

# 5



isma rushed down to the main room, then dashed to the kitchen, where Mei was lying on the floor.

‘What happened?’ she cried, falling to her knees by Mei’s side. Mei was unconscious, her silky black hair spread around her head like spilled ink.

The veins of her arms were an unnatural dark blue. Bisma had never seen anything like it before. The girls were right; it was a poisoning. It could not be anything else. Rage whipped through Bisma, fire-hot.

Mei’s chest gently rose and fell; Bisma forced herself to focus. At the very least, Mei was breathing. The girls were all gathered around her: Luna’s eyes were wide as she held sleeping baby Deebea; Azalea looked horrified, a hand covering her mouth; and Nori was pulling at Mei’s hand with both of hers.

‘Mei, wake up,’ Nori said, her little voice worried.

Bisma felt the skin of Mei’s arm, which was freezing cold. She ran a hand along Mei’s dark veins, which were raised. She didn’t understand the symptoms.

‘Get blankets,’ Bisma said. ‘And a pillow for her head. Did she fall?’

It wasn’t good that Mei was so cold.

Azalea ran to get blankets, while Luna said, ‘I think so but I’m not sure, none of us actually saw. I heard a thud and when I turned around she was on the floor.’

‘I asked her to bring me a snack,’ Nori said, eyes welling with tears.

‘Shh, it’s okay,’ Bisma said, putting her hands on Nori’s shoulders. ‘It isn’t your fault, sweet.’

But whose fault was it?

Who would poison Mei, and how did they do it?

Bisma set those questions to one side; she had to focus.

‘Get her up onto the sofa,’ she ordered. ‘And get her warm. I’ll be back.’

Mind racing, Bisma ran down to her garden. Wind howled around her as she went directly to her cart. Bottles clinked together as she rummaged through potions, trying to find something, anything.

Finally, she found a generic cure-all that she sometimes sold with her poisons, especially to mothers with small children who were afraid of their children accidentally ingesting poison. The cure-all wasn’t guaranteed to be an antidote, but it was better than nothing.

Grabbing the dark pink bottle, Bisma ran back up to the main room of the treehouse, then dashed to the kitchen. The cure-all was made of gullshamdani, a purple flower with hairy-toothed leaves; the root was dried then crushed, but to be effective it needed to be mixed with milk and sugar.

‘Baji,’ Nori called, her voice worried.

‘Just a moment,’ Bisma said, making the mixture, using her magic to stir it more quickly. ‘Done.’

In three large steps she was back in the main room, where Luna had set Deebea down and was sitting beside Mei, holding her hand as it dangled off the sofa. Bisma went down on her knees beside her, lifting Mei’s little head up, Mei’s dark hair soft in Bisma’s shaking hand.

‘Azalea, Luna, help me hold her up,’ Bisma said.

Azalea did as she was told, holding Mei up from the other side, while Luna held Mei’s head from beside Bisma. With Bisma’s free hand, she opened Mei’s mouth and with the other, dribbled in some of the cure-all. Pink liquid wet Mei’s lips, a drop falling down her chin and onto her dress.

‘Tilt her head back a little,’ Bisma ordered.

The girls did as they were told, and they watched with bated breath, waiting to see if Mei would swallow.

At last, Mei’s throat moved.

‘Sit her up,’ Bisma said.

Azalea and Luna helped lift her up fully and Bisma sat on the sofa behind her, so Mei could lean against her. The weight of her sister felt both too heavy and too light. ‘Nori, angel, can you rub Mei’s feet please?’

Nori nodded. Reaching under the blanket, she rubbed Mei’s feet as Bisma waited. ‘Luna, Azalea, her hands,’ Bisma said, and they began to rub her hands.

They all held their breath, watching.

Finally, Mei’s veins lightened, the dark blue color leaving them almost entirely. Warmth returned to her fawn-toned skin. She coughed, then groaned.

‘Mei, honey, it’s Baji,’ Bisma said, rubbing her arms. ‘Can you open your eyes?’

Slowly, Mei blinked, then opened her eyes. Her dark eyes took in the sight of all her sisters; her face furrowed with confusion.

‘What happened?’ she asked, her voice hoarse.

The girls looked at each other, then to Bisma.

The problem was Bisma didn’t know either. And she was *supposed* to know.

‘You fell,’ Bisma said, not wanting to worry Mei.

She controlled the narrative; if she panicked, then the other girls would, too. Bisma forced a smile as Mei looked back at her.

‘Oh,’ Mei said, trying to smile. ‘How silly.’

‘Yes,’ Bisma said, forcing a smile on to her own face as well. ‘Very silly.’

‘It’s so cold,’ Mei said, snuggling close to Bisma, who wrapped her arms tight around the nine-year-old.

Her skin was still icy, though not as freezing as before. The cure-all may have worked for now, but it hadn’t solved the root of the problem. Bisma could still see the remnants of the poison inside Mei; her veins still bulged slightly, and they were darker than they should have been.

‘What—’ Bisma began, but she stopped when Mei yawned.

‘I’m so sleepy,’ Mei said. She leaned heavily against Bisma.

‘Let’s get you to sleep, then,’ Bisma said. She would have to ask her questions later to uncover what exactly had caused such a reaction, what Mei had eaten or touched.

‘Come on,’ Azalea said, helping lift Mei to her feet. As much as the dramatic twelve-year-old complained about chores, when it counted, she was there for her sisters. Bisma gave Azalea a grateful smile.

They guided Mei to her room, Luna trailing behind them with Nori and Deeba. Mei’s room was neat and clean, her desk covered with herbs set out to dry. Above them hung ribbons in various shades, ribbons she used when doing up any of her sisters’ hair.

Bisma helped Mei settle in her bed, then tucked her in with blankets.

‘Do you need anything?’ she asked, sitting beside her.

Mei languidly shook her head, eyes already drooping closed. A few moments later, Mei fell asleep, her breathing soft but steady.

The other girls still seemed worried, so Bisma gave them all a reassuring smile, pulling Nori close to her, stroking her blonde curls.

‘Everything is alright,’ Bisma said, forcing herself to sound bright as she led them out of Mei’s room. ‘Who’s hungry? Let’s get ready for dinner.’

‘I’m starving,’ Luna said, helping Bisma break the tension.

‘Weren’t you just reading poetry?’ Azalea said, arching a brow.

Luna gave Azalea a confused look. ‘What precisely is your point?’

‘Aren’t you always going on about how you could just *live* off books?’

Luna scoffed. ‘I was being hyperbolic.’

‘Riiight.’

Bisma laughed, and the other girls followed suit, giggling. The tension dissipated from the room as they busied themselves with setting the table. Azalea had been helping Mei with dinner tonight, and it was a dish of soft cheese drizzled with honey, a fresh loaf of bread, and a salad with dried cranberries, nuts, and sweet potatoes.

As they ate, Bisma’s thoughts strayed to Mei, who thankfully slept peacefully. If she had been disturbed, or her condition grew worse, Bisma knew the Forest would alert her.

Bisma fought the urge to go down to her garden to start whipping something together. She knew that if she panicked, the girls would as well.

So Bisma ate her food and chatted with her sisters. After, she checked in on Mei, whose skin still had a bluish tint to it. Her condition had not grown worse, but it had not improved, either.

‘Time for bed,’ Bisma announced.

They all cleaned up and got ready for bed, and only after everyone was asleep did Bisma go down to the garden, lighting the hanging candles so that she might see in the dark.

She worked on a few different potions by candlelight, her mind running through possibilities. She grew a *pashanbhed*—the flowers pale pink with a deeper rose flush in the center—then crushed the rhizome; it was often used to cure internal infections. But what if it wasn’t an infection, and instead was something she had ingested?

Karu was used for stomach aches, so if this poisoning had been caused by something Mei ate, the root of the blue-flowered plant could be used to cure her.

Or perhaps the right course of action was to use yellow cobra lily? The plant itself was poisonous, but it was also used to cure certain snake bites. Could it work if Mei had been bitten by something venomous?

Alone in her garden, panic flared through her. She was running blind; she didn’t know what to do. She had a working knowledge of various plants and their uses, but she didn’t have enough experience, exposure, or education to know which would be correct, which would be best. Her work with curing potions was low-level: basic medicinal herbs, like peppermint tea for upset stomachs, or elderberry syrup for a cold, things like that, things she could easily make and sell.

This was not her expertise, but she knew whose it was.

Bisma clenched her jaw. She would rather chew off her own hand than reach out to Xander, but maybe he didn’t need to know. His family’s apothecary would surely have cure-alls more effective than hers, as well as other ingredients she could mix to create a cure of her own.

She looked up at the moon; it was night. The Apothecary would

be closed. She could sneak in and grab what she needed and he would be none the wiser. Yes, that would work.

She quickly checked on the girls. Their home was quiet (well, Nori was snoring) and everyone was fast asleep. Grabbing her sweater and pouch, she snuck out, making haste through the dense trees until she was out of the Enchanted Forest, heading for Old Town. The autumn night had a bitter bite to it, wind scraping against her, but she hardly felt it. Her blood was running too hot with worry for Mei, as well as rage at the thought of someone trying to hurt one of her sisters.

When she arrived in town, everything was closed, doors shut and locked. The square was empty and silent, dark save for the few lamp posts that stayed lit through the night.

She walked over to the Apothecary—one of the largest buildings—and slipped behind the building to the back door. As she did, it began to rain. Under the gray clouds, she broke off a little branch, infusing it with her magic, willing it to become what she needed it to.

Her magic came easier to her in the Enchanted Forest—as easy as breathing, really—but outside the Forest, it required more of her energy. Even so, the branch gave way and morphed. She used it to pick the lock, which gave way quickly.

Bisma crept into the shop, which was filled with rows and rows of potions and powders and salves. The potions were housed in the typical Chapman Apothecary special glass, which was made especially for them and imported in from Castletown. It smelled strongly of various herbs, though the one that stuck out most to her was the sweet, spicy scent of cloves, so strong she could taste it. *Xander's scent.*

The thought sent a jolt down her spine. Shaking her head, she pulled a candle and match out of her purse and lit it, holding the

light up as she made her way through the aisles, reading the different medicines.

There was an entire aisle dedicated to beauty products, which wasn't shocking to her in the slightest; no wonder Xander's cream-colored skin and copper hair were always immaculate. He probably tested all his mother's potions.

After a little while, she heard a noise, but assumed it was just the wind outside, picking up intensity as the rain fell harder. Bisma continued down the aisle, turning bottles to read their ingredients. Allspice for relieving aches, arugula for fertility, nutmeg for colds . . .

Finally, she found the section of cure-alls.

She set her candle down and grabbed a few different ones, sneaking them into her purse. She held one up, about to open the cap to take a sniff when someone grabbed her from behind.

A hand clamped over her mouth to keep her from screaming out while an arm wound tight around her waist. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest.

Bisma whirled around, and her assailant immediately dropped his hand from her mouth.

'Bisma?' Xander said, confused. His arm was still around her, his grip strong. He held her in a near embrace, and she could smell the rain and earth on his sweet skin. Standing this close, she had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

His copper hair was a mess, as though he'd just woken up, but his green eyes were vivid and alert. He was in his shirtsleeves, the blouse open at the neck to reveal the long line of his pale throat, which was wet with rain, glistening.

She could feel his pulse racing and felt her own quicken in response.

*Foolish.* 'Let go of me,' she snarled. She struck him with her elbow, and he stumbled back.



Once he'd caught his breath, he straightened up. 'What are you doing here?' he asked, brows furrowed. 'You're not a thief.'

He looked at her with confusion, and irritation flashed through her. If it was anyone else catching her trying to rob their family's business, they would have been livid. But not Xander. He only looked concerned, his emerald eyes warm.

'What are *you* doing here?' she countered, avoiding his gaze.

'Someone saw a light and came to inform me.' He furrowed his brows. 'Now answer the question, Bisma. What are you doing here?'

Hearing her name on his lips made her shiver and she forced herself to take another step back. 'Nothing,' she snapped, trying to brush past him. As she stepped away from him, he reached out and caught her wrist, pulling her back.

'What's wrong?' he asked, velvet voice low with worry. 'You can tell me.'

'*Nothing*,' she said. But her voice was lacking its usual bite.

He still held onto her, his slender fingers soft yet firm around her forearm. That was when he noticed the bottle in her hand.

'Something's wrong, what is it?' She did not reply, and he stepped closer, his tone gentle as though she was a wild animal that might scare easily. 'Bis, let me help.'

She would not be in his debt; she would not let him hold power over her—not any more than he already had, which was dangerous enough.

'Please,' she said, hating how her voice trembled. 'Just let me go.'

With a sigh, he stepped back.

Not looking at him, she ran.

She didn't stop running until she returned to the Enchanted Forest, until she returned home.

Mei was sound asleep in her bed, and Bisma set a pillow on the

floor beside her, lying down. She reached up and took one of Mei's hands; it was still cold, but not colder than before. Bisma would try the Apothecary cure-all in the morning. Maybe rest would do Mei good.

*She would be fine*, Bisma reassured herself. *Perfectly fine*.

The next morning, mercifully, Mei's condition was the same. The girls were relieved to find their sister stable, even if her skin had an unnatural blue tint to it.

'Come, let's have a picnic in the main room,' Bisma suggested, helping Mei to the sofa there.

'I got the blanket!' Nori called, bringing over the yellow picnic blanket. Azalea helped her set it up, while Luna and Bisma retrieved the breakfast items from the kitchen.

They brought all the goods to the floor in front of Mei so they could eat breakfast together. Mei stayed bundled in blankets, holding Deeba in her lap as Deeba talked in broken sentences of gibberish.

After Mei had some breakfast, Bisma fed her the potion from the Apothecary and was relieved to see that throughout the day Mei's condition seemed to be getting better. By the afternoon, Mei had enough energy to get up on her own, and the blue tinge from her skin was almost entirely gone.

They were nearly in the clear. Soon, Bisma would investigate what had happened, but until then, she focused on the girls, on things going back to normal.

The tension of the night before left their home entirely. By evening, even Bisma was feeling relieved, the sight of Mei's darkened veins already morphing from reality to memory.

Outside, it began to drizzle, then pour, and they all gathered round the windows, looking out to watch the rain soak the earth, dribbling down the leaves of the trees.

They ate together at the table, a hot basil tomato soup with gooey grilled-cheese sandwiches, their fingers shining from the butter, and everything was alright.

Until it wasn't.

An hour after dinner, as they were all busy with their own things, Mei stood from the sofa and promptly collapsed. The blankets fell from her body, revealing dark blue veins across her arms and legs.

'Baji!' Nori shrieked.

'Mei!' Luna cried.

They all rushed to her side. Dread curdled through Bisma. She touched a hand to Mei's skin; it was freezing and tinged a deeper blue than last night.

The cure-all must have faded.

'I thought she was better!' Azalea cried, her voice accusatory as her brown eyes flicked to Bisma.

'What's happening?' Nori asked, petrified.

'Maybe try this?' Luna said, bringing the cure-all from the Apothecary forward from the kitchen. 'Baji?'

They all turned to Bisma.

Bisma opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. She didn't know what was happening, and anxiety iced through her. Her sight began swimming; she felt faint.

Bisma swayed, then jolted upright. She heard a snuffle and saw that Nori and Deebea had both noticed. They looked at her with concern, afraid. They were all so small.

*What was she doing?* Bisma couldn't let them see her unraveling. Her heart pounded against her chest, drawing pain with every beat.

'I need a moment,' she said, her voice high. Her gaze jumped to Luna, who looked frightened as well.

'Go,' Luna said. Bisma hesitated; she didn't want to leave them for even a second, but she needed to compose herself.

She felt a hand on her back; it was Azalea, pushing her. Without thinking further, Bisma ran up the stairs, going all the way up to her room.

Now that she was alone, the anxiety overcame her completely. Her vision blurred with tears as she gasped for breath, everything inside her tightening and twisting.

She was so scared. She missed her baji, all the bajiis that had come before her. She didn't want this responsibility. How could she take care of the others? She hardly knew how to take care of herself!

*What was she doing? What was she doing?*

Her thoughts spiraled, and she felt like a fish caught in a net, pulled out of the water and flopping this way and that as it struggled to breathe.

Then she spotted something on her bed.

It was a neatly folded piece of paper. It had no seal but was covered with streaks of dirt, as if it had come from the earth. The Forest must have delivered it to her.

Curiosity needled through her anxiety, and she clung to it, hoping to clear her head. She walked to her bed and took hold of the letter, unfolding it.

She began to read.

*I received your letter, which I was very surprised to be the recipient of. Please do not be alarmed by my response, for I feel you did not expect your letter to be received. I must confess I know who you are, though I will not divulge who I am, except to say that I am a long-time admirer and wish only to be your sincere friend. It seems you are in need of a friend, and, as it so happens, so am I.*

*I understand loneliness. Being surrounded by loved ones, yet still feeling completely and utterly alone.*

*Perhaps we can be lonely together.*

*As for what you should do . . . what else can you do but your best?  
And if you feel your best is not good enough, then try again . . . and  
then try harder. That is all you can do.*

*What you must not do is give up. Or give in. Then you have truly  
lost, and you do not seem like a girl who likes to lose.  
Hoping to be your friend.*

Bisma exhaled deeply. The letter was short—it took only a minute to read—yet focusing on the words had helped her calm down. Her heart felt a little steadier.

She wondered who had written the letter. For a moment, she thought of Xander, but he would never waste his time writing her a letter. His aim was to play with her, while this letter was genuine. Kind.

Who was this mysterious writer? They had not even signed their name. The Forest must have delivered the letter she had written, but to whom?

It did not matter. She trusted the Forest, and for good reason. Reading this response had quelled the panic that had been rising in her like a tide, threatening to drown her.

Bisma wiped her cheeks, brushing away her tears. She took a deep breath, then exhaled. She listened to the sound of the rain falling outside, taking in the sweet scent of petrichor that was thick in the air.

She grabbed a cup and stuck it out of the open window until it filled, wetting her hand in the process. Bisma gulped down the cold rainwater. Finally, the noise in her brain calmed, and she could think.

She knew what she needed to do.

Pushing her hair back, Bisma went down the stairs. Her sisters turned to look at her when she entered. They were all huddled around Mei's body, clinging to one another: Luna, Azalea, Nori, and Deebea.

Bisma went and crouched down next to Nori.

‘It’s going to be alright,’ she said, running a hand over her blonde hair. ‘I promise.’

Nori released a breath, some of the tension leaving her. She nodded. ‘OK, Baji,’ Nori said quietly.

Bisma kissed her cheek, then stood, turning to Luna and Azalea.

‘I’m taking Mei to town,’ she declared. ‘All of you go to sleep. Mei will be fine.’

‘But—’ Azalea began, gearing up to argue, like always.

‘Trust me,’ Bisma said, her voice surer and stronger than she felt. Even so, she felt better than she had before.

‘We do,’ Luna said, her hand on Azalea’s arm, and Azalea nodded.

It gave her some strength to know that there was someone out there who knew her pain—someone who had read her words and taken the time to respond. She would do her best; it was all she could do.

‘You heard Baji,’ Luna said, nudging Azalea. ‘Time for bed.’

Bisma gave Luna and Azalea a hug. The older girls held onto her tight, and Bisma heard Luna’s breath catch.

‘Everything’s going to be fine,’ Bisma repeated, squeezing their shoulders.

With that, she went down the steps and into the rain. ‘Forrie,’ she said. ‘Bring Mei down.’

A branch curled up into the treehouse and a moment later brought Mei down. Bisma had her cart ready, emptied of its contents, and the branch gently laid Mei down on the cart. She was shivering.

‘Luna!’ Bisma called. ‘Blankets!’

Luna and Azalea tossed blankets down from the treehouse. Bisma did her best to cover her sister, whose skin was now tinged purple, the veins bulging dark blue.

Bisma's stomach turned at the sight, but she pushed past it and instead pushed the cart forward to leave the Forest.

As she sped down the path to Old Town, the Enchanted Forest bent its branches so that leaves would provide cover from the rain. Even so, Bisma was soaked by the time they made it to the village outside town.

Heart beating painfully, she pushed her cart down to the most expensive street, the one with the biggest, most extravagant estates. She ran past the neat and tidy lawns, until she found the one she was looking for.

'Hold on, Mei,' she whispered, her voice cracking. 'Just a little longer, I promise.'

She stopped in front of the intricately designed door of a grand house and lifted her hand. Hoping he would answer, Bisma knocked hard with her knuckles, then stepped back, waiting.

She had nowhere else to go.

Rain poured down, soaking her further as she waited for the door to open. Bisma turned to look at Mei, who was whimpering lightly, the layers of blankets above her also growing heavy with water.

Bisma knocked again, hard enough to bruise her hand and rattle her bones.

'Please,' she whispered. Hot tears filled her eyes and fell down her cheeks, mixing with the cold rainwater. She wanted to fall to the ground and sob, to let the earth take her.

But then she remembered the letter: *What you must not do is give up, or give in.*

She would not give up. She would not give in.

She knocked again.

Finally, the door opened. Light flooded out into the darkness, blinding her for a moment as a silhouette approached her.

'Xander,' she choked out. 'I need your help.'