

The Princess Ruined, Chapter 01

Lily was still getting used to her change in wardrobe—and the new perils that came with it.

Such as that every time the carriage wheels struck a stone, the whole carriage would bounce, the window shutters would snap open to admit the blustering winds, and Lily, former Prince of Wellseek, would have to frantically yank down the hem of her dress to keep it from billowing above her knees.

“Are you—are you quite certain about this dress, Settie?” she squeaked.

Seated across from her, a smile drifted across the face of Poinsettia—Poinsettia the Witch of Wellseek to strangers, and Settie to exactly two beings in the universe. “Yes, Lily. I told you, chemise gowns are coming into fashion this season! Colors need to come in the hair or accessories.” She reached up to cup one of the two red poppy flowers tucked into Lily’s blonde hair. “Especially for you.”

“No, I mean it’s... nice.” Lily straightened her hemline and crossed her legs, then uncrossed them, trying not to be flustered at the casual touch. “But aren’t chemises meant to clear the ankles?”

“You don’t want to seem like you have anything to hide.” Settie herself was wearing a practical pair of tan trousers and a comfortable-looking dull green tunic, with a billowing red-orange frock to guard her from the wind. Her strikingly pretty face was weathered by just a few extra years, and easy laugh lines softened an intense amber stare. Painted-red lips matched the namesake poinsettia tucked into her thick black curls. “And I like seeing your legs.”

Lily felt heat gathering at her collar. She glared, smacking away the witch’s hand. “*Settie*.”

“And other people will, too!” Settie laughed, obediently withdrawing. “It’s a way of showing confidence in your body.”

Lily scoffed. “If I wanted to show that off,” she grumbled, “we might as well drop the neckline.”

Settie’s eyes sparked like a flint on steel. “*That* we’ll want to wait on until they’ve filled out a little more naturally, Lily. Showing them off now just looks desperate. As *lovely* as they are already.”

Lily’s slipper tapped against the wood floor. “*Hmph*.”

“Now, quit fussing with the dress and focus on what I’m telling you.” Settie turned back to her satchel. “You’ll be mixing two spoonfuls of the hawkfiddles—” She drew out a jar full of dried and crushed herbs. “—and *one-half* spoonful of horsetail honey.” She drew up a jar full of particularly pale honey. “Steep it at first light, and drink it cold at dusk.”

Lily leaned back in her seat, gripping the hem tightly as the carriage bounced again. “Why then?”

Settie set the two jars back into the satchel and drew the strings closed. “First light so the hawkfiddles can awaken to the music of the dawn chorus. Hawkfiddle ferns catch and devour songbirds, so the melodies of windswept merriment will rouse them to full potency.” She shrugged. “Dusk because the honey tends to make people a little sleepy.”

Lily nodded slightly. She fidgeted with her necklace, dropping her gaze. “Thank you for this, Settie.”

“It’s not a favor one thanks for.” Poinsettia sniffed. “I’d do this for anyone in Wellseek. People should be what they are. It’s not natural otherwise.”

“Right.” Lily smiled down at her knees. She let the necklace go, and the little sapphire signet pendant fell to dangle within what would be a scandalous neckline if she had the cleavage yet to fill it. “All the same, it...”

She trailed off. Her eyes settled on her long, pale gloves.

There was a brief silence.

“Right,” Poinsettia said. “Now, when we arrive, you’ll be greeted by all the members of your house. Your ‘reintroductions’ should go smoothly, although...”

Lily tugged idly at one of the gloves, biting her lip. Settie kept talking, reminding her of various nobles and customs—an endless string of names and warnings that all seemed to pool together the longer she went on.

Lily really was trying to listen. She thought she was listening. But her mind had settled on those gloves. Settie had unthinkingly slipped into that special voice she used—the one she adopted when she wanted to keep people calm—and it always made Lily drowsy.

The gloves were new. They weren’t part of the set Settie had prepared for her. Lily had chosen them herself. Begged for them, really.

She needed them. Her hands were still... very sensitive.

She studied them idly. Strangely, she’d always been a little embarrassed of these hands growing up. Settie had gardening hands, rough and worn and usually stained green from pulling weeds and crushing herbs. Lily’s were soft and uncalledoused, unmarred by swordplay or honest labor, with long, delicate fingers and baby-soft palms.

Now that she was a girl, though...

She bit her lip.

Miss Bell had liked her hands. The jellyfish mermaid had said as much, many times, as they'd hung there in the depths. Had whispered such tender praise in Lily's ear as Lily had drifted in the clear waters.

Miss Bell's ghostly, fluffy tentacles holding Lily suspended, captive, safe. Miss Bell's big, pretty eyes filling Lily's soul. And Miss Bell's hands...

Lily slowly clasped her hands, each finger locking between its counterparts. She felt her breath turning shallow.

Miss Bell's delicate fingers slowly interlacing with Lily's, as Lily had fought not to moan, not to squeal, the unbearable, hypersensitized pleasure mixing with that strange, wonderful euphoria as Miss Bell had called her *such a pretty girl* for the very first time...

"My Lady?" Settie's voice filtered in, but Lily only half-registered it. "*Lily*."

Lily's head snapped back up to attention, and her vision flashing back into focus. "Right! S-Sorry, Settie!"

Settie's smile pinched at the corners. "This is important, Lily."

"I-I know!"

"You may not pay attention, but everyone else will."

"I know." Lily nodded meekly. "But... I mean, it's going to be fine, Settie. I am listening, or, um, trying to, but nothing has really changed! I'm still—"

The carriage wheel hit another bump, slamming the shutters open, and Lily squeaked as they were both bounced in their seats. Short little Settie had no problem; but Lily kept coming perilously close to bonking her head.

The dress fluttered and billowed in the wind, and her hands shot down to shove it back into a modest position. A little too slow.

Settie raised an eyebrow.

Lily's slippers tapped restlessly against the rattling floor. "Nothing of any *importance* has changed," she huffed. "My people aren't going to treat me any different."

She smoothed out the dress a little, ducking her head to conceal her blush.

Settie's lips quirked. "I'm *sure* you're right, My Lady." She tipped her wide-brimmed hat, tone melting into a familiar overly-obsequious syrup as her face became a mask of contrition. "And *far* be it from a humble floral witch's heart to condescend to her *esteemed Princess*."

Lily flushed. "Oh, come on, Settie, not this bit again."

"Ooh. I see you have grown old and cynical, *My Lady!*" Settie shook her head mournfully. "Verily, perhaps you have no more need for a floral witch's *meddling*. Alas. I had best return to the sea..."

"Ugh." Lily shook her head, forcing herself not to smile. "I should have let you walk right into that pond the first time you tried this on me."

"You did once!" Settie's eyes flashed, briefly breaking character. "Spoiled princeling that you were!"

"I did not!" Lily shook her head furiously, forced down giggles. "I always called you back!"

"You let me walk right in. Spoiled, heartless princeling. Princelette."

"Wh—oh, the time with the cream puffs?" Lily scoffed. "Your feet got wet, that's all! Then I got scared and ran in after you."

"I was in up to here." Settie huffed, gesturing to her waist. "That was when you *deigned* to come in to 'save' me and—"

Lily's eyes widened. "—wait, right—"

"—nearly drowned yourself."

"You weren't looking!" Lily couldn't hold back the giggles now. "You were an apprentice of seventeen winters having a full-blown tantrum because a twelve-year-old ate your pastry!"

Settie was clearly trying to look indignant, but her own laughter was breaking between her words. "I thought your governess was going to have my Mistress shot! For *years* I thought that was why Mistress lost her retainer. I mean, that was the last time we came by for..." Settie trailed off. Her laughter faded, though a smile lingered.

She turned and gazed out the window. "Well, you know."

Lily's laughter ebbed as well. She smiled at her lap.

Eight years. Wellseek had been without a floral witch on retainer for eight years. Then Lily had inherited and reextended the retainer, only to learn that Old Ravensroot was dead, and Poinsettia was now the new senior floral witch for Wellseek County. That had been five years ago.

“Oh.” Settie laughed shortly. “Look at me. You’ve dragged me into more chitchat about the past, when we have the present to attend to. You’re so nostalgic lately, it’s infectious.”

“It’s nice to ‘chitchat’ sometimes, Settie.” Lily smiled up at Poinsettia. “I feel like a lot of things are changing so quickly. It’s nice to look back.”

“No. No looking back.” Settie shook her head firmly. “Your daydreaming will be the death of you, Lily, and probably of me, too. Now, listen up.” She held up a hand and snapped her fingers sharply; Lily instinctively straightened. “The Harvest Ball is this Eroday. You will be going.”

“The Lady of Wellmint has always sponsored our claim,” Lily said hesitantly.

“And we can hope she still does. But that’s just the hostess. Many nobles will be coming *specifically* to congratulate you. Not just ‘your people’.” Settie’s posture was tensed as if bracing for a blow.

“Neighbors. Strangers. Opportunists. Rivals. People from counties and duchies and baronies that are, and I want to put this kindly, *not* our friends.”

“I know politics, Settie.”

“This won’t be politics, My Lady.” Settie’s red eyes glimmered like dying coals. “This will be hunting.”

* * *

“Hold still, Your Highness.” Tymerous’s wheezing voice was nearly too soft to hear over the sound of his apprentices working the sewing machines. “I need your waist.”

Lily spread her arms wide and nodded slightly, allowing the slight old man to wrap the measuring tape around her waist. “It’s just, um, ‘My Lady’ for now, Tymerous.”

They were back at the castle now, and Settie had returned to her cottage. The initial reintroductions had gone over well, as Lily had been sure they would. What slipups she’d noticed so far were clearly genuine, and not meant to sting.

“Oh?” Tymerous blinked, his eyes appearing huge and insectile behind his thick spectacles. “Oh! Yes. Your—My Lady, that is.” He nodded to himself, drawing the tape measure tight. “It’s all very new.

Hard to teach an old hound a new trick, but they all said I couldn't learn the sewing machine, either, and we proved them wrong, didn't we, My Lady!"

Lily smiled, trying to ignore the apprentices exchanging smirks behind Tymerous's back. She'd never liked the two apprentices—Ida and Lilac seemed like nice enough girls, but she'd heard how they talked about old Tymerous when he wasn't around. "We did! You got the hang of that machine quicker than I learned to ride horseback."

"Heh! Of course, I shan't have as much time to learn this one, Your H—My Lady." Tymerous hesitated, then reached up to take her bust size. Lily bit her lip; she supposed there wasn't exactly much to measure at the moment. Settie said she needed to start eating more. "You'll soon be expected to get a new tailor, I expect, with the new status, and the new title."

"What? No." Lily shook her head, frowning. "No. Don't say such things."

She heard the apprentices tittering softly and resisted the urge to flash them a glare. She knew intervening like that never helped.

The idea of Tymerous leaving twisted her stomach a little. She looked at her reflection, trying to imagine trusting anyone else to measure her, to fit her garments and assemble her wardrobe. The idea of a stranger judging her body—appraising her still-small bosom, judging her too-wide shoulders, measuring the exact plumpness of her thighs and scolding her about her pastry intake, telling her what colors should go with her strawberry blonde hair, which still hadn't quite cleared her shoulders no matter how she willed it to grow faster...

Tymerous dipped his head respectfully. "I'll be staying as long as I'm wanted, My Lady. But I expect my cuts aren't measured for the likes of where you'll be going, and—"

"You're fine." Lily smiled at him, trying to banish the bitter roiling. "You were here before I was, Tymerous. Just because one or two things changed doesn't mean everything has to..."

There came a knock at the door.

Lily looked over. Tymerous finished his measurement and backed away.

"Enter!" Lily called, adjusting her dress slightly.

The dressing room door swung open, and three unfamiliar girls in beautiful black-and-white dresses swept in from the hall.

Lily frowned. Although they were clearly maids, these three weren't dressed anything like her own servants. Those were the uniforms of the Wellmint Barony's staff.

Lily had visited Wellmint many times, and she'd seen the servants. Lady Wellmint put her maids in frilly, lacy dresses, with mercilessly low necklines and scandalously high hems. Stockings rose to cover what those hems didn't, but rarely reached quite high enough, and tight corsets ensured that the maids' necklines were always amply filled. It was garb designed to show off what Lady Wellmint liked to see.

Lily had always thought it was a bit unseemly. Unkind, even. To use one's employees as decoration, to display them for wandering eyes as if every part of them was for sale, rather than just their service.

She'd felt uncomfortable, and yet... Lily had also frequently had to keep her own eyes from wandering, especially when she was younger. She'd watched the maids as they twirled and hurried away, let her eyes linger as they bounced down the stairs. Sometimes, late at night, she'd...

She'd thought a lot about the Wellmint maids. At some point, she'd also probably started wondering what it would be like to wear a dress like that.

The door clicked shut, snapping Lily back to the present.

The shortest of the maids, and first to enter, had luscious black curls down to her shoulders. Her eyes were wide and bright, with thick lashes that seemed inclined to flutter at any information she received. Lily noticed her tugging the hemline of her dress down a little, as if very conscious of the stockings' shortcomings. A blue hairbow was tied into her hair on the left side, pulling her hair into a slightly asymmetric tilt. She had to be the youngest; Lily couldn't imagine she was older than twenty.

The second maid to enter was perhaps an inch or two taller than the first, but plumper, with a... particularly strained bodice. She had wavy red hair to frame a pale freckled face that was strikingly pretty, in an angular sort of way. Even when she smiled, something about her steely gray eyes didn't quite keep up, as they and the rest of her face were not fully on speaking terms. It made her smile come off as cold, which Lily supposed wasn't fair.

The third maid to enter, and the tallest by far, had long, straight, lustrous black hair that spilled down to her chest. Thick bangs almost curtained deep, dark eyes. She had a very easy way of smiling, in contrast to the redhead, but it was the kind of comfortable closed-mouth confidence that almost made Lily nervous. Or maybe envious. Her self-certainty seemed perfectly measured, perfectly ladylike. This girl looked like she never let herself get too excited, like those plump, dark lips never parted wide.

All three of them curtsied low—the short one a blink after the other two.

“Good afternoon, my lady,” said the red-haired maid, lifting her head to meet Lily's gaze. “My name is Enid, of Wellmint. This is Ayika,” she indicated the girl with calm eyes, “and Motley.” She indicated the smaller girl.

Lily blinked. “Oh?”

Enid’s head tilted to the side. “I believe Her Ladyship told you we would be...?”

“Oh. Oh!” Lily’s eyes widened. She rushed over, smiling brightly. “You’re the new, ah, handmaidens! Yes.”

Settie had warned her about this. Any lady of Lily’s status would be expected to have properly-trained handmaidens, so the Baroness of Wellmint had taken it upon herself to send over a few girls for the time being. It was a kind gesture, in Lily’s opinion. The Baroness had always been her closest noble ally.

“Verily!” blurted Motley, and then flushed. “Ah—um—we do hope to be of service, m’lady!” She curtsied low. “In any way we can be!”

Lily noted Ayika and Enid exchanging looks. Enid was hard to read, but Ayika clearly looked amused. Then they curtsied as well.

“Oh, well, of course you’re more than welcome here.” Lily dipped her head respectfully. “I regret that you weren’t received properly! We’ve all been quite busy, and—”

“Your Ladyship mustn’t worry about that,” Ayika said smoothly. The maid walked over to Tymerous. “Are your measurements completed, tailor?”

Tymerous blinked rapidly up at the handmaiden, then nodded. “Oh, yes, ma’am! We’ll just see ourselves out.”

Lily’s heart sank. She reached up. “Oh, but Tymerous—”

Enid appeared at her side and placed her hand on Lily’s arm. “The Baroness has kindly supplied a dress based on your previous measurements, m’lady. It wouldn’t do for us to help you dress in front of your tailor, would it?”

“We can talk later with Mr. Tymerous about the new measurements,” Ayika said, “and plan adjustments to your wardrobe accordingly.”

Lily hesitated. Her cheeks flushed slightly as her hand lowered.

“Not to worry, m’lady.” Tymerous dipped his head rapidly like a bird drinking water, ushering his two apprentices to the door. “I’ll be getting started on your new wardrobe right away!”

Lily’s hand lowered. “Alright. Thank you, Tymerous.”

The door shut, and Lily found herself alone in her dressing room with three very pretty strangers.

Ayika turned back and gave her a gentle smile. “Very good. Now, m’lady...”

Enid’s hand settled on the small of Lily’s back, and Lily found herself being herded back to the mirrors. The maids were a whirlwind of activity around her, all billowing frills and friendly smiles. Lily was too busy suppressing a shiver at the touch to make any objections.

“... we had better be getting you out of that,” Enid murmured, tugging disdainfully at the fabric of Lily’s chemise, “and into something a little bit more *in fashion*.”

Lily blinked rapidly.

“I don’t see what’s the matter with this dress.” She frowned down at the floor, cheeks reddening. “I... quite like it. My floral witch selected it herself, you know.”

Enid and Ayika tittered as they worked at helping her out of the gown. “My lady,” Enid said, “your floral witch must be very attuned indeed to the fashions of *Wellseek*.”

Lily flinched as they started pulling the chemise off of her. She opened her mouth to object, but why would she? This was all just happening so fast, and she didn’t want to shove anyone away—

“But the fashions in Wellmint lead the whole Valley,” Ayika purred.

All three maids briefly disappeared in a cloud of white as the soft, simple gown rose over Lily’s head.

Suddenly Ayika’s voice sounded very close. “And surely Your Ladyship would like to show something more... elaborate at the upcoming ball.” Soft laughter. Ayika’s lips seemed to be right by Lily’s ear, whispering to her right through the sheer fabric. “Something that better flatters your *lovely* figure.”

Lily’s cheeks heated.

The dress spilled off of her. Ayika smiled, a normal distance apart. She and Enid tossed the gossamer mass into the arms of the smallest of their number. “Motley,” Enid said, “be good and go get the Mistress’s new ensemble. She’s going to just *adore* it.”

“Oh!” Motley nodded weakly as she visibly struggled to contain the full dress in her arms. “Yes, Enid!”

The little maid scampered over to the trunk the maids had had brought up with them.

Lily bit her lip, hands stinging at her sides, fighting the urge to self-consciously cover herself. This had all happened so fast. All she wanted to do was disappear, and she couldn't bear to see her nearly-naked body reflected in the mirrors around her. But avoiding that meant looking at her handmaidens.

She stared hard at the tile floor, forcing her breathing to steady.

Ayika was very pretty.

All of them were so pretty.

A hand settled on her shoulder. She turned to see that Enid had swept to her other side, putting her directly between her and Ayika. Enid's hand gave her shoulder a squeeze. "My Lady has lovely shoulders."

"Oh." Lily's face heated up. "Um, thank you."

"We had better find something that flatters them," purred Ayika. Her smile quirked slightly as her fingertips slid to the crook of Lily's neck. "Not to mention your graceful neck."

"Um." Lily swallowed, reached back into her years of royal practice, and managed a calm, serene smile. "You're too kind."

"Oh, not kind enough, Your Ladyship!" she heard Motley squeak, and the little maid came bounding over to beam up at her, a bag clutched in both arms along with the new dress. "I mean, I had—" She ducked her head shyly. "I had heard you were pretty, but verily—"

"Verily," Enid purred softly, her cadence ever-so-slightly mocking.

"—your graceful fae features—" Motley's words came out in a heedless torrent. "—your slender height that rises as if in return to the stars—v-verily, even your flushed cheeks have you looking like the dawn, like the bloodstained sunrise, or an endless sunset stretched and spilt across the horizon's vast ocean waters!" Her eyes were even wider than normal, pupils fully dilated. Then Lily saw the pupils shrink slightly. The maid's own cheeks went bright pink, and her head dropped to stare intently at the bag.

Lily fought not to squirm, even as Ayika's hand slipped down between her shoulderblades. She could barely understand Motley's rapid-fire babble. So why could she see in the mirror that she was blushing?

"I." She nodded slowly, maintaining her smile. "Thank you. But you can just call me 'Miss', or the like, if it would be easier." She'd learned that asking the servants to call her Lily often made them

uncomfortable. Blurring even those arbitrary boundaries was considered a major red flag for servants in the Rose Valley, a sign of future planned indiscretions. She hated that about this place.

And selfishly, as nice as *m'lady* sounded, she'd always wondered what it would be like to be called...

"Miss, then." Ayika's voice crept around her as that hand pressed gently between her shoulderblades.

"Motley, show her the dress."

"Oh! Yes!" Motley's head bobbed as she set down the bag and lifted up that long, flowing dress for proper presentation. To Lily's disappointment, it was wholly white, which meant she had no excuse not to wear it instead of the dress dear Settie had picked for her. Even with the same colors involved, some floral witches would still take it as an insult, but refusing a noblewoman's gift under present circumstances could be just as problematic. She hoped Settie would understand.

At least the new dress seemed to be longer.

But the bag... was that...?

"Oh, Mistress is just going to *love* her new dress," Enid enthused. She leaned over to smile up at Lily, catching her eye. "Are you excited, Mistress?"

Lily nodded slightly. Eye contact was one of those skills she was still working on. "The dress looks lovely. Lady Wellmint has... exquisite taste."

"Oh, doesn't she?" Enid's eyes lit up with clear amusement, and she gave a low curtsy. Lily belatedly registered the double meaning. "Her Ladyship does have an eye for pretty things, doesn't she?"

Lily averted her gaze from Enid's chest, biting the inside of her cheek. "Y-Yes."

"Miss." She turned to see Ayika. Those fulsome lips were curved upwards ever-so-slightly. "Would you kindly lift your arms?"

"Oh." Lily nodded again. "Yes, Ayika. Of course." Her arms had instinctively folded to cover her chest. Reluctance dragged at them as they rose above her head.

"Good." Ayika's fingers traced slow circles between her shoulder blades. It was strangely soothing.

"Very good, Miss. Just stay like that."

Lily nodded again. Ayika had a very soft voice, and her eyes were a bit more calming to stare into than Enid's, but eye contact still made Lily feel a little... naked.

Ayika's fingers drew slowly around. Slow, gentle circles. "You'd like me to explain what we're doing, wouldn't you?"

"Y-Yes." Lily's voice was soft. She cleared her throat. "Yes, please."

On her other side, she heard Enid laugh. "Well, first, we're going to take *this* silly thing off." Her hand settled on Lily's chest for a moment, then drifted down to the laces of Lily's plain linen jump. "This won't do at all, Mistress~"

Lily's heart fluttered. "O-Oh?" She itched to squirm. She forced herself to keep still and keep her arms up as the three maids pressed in around her. "But—"

"Oh! Yes!" Motley giggled, smiling brightly up at her. She had such a charming guilelessness to her smile. "All the fine ladies of court are wearing proper stays of late, m'lady!"

"To show off their... figure." Lily could sense a bit of amusement in Enid's tone, and Lily felt burning heat rising up to her neck.

"But—but I don't, um..." Lily licked her lips. She couldn't stim with her hands in the air like this, and the energy was whirling inside her, dizzying, almost panicky. But Ayika's fingers continued their gentle circling between Lily's shoulderblades.

"Motley," the tallest maid said softly, "help the Mistress out of her jump."

"Yes, Ayika!" Motley gave Lily what was perhaps meant to be a reassuring smile as she began deftly unlacing the loose, comfortable undergarment.

Lily stayed stock-still, blinking rapidly, staring at herself in the mirror. She tried to mold her features, to banish the fear in those eyes, but she could see herself twitching and flinching almost imperceptibly at every stray touch...

She wondered if Motley could feel her heart racing. Enid's hand was wandering down her side, as if gauging measurements. Her nails were digging in a little, making Lily's breath catch—her sides were so *sensitive*—

She suppressed her trembling. She needed to stay still, as still as a doll while these two worked on her. But Enid's touches were so quick and invasive, Motley's so thoughtless and eager... she could see herself in the mirror, surrounded by three beautiful girls, and oh, *gods*, she'd never been this close to her female servants before...

Another shiver rose in her. Lily pushed it down, pushed everything down...

“It’s okay,” she heard Ayika whisper. “Just relax, Mistress. Relax. You mustn’t squirm. We know what we’re doing, don’t we?”

“I-I know,” Lily whispered back, embarrassed that Ayika had noticed. She pushed the panic down deeper, and pushed herself deeper inward, too, making her face a mask of serenity. But it couldn’t last. She needed something to distract herself. A way to help her mind wander. Something to... focus on.

Ayika’s fingers continued their circles, drawing slow, soothing spirals between Lily’s shoulder blades. Lily felt her attention settling on those gentle, endless circles.

Ayika’s touches were... steadier. More predictable. The maid was not quite Lily’s height, but Lily felt like Ayika loomed over her, felt tucked into Ayika’s shadow. Ayika was trying to comfort her, to take care of her.

Lily wasn’t used to that. To that calm, that tenderness.

She felt like she could lean into Ayika’s arms and be lost to the rest of the world, and the thought made her cheeks heat a little—she saw the pink flush entering them—but also felt reassuring right now. Safe.

“Mistress must excuse our Motley,” Ayika murmured in her ear. “She’s a little scatterbrained, but her fingers are quite nimble, aren’t they?”

“Mm.” Lily nodded weakly as she felt the jump coming undone, and all of her nothing came ‘spilling out’. Enid and Ayika pulled the jump away, and now her chest was totally bare. She almost whimpered.

Lily had only started on the tea a few months ago. Settie was a wonderful witch, and had done her best to strengthen the concoction, but the results were... always going to be slow, Settie had said. Even at fourfold the tea’s normal speed, Lily wasn’t confident she’d grown at all.

Certainly her maids’ soft giggling did not encourage her.

“Oh, Mistress,” Enid cooed, her tone ever-so-slightly mocking, “I only hope the Baroness’s old measurements will still apply~!”

“H-Ha.” Lily smiled at Enid, vicious embarrassment nearly choking the laugh. “Yes. I’m sure.”

“Perhaps Mistress will grow into her corset~” Amusement oozed from Ayika’s soft, soothing voice. Her hand continued those gentle circles, easing Lily’s nerves but not her shame. “We can just draw the laces a little tighter for now.”

Lily shifted her weight miserably, too embarrassed to speak—even though she knew she needed to say something, needed to scold them for their rudeness—

Wait, corset?

“What nonsense are you two talking?” The three of them turned to Motley, who was blinking those big eyes as if someone had just flashed a light into them. “Why, well past the old measurements has Miss Lily grown!”

The circles paused slightly.

Lily blinked. “I-I have?”

“Verily!” Motley beamed up at her, lashes fluttering. “Your breasts are nearly as big as Ayika’s, I should think!”

And to Lily’s shock, she actually took one of Lily’s sensitive breasts and gave it a demonstrative *squeeze*.

Lily barely kept from squealing as sensations flared inside her. She trembled, trying to force the overwhelming pleasure down—oh, gods, the tea made them so *sensitive*—

“Only more spread apart,” Motley conceded, “as they grow into their size and shape, but—but a stay will push them up and together most pleasingly, I think!” She bounced the breast slightly, gaze fixed on it adoringly, then lifted up what Lily had spotted in the bag earlier. A lacy eggshell-white corset. “And besides, a modest size is in fashion at the moment!”

Her other hand hadn’t left Lily’s breast. Lily fought to control her breathing. Motley’s touch was gentler now, but even just the feeling of Motley’s soft, warm hand touching her naked breast was almost too much to bear. Lily’s heart was pounding, and focus as she tried on anything else—the words Motley was saying, the prettiness of Motley’s eyes, the feel of Ayika’s steady, winding circles—

With a choked involuntary exhale, she flinched back away from Motley’s hand.

Motley didn’t seem to notice. She was setting aside the dress to lift the corset to Lily’s chest.

But Lily heard laughter on both sides.

“Mistress,” Enid cooed sweetly in her ear, keeping her voice very soft so Motley wouldn’t hear, “is everything alright?”

“Y-Yes,” Lily breathed. She forced herself to stay still as Motley leaned in to wrap the corset around her front, tried not to whimper as Motley guided her breasts into place... as Motley wrapped her arms around her to fix the corset into place...

“Mistress,” Ayika whispered, with a confidential intimacy to her words as she cupped Lily’s ear, “you know Motley means no... impropriety in her acts.”

“I kn-know.” Lily barely mouthed the words. She looked away from the mirrors, unable to bear it any longer.

“She’s just so very eager to take care of her Mistress.” Enid’s breath was hot against Lily’s cheek. Lily couldn’t help but shiver as she felt Enid’s hands working to tie the laces of the corset Motley held in place. “You wouldn’t ever think anything... *untoward* of her, would you?”

“You don’t want us to talk to her for you, *do* you, Mistress?” Ayika purred. “To tell her how much of an *effect* she’s having on your delicate virgin body, so that she knows to stop?” Circles. So many slow, soothing circles...

Motley was humming to herself as she waited for Enid to finish with the laces. Her body was pressed up against Lily, arms encircling Lily’s chest. She wasn’t looking at Lily. Her head was ducked down against Lily’s shoulder, and all Lily could see of her was an arched back and ample bustle.

No, that wasn’t a bustle. Her hips were just like that. Lily didn’t want to stare, but there was nowhere else...

Lily shook her head minutely. Her arms were starting to get tired, but she didn’t dare lower them—especially when the three were so close.

“Why, Mistress, you’re so tense!” Ayika’s breath tickled Lily’s ear. Her hand continued to draw those gentle spirals, around and around... “It’s okay, Miss. It’s safe to relax here.”

Lily’s tongue wet her lips. She nodded.

“We’re your handmaidens, after all,” Enid purred. Her hand ran up Lily’s arm. “*All yours*. We only want to understand how to help you. It’s the service handmaidens provide for their ladies.”

Lily nodded again. She knew that. She was... she was reading too much into this.

“This is how handmaidens *are* with their Mistress,” Ayika cooed. Her spare hand ran down Lily’s side. Her other continued the gentle spirals, and Lily felt like her dizzy mind was starting to follow that hand, to circle around and around... “You don’t need to worry about anything with us. You can tell us everything. Trust us with everything.”

Something about the endless circles drew Lily's focus in. Maybe it was her desperation to focus on anything but Motley pressed against her, anything but the hands trailing over her nearly naked body. She flinched slightly from Ayika's hand on her hip, but only slightly.

"Please stay still, Miss," Motley said softly. "Enid, are the, um, laces done yet?"

"Soon, Motley~!" Enid said sweetly. "Just stay where you are. Unless you don't like being close to the Mistress?"

Lily's cheeks heated up. It seemed like Enid was taking a suspiciously long time, but...

"N-No! Um, verily, not!" Lily felt Motley's heart pounding. "It's actually, um, quite—I mean, I shouldn't say I don't like it, for in truth, um, well—"

"Relax, Miss," Ayika murmured in Lily's ear, pulling her attention back in. Swirl. *Swirl*. The circling strokes started to deepen slightly, pushing in more, massaging between her shoulder blades, and Lily felt like she was being guided to sway with them. Maybe it was to adjust her position to make the corset easier to lace. "Just let your handmaidens take care of you."

"I..."

"Shh." Ayika's exploring hand returned to stroke Lily's hair. "Oh, My Lady, you have such *beautiful* hair."

Lily's toes curled.

"You must let us style it for you later!" Enid's fingers joined Ayika's, running through Lily's locks and scratching Lily's scalp. "We'll have you looking like a *doll*. No one at the Harvest Ball will be able to resist admiring such a *pretty girl*."

Lily's breath caught. She couldn't help it any longer. Her head lifted, and she met her own eyes.

She saw herself standing stiff, hands clasped high above her head as if posing for a painting. Or as if bound. Her blonde hair was done into a tight bun for basic practicality's sake, but in this light, it seemed to shimmer. Her plump cheeks were bright red, and her body was almost totally still as the three beautiful girls pressed in around her.

She was swaying slightly, though. Swaying with Ayika's hand.

Her heart was pounding. She'd never had so many girls so... close to her before. They smelled nice, and they were so pretty, and the way they were talking about her, the way they smiled and cooed...

The fingers circled around and around, pressing in deeper. Her body followed Ayika's hand as if puppeted, swaying to and fro. To help Enid tie the corset laces, wasn't it? To help them dress her.

She looked at Enid through the mirror. The buxom redhead had one hand climbing up Lily's arm and the other at work behind her. Her lips were parted in a grin, but her eyes still seemed cold. Calculating.

She saw Motley pressed against her, slight and adorable, with those generous hips wiggling slightly as if in discomfort, or overwhelmed shyness... so shameless, and yet so skittish, so adorable and sweet... Lily had never seen a girl smile at her like that...

And Ayika...

Ayika's one hand gently guided Lily's sways and turns. The other stroked Lily's pretty hair. And Ayika was staring directly at the mirror, smiling over Lily's shoulder. She seemed to meet Lily's eyes, and that gentle knowing look made Lily feel weak inside.

Pretty. These girls thought she was pretty. She'd gotten so used to servants calling her handsome, or dashing, or... but.

Pretty.

She watched herself swallow.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Enid and Ayika giggled softly. Lily watched in the reflection as Ayika leaned in close to whisper in her ear, watched herself leaning down to meet her...

"Of course, Miss," Ayika purred, her hand circling. Her free hand left Lily's hair to lightly touch her arm. "You can lower these now."

"O-Oh?" Lily started to oblige, blinking at the reflection. She looked almost... dazed. Swaying. The room was so warm, and the tight corset limited her breathing ever-so-slightly. It was so much stimulation, so much closeness...

"Motley, silly girl," she heard Enid chirp, "why are you still down there? It's been laced."

"Wh—" Motley started back, blinking wide eyes up at Lily. Her face was bright pink. "You—but you said it was still being—"

Lily looked at herself, and her breath caught.

She *did* have breasts. The corset pushed them up and together, showing them off beautifully. They were modest, but still... nice.

With her waistline and thick thighs, they gave her almost the indication of an hourglass figure.

She bit her lip. Happy bubbly delights were rippling inside her at the sight. She watched herself swaying with Ayika's hand, and almost smiled shyly at how the breasts jiggled ever-so-slightly...

"Get the dress, Motley," Ayika said sweetly. "It's time to get the Mistress ready for display."

Motley smiled and bent over to retrieve it, then rose, holding the gown up above her head for Lily to see.

Lily swayed and stared at the dress, and longing sprouted in her heart.

So did anxiety, which grew faster.

It was... bold. Unlike the comfortable, simple chemise, this gown had an extremely generous sweetheart neckline that would probably barely cover the corset. The shoulders were bare. The hem was much, much longer, trailing down past the legs, but the material itself...

The dress was lace. It was diaphanous, ghostly, with a long slit running down one leg. It could be mistaken for a wedding dress, but Lily had never seen any bride wear a dress so provocative.

And it was going on her.

And it was beautiful. Lily's heart was a frantic fluttering thing as she stared at the ethereal gown.

And swayed. Ayika's hand kept circling between her shoulder blades, guiding her motions. Soothing her like a wild animal.

"Isn't it *so* pretty?" Enid cooed in her ear.

"I..." Lily swallowed, trying to control her voice. She had to say no to this. She could. Her witch had already picked something out, it was tradition, she could...

"You would look so beautiful in it," Ayika murmured. "Wouldn't she, Motley?"

"Oh, um." Motley peeked around the dress, blinked at it, then back up at Lily. Her cheeks reddened.

"Yes! Um, very—very lovely, m'miss! I mean, m'lady! Miss! Lady Lily!"

"You would turn every head," Enid murmured.

Ayika and Enid were gently encouraging Lily's arms to lower, but she realized they had nowhere to fall but over Enid's and Ayika's shoulders. She tried to stop lowering them. But they felt strangely heavy all of a sudden. Enid's and Ayika's hands didn't seem to be tugging too firmly, but with her whole body swaying, with her mind wandering...

"Just relax, Mistress," Ayika cooed. "Focus on the dress. See its pretty lacework? The nice... swirling... whorling... patterns...?"

The dress. Lily nodded dumbly, letting herself sway from side to side with the gentle circle motions. "Um... it's very, um... m-my floral witch, she already..."

She felt tongue-tied. Her words were slurred as if she was half-asleep.

"You'll be wearing her colors, Mistress," Enid cut in easily. "We can make sure of it. And oh, how the red will complement the white of this dress."

"It will draw everyone's gaze to your pretty eyes."

Her eyes. Lily stared at her own pale blue eyes, which seemed strangely glassy as she swayed. "Yes, um... but..."

Motley was distracted holding up the dress. Lily's arms were settling over Ayika's and Enid's shoulders now, and she felt the pair creeping in closer. She had a faint certainty that she should object, but her thoughts felt so fuzzy...

Ayika's free hand crept down her side again, her fingers wandering to and fro. The touches felt almost... exploratory. Experimental, as those fingertips drifted about, testing what touches earned responses.

It didn't feel hard not to squirm anymore. Squirming felt... distant. Lily just swayed and stared at herself, stared at Ayika, who was so pretty, so lovely, so gentle and caring...

"Is this alright, Mistress?" Ayika whispered in her ear. Her hand slipped back to Lily's rear.

"Um. It's..." Lily blinked slowly, lashes fluttering. She had very nice lashes. People had always said that. Ayika's hand was on her butt now. "It's, um... your hand is..."

"She means the dress, Mistress." Enid's tone was almost teasing. She leaned in very, very close, and Lily gasped softly as her voice poured right into Lily's ear. "*Or is something else on your mind?*"

Sway. Sway.

“N-No,” Lily managed.

“Oh.” She saw Enid cock her head innocently. “Are Mistress’s ears sensitive?”

“Um.” Lily’s thoughts swam in thick treacle. “Um.”

Ayika’s lips brushed her other ear. “Enid, you *mustn’t overwhelm her~*” Her voice was as thick and sweet as fresh cream. “She still hasn’t answered my question, the *silly, lovely Lady~*”

Lily didn’t even have a chance to hold it back. Holding it back didn’t even occur to her. She just felt Ayika guide her in closer, so she leaned in closer, and Ayika’s voice and breath filled her ear, and she...

A tiny moan escaped her.

She stared dumbly into the mirror and saw the two maids appear to smirk.

Those smiles, that felt... that seemed like...

She tried to find the words for the thoughts of fear and worry. But they just weren’t there anymore.

Sway. Sway...

“And what of Mistress’s *derriere?*” Ayika asked sweetly, giving Lily’s butt a gentle squeeze.

Lily squeaked. Heat blazed inside her, wild and helpless. They couldn’t! They couldn’t just... she sputtered and squirmed, stammering uselessly...

She saw the handmaidens’ smirks widen.

“For the *dress* Mistress,” Ayika cooed. “I mean for the dress!”

Lily went still. Her voice was barely a whisper. “The... d-dress...?”

“Why, My Lady!” Ayika batted her eyelashes. “Is something the matter?”

Lily blinked slowly, trying in vain to clear the strange drowsy haze. “But. But I.”

“Shh. *Relax.*” Ayika’s hand swirled gently. Lily felt herself guided in closer to Enid. She watched herself following Ayika’s hand like a hand puppet. The sight was almost a little comical, and she saw a confused smile drifting across her pretty face. “Let your handmaidens help you.”

“We only want to *help you, m’lady*,” Enid whispered in her ear. Lily shivered as she felt fingers sinking into her hair. “Does this *please you*?”

“Wh-wh...” Lily’s eyelashes felt heavy as Enid’s hand gently ran over her hair, nails brushing her scalp. “... oh...”

Being petted felt... nice.

Of course girls had flirted with her before. Lily had been trained to resist seductions, temptations, even a few hypnotic tricks. Somehow all of that was suddenly gone. It felt like her whole framework had fallen apart, like now that people knew she was a girl, all her armor had melted away and left her just as exposed, just as raw, as she’d been the first time a merchant’s daughter had tried to tempt her into trading a kiss.

Her gaze sank to Motley. The little maid was watching her, blinking slowly, dazedly. She seemed to be swaying a little, too, matching Lily’s moments as she idly readied the gown. As if just watching this was drawing Motley in as well.

Drawing her into... what?

“*Oh~*” Enid’s voice took on a new quality, and Lily noticed in the mirror that her eyes had lit up. She hadn’t seen Enid fully smile before. She had a very pretty smile. “Oh, Mistress, how *silly* of us!”

“W...What?” Something was... wrong here.

“What have you noticed, Enid?” Ayika asked, ignoring Lily entirely.

“These *gloves* of the Mistress.” Enid’s voice dripped with glee. “She hasn’t taken them off this whole time! Not even for her measurements!”

Lily stopped breathing.

“My, my, so she hasn’t!” Ayika turned and smiled at Lily in the reflection. “And why might that be?”

Lily saw Motley’s head shaking slightly. As though the little maid was watching a play she knew the ending of but could do nothing to interfere in.

Lily felt the same way.

“We had better take them off!” Enid giggled. Her hand crept to Lily’s arm, draped weakly over Enid’s shoulder. “So they aren’t in the way.”

“W. Wai...t.” Lily struggled to find her voice. To find any words at all. This was... they *couldn't* mean...

Miss Bell's wonderful sweet laughter echoed in her head. Those delicate hands, that wonderful touch, the tendrils' delicate, sensitizing stings...

Ayika was tugging at the glove. Lily's whole body started to tremble. She needed to pull her arms away, but they felt like lead. Ayika's hand was still puppeting her. None of her muscles were obeying.

“Let us help you, Mistress,” Enid hissed. She was pulling off the glove on Lily's other hand.

Lily's mind started to crackle and spit, like a dying fire someone had just flung a fresh pine log into, but she still felt paralyzed. Captive. She tried to speak, to explain, but her tongue wasn't obeying her, and all she managed was a weak whine as the gloves started to slip off, as even that sensation started to send shivers of pleasure through her... no, no, *no*, she could feel tingling down there, her hands were still so, so, so—

“W-Wait.”

Lily's thoughts slowed. She, Enid and Ayika all looked down to stare at Motley.

Motley had stopped swaying. The little maid squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them with a dazed-looking frown. “Wait,” she repeated weakly. “You... Enid, Ayika, you...” She squirmed. “... you *c-can't*...”

And Lily saw something harden in Enid's and Ayika's smiles.

“What's that, Motley?” Ayika asked softly, her lips still right next to Lily's ear. Lily's mind felt like syrup at this point. “We *can't* what?”

Motley squirmed, clearly overwhelmed by the sudden attention. “Y-You—” Her voice came out as a feeble squeak. “I mean, you m-mustn't!”

On either side of her, Lily felt Enid and Ayika going very still. The tugging on her gloves stopped. The swirling hand on Lily's back continued, but she could sense that the handmaidens were not focusing on her anymore.

“Oh.” Enid's eyes glittered like sharpened silver. She was still stroking Lily's hair, but her other hand let go of Lily's glove and dipped down to cup Motley's cheek.

It was a seemingly gentle touch. But Lily saw how Motley flinched.

“*Is. That. So?*”

“I.” Motley’s chest was rising and falling rapidly. Her head bowed, and her voice trembled. “I, I, I, um—”

The hand lunged to grab Motley’s chin and force her head back up, squishing together Motley’s plump cheeks. Motley let out a panicked squeak.

“Sweet Motley,” Enid cooed, “what exactly *mustn’t* we be doing?”

Motley visibly swallowed.

Lily’s eyelids were drooping. She knew something was wrong. All of it felt wrong. But... it felt so hard to process any of it. She felt trapped, imprisoned inside her own mind, her own uncertainties. Was she overreacting? Overthinking? Were the maids just teasing each other?

Lily swayed, lashes fluttering. Speaking up felt impossible. Interrupting felt impossible. Lost in a kind of dreamy distance, she watched the scene unfold.

“I only...” Motley rubbed her thighs together. “I didn’t mean...”

“Oh, *Motley*.” Lily could hear the sneer in Enid’s voice. “We’re just taking *care* of the Mistress, aren’t we?”

“We aren’t doing anything Mistress wouldn’t want,” Ayika purred in Lily’s ear. “This is all fine, isn’t it?”

The hand pushed slightly between her shoulders. Lily found herself nodding. Right. This was all fine. This was all... normal.

Wasn’t it?

Her head swam. It was all so mortifying. Every little touch, every careless grope, every insidious whisper. She’d *never* let people treat her like this before, but now she was drifting in unfamiliar waters, drifting deep. She knew some of it couldn’t be normal, couldn’t be right, but where were the lines drawn? What parts were normal? What parts were her overthinking, oversexualizing?

And how was she supposed to handle telling them to stop? Would she seem cruel, or irrational, or pathetic, or... perverted?

Would her new handmaidens hate her?

Would they even stop if she told them to?

Wasn't it safer to just... sit still and let it happen?

Her head lolled with the last nod. She heard Ayika giggling softly, whispering wordless approval in her ear. Her cheeks were hot. It wasn't as if all of it was... *unpleasant*. That wasn't the issue.

It wasn't unpleasant at all. She *could* just let her eyes close and let it all happen to her. Could just sink, and sway, and let them tease her, let them touch her... she could handle all this later...

It sounded easy. It sounded safe. It sounded nice.

But she saw the way Motley faltered at her nodding, and something twisted inside her at the sight.

"There, you see, Motley?" Lily watched Enid's hand slowly slide down until her fingers were wrapped around Motley's neck. "You must be good for Mistress. And *Mistress is calling, little maid~*"

Motley instantly stiffened, and then seemed to go limp. Her lips parted, but briefly all that came out was air. It was as though she was trying to find the shapes of words. Searching for inner strength that just wasn't there.

Lily whimpered softly. She knew this, *this* was definitely wrong somehow, but she couldn't... Ayika's hand kept guiding her slow, dizzy sways, and Ayika's other hand was still touching hers through the glove...

"*Mistress is calling*," Enid whispered, as her fingers caressed Motley's throat. Lily didn't see her other hand anymore, but she thought she heard the faint chiming of a bell.

"W-W..." Lily licked her lips. Her whole body swayed, following Ayika's swirling touches, lost in that nice, dreamy daze... she wanted to speak, but she felt like she was underwater, and pushing up out of those depths felt so exhausting, and it would be so easy to...

"Y-Yes..." Motley whispered. Her lips remained parted. Her eyes were glassy and lost. "Yes, Mistress.."

With a wicked laugh, Enid released Motley's neck and reached down under Motley's neckline, groping hungrily as Motley squeaked and squirmed—

"T-That's enough."

All three maids went still.

Lily blinked. Then she cleared her throat and said, louder, “That will be *enough*, Enid.”

She still felt like she was a little in that dreamlike state, but whatever trance she’d spilled into was fading fast. Ayika’s hand had fallen away. A part of Lily missed the gentle touch, but that part of her wasn’t at the reins right now.

“Mistress,” Enid said, turning to smile innocently at Lily, “we were just...”

“No, thank you.” She drew herself up straight and folded her arms before her chest. “No explanation is required.”

“But...” Ayika pulled away. Lily tried to ignore a slight pang of longing. “But My Lady...”

“Mistress will do.” Lily smiled coolly between the pair, then more gently at Motley. Her royal training was finally trickling back in. “And you will *not* touch Motley like that again, Enid. Not in my house.”

Enid blinked rapidly. So did Motley.

“Unless she requests it,” Lily added quickly. “I can tell you feel very fondly towards her, but I won’t tolerate you expressing that through wanton cruelty.” She arched her eyebrows. “If you love her, you should tell her so. Understood?”

The implication had its intended effect. Enid went beetred and lurched away from Motley as if the smaller maid was ablaze. She sputtered, shaking her head frantically. “I—I’m not—”

“Additionally.” Lily took in a deep breath, then took a step away from the mirrors. She couldn’t handle seeing herself in so little right now. “I know you three come from Wellmint, and I understand things are done differently there. This will be an adjustment period for you.” She tried to put some sympathy into her smile. “But you should know that everyone here is held to the same standards to which I hold myself. The other servants will not tolerate it if they see you misbehaving, especially towards someone who can’t defend herself. You will comport yourself with kindness, or you *will* be sent back. Am I understood?”

Enid only returned Lily’s stare briefly before lowering her head. “Yes, Mistress.”

Ayika and even Motley echoed the consent. Enid and Ayika didn’t meet her eyes; Motley was staring at her with eyes the size of saucers.

Inside, Lily had too many emotions to name. Far too many, and they all seemed to clog her lungs, and she could barely breathe. She knew for sure that Motley had been getting mistreated, but she still felt totally unable to wrap her head around any of what the maids had done to *her*. What parts of that had

been too much? The gloves? The whispers? Had she let them go too far? Had she already ruined their respect for her? Had she made them angry? Would they not touch her like that again?

Touch her like Ayika had touched her, in that tender, secret way, that way that made her feel so safe and small and... guided...

And the way Motley looked at her now... adoring. Worshipful. Like she'd seen the moons for the first time.

Not a trace of confusion or doubt came forth in her tone. A Princess's voice was her most refined instrument, and any Princess with a real, serious claim to the throne had to learn to hone it into a weapon.

She let her smile relax as she gazed at Motley, feeling her cheeks heating just a little. "Now, I do still need to get dressed. Enid, perhaps you had better take a break. Go and get some fresh air. The gardens are a beautiful place to clear your head."

Enid nodded glumly and went to the door.

Lily truly hoped the walk would help. She didn't want to send Enid back. She knew how a maid would likely be treated for failing at a task like this. Oh, what horribly delicate games the Rose Valley forced her to play.

One day that would change. She'd promised herself that.

"I will go, too, Mistress," Ayika said. She smiled gently toward the departing Enid. "I know Enid very well. I might be able to help her through this."

"Oh." Lily nodded minutely. She'd almost sent Ayika away, too, in truth. But Ayika hadn't done anything to Motley. She'd only touched Lily. And Lily had sort of... hoped Ayika would stay. "Of course. Thank you, Ayika."

Ayika curtsied, and the pair took their leave.

And Lily was left alone with Motley, who was still staring at her like a star come down to earth.

Lily wet her lips. "Now, Motley—"

"Yes, Mistress!" Motley squealed, snatching up the dress and giving her a broad, adoring smile. She positively bounced in place. "Let me help you get dressed!"

Despite her doubts, Lily couldn't hold in a small giggle. "Of—of course, Motley."

“Oh, Mistress...” Motley moved in close, batting her eyelashes. “You are going to look so *beautiful*.”

Lily returned the smile, gazing into Motley’s bright eyes.

She felt her heart starting to flutter again.

* * *

“Little Motley should keep Her Ladyship occupied for some time,” Ayika said coolly, as she ground something in a small mortar and pestle. She gave Enid a smirk. “Don’t you almost wish you could be there to see it?”

“You could have been.” Enid rolled her eyes. She was leaned against the tower windowsill, fiddling with a folded paper bird.

“Oh, I wanted to check in!” Ayika released the pestle to put a hand to her lips in mock concern. “I know this *adjustment period* is difficult for you.”

Enid snorted. “That condescending brat.”

“You know, I think she meant it.” Ayika looked out the window at the forests and houses below. She returned to her task, taking care to thoroughly crush the crystals and tea leaves in the mortar. “She was certainly sorry to see you leave.”

“I’ll bet she was.” Enid finished unfolding the paper and started writing, jotting down three separate bullet point lists. “So, who are you sending to?” She flashed Ayika a smirk. “Other than Wellmint, I mean.”

“Oh...” Ayika smiled lazily. She lifted the mortar and carefully poured its contents into the censer on the sill. She blew on it, and the mixture began to smolder. “I think the Daughters of Southwish will be quite grateful to learn about those adorably sensitive ears.”

Enid giggled. “Oh, no doubt.” She finished writing, carefully folded the paper three times, and drew out a small pair of brass scissors. The scissors’ blades were styled like the beak of a heron. “For me, you know how sweetly the Princess of Redport pays for any excuse to play dressup. Did you see how the Mistress eyed us in our dresses?”

They both tittered. Ayika took Enid’s pen and retrieved three identical slips of paper from her bag. She nibbled on the pen’s tip, then started covering each slip with her spidery scrawl. Each time she finished a slip, she rolled it up and fed it into the burning incense, incinerating each slip instantly.

“I imagine all of our patrons had the same condition on who *not* to send to,” she remarked.

“Naturally.” Out of the corner of her eye, Ayika saw Enid cutting out a shape. Little paper birds fluttered out from the shreds and took off out the opened window, to be immediately swept away by the breeze. “Who would want the competition with that upstart? Especially one so spiteful.”

“She might take it too far,” Ayika agreed. She finished burning the last slip. With a quick blow, the ashes and incense were dispersed into the outside winds. She gingerly picked up the warm censer and dropped it back in her bag. She spun on her heel and made for the stairs.

“Oh, definitely.” Enid laughed. “I’d say she is the one woman we *must* not send it to. One who would chop down a willow if it cast her ivy in shadow.” She turned and followed behind.

“How much did she offer you?”

“Enough.” Enid winked. “You?”

Ayika smiled happily. “More than enough.”

They hooked arms and descended down the stairs, heading to the courtyard to, as Her Ladyship had suggested, ‘get some fresh air’.

This was shaping up to be a most exciting year.