

Becoming Humble

For CreepyJ

By TheSpiralledEye

Lord Edward is sick of his spoiled younger sister's attitude so he decides to make a deal with a wandering herbalist with a skill for the occult to teach her some humility through transformation and hard work.

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Edward groaned as his carriage pulled to a stop for the fourth time. Though he already knew the cause he pulled back the curtain in time for his footman to appear with an apologetic look on his face.

“I am sorry m’lord, Lady Beatrice insisted we stop.”

“Again? What on Earth for this time?”

“She says she feels ill.”

Edward rolled his eyes.

“Of course she does.” With a huff he stepped out of his carriage and into the warm afternoon sun.

The scenery was full of beautiful rolling hills framed by dark forests in the distance. Romania was a beautiful country, a far cry from the hustle and bustle of London and Edward found it suited him. He had hoped that by getting his spoiled sister out of the city to enjoy some travel she might gain some clarity and humility. So far, his plan was failing miserably.

Not only did Beatrice insist on travelling in separate carriages because sharing one all the way across England would be ‘too crowded’, which had slowed their travels considerably, she insisted on stopping constantly. If it was because she simply enjoyed the scenery, that would be one thing, but it never was. It was always so she could pout and complain; Edward suspected she simply wanted everybody as miserable as she insisted on being.

“Beatrice, what is it this time?” Edward asked as he banged on the door and she pulled the curtain aside.

Her golden hair was in perfect ringlets around her face, which seemed even more sharp since it was pulled into a sneer.

“The road is too bumpy, it is making me feel ill.” She insisted, “If this backwards place cannot be bothered to put in proper cobblestone I do not see why it is worth visiting.”

“We are only a few miles from the estate I have hired for our stay, you are only delaying your own comfort.” Edward scolded, “You are far too old to be acting like a child, Bea.”

“Just because you are happy to traipse through the mud, ruining your good shoes and mingling with common folk does not mean I am.” She replied snootily, “We have blue blood, remember?”

“How could I ever forget when you wont stop talking about it.” Edward grumbled, heading back to his carriage and giving the order not to stop under any circumstances, no matter what his sister said. He was still the lord of House Harrington after all, not her.

Edward couldn't help but feel somewhat guilty for Beatrice's entitled attitude. She had been only ten when their father and mother passed, leaving him, at only seventeen, in charge of her upbringing. He had given her all he had assumed a young lady of society needed, the finest governesses and finishing lessons their money and prestige could buy. After losing her parents so young he had wanted to make sure his sister wanted for nothing. Of course, wanting for nothing breeds entitlement and a spoiled attitude; a lesson he'd learned far too late.

He was trying to make up for it now with trips such as this but all it got him was a headache from her constant complaining. As they approached the estate he had hired he was pleased to see it was a rather humble affair compared to their home in London. Only two storeys with a charming little garden and ivy growing up the old stones. He had organised for a small staff in the hopes that having fewer people at her beck and call would help Beatrice learn some manners. But as they pulled up and he watched her get out of her carriage and pull a face he felt his heart beginning to drop; something told him this plan was going to fail as well.

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“A month!?”

Edward sipped at his tea, taking the moment to breathe out heavily.

“Sit down Beatrice, this sort of yelling is not becoming of a young lady.”

“I am hardly being treated like a lady in this squalor!”

The ‘squalor’ in question was a well maintained drawing room, with rustic style furniture and paintings of the surrounds. The house was lovely, humble compared to the grandeur Beatrice was used to, yes, but hardly squalor.

“This place is awful, there is nothing to do, nobody to visit, no parties to attend. I can’t even hold one of my own because there is nobody to invite!”

“You could always go visit the local village, it’s quite a lovely quaint place.” Edward suggested. “All the staff are locals, I am sure one would be happy to show you around.”

Edward was sure they would all rather hang themselves than do that, but he’d take anything at this point.

“That dirty place? There is nothing there worth seeing. I cannot believe I am missing the end of the season in London for this.”

She threw up her hands in frustration before curling them into fists and stalking off. Edward silently cursed her; Beatrice was blessed with natural beauty and unusual height for a woman. She stood as tall as he did at six feet and with her golden hair and delicate features, she cut quite the figure. He was sure if she wasn’t quite so bratty, somebody would have approached him about taking her hand by now.

He took another sip of tea and smiled; it was a lovely brew. A local one according to the cook.

“I think I will take a trip into town.” he told the serving girl, “Ask the footman to prepare the carriage. I have no desire to stay here with my sister stalking around like an

angry poltergeist. Perhaps you can take me to the maker of this tea, I'd like to put in an order to take back to England."

Loathe as he was to admit it; Beatrice was right about the village being a bit beneath them. It was a simple place, with thatched roofs and small wooden houses, still the people seemed friendly enough, at least the ones who hadn't had the unpleasant experience of meeting his sister first.

The tea grower lived in a small hut at the edge of town and possessed a huge, but wild looking garden full of herbs and flowering bushes. Edward felt distinctly out of place standing on her doorstep in his fancy clothes but did his best to act as if this were the sort of place he visited all the time.

The door opened and a short woman with long flowing black hair opened the door, the tresses brushed her ankles as she walked and her warm brown eyes immediately put Edward at ease. Despite looking nothing like her, he couldn't help but feel reminded of his mother. There was something maternal and peaceful about this woman.

"Lord Edward." He gave her a little nod and the woman bowed awkwardly, as if she wasn't sure she was supposed to.

"Esmeralda Petrov." She replied, "You may call me Auntie Esme, everybody does."

"Lovely to meet you," Edward smiled, "I wanted to tell you in person how lovely the tea you sent to the house was, may I pay you for more to take back with me to England. I hope to convince my sister to give it a try, I know she would like it if she would simply give it a try."

"Ah yes, I believe I heard her complaining when I made the delivery." Auntie Esme smiled, leading him into her shack which smelt strongly of herbs. "Something about not letting 'filthy peasant leaves near her delicate mouth'."

Edward winced.

"Yes, that sounds like her. I apologise. I have been trying to humble her a bit with trips like these but it seems the only effect is making her even more entitled."

"You ladies like that need a lesson, with a firm hand." Auntie Esme said matter of factly, "I may be able to help."

Edward doubted this peasant woman would be able to do anything; Beatrice barely listened to him. She wasn't going to give this poor herbalist a single iota of her attention. Yet as she poured him another cup of tea in a small, chipped mug and began to explain her idea Edward felt a sense of hope and guilt merge in his gut. It was drastic, some might even say too much, but he'd tried everything. Perhaps it was time for more drastic measures.

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Beatrice sipped at her tea, the fine porcelain cup resting against her soft thin lips. She sighed, letting the warm air flow from her mouth in utter relaxation. It had been days without a good cup of tea and she was thankful her brother finally relented and allowed her to drink from the stash he'd brought from England. She knew he'd been lying when he said he'd not bought any along.

"See, now this is much finer than that...hot leaf water, locals call tea." She said primly, placing the empty cup down on the table. "You may be older but I am the one with the refined sense of taste. You need to trust me on this more."

Edward said nothing, just stared at her intently and she took that as a sign of victory. Beatrice felt her brow furrow.

"Brother, you've not touched your own drink at all. Do not let this go to waste."

"This is a brew made especially for you, sister." Edward replied slowly, "To teach you a lesson in humility."

Beatrice blinked in shock; then realisation and humiliation flushed her cheeks.

"This is that local swill!"

"You just said you liked it." Edward smirked.

"That is because my palette is obviously shot!" Beatrice cried, "I need to go back to England before I lose all sense of refinement!"

“What you need is a sense of humility.” Spoke a short, dark skinned woman as she stepped out from behind the drawing room curtain.

Beatrice felt her blood boil, especially when Edward remained calm; he must have known she was there the sneak!

“How dare you hide in our house you filthy peasant!”

“I may be a peasant but I am hardly filthy, though I am gratified to know you enjoy my brew. I hope the side effects are illuminating for you.”

“Side effects?” Beatrice felt her heart begin to thunder as she turned to her brother. “You let a stranger poison me!?”

Her voice was so high pitched it even hurt her ears but she didn't care. She could not believe her brother was even fraternising with somebody of such low class, let alone let her slip something into her drink! Her stomach churned and she could be sure if it was fear or whatever toxin she'd been secretly given.

“You are not poisoned silly girl, simply changed. Or at least you will be.” The woman explained, “By the end of the hour the transformation will be complete and you will be forced to walk in somebody else's shoes.”

Transformation? Beatrice felt her temper flare even further. She had never been so furious as she stormed over to her brother who was somehow still sipping tea as if this were a perfectly normal Sunday afternoon luncheon.

“You let some sort of insane witch woman poison me.” She seethed.

“She is not insane.” Edward said calmly, “And frankly, I have tried everything to improve your attitude, if dabbling in some...occult herbalism is what it takes, I will do it.”

Beatrice screamed, just a wordless noise of frustration and anger. She had always gotten her way by doing that ever since she was a girl; people hated the sound of a shrieking woman. Normally even Edward gave in after a few seconds but today he stubbornly refused. No matter how much Beatrice stomped her feet or screamed until her face was red and her throat was raw, he ignored her.

She opened her mouth to take another breath when suddenly a wave of dizziness swept through her. She wobbled on her feet, stumbling to find her footing only to find the world shifting in perspective; she was getting shorter. Beatrice watched as her long dress began to pool on the floor as she shrunk down. She had always loved how tall she was, it gave her thin frame an almost willowy appearance and made it all the more easy to intimidate people into giving her what she wanted. Now she had lost almost a foot in height and was closer to the short foreign woman than she was her brother, who had always been her equal in that regard.

Beatrice couldn't decide what was more humiliating; the fact that this was even somehow possible, or that she had an audience. Her brother was hiding a smug grin behind his teacup and the woman was smiling proudly. Beatrice grimaced at them both before turning tail and running. She didn't care who saw her as she fled through the house and into the room she had been given. It was far too small and she hated it; but at least it was private.

She wanted to dramatically fling herself onto the bed but misjudged the distance thanks to her change in height and ended up throwing herself on the floor instead. She was tempted to stay there and thump her fists into the floor like a child but even she wasn't that immature. She sat up watching as the milky skin on the back of her hands turned a dark shade of olive.

In horror she turned to the mirror and watched as her pale golden tresses changed to dark black ones. The carefully made ringlets springing into wild, natural curls that no amount of pins could contain. She could only weep pitifully as the gem encrusted clips fell to the floor as her hair became even more wild and unmaintained. It suited her new complexion; her skin remained blissfully soft but gone was her ghostly pale pallor. No amount of powder could ever make her olive skin look white now.

Eventually, the changes seemed to end; her blue eyes now brown, her build now slightly more thick and curvy, and her features a little wider. Even if she tried her lips couldn't thin the way she wanted to. She looked like a local and she hated it. As she stood her dress gathered unflattering around her ankles; she looked like a little girl wearing her mothers dress. Not to mention how tight it was around her arms and bust now that they were slightly wider. The sound of the door opening made her turn and she snarled as the strange woman walked in. Uninvited.

“How dare you walk into my room without even knocking first? Do you country bumpkins have no sense of propriety at all.”

The woman raised an eyebrow.

“Would you have let me in if I had?”

“No.”

“Well then, if it weren't for this silly little conversation I'd say I saved us some time.” She said sternly, “My name is Esmerelda by the way, you will call me Auntie Esme.”

“I will call you nothing! I will have you hung for this! Right after you reverse this!” Beatrice hissed.

“No, I don't think you will. Your brother and I had a long talk about your nasty attitude, one unfitting a lady of your stature. We have worked out a deal. You are coming to live and work for me until it comes time for you to return to London.”

“Work?” Beatrice balked. “I am a woman of the nobility! I will not lower myself to such a thing. Menial peasant labour is for, well, peasants!”

The woman smiled; it was somehow warm and motherly and ice cold all at the same time.

“My dear, you are a peasant now.”

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The trip to the village made Beatrice's feet ache. She had never had to walk so far in her life, almost a full mile! In cheap woven shoes with thin leather soles tacked to them no less. She did not fit a single one of her fine gowns any longer so of course, she had no choice but to wear the clothes Auntie Esme had brought her. A simple dress and smock made from some sort of rough cotton or wool that itched terribly and a simple head scarf made from what looked like an off cut of fabric.

Beatrice didn't know what the point of it was; it did nothing to tame her wild, dark curls that kept flying out at all angles. The only good thing about this body was that at the very least, nobody would recognise her.

She still couldn't believe Edward had kicked her out; the place they were staying was hardly paradise but it would look like heaven compared to whatever hovel Auntie Esme welcomed her into. And she used the word 'welcomed' lightly, as the older woman had been

nothing but superior and smug the entire walk. Beatrice couldn't wait till this was all over and she could put the dirty old hag in her place.

She looked at the lines on the older woman's face, the roughness of her hands; both signs of life outside in the hot sun and manual labour. Beatrice looked down at her own soft, delicate skin; how would it ever recover from almost a month of being forced to do...whatever it was peasants did. Dig in the dirt? Just the idea made her shudder.

When they finally arrived at Esme's house Beatrice's mood did not improve; the garden was just as wild as her hair and the old building looked as if it was half held up by the ivy that coated the walls. Surely her brother couldn't have known this was where she was to stay?

"Welcome, home." Auntie Esme smiled, pushing open the creaking door. To reveal the inside of the hovel.

It was crowded with furniture; tables, desks, chairs, cauldrons; and the air was thick with the scent of herbs and dirt. Bunches of dried herbs and flowers hung from the low ceiling and would have gotten in the way were she not so short now. In the corner she saw a wooden tub and pitcher which she assumed was the older woman's sad excuse for a washroom and then to her horror, in the other corner, a bed.

"This is just one room." Beatrice whispered, "And it's smaller than my room back at the estate!"

"Yes, and it's quite spacious considering I live alone, most of the time." Esme replied. "I have a spare hay mattress, you shall sleep by the fire on it."

Beatrice couldn't believe what she was hearing; a hay mattress. Sleeping on the floor? This had gone beyond barbaric! It was too much, she simply couldn't handle the humiliation anymore and tears began to burn at her eyes. She turned to Auntie Esme, expecting the woman to finally see that her cruelty had gone too far but to her shock, the woman rolled her eyes.

"Come now, thousands upon thousands of people live in much worse conditions than this girl." She tutted, "It's about time you grew a thicker skin, if this makes you cry you are truly weak."

"But...but..."

“No buts, now, it’s getting late, let’s make dinner and get a good night’s sleep. You have your first day of chores tomorrow and it starts bright and early.”

Not one ounce of sympathy to be heard. Their dinner was a plain affair, boiled stew made from vegetables and a small amount of wild game that had been dried. It stuck in Beatrice’s throat and she felt her eyes burn as she thought back to the elaborate dinner her brother was probably enjoying right now. This tasted like nothing and she wished she could pour it on the floor where it belonged. But there were no better options available, save starving all night.

She already knew it would be hard; the mattress was so thin it barely did anything to comfort her. Not to mention the spikes of hay that poked into her still delicate skin all night. Her blanket was far too thin but she complained Esme simply pointed out there wasn’t another to add.

“I already gave up a blanket for you. I am not about to give up my other one.”

Beatrice grimace down at the itchy fabric around her legs.

“This was yours?”

“Of course it was, silly girl? Do you think I just keep spares laying around? If it were winter you’d be plum out of luck because I’d need it.”

Beatrice felt even more disgusted; sharing that woman’s blanket but with freezing her only other alternative she settled down and settled in for a night of tossing and turning.

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It felt as though she had barely closed her eyes when the rooster rudely awoke her at dawn. Esme was up and on her feet, cutting bread for breakfast before Beatrice could even rub the sleep from her eyes.

“Today we’ll start you off easy.” Esme said kindly, Beatrice didn’t trust the warmth in her voice at all. “To start, go and fetch a pail of water from the well in town, then when you’re back you can help me gather herbs.”

“But I’m tired.” Beatrice groaned, “And I haven’t even brushed my hair!”

She tried to comb her fingers through the long curls but got nowhere, no amount of trying could get those curls straight or even into a neat wave.

“Stop fussing girl, your hair looks fine as it is naturally, now go get that water.” Esme ordered.

Beatrice bit her lip. Maybe if she pretended to go along with this, Esme would think she’d learned her lesson and let her go home early. She picked up the wooden bucket and started down the dirt round to what was generously called the town square. The well was there, a thick rope tied to the post next to it, presumably to attach her bucket to.

Lacking any better idea she fastened the rope to the handle and lowered the bucket down, wincing as the rope stung her palms. One splash later she began to heave. She felt her cheeks turning pink and several young children began to snicker watching her struggle to lift a single bucket of water. It wasn’t her fault! It was much heavier than it should have been. After a full minute of struggling her arms burned and one for the older children, a boy who couldn’t be older than twelve, was full on laughing.

“Well you try then!” She spat, throwing the rope at him, “This bucket is big! Bigger than anything most people are supposed to lift I’ll bet! It would be just like Esme to give me an impossible task!”

With a cocky grin the boy took the rope and to her embarrassment, began to easily lift the bucket up the well only for the rope to suddenly go slack. He held up the end of the rope and made a face of disbelief.

“What sort of person can’t tie a knot?” He snickered.

Beatrice turned on her heels and stalked away from the laughing children, too embarrassed to even reply. Esme was none too pleased when she returned empty handed.

“We’ll have to make another one now.” She muttered, “And we’ll have no water. I’ll have to ask one of the neighbours for some.”

Beatrice then spent the next hour struggling to carry a heavy earthenware container full of water up to Esme’s house from the well after a neighbour filled it for her. That same boy was

there, Beatrice was sure he was hanging around just to watch her suffer. Then, Esme made her chop wood, or at least, she tried to. Beatrice could barely lift the tiny axe, let alone swing it hard enough to cut the sticks.

By the end of the day she was hot, tired and utterly humiliated. She was so tired and hungry she couldn't even complain about another meal of slop. She looked at the bathtub with longing; her skin felt filthy with sweat but until they could fetch more water, Esme had forbidden her from bathing. Unless she felt like doing another three or four trips with that heavy vase and find somebody willing to lend them a bucket. So she had no choice but to go to bed feeling miserable and sorry for herself.

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The next few days seemed to blur into one; cutting herbs, making a new bucket, eating and cooking her own food. Each day was much the same but to her surprise, each task slowly got a little easier each time. On the first day she had to really pull hard to get the herbs and vegetables out of the ground, often falling back on her ass. After a few days, she could pull them up one handed, she could even pull the new bucket out of the well!

Esme taught her the names of each of the herbs in her garden as well as the wild ones in the forest. Then how to prepare them for keeping, drying, hanging and pressing. Beatrice's finger nails cracked and her fingers started to ache as they became rough but she didn't bother complaining. She'd learned it would get her nowhere, as would sitting down and refusing to help. That had just forced Esme to magically force her to her feet.

So she grit her teeth and bore it; despite Esme's obvious cruelty. She was torn; on the one hand she wanted to complain about the woman bitterly when she returned to England, on the other, she didn't want another soul to know the humiliation she'd suffered. She carefully funnelled the powder they had spent the day making into the tiny phials and stared at it. Five little phials, that was it. After all her hard work, her aching back, that's all she had to show for it.

"Is that it? All those herbs I picked and all it made was that?" she pouted, "I thought we were making a year's supply of...whatever this is."

"Herbs are small and shrivel when dried." Esme chuckled, "Did you think all those expensive perfumes and soaps you use were easy to make?"

"I never thought about it." Beatrice admitted.

“Or the people who slave away at it I’ll bet.” Esme said, though not unkindly.

If anything her voice had a soft quality to it, like she was talking to a young child who couldn’t have known better. Somehow that felt worse.

“Well,” Esme continued, “Now that we are done, and we have a bucket, you can finally have a bath. Sun’s setting, we don’t need to go out again.”

A bath. Oh that sounded so lovely. Esme placed one of the phials of herb salt next to the bath and Beatrice raised an eyebrow.

“Did we seriously spend all morning making...soap?”

“Scrub.” Esme corrected and Beatrice groaned.

“I thought it was some sort of magical concoction like the one that changed me!”

“You think I’d have you make something so dangerous and volatile on your first day?” Esme cackled, “No, regular herbal concoctions for you for a while my dear. Maybe if you’re good I can teach you something with a little dazzle.”

Beatrice let herself feel excited about that prospect for a moment before she realised it would probably be even more work than today and she deflated. Esme gathered her headscarf and moved to the door.

“I’m going for a walk, enjoy your bath.” She smiled, not even bothering to put on her shoes.

The idea of walking barefoot on those dirt roads made Beatrice shudder. She set her sights on the bath, painstakingly filling it with water heated over the fire. By the time it was full she was more than ready to sit down and rest her aching legs.

Beatrice sunk down into the wooden tub with a sigh. Even a few days ago she would have complained about the rough wood at the edges poking into her, or the fact that the water was lukewarm at best but after several days of hard work it felt perfect. She soaked her long curly hair and felt it turn heavy and slowly scrubbed the dirt from her skin.

She looked down at her naked body, amazed by the difference only a few days had made. Her skin was still smooth and beautiful but it seemed somehow tougher. She could

feel the callouses starting to form around her fingers and palms, and her heels were starting to harden. She had always taken pride in her soft digits and even softer, delicate feet.

Now she had the exact opposite and yet, she did not feel ashamed. On the contrary, those rough patches brought a strange smile to her face. There was proof, tangible, physical proof of how hard she'd been working. Nobody could deny she wasn't trying at the very least. She picked up the small bottle of powder Esme had her make and poured it into the water. Immediately it seemed to dissolve, tinging the water green and giving it a faint herbal scent that seemed to relax her instantly. This felt wonderful.

She had experienced more luxurious baths before; in finer tubs with much fancier soaks and yet, none of them could compare to this. The relaxation felt so much better when she had worked hard for it, rather than it simply being expected. Perhaps Esme had been right about that if nothing else.

She grabbed handfuls of the herbal scrub, rubbing it into her hands and hair, letting it bubble and sighing happily as she felt the grime wash away. It was so different to the expensive, smooth soaps she was used to. She was sure if she had used this on her delicate skin before it would have been scratched or perhaps, a little voice in her head whispered, she would have been fine and she would have been complaining for nothing.

Her fingers raked through the wet curls and she enjoyed the sensation of her nails scraping against her skull. Once she had finished, she didn't even mind the roughness of the towel. It almost felt good; it scraped at her skin roughly, tinging it red and ensuring that not a speck of dirt could remain.

Of course this was all temporary; it would take less than an hour of work tomorrow before the sweat and dirt was back but it felt good to conquer it in this moment. That, and knowing how good it would feel to remove made her dread it less, just a little.

She sat herself down at the table and began to comb her hair using the bone comb Esme had provided. Even wet and well brushed, her hair began to curl once more as it dried. She'd never done her own hair before and after several long minutes of fiddling, gave up. There was simply too much to manage, braiding her hair would have been hard enough if it was the straight tresses she was used to. This was downright impossible.

She looked around for a moment before realising there was no mirror. Her cheeks turned pink; of course there was no mirror, this was a peasants cottage. Beatrice tapped her fingers against her hem for a moment before getting up; she wasn't used to being washed quite so easily. The affair usually involved several changes of clothes and multiple trips to the mirror to check her makeup and accessories. Now she had only one outfit, no jewels and no need to do her hair. It felt surprisingly freeing to have so much free time. The question was, what to do with it?

All her usual avenues of entertainment were gone and she found herself picking up a book from Esme's shelf and opening it. It was all about herbal remedies, the sort of thing she would have put straight back on the shelf were she in her own library. But Esme only had a handful of books to choose from; well worn ones that were likely older than she was. She didn't have the luxury of being picky. To her surprise, the book was quite interesting and she found herself absorbed, trying to will herself not to fall asleep after the exhausting day just so she could read one page more.

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The days began to blur together but not in an unpleasant way; yes she was tired and sore much of the time, but she was no longer beholden to a schedule. No more lunch dates, no more daily music or finishing lessons. She woke with the sun and slept with it as well. The sun turned her olive skin an even darker and prettier shade of brown and she found to her surprise that she liked it. No more turning into a pink flamingo on hot summer days.

Together with her evening reading and Esme's lessons her skills in herbalism were growing quickly and Beatrice slowly discovered a certain kind of low, constant satisfaction that came with the work. She was even getting used to the lukewarm baths and calluses on her fingers.

Now that she'd stopped complaining quite so much Esme was even warming up to her, using gentle encouragement instead of derision at every turn. It had been so long since Beatrice had received that sort of motherly attention it felt...nice. She even found herself missing the women when she went out to hunt every few days.

Even though she still felt squeamish around killing her own food she did her best to help Esme as she butchered a small pheasant; gathering the feathers and sorting them into suitable piles for quills and pillows. She glanced up to see Esme boiling the small bones clean before laying them out on the table to dry.

"What good are bones?" Beatrice asked, looking at the tiny white lumps Esme was polishing, "Surely they are too small to make broth with?"

"These, my girl, are for telling fortunes."

"Witchcraft?" Beatrice breathed, slightly in awe, of course she knew Esme was capable of magic, she had transformed her, still it was all new to her. "How does it work?"

Esme regarded her for a moment, seemingly surprised by her genuine interest but then began to explain the process. Casting the bones, reading the cracks and how they mingled with the energy that emanate from every person. The bones told a story, all thanks to that energy and she used that to focus her mind and read people's futures.

"You can use many things as a focus, such as cards or even tea leaves."

"That's why you grow it?"

"Yes, I read your brother's tea leaves when he first visited here, "I could see he was very stressed, and in for a rough future if you didn't start making his life easier."

For the first time, Beatrice felt a stab of guilt. She'd never been responsible for anybody, not even herself really. She thought back to all her tantrums, the humiliations she'd delivered on her brother, the suitors she'd scared away. It all seemed so worth it at the time, getting her own way, now she was starting to feel...guilty.

"Could you teach me?" Beatrice asked after a moment.

"It takes much longer than a few weeks to master, my girl."

"Try?" Beatrice begged, "Being able to read the future sounds incredible."

Esme smiled that warm motherly smile and began to explain the process of reading the cracks but also sensing the magic in the air.

"Most people need to be born with it, you see. Learning to read somebody's essence is very hard without a natural spark. Reading the cracks and cards can only get you so far."

Beatrice deflated a little.

"So I can't learn?"

"Not in three days you can't." Esme chuckled.

"Three days?"

“Yes, you’re set to go back to your pretty house and move on to your next destination then.” Esme shrugged and Beatrice found herself blinking in confusion.

The three weeks were done? Already? When her days were filled with the hard, yet satisfying work time seemed to stand still. The change only coming with the weather and perhaps over a longer period of time, the seasons.

“You seem shocked.” Esme smiled.

“Yes I just...it all seemed to happen so fast.”

She went back to working but the idea that her ticking clock was so much shorter stayed on her mind. As she laid down on her bed by the fire she watched the warm embers crackle and thought about her soft, feather down pillows and blankets back at the estate. How many pheasants would she have to feather in order to make something like that? It would be impossible.

She could go back to having an extravagant wardrobe, she could waltz into ballrooms in diamonds and jewels being the centre of attention again. She thought about it and cringed, remembering the way she would preen and smile as everybody looked at her. It was all so...gouache. Had she really been so vain that her appearance was what took up most of her time? Trying on dresses and demanding others redo her hairstyle so she could look perfect for a few hours? She had been so weak she couldn’t even pull a bucket of water out of a well. It was downright embarrassing.

Still, she had her pride. Going back to her brother and admitting he had been right to call her a brat...that was humiliating. She could already picture his smug face as he saw her humbled. Yes, she had been but that didn't mean she wanted to admit it graciously! She hasn't changed that much! She realised she had a choice to make, and less than three days to make it.

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The Sunday market was a wonderful place. Beatrice had really learned to love the hustle and bustle of all the locals from the surrounding hills coming together to sell and trade. Esme usually sold her tinctures and read palms or bones by a little stall and with Beatrice helping, she could now do twice as many fortunes.

“You’re really selling all of this?” She gaped as they filled their baskets and bags with almost everything in Esme’s shack. “This is months of gathering work.”

“Yes but I won’t be here much longer.” Esme explained, “In a week I am on the move, a herbalist must move with the seasons you see.”

Beatrice almost dropped her basket.

“But the garden!” She gasped, just thinking of that beautiful wild garden being abandoned made her heart ache. “It would take you years to regather and plant all those herbs and flowers.”

Esme threw back her head and laughed.

“If I didn’t have the touch, perhaps.” She said lightly, “I will travel, gather the seeds I need, then set up shop in some little hamlet for a time before moving on. It is my way. How do you think I got so many plants that are not native to these hills?”

She’d never considered it. It sounded magical, wandering the land gathering herbs and telling fortunes. Far more interesting than the endless parade of balls she attended back in London, which now that she thought about it, were all the same really just with different settings.

They set up shop and Esme began telling her fortunes as Beatrice handled the sales. The boy who had laughed at her the first day she came to the village ran past and stuck his tongue out, she returned the gesture with a laugh. The air was fresh and perfumed by Esme’s flowers and without thinking she stuck one in her hair.

The bright pink petals stood out against her dark natural curls and felt herself flush with happiness as she caught her reflection in the pail of water Esme kept on hand to create tinctures on the fly. For a moment the water shimmered and she swore she could see her old face there; pale, sharp and unwelcoming with her lips constantly pressed into a thin, unhappy line.

Now her cheeks were rosy and her lips full, her hair no longer tortured into various shapes. She finally understood what people meant by natural beauty. As did several of the local men who took the time to look over her selection slowly, eyes occasionally drifting to her. Their interest felt genuine, she no longer saw the hungry eyes of men simply looking for a woman to give them an heir and a large dowry.

“Do you have any of that lovely black tea?”

Came a smooth voice and Beatrice looked up to see Edward standing there, a smug smile on his face but there was also a hint of confusion in his eyes. Clearly he had not been expecting her to look so happy.

“We do.” She replied haughtily, “but I am not sure I want to sell it to somebody who would use it to wickedly trick his own sister.”

“I think she is doing alright.” Edward smiled, “Perhaps she learned a thing or two. I look forward to hearing about it all in a few days when she comes home.”

At that moment, Beatrice felt something click in her mind. A sense of certainty and purpose filled her and she looked up at her now taller brother with a defiant expression.

“I don’t think she’ll be returning.” She said simply and Edward’s expression turned to pure shock. “I think she prefers her life as it is now.”

“But, Bea, how am I going to explain where you went when I get home?” He hissed, leaning in close so nobody else could hear. “I know you’re mad but this is not time for one of your tantrums.”

“I am not having a tantrum.” She said calmly, “I am simply informing you of a decision I have made. As for the explanation, I am sure you can come up with something.”

She smiled at him, grinning ear to ear. She may have been made shorter in stature but she could still tower over him with her sheer force of will.

“Esme and I are leaving in a few days anyway, isn’t that right auntie?”

Esme smiled and nodded.

“My new apprentice needs training if she ever wants to learn fortune telling. Besides now that I have her all broken in I don’t feel like training another.”

Beatrice giggled as her heart began to race with excitement. She knew she had signed up for a harder life, but it was one she was eager to try. She could not wait to see what the future held for her in her new life as a wandering herbalist.