

Mia held out her arm to stop Henrik, who seemed about to storm off and launch a confrontation.

"I doubt he's going to tell the truth, even if we manage to confront whoever it is."

"So let's get some proof first."

"...How?"

"How many places are there on campus where he could be conducting secret trials? If we can find his secret lab, and there are other rabbits there just like Luna, then..."

Then that would be all the proof they needed.

"Mathias, you found Luna by that old ruined building, right?"

Suspiciousness was running high. There was definitely something there, in that creepy old building. They were all sure of it now.

"I think we should go back and check it out again."

Everyone nodded in full agreement with Mia.

Chapter 22: The Laboratory in the Old Ruined Building

AFTER sundown, Mia and the others snuck out of their dorms.

Then, they headed to the ruined building. They tried to locate the hidden door they'd found that afternoon, but without success. The door seemed to have vanished.

"It doesn't make sense. It should have been here, on this stretch of wall between the dorm and the medicinal herb garden."

Mia frowned. The events of the afternoon hadn't been a dream. The scratch on her hand, courtesy of Luna, was proof enough of that.

She looked around, her gaze falling on Mathias. *Hmm...* When Mathias had been carrying Luna around campus, he'd managed to avoid the rabbit being noticed by anyone. All because he was using a deception spell to hide her.

"Mathias! Tell me again how you managed to keep the rabbit hidden from view?"

Felix and Henrik both turned to look at Mathias as well.

Mathias gasped, his face lighting up with realization.

"An air-based magic spell. Using a heat haze to obscure something with hot air from above."

Mathias was rubbing his chin, nodding to himself, his expression growing solemn.

"Oh spirit of air, reveal unto me that which is hidden! *Vocale, szeptos, forium, ventos, flume!*"

A sudden breeze seemed to blow in from nowhere, and a section of the wall in front of them seemed to shimmer and falter before appearing to almost peel away like wallpaper and reveal the true section of wall underneath, the section with the ivy-strewn door they'd found that afternoon.

Mia's jaw dropped. Air magic really was amazing. She hadn't seen it put to use like this before. Even more impressive coming from Mathias, who looked more like a military heavyweight than a mage.

The wind died down, and the heat haze dissipated.

Mia reached out to push on the gate, but it was locked. *He* had made sure to securely lock the door on top of obscuring it with magic.

But who was the mysterious culprit, really? Mia had her suspicions, but then it was Associate Professor Bahr who had chased Mia and the others out earlier. Could it be him? But if so, why?

"What should we do now?"

The four of them exchanged glances.

"Let me handle this."

Felix suddenly swung himself up on top of the wall where he wiggled his way over the gate and dropped onto the other side and then unlocked the gate for the rest of them. They were all surprised by this unusual display of nimbleness.

Oh, this reminds me of the time he jumped down from the window.

But that memory would lead to another memory, a memory Mia didn't want to be reliving right then. She tried desperately to think of something else, but it was too late.

She was reliving it...Felix administering medicine to her, using his own mouth...

Yeeek!

As Mia blushed bright red, Henrik looked at her in alarm.

"Mia? You're very red in the face. Do you have a fever?"

"N-N-No! I'm fine! It's just kinda hot out, is all!"

"In this weather? Oh no, I hope that scratch from earlier hasn't gotten infected."

Henrik's gaze was sharp but filled with concern. Mia stepped back in alarm. In the excitement of Felix's return, she'd almost forgotten how Henrik had pulled

her into his arms to comfort her after Felix had announced he was through with the group.

“It’s all right. I’m right here for you.”

Mia hadn’t been able to think too deeply about Henrik’s actions. But when she considered the green frog brooch—the same green color as his eyes—she couldn’t fool herself it was only a hug.

Mia felt afraid all of a sudden. At moments like these, she felt her thoughts slipping worryingly away from her mom. When she was with these two boys, it felt like her heart might sway away from its true purpose.

It’s like I’m not myself... I have to focus on Mom above all else.

Felix’s words could make her pause. Henrik’s eyes could stop her in her tracks. That side of Mia—it scared her. A strong sense of self-hatred suddenly overtook her.

No, that’s not the real me...it’s not!

“I’m fine, really.”

Mia shrugged off their concerns and hurried forward, snagging her foot on a loose brick and falling forward.

“Mia?!”

Felix bellowed in alarm. “Shhh!” hissed Mathias. In the moment, they had all forgotten they were meant to be undercover.

“I’m okay! I’m fine. Really!”

Mia looked down, trying to hide her misery.

She took a breath and told herself to get it together. If she carried on like this, she was going to be sorry in the end.

Finally, she looked up, making herself smile. She was relieved she could still smile.

The three boys all looked like they had something to say but kept silent as they took in Mia’s firm, composed expression.

“Let’s go.”

Mathias spoke up, breaking the awkward silence. They all nodded and carried on.

The door to the old building was locked as well.

“This one’s sealed with magic. A pretty secure spell, too.”

Mathias frowned.

The door looked old and crumbling, but oddly, it was firmly closed and wouldn’t budge.

“What are we going to do?”

They would have to use their smarts to get out of this one. Henrik rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

“We still don’t know who the culprit is, but even if we did, asking him to open this door would be an exercise in futility. We have no other choice but to break it down.”

Henrik looked at Felix, who grinned back.

“I guess it’s my turn to shine, eh?”

...*What?*

Why was it Felix’s turn? What was he planning to do? As Mia watched, Felix turned to Mathias and said, “Let’s roll.”

Mathias nodded, then began nervously chanting an incantation.

“Vocale, salfatio, ventos, flume. Cintium principium!”

All of a sudden, her ears felt like they had been stopped up with cotton. It was the work of a magic spell.

Felix took several steps away from the door, waving Mia and the others aside as he did so. Then he ran towards the door, jumping into the air and kicking it hard. Even though there was no sound, Mia could almost imagine she heard the door shaking in its hinges. A second later, the door fell off its hinges, toppling through the open doorway. They were in.

Mia was half worried Felix might have broken his foot.

“Felix?!”

“Be quiet! I only blocked the sound waves nearest the door!”

Mathias’s face was stiff with tension. Mia was relieved Felix wasn’t hurt but did the boy have steel feet or something?

It’s hard to believe he suffers from a chronic illness...

Mia felt an urge to protect Felix, who was so strong, even with the weight of the chronic nervous condition he had to suffer with.

Three more attacks by Felix saw the old door falling with what should have been a heavy thud revealing a dark hall ahead.

Mathias’s soundwave blocking spell seemed to have been effective. No one was rushing to stop them after the door fell in.

With Mathias’ spell removed, the group proceeded further into the gloom, where they could hear rustling further inside. The hallways of the old school building were all empty, yet still, they heard noises. Finding the old stairs leading to the second floor, they hunted for the source of the noise.

As they advanced up the stairs to the second floor, they finally found the source in one of the abandoned classrooms. They could make out the shadows of stacks of cages containing rabbits scattered about on carefully organized tables.

The windows in the room were covered with blankets, keeping attention off any light inside. The entire space appeared clean, almost spotless. It smelled of hospital sterilization. Mathias stepped in front of everyone else as they filed into the room.

Mathias murmured to himself, lighting the tip of his wand.

“Red eyes...”

All of the rabbits in the cages had red eyes. Responding to Mathias’s light, they began to bare their teeth. *Just like Luna*, Mia thought.

There were numbers written on the cages.

And each had a label attached, with “Dosage Amount” scrawled in messy

handwriting.

“Dosage?”

Dosage of what?

Mia turned, seeing a large metal workbench with a huge injector syringe on it.

There was a notebook next to the syringe. Mia leaned in, trembling.

Amidst the jumble of figures and formulas, one phrase leaped out, imprinting itself on Mia’s retinas.

“Magic Injection.”

Could it be?

“He’s been injecting them with magic?”

A strange feeling of triumphant excitement was welling up within Mia, alongside her fear. The feeling felt so inhumane, Mia struggled hard to shove it back down inside.

“I think it’s safe to say...we’ve found out the truth about the preventative medicine.”

The three of them turned to Henrik, repeating what he’d just said.

“Preventative?”

Henrik pointed to the notebook. As Mia looked down at it again, she felt her head spin. *“Safe Dosage Limit Exceeded”* was scrawled there with a big black X slashed beside it. The coldblooded implications of what that symbol meant made Mia’s eyes swim as she struggled to focus on it.

“I had a hunch when we were checking out the past theses. The number of patients dropped off all of a sudden, right? A huge reduction. You could be forgiven for thinking it was the result of some new type of effective drug. But no. They just managed to calculate a safer dose, using these types of animal experiments.”

“But that’s insane!”

Mathias yelled out in anger as Felix paled and clutched at his chest. Mia reached out to stroke Felix’s back, choking down her own tears.

Solemn-faced, Henrik muttered under his breath.

“But what I’d like to know is...how did they get their hands on this magic power? And how did they manage to inject it?”

Mia’s eyes widened as Felix murmured beside her.

Yeah, that’s a good question.

In humans, *Angel Tears* infection is caused when too much magical power is transferred from another human.

Mia was getting a terrible feeling about all of this, her chest prickling with alarm.

They continued further into the secret lab. They soon happened across a glass case with a rabbit inside.

The rabbit was extremely skinny and looked weak. It had food and water, but otherwise, it didn’t seem to have been cared for at all.

The case had a label that read *Supply Source* on it. There were also three *Donation Dates* listed underneath. As the implications of this dawned on Mia, she felt her anger growing.

In other words, the scientist was removing magical power from this rabbit and giving it to the others. In this way, they could create a lab full of rabbits with either *Angel Tears* or *Demon Claw* conditions.

Mia was shaking with rage.

“I can’t...I can’t let them get away with this!”

“I should have known it was you kids.”

A cold voice rang out from near the entrance. Mia stiffened and turned around. She’d been so distracted, she’d never even sensed anyone approaching.

The individual sauntered into the room while glaring at Mia and the others with a severe expression.

“I knew it was you, Professor Bralle.”

Henrik took a step forward, meeting Bralle’s eye with a cold glare of his own.

Yes, it was Professor Bralle. Feeling sorry that her own suspicions had been confirmed, Mia took a step forward in line with Henrik. Felix and Mathias followed suit.

They were all stood in a line, facing off against Bralle.

“I knew something was up with you kids sniffing around about animal trials and acting out of turn. Still, I never thought you’d go this far. Clearly, I underestimated you.”

Bralle was speaking in tones of disgust.

“We never thought you’d do something as despicable as this either, Professor.”

Henrik’s words were laced with sarcasm.

“What? You know, kids, I appreciate your drive to heal disease. But undertaking unauthorized animal trials, that’s grounds for immediate expulsion.”

“Unauthorized animal trials?”

Mia blinked. She didn’t know what Bralle was saying.

“It’s terrible how you kids don’t understand the value of life. You’re second years, aren’t you? Why, two of you are a future doctor and pharmacist, even.”

Shaking his head, Bralle turned a sympathetic eye on the rabbit in the glass case. The look on his face, the things he was saying...Mia couldn’t follow at all.

“You little brats!”

From the dark shadows of the corridor, another voice rang out. Bralle’s eyes widened in surprise as he whirled around. Then he looked back over his shoulder at Mia and the others, frowning deeply.

“What’s going on here? ...I see. So, it seems I didn’t underestimate you kids after all. Or at least, you weren’t the ones I was underestimating.” Muttering to himself, Bralle smiled coldly.

“Professor Bralle?! What are you doing in here?! Did you break down the door and come in with these kids? You can’t possibly...”

“...Professor Trout?” Mathias mumbled in shock.

It was Assistant Professor Trout who had just emerged from the shadows.

The rest of the group exchanged glances, utterly surprised by the man’s unexpected appearance.

“What? Is it really such a strange thing for me to be here?” Bralle had stopped scowling and seemed to have regained some of his usual composure.

“How did you get in here? I locked that door using the strongest magic! Even young Weiss there wouldn’t have been able to dissolve my spell!”

Trout was glaring at Mathias, his eyes hard and flinty with suspicion. But Bralle just shrugged.

“You know your weak point? Actually, all mages share it...an over-reliance on magic. A door with an enchanted lock can still be broken down by physical force. As long as you’ve got someone with the crazy strength needed to bust it off its hinges, that is.”

Mia glanced at Felix. He was smiling a little, as if drinking in the unexpected praise.

“A rabbit got loose on campus, and I knew it wasn’t one of our rabbits, so I did some investigating. What are you doing here with these rabbits? You didn’t submit written permission for any experiments, now, did you?”

“ ... ”

Trout was silent.

“Also, I’ve never heard of anyone doing animal trials using magic before.”

“ ... ”

“Not going to talk, hmm? You certainly went to extreme lengths to conceal this. Casting magic to keep people out.”

Trout licked his lips, ignoring the question.

“This area is under magic department jurisdiction. I don’t think you have any right to question me.”

“Don’t I? I’m in charge of ethics screening for all animal trials. Or had you

forgotten? A doctor who wastes the life of even a single rabbit...that's not acceptable."

Bralle's tone was hard and unwavering.

"There will have to be a faculty meeting about this. And in light of the disturbing use you've put this place to, I think a re-investigation of the events that led to this building being abandoned is in order too. You had better prepare your defense."

That's when Trout suddenly became pompous and started aggressively talking back.

"You know who I've got behind me in all this, don't you?"

Bralle nodded, looking around the lab.

"Yes, it's obvious. You're a little man acting out under the protection of a higher authority. There's no way one man—let alone a lowly assistant professor like you—could amass all this high-tech equipment. And there's only one organization with enough money to fund an operation like this."

Bralle's droll sarcasm made Trout's eyes blaze with fury. He raised his fists, and Mia took an anxious step back. Both Felix and Mathias raised their fists as well. Bralle, however, didn't even flinch.

"At any rate, your little agreement with the army needs to end. This is a school, not the army's testing grounds. This school was set up to save patients from *Angel Tears*, the terrible disease that affects only mages. The Academy exists for researchers in the fields of medicine and pharmacology to conduct research to help patients. It is not a lab for creating artificial mages. Now you've gone and created more patients! You've strayed so far from the goals of this academic organization. I have no doubt the other professors will agree with me that you should be held accountable for your crimes."

Cowed into submission by Bralle's logic, Trout fell silent. A moment later, though, he smirked.

"Be that as it may, as a scientist, as a doctor, you want these rabbits too. Don't you?"

Bralle didn't bother to deny it.

"That goes for you kids as well. You talk so high and mighty, blithering about animal rights, but you want to get your hands on these rabbits so bad you can barely stand it. Tell me I'm wrong. Go on!"

Trout pointed directly at Mia. She couldn't deny it either. Her heart felt like a heavy, cold stone in her chest.

For Mia's future trials...she needed test subjects. Just like these rabbits.

"And you want to know how the transference process takes place, right, Mia Baumann? If you ever want to save mother dearest...then you need that knowledge."

Mia leaned forward, eyes round and shiny like marbles. She knew it was inhumane, but it was the only way...the only way to save her mom...

"Yes, tell me, please! How did you manage to transfer the magical energy?!"

Henrik suddenly leaped for the notebook on the table.

Yes, of course! It should all be written down in there!

But at that exact moment, Trout whipped out his wand from his inner jacket pocket.

Reflexively, Felix leaped at Trout. They struggled together, Trout grimly trying to force the tip of his wand towards Felix.

"Felix! Watch out! *Vocale, sceptos, forium, ventos, flume!*"

Mathias yelled out, and the room was suddenly filled with what felt like a small tornado. Trout's wand went flying. But there was only time for a second of relief.

Grinning, Trout pulled a second wand out of his pocket.

He had a spare?!

Then, waving the wand in the air, he began to chant. "*Vocale, flamra, elputio!*" It sounded like a dark curse. With a bang, the notebook Henrik was clutching to his chest suddenly exploded.

"Henrik! Are you okay?!"

The force of the explosion had knocked Henrik flat on his back. Mia ran over to him. He was white-faced, staring at the ceiling.

“I’m...all right. But the notebook...”

Henrik’s hands were clutching nothing but a disintegrating clump of ash. Mia whirled around, looking wildly up at Trout.

That didn’t just happen, did it?!

A scientist’s research data is as precious as his own life. As Mia gazed at him, white-faced, Trout tapped his forehead smugly.

It’s all up here, he seemed to be indicating, a high-pitched laugh spilling from his thin lips.

“You want me to tell you? Aren’t you cute? I’m not going to tell you, you stupid child. Don’t you realize what it’s cost me, getting all that data together? I wasn’t born privileged like you spoiled brats. I’ve had to grovel through the dirt and debase myself just to get to where I am today. And here I am, poised to obtain more power than I could have ever dreamed of! If you kids want to get out of this alive, you’ll have to make sacrifices, too.”

“Power? What power?!”

Mia couldn’t understand what this madman was raving about. All she knew was that they couldn’t let him get away.

“It’s right here, can’t you see it? Within my grasp. I can reach the sky!”

With a high-pitched laugh, Trout charged one of the covered windows, and with a crash of shattering glass, he leaped out the window and into the air from the second-floor classroom.



“Get back here!” Mia yelled in shock and frustration.

Felix ran to the window, leaping after Trout in an attempt to grab him, but Trout twisted, evading Felix’s grasp. Losing his balance with only his feet still at the window’s edge, he almost plummeted down to the ground. Fortunately, Felix was quickly caught by Mathias as Trout got away.

Mia ran over to the window, searching for Trout while Mathias pulled Felix back into the classroom. Trout was somehow swimming through the air, fleeing the academy grounds.

Mia leaned against the window frame, her thoughts whirling, her mind a mess. She felt like she was about to go crazy.

Trout’s words to her had sunk in like a stain.

“Could it be that you’re actually grateful to that man?” Bralle murmured softly. Mia twitched.

Yes...I wanted these rabbits. I can’t deny it.

She wanted to cure her mom’s disease. But purposefully infecting rabbits had seemed impossibly cruel. Trout was right, though—someone had to do it. Otherwise, there would be no progress. So, now Mia was free from her turmoil.

By coincidence, she had come across a lab full of rabbits, already infected. The part of her that was pleased by this coincidence made her want to puke. This didn’t change the fact that innocent little lives were being interfered with.

As Mia stood there stricken, Bralle walked over to the glass case.

“I’m not grateful to that man. Not at all. But he sure prodded a sore spot. It’s true that if we want a new treatment for *Angel Tears*, then infected test subjects are an absolute necessity.”

At the same time, a cure for *Demon Claw* would need *Demon Claw* infected test subjects.

Bralle gazed down at the rabbit in the glass case. It was sleeping, clearly incredibly weak. Just looking at it made Mia’s heart ache with pity for the poor little thing.

“The only thing we can do now is focus on getting results and making sure their sacrifice hasn’t been in vain.”

Bralle turned to look at Mia. She nodded mutely, nauseous with turmoil. This time, though, she wouldn’t run away. She’d face up to the value of a life and take responsibility.

She looked over at Henrik, who nodded.

“We won’t let any lives go to waste.”

Bralle smiled softly. As Mia gazed at him, she remembered what Rueger had said. He *was* easy to misunderstand.

Then Bralle turned to Henrik.

“Vigant, I recall you went home for Winter Break? Any results there? Your father is a remarkable man. I felt sure he’d be able to point you in the right direction.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Henrik looked suddenly very uncomfortable but managed to nod. Then he narrowed his eyes at Bralle in a challenging way.

“Could you release these rabbits to our care? We promise that we won’t let a single life go to waste.”

Bralle raised one eyebrow. He looked at Mia, then at Felix, then at Mathias.

As the four of them gazed back at him, Bralle finally gave them a small, satisfied nod.

Chapter 23: Felix's Gift

AS springtime came, the research team began developing a new drug to treat the symptoms of *Demon Claw*.

Using the materials from Henrik's father, they had managed to narrow down a list of appropriate herbs, synthesize a prototype, and begin the process of administering it to their rabbit test subjects.

What happened to Trout? Well, after that, he vanished from campus entirely. The other professors had held a meeting and decided to officially terminate his employment.

While searching through Trout's personal effects, they discovered documents proving that he had received large amounts of compensation from the army for the delivery of his experimental research data.

After what happened with Einz last year, Trout was given zero leeway. The Academy now had a zero-tolerance policy when it came to army collusion.

But something about it all didn't sit right with Mia. The way Trout was talking sounded like the army was giving him something much more impressive than money.

What did he mean by power? Reaching the sky...?

The remaining equipment from the abandoned building's lab and the rabbit test subjects had been retrieved and designated as valuable materials for the medical and pharmacology departments. Then, in an almost miraculous stroke of luck, Mia and her group had managed to keep the *Demon Claw* ravaged little rabbit alive under the supervision of Bralle.

This miracle led to the resolution of one of the biggest problems facing Mia's group.

The little rabbit was physical proof that *Demon Claw* wasn't contagious. With this proof in hand, Bralle had finally decided to back them up on this, too.

Then one day, after six months of solid experimentation, it finally happened.

The *Demon Claw*-affected rabbit they had retrieved from the lab hopped. It actually hopped. And it ate food on its own for the first time.

When they'd first retrieved it, it could barely even breathe on its own, it was so weak. This was a huge, marked improvement.

It put on some weight, and its core temperature rose. The data alone was beautiful to look at, but it was nothing compared to the joy of seeing the little rabbit getting its strength back.

"It's working?"

"It's working!!!"

Mia leaped into the air, and Felix impulsively reached out to hug her, beaming in excitement. "It's not complete yet, though!" Mia shrieked, jumping back out of reach of his arms.

Henrik smiled at them both, suppressing an internal tear.

"We've still got a long way to go until it's complete. Once we have the data from this, we enter a clinical study. Then if that goes well, clinical trials. Then the real thing. Felix, your turn is almost up. You have been studying law like we said, haven't you? You haven't failed any classes, right?"

Felix paled, remembering the end-of-semester exam.

"Yes, yes, I get all of that...but once that's all done, then we can get Mia's mom out, right?"

"Yes, we can!!!"

Mia nodded joyfully, but Felix noticed something.

There was a shadow that lay beneath her smile.

"What's wrong?"

They were able to go on to clinical trials! So why did Mia look so sad? Come to think of it, she'd seemed kind of down ever since the animal trials started.

"Nothing's wrong."

Mia turned away, hiding her face and reaching for her notebook. “We’ve gotta write our report!”

“...?”

Felix frowned, shooting a look at his rival. Henrik was watching Mia, wearing a small frown of his own.

“Man, I’m hungry.”

Jerking his chin at Felix, Henrik got up and strolled out of the lab room. Felix got up and followed him out.

Walking in the opposite direction to the cafeteria, Henrik led Felix to the patch of lawn in front of the boys’ dorm. Then he finally spoke.

“What’s wrong with Mia? We finally have promising results. That means we can cure her mom, right?”

Yes, they had definite results now. This was a huge step forward. Mia ought to have been able to relax a little and enjoy their success. Only...

“Mia wants a total cure.”

Henrik spoke plainly.

“A total cure?”

Felix felt his heart sink. So that was what had been bothering Mia.

The cause of *Demon Claw* was a lack of magical energy in the body. If they couldn’t fix that issue, then you couldn’t call it a cure. That’s how Mia saw it.

Henrik kicked the gravel miserably.

“But what more can we possibly do? Yes, okay, finding out how to inject magical power into a body would be the best solution. But we have no idea where Trout fled to, and we don’t have the power to face off against the army. And anyway, even *Angel Tears* is being brought under control by symptom-reducing drugs. Patients might have to keep on taking medicine for the rest of their lives, but isn’t it good enough to keep their symptoms under control? How is that any different from being healthy?”

It was unusual to see Henrik so upset. Felix was taken aback. Apparently, he

wasn't as cool as he tried to appear.

Living without Mia's smile. Feeling responsible. Wanting to grow up faster. Wanting to be a more powerful man.

Felix could understand that. After all, he felt the same.

How could he get Mia to smile genuinely from the heart? How could he save the girl who had saved him?

That was all Felix had been thinking about this whole time.

Felix clenched his fists. He had made all kinds of preparations, wanting to give her a gift that would make her smile, but would she ever be truly happy?

A total cure...

Felix thought about Trout's experimental data, the contents of his notebook. Mia had wanted it so badly, but there was no way to access that data, save for infiltrating the army.

"MIA?"

Mathias leaned in to speak to Mia, who had remained in the lab working on her report. Mia jumped. She'd assumed Mathias had left with the other two. He had an uncanny ability to go unnoticed sometimes, despite his bulky form.

He took a deep breath, then continued in his deep voice.

"What do you think of them, really?"

His question made Mia blush. He was asking her about Felix and Henrik. Mathias was always close by, observing. He had to have noticed the indecision that had taken root in her heart.

"Wh-What do you mean?"

Mia had planned to evade the question, but one look at Mathias's solemn expression made her close her mouth again.

Mathias continued to dig.

"Still just friends?"

Mia gulped. Mathias was being uncharacteristically pushy. Unable to answer, she remained silent. Mathias sighed.

“I really think you should go with Henrik.”

Mia looked up at him, surprised. She’d assumed he’d be in Felix’s corner.

She wondered what Mathias’s motivation for saying this was.

“Otherwise, I think you’ll end up suffering. Not just you. Him, too.”

Mathias frowned, chewing on his lip, a bitter expression on his face.

THE season changed, and the day of the Summer Solstice came around. The sun was at the highest point of the entire year, blazing down on the roads that divided the wheat fields into neat squares. A single carriage came trundling leisurely down one such road.

A few small stone buildings dotted the landscape, but they were mostly all water mills. The water wheels went around and around, sending clean water tumbling down. It was all so different from the hustle and bustle of the capital, like something out of another world.

This was where Mia grew up.

Mia had come home during the school break to tell her mother the good news. Incidentally, Henrik scored the highest on the end-of-semester exams for the second year in a row. And Mia managed to place at the top of her class again.

Felix and Mathias...well, they both barely scraped by, as usual. But at least they’d done well enough to avoid having to repeat a year.

Mia was hoping her mother would be encouraged by the promising news she had to deliver.

Honestly, Mia wished they could just plunge right ahead with clinical trials, but a lack of caution at this stage could mess everything up.

“It’s beautiful here. So relaxing.”

Felix was gazing at the bucolic scenery with wonder.

The breeze sent the green grasses of the wheat field undulating like waves. Birds were flying across the clear skies. Most Sanatoriums were located in the countryside. Fewer people resided there, and it wasn't easily accessible.

Felix, Henrik, and Mathias had all decided to accompany Mia on this trip to the tiny rural town located on the southernmost tip of the kingdom.

"We're almost there. I can't wait to meet your mother, Mia! I'm so nervous!"

"Just don't ask for her daughter's hand in marriage. Don't even let it slip out! She'll think you're a weirdo."

Mathias gave Felix a droll look as Felix sat there practically bouncing in his seat. Mia giggled. Then she grew serious again. It was strange, though, Felix making such a fuss.

After all, even though they were heading to visit the Sanatorium, there was very little chance they'd be allowed to actually see Mia's mother. Even getting to pass a letter to her would take some convincing. And there was no guarantee they'd even let Mia know how her mom was doing.

Even the tiniest germ could prove fatal to someone in Mia's mom's condition. So, it probably couldn't be helped.

It was okay, though. As long as they managed to get the news across to Mia's mom that a cure was coming...that was all Mia needed.

Felix, however, remained in a state of agitation.

When they arrived at the Sanatorium, Mia soon realized why.

When they walked into the public health clinic attached to the Sanatorium, there was something there that hadn't been there before.

The once-dark hallways were now filled with light. Had the place been wired for electricity? Mia narrowed her eyes, focusing. When she saw where the light was coming from, she froze.

"No way...how?"

There weren't many people around who could make something like that happen.

She turned to Felix. He immediately smiled and nodded.

“Go ahead.”

Felix led her forward, and Mia’s eyes flew wide open in astonishment.

“No way!!!”

Her feet propelled her forward. She forgot she was in a hospital, a place of sickness, for a moment, as she dashed ahead.

The Sanatorium’s walls had been fitted with huge glass windows.

And someone was standing on the other side—a woman.

She wore a white dress and had the same shade of red hair as Mia.

“Mom!”

Those familiar slim eyebrows and high nose. The same hazel-green eyes as Mia.

She’d lost a lot of weight, but Mia could never forget that face, no matter how many years passed.

Her mom smiled and touched the glass. Mia placed her hand up against hers.

The glass was very thick. Far too thick for Mia to be really feeling the warmth of her mom’s hand, but nonetheless...she felt it.

Her heart was filled with a warm, happy feeling of comfort and safety.

Mom, Mom, Mom!

Gulping back her emotions, she gazed up at her mother. She was gazing back at Mia, openly crying.



“Oh, Mia, I’ve missed you so much. Look how much you’ve grown! Are you well? The doctors said you joined the Academy. You’ve done so well. You’ve become a wonderful young lady, all on your own...”

Mia’s mom’s lips were moving. There was no sound, but Mia could hear her voice in her mind. The soothing, warm voice that Mia loved so much.

“Mom, I’ve...I’ve really tried so hard.”

Mia knew her mom couldn’t hear, but she was desperate to make her understand.

Everything that had happened the last year...studying like mad to try to find a cure. Getting to the truth about her mom’s condition.

And now...she was hard at work creating the drug that would heal her.

Mia’s mom was nodding earnestly through the glass, as if to say, *“That sounds very tough.”*

“Actually, I—Oh! Let me introduce you to everyone! This is Felix, Henrik, and Mathias. They’ve all been helping me. So, even though it was tough, it wasn’t actually so bad after all!”

Mia was babbling, still trying to fight back the tears. She hadn’t seen her mom in ten years, and that was a lot of time to hold back one’s emotions.

As she stretched her palm flat against her mother’s, she felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the boy behind her. The one who had given her what she wanted most of all.

Felix...thank you.

Her gratitude for him was greater than it had ever been.

She didn’t think she could ever repay him for this.

The lock Mia had placed on her heart seemed to unlock itself then, and she was overcome by feelings. At that moment, Mia finally felt like she could open herself up to love.

FELIX sighed, watching Mia and her mother’s emotional reunion.

The glass between them was very thick to keep out the cold and bacteria. But even though the two of them couldn't hear one another, they seemed to be able to communicate perfectly.

Mia's face was lit up as she kept babbling away like an excitable child, telling her mom everything.

They had ten years to catch up on, after all. No matter how long a visit it was, it would never be long enough.

Seeing Mia looking so happy and innocent, like the six-year-old child she'd been when she was torn from her mother's side...filled Felix's heart with joy.

I'm so glad.

Finally, he was able to see Mia's real smile. Negotiating this setup with his father had been very grueling for Felix, but it was worth it. It was so worth it.

"Mom, the medicine is going to be ready soon! You're going to get better! You're going to be able to live your life again, without anything to fear! I'm going to work even harder and get it done real soon!"

Mia wiped away her tears, beaming at her mother through the glass. Mia's expression was firm and resolute, and it was clear that she had a renewed purpose now.



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