

Mirae pressed herself flat against the roof and held her breath. She'd been seen. He had been walking in the garden and looked up long enough to see her. The warm summer night was cool and fresh, but it felt clammy and dense to Mirae.

A minute passed. Then two. Mirae risked a glance over the edge of the roof. The garden was once again empty. Maybe she had gotten lucky...or maybe he had gone to get more guards. Either way, Mirae couldn't afford to wait any longer.

It had started with the storms from across the Tempra Sea. Winds battered on the windows of her family home, threatening to pull the walls loose. The rain pounded on the roof, too much and too frequent that it was only a matter of time before rainwater found the many gaps in the family's apartment above the candle shop. Mirae had spent the time telling stories to her three younger brothers and helping her mother clean the house and stopper up new leaks. Her father had been able to keep making candles, though no one came to the shop. The boys couldn't go out and play or attend the usual lessons, so they became bored first. That led to Tomen's recklessness.

Tomen was, technically, the middle of the four children. Wiff and Jat were twins and Mirae was older by over three years. He'd spoken about it often, but no one thought Tomen would actually risk going out in the storm because of a few leaks. Mirae had been bathing the twins when he had slipped out through a window with armfuls of straw. He had spent hours up on the roof, patching the holes he could see or guess from memory. Mirae and her mother had torn the small home apart trying to find Tomen before he climbed back in through the window, soaking wet and shivering with bits of hay stuck in his hair.

After a scolding from Mirae's father, a vigorous regiment of hot baths and foul tasting tea, Tomen was exiled to his bed for the evening. The next morning, Mirae tried to wake him, but his

body was shivering and his forehead felt like ice. Another day of hot baths and more tea didn't improve his condition and he had developed a harsh cough by the end of the third day. He hacked through the rest of the storm, day and night. Mirae had barely noticed it had stopped raining because her brother's cough was all she could hear. He wasn't getting any better and needed a miracle. Mirae had heard about the Herb Master's garden. Just on the other side of a short palace wall, the garden was rumored to contain plants from all around the world and there was a flower for everything within.

The garden was a treasure hoard with flowers worth more than Mirae could even guess. Some brought luck, some brought love, and some were for curses and pain. There was one that had supposedly cured the Queen when she had fallen dangerously ill. The Herb Master's garden was sometimes open to the public, but touching the flowers was a punishable offense. They had called it a miracle.

According to stories, the Herb Master had ordered a man's fingers removed for touching the delicate petals of one of his flowers. Mirae had never heard what happened to thieves, but she was desperate. Waiting until her mother was watching Tomen and the twins, Mirae found a moment to sneak out under the moonlight.

Waiting behind a raucous inn, Mirae watched the patrols until the guards weren't paying attention, awkwardly climbing up a tree and jumping to the garden wall. Sneaking along the edge of the wall, Mirae jumped to the garden house and peered over the edge, startled by the Herb Master walking through the garden.

The Herb Master was a taller man with a puffy, white beard and round spectacles. Mirae would have mistaken him for a garden aide if it weren't for the Master's Staff in his hand, his

fingers wrapped around a bouquet of carved, wooden flowers. Mirae was almost certain that he had seen her, but when Mirae risked another look over the edge, the garden was empty.

With a few grunts—and enough cursing to impress a sailor—Mirae landed on her tailbone in the dirt. Pausing to rub her lower back, Mirae quickly pressed flat against a tree to hide her silhouette. She caught her breath for a moment and peered around the edge of the wooden trunk, suddenly transfixed by the greenery around her.

The garden under the moonlight was beautiful, softly lit without dulling the color of the flowers. The flowers were set into neat rows, some supported on slim, wooden rods. Others grew in wild bushes with the flowering parts spread wide to the moonlight. Some bore fruit and berries, while others bore only their flowers, prominently on display. From bright reds to pale violets, the garden was an explosion of color that would have made Mirae's heart soar with joy if she were here for another purpose. Yet her task weighed heavy on her.

When she was sure the garden was empty, Mirae prowled around the edge of the yard, crawling through the grass on her hands and knees. She had researched the night before and knew what kind of flower to steal. These were further in the back if others were to be believed.

Mirae passed a section that was quartered off with metal wire. These plants supposedly brought luck, fortune, and power. According to the book she'd read by the Herb Master himself, one blossom from a Golden Poppy steeped in a tea would ensure that a person never wanted for anything again as long as they lived. Fortune would allow them to succeed and bring them treasures untold. After a moment of hesitating, Mirae shook her head and crawled on. The money wouldn't heal her brother and her family was happier without that much money. Besides, a Golden Poppy was poisonous if used improperly and Mirae couldn't find thorough enough instructions to risk it.

Next, a section of bright red vines with hanging flowers reached out to tickle her arm as she crawled through the dark. Crimson Summers only bloomed once a decade and could brew a powerful love potion if mixed with honey and water under a full moon. These didn't tempt Mirae at all. The flowers did nothing but create the feeling of love, not love for an actual person. It was a silly thing that nobles would sometimes use for their own cruel pleasure or to ensure an arranged marriage bore a successful heir. If anything, Mirae wanted the flowers burned, but she pressed on.

Carefree Ivy filled a large planter, climbing up and over a lattice and reaching for any supports within a hand's width of the leaf tips. Mirae had read about Carefree Ivy. It was expensive and, when smoked in a pipe, gave the user a sense of bliss and calm. Mirae thought of her mother and father, exhausted each night from working or tending her brothers. A little Carefree Ivy would lift their spirits and fill the house with dancing like on festival days. But no... Carefree Ivy was highly addictive and could easily be the only thing to bring a person joy if it was overused.

She finally found the medicinal plants, plants that healed all sorts of ailments and wounds. Whatever the danger, there was something here that would help her. Mirae carefully pawed through the greenery, not disturbing anything more than she had to. Using the bushes as cover, Mirae picked through bright orange flowers, curling green vines and the bulbous fruits that grew off of bushes and tree branches.

After shuffling up to the front of the patch, Mirae saw what she was after. It was a small sprig, about the size of her hand, covered in dark green nettles with pale blue berries. The Frost Kiss would take away her brother's chill, expelling the cold with a trip to the latrine. It wasn't a common herb, but it wasn't as rare as other plants in the garden. It wouldn't be missed and Mirae

was sure that it wouldn't upset the balance of the Herb Master's collection. Carefully, she broke off one of the lower branches. It was just enough for what she needed and would be less noticeable than if she had taken something from the top. Crawling back, Mirae avoided the other temptations she went by. Love, Money, Happiness...all of them were illusions and all of them came at too high a cost.

She was nearly at the garden house again when she looked up to the window and froze. The Herb Master was standing in a window, staring down at her over a mug of steaming tea. To Mirae's surprise, the old man only grinned a little and gestured behind the house. "There's a ladder behind the tool shed if you'd like. It's bad luck to leave a different way from where you entered, but I don't think you could jump to the roof from the ground."

"Th-thank you, sir," Mirae whispered, still on her hands and knees.

"Also Frost Kiss is often bitter," the Herb Master took a sip of his tea. "I've seen people spit out more of the steeped tea than they end up drinking. I'd suggest a large, ripe strawberry mixed in. Seedless, of course."

"Of...of course. Thank you, sir."

The old man bowed his head a little. "The Herbalist Way: Take only what is needed, need only what is necessary. Though I don't approve of thievery, I do admire your focus. Not many would pass Golden Poppies. Should you need more, please ask before sneaking over my walls again, please?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The old man nodded again. "Right then. Ladder's just behind you. I'll see that it's put back in its place before I leave for the night. Quick as you like."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The Herb Master nodded with a smile and closed the shutters to the garden house. Still on her hands and knees, Mirae snuck to the back of the small shack.