



Dragons & Dumplings (Falhaven Castle #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A princess who wants to bake, a visiting delegation, and a dragon egg in the oven.

Princess Evie loves nothing more than spending the evening baking in the castles kitchen with her best friend Nate, even if shes supposed to be attending royal functions and meeting ambassadors.

When a foreign delegation visits, Nate manages to get some new recipes for them to try. But thats not all thats new in the kitchen when Evie is gifted a dragon egg and told to keep it in the fire.

Now, dumplings arent the only thing being made in the kitchen.

Dragons Dumplings is a prequel to the Falhaven Castle series, a cozy fantasy with a baking dragon, a princess who wants to be in the kitchen over the throne room, and the baker who wants to be there with her. There is a slow burn friends-to-lovers romance, with a pinch of steam in later books, and an ace heroine.

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Torches flicker from the sconces spaced throughout the banquet hall, giving it a warm glow without much heat seeping in to go with it. I know that's not going to last. By the time the banquet is underway, there'll be too many people in the room for it to be anything approaching cold.

I look around the room, hating how crowded it already is, especially when the musicians are playing louder than they have any real need to.

It's making everyone shout over one another in order to have a conversation, rather than keeping it at a reasonable level so those of us who don't want to take part aren't overwhelmed by it all.

I shuffle in the ornate chair designated for me, trying not to be too bothered by it.

On either side of me, my sisters seem clueless to any of my discomfort, and my younger brothers are the same.

Maybe they're going through something similar to I am, knowing that our parents expect us to be here to welcome the delegation from Shengda, and that we have to act like the perfect royals in order to make a good impression.

Without meaning to, I pick at the collar of my dress.

I hate the way the gold thread feels against my skin.

It makes me want to tear off the whole thing and put it in the fire.

I can't do that again, Mama wouldn't be pleased with me if she discovered I'd ruined another dress like that, especially one that's been made especially for this banquet.

At least my siblings are equally dressed in what must be annoying fabric, and Kathryn is even wearing a heavy-looking tiara thanks to her status as Crown Princess. Things could be worse for me. I don't think I'd like the tiara or the attention.

I run my fingers under the collar to try and get it away from the sensitive skin of my neck. It's going to be a long night if this continues.

"Stop it, Evie, you're being distracting," Veronica says from my left, barely turning her head to look at me. It doesn't mean anything, we've mastered this way of communicating over the years.

"I can't help it," I mutter under my breath in a very unprincesslike way.

"Just think about what you're going to do when you escape down to the kitchens," Arthur suggests from her other side.

"Hmm, that could work," I admit, my mind filling with all kinds of ideas for recipes and methods for making baked treats.

I wonder what I'll be able to make tonight?

Perhaps some bread, that's always comforting.

Or a pastry of some kind with sugared almonds and fresh apples.

Today is market day in the town surrounding the castle, so there are bound to be some.

"You can't," Veronica says, almost as if she's the Crown Princess, but Kathryn is just ignoring us, as usual. It makes sense, she's five years older than I am, whereas Veronica, Arthur, and I are all closer in age, with only two years between me at nineteen and Arthur at seventeen.

"I know."

"Our parents want us to be here to meet the delegation," she says needlessly. I've already accepted my lot.

"I'm not going anywhere right now," I point out.

"I know my duty as well as the rest of you.

" Though I'm not sure Ernest really understands much of it.

He's only five and would much rather be playing with his wooden soldiers.

At least I assume so from the way he's lined up all of the carrots on one side of his plate and the parsnips on the other.

I'm sure there must be some commentary to the situation in Ernest's head, but he's not saying any of it out loud.

Veronica nods. I can't tell if she's relieved or not.

I might know my sister well, but I find her hard to read sometimes.

Kathryn shoots us a look from her position to my right, but if I can't read Veronica, it's even harder to understand what my older sister is thinking.

Sometimes, I consider that might be because she's the Crown Princess of Falhaven and she has duties to attend to that I don't understand.

Other times, I think it's just that we're different people.

I sigh and look down at my plate, using my knife to build a dam between the gravy on one side, and the white sauce on the other. It's going to be a long evening, especially when I can't just make excuses to head down to the kitchen until the entire banquet is done.

It's hard to drown out the sounds of knives scraping against plates and hundreds of voices talking at once.

I clench my jaw and try to get control of my emotions.

I can't demand that people just stop talking, especially when I know this is a me problem, but I do have the urge to run out of the room and scream.

Maybe I should. Then I can come back and act like the perfect princess I'm supposed to be.

I push back my chair just as my father gestures for the servants to clear the tables in front of us.

It would seem that I've missed my chance for a moment alone before the next part of the festivities starts.

Once they're done, my father straightens his crown and stands, gesturing for us to do the same. I fold my hands in front of me, trying to ignore the scratching of my collar. Now we're standing, everyone's eyes are going to be on us, and there's no way I can sort it out.

I attempt to distract myself by watching the delegation from Shengda approach the front of the banquet hall.

They're all dressed finely, though the fashions aren't the same as those we wear in Falhaven.

A brief pang of jealousy travels through me at the sight of the fabric the members of the delegation are wearing.

The clothes seem to be made of some kind of silk, with flowing sleeves and nothing that fits too tightly.

Though there's a lot of embroidery. It's beautiful, but I can only imagine how itchy it would make my skin feel.

The man at the front steps forward and bows deeply to my father. "Your Majesty."

"Welcome to Falhaven Castle," my father responds.

"It is my honour to be here," the man responds, his accent not doing anything to obscure his words. "I am Ambassador Zixin. This is my wife, Lady An."

A lady in a beautiful pink dress with a purple waistband dips into what looks like it must be a curtsy, but isn't quite the same as how we would do it here.

I've met enough foreign delegates to know that not all of the kingdoms use the same system of bowing.

"You have a beautiful castle, Your Majesty. "

"Thank you," my father says with a nod. "May I present my wife and our children?"

Ambassador Zixin bows his head in acknowledgement.

"This is my wife, Queen Cecilia," Father says.

"And my children. My heir, Princess Kathryn, as well as Princess Evelyn, Princess Veronica, Prince Arthur, and Prince Ernest." He gestures to each of us in turn, and I dip into a curtsy as he says my name.

None of the delegation outranks me as far as I know, but it never hurts to be polite.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highnesses," the man at the front says, dipping his head in acknowledgement.

"I am pleased to bring gifts on behalf of my Emperor for each of you.

" He signals to some attendants who bring forward four chests of shining red and gold.

I have to admit that it's a spectacle, and from the murmurs amongst the courtiers, I'm not the only one who thinks so.

They set the chests down in front of each of us.

"For Princess Kathryn, His Imperial Majesty has sent perfumes and fabrics befitting an empress," he announces as his attendants open the lid of the chest and show her the contents.

I raise an eyebrow but don't say anything.

Why would she need clothes that are fit for an empress if she isn't one?

Unless this is the Emperor's way of asking her to marry him, but I doubt it.

She's going to rule Falhaven in her own right, my parents aren't going to let her marry anyone with a kingdom of their own.

"Please give my thanks to your Emperor," Kathryn says with a slight giggle. "They are very fine."

The delegate nods and moves to the next chest, smiling at me with blank eyes. Maybe he doesn't like the fact that he's been sent to give gifts to us.

"To Princess Evelyn, the Emperor has sent a true treasure, a dragon egg from the mountains."

The chest opens, revealing a small green egg which shimmers in the light of the room.

It's barely bigger than a chicken's egg, but it does look a lot more impressive, especially when it seems to be sitting on a bolt of green silk with gold embroidery.

It seems I can find out for myself if it is as itchy as it looks.

I hope not. If it's nice, I can have it made into a dress, or at the very least, a robe.

The egg reflects the fire of the torch on the wall behind me, drawing attention to a multitude of questions I'm now finding myself faced with.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" I ask without thinking, remembering that I'm supposed to be representing my kingdom a moment too late. "I mean, I am truly grateful to His Imperial for the remarkable gift. I only ask because I don't wish to treat such a gift poorly."

To my surprise, the ambassador nods. "I can understand your hesitation, Your Highness. It is recommended that you keep the egg in the warmest fire you have. If you are lucky, it will hatch."

"Thank you, this gift is most kind," I say out loud. Internally, I'm trying to reconcile what he's saying with reality.

He thinks I could hatch a dragon . I'm not even entirely sure what I'd do with one if I had one. I've never really thought much about pets. Arthur is the one who is fond of animals, not me, but the idea of having a dragon is at least a little exciting.

The ambassador doesn't seem to give my reaction any other thought and moves on to Veronica, while Arthur shoots the chest with the dragon egg a funny look.

Maybe he wishes that he were the one who had a chance to have a dragon and not me.

He remembers himself in time to thank the ambassador for the hunting knife he's been gifted.

I reach out to touch the egg, finding it slightly warm under my fingers.

It's smoother than I expect, with a few ridges that seem to resemble those I'd imagine a dragon to have.

My mind drifts to the fire in my bed chamber, but that doesn't seem like the right place to try and hatch a dragon, especially when it's not the warmest place in the castle.

But I do know exactly where that is.

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It's already late by the time the banquet finishes, and I had to change before coming down to the kitchens. Not because I'm worried about my dress, I know how to bake without ruining my clothing, but because I couldn't stand a single moment more of having the itchy collar against my neck.

The kitchens are mostly empty by the time I finally arrive, though the spit boy is in place, turning the meat that will make up the centrepiece of tomorrow night's feast. He ignores me, and I do the same as I head through to a smaller room where a familiar figure is kneading bread.

Nate looks up when he hears me enter and flashes me a smile that I know he doesn't give to many other people. Or not that I've seen, anyway. I suppose there's a chance he gives it to someone outside the castle whom I've never met.

A strange feeling grows within me even as I think it. I know I don't have any right to insist that I'm his only friend, but sometimes it feels like that's what I want.

"I didn't expect you tonight," he says. "Isn't the banquet still going?"

"You thought I'd pass up on an excuse to escape down here and not have to make small talk with people who think they're more important than they are?"

Nate chuckles. "I think they are important, Evie. That's why they're the delegates for a foreign ruler."

"I suppose. I'm just glad that Kathryn is the one who has to deal with all of that, not me. I don't see the point of it all. They give us expensive gifts, and we give them

back. Wouldn't it just be easier if no one gave anyone any gifts and everyone just retained their wealth?"

"I think it's seen as a show of friendship," he responds. "What did you get this time?"

"A dragon egg," I respond, taking it out of my pocket and holding it out for him to see. I don't normally bring my gifts down to the kitchen with me, mostly because they never need to come here. But this one is different.

"Huh, that's smaller than I'd expect a dragon egg to be," he admits.

I shrug. "Maybe it's for a small dragon. I don't know enough about them to know."

"What are you supposed to do with it now?" he asks.

"The ambassador said that I should keep it in a warm fire. I was wondering if I could put it in your oven?"

"Of course. I need to put the bread in the proving jar before I do anything else."

I nod and put the egg back in my pocket so that I can get it for him, setting the large brown pot on the workbench.

He folds the dough over on itself once more, before shaping it and lowering it gently into the pot. He covers it with a cloth and puts it back into position.

I wait patiently for him to wash his hands and come back, admiring the ease with which he moves around the kitchen as I do.

"All right, what have we got?" he asks.

"Dragon egg."

"Yes, you said that."

"Oh, no. That's it. A dragon egg and some vague instructions." I sigh and lean back against the workbench. "It was awful, I blurted out a question about what to do with it before I even said thank you. Mama is going to lecture me about etiquette tomorrow."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. You need to know how to look after a dragon."

"Exactly! That was what I said after I realised I'd made a mistake. That I just wanted to make sure that I looked after it properly. I think the ambassador believed me, but maybe he was just being polite."

"Can't you send a thank-you note, or something?"

"I'll do that too. Just in case. But I wish I was better at these things. I always seem to say the wrong thing." It's frustrating. I want to be a good princess and make my parents proud, but sometimes it feels as if it's impossible for me to achieve that.

"You haven't caused any political disasters yet, Evie, you're probably fine."

"That was before. I'm of age now, people are going to start talking if I can't manage to keep my tongue in check."

"You just need to keep yourself on safe subjects."

"I doubt the delegation from Shengda wants to hear my opinions on the different kinds of pastries," I murmur.

"Maybe not, but I do."

"You know all of my opinions on pastries." Mostly because he was there to form them with me.

"There's always time to gain more," he responds. "So, the dragon egg?"

I hand it to him without even thinking twice about it. I've known Nate for as long as I can remember, certainly from before I truly understood the difference between a princess and an apprentice pastry chef.

"It's very pretty," he says.

"It is. And it's supposed to stay in the fire in case it wants to hatch."

"And you want it to be this fire?" he asks, looking over to the oven.

"If that's all right. I'd put it in the fire in my room, but there are so many people coming in and out that I barely know, whereas here, it'll be safe with you." Not many people use this part of the kitchen unless there's a huge banquet on. It's normally just Nate, and sometimes his father.

Nate's warm brown eyes fill with an emotion I can't name, but I know it's a good one. And that I like it when he looks at me like that. "Let me clear some space for it, then we can put it in." He hands the egg back to me so he can pull on some gloves.

There's a scraping sound as he moves some of the stones in the oven, and it doesn't take me long to realise he's making a little nest for my dragon. I look down at the egg, wondering what I'm going to do if it actually hatches. "Do you think we could teach it to bake?" I muse.

Nate steps back from the oven and raises an eyebrow. "The dragon?"

"Yes. Imagine what it would be like if you could get a dragon to flambé something for you. Or toast the top of meringues. Oh, or those custards that your father makes sometimes. What are they called again?"

"Crème brûlées," he responds.

"Yes, those. I like them. But imagine if a dragon could do the caramelised sugar on top, wouldn't that be so much easier?"

"Probably. But I doubt anyone's thought of trying it. Dragons aren't exactly common, especially in kitchens."

"Well, this one is going to have to get used to kitchens," I respond. "It's going to be here all the time."

He chuckles. "It might get a bit big for that."

I look at the egg. "It doesn't seem that big."

"That's because it's a baby."

"Hmm. Then I'm going to have to research dragons from Shengda, because I need to know what I'm getting myself in for. Or maybe ask Arthur what he knows. He likes animals. But it might not even be an issue, they said it might not hatch."

"Well, let's put it in the oven and see what happens," Nate says, gesturing for me to do the honours.

The heat from the fire hits my skin, causing a warm glow to spread over me as I carefully lean in and place the egg in the nest of rocks he made for me.

It sits well there, shining green in the firelight.

I have no idea if it's going to hatch, but I'm interested in finding out what will happen to it.

And hopefully, if it does hatch, it'll be interested in baking, because that's exactly what I intend to do with it.

"So, what now?" I ask. "You've done the bread..."

He chuckles. "It's already after midnight and you want to bake?"

"I've spent the past five hours in a room with hundreds of people feeling like my dress was shredding my skin and that a single note was too loud. I would really like to bake now. I can do it alone if you need to sleep." I don't want him to stay up too late because of me.

"And miss out on time with my favourite royal?" he jokes.

"You shouldn't sacrifice sleep just to spend time with me," I say.

"I was going to be here anyway. Tomorrow's bread will be better with a longer prove, and my father was busy with the desserts for the banquet."

I grimace. "Didn't you help him with that?"

"Definitely not. He won't let me touch anything that important." There's a note of bitterness in his voice, and it makes my heart ache for him. He's spent years working hard to ensure he's up to his father's standards, he should be allowed to help with the baking.

"I'm sorry."

Nate flashes me a weak smile. "Don't be. He's been talking about getting me an apprenticeship now I'm nearly twenty."

"But you're already his apprentice," I point out.

He shrugs and gets some butter from the cool box, setting it on the large wooden table at the centre of the room along with some flour and sugar.

"He's always telling me that he was younger than me when he was apprenticed to a cook in Gaullesse, and that it's long past time that I should do the same.

It's only because of Ma that he hasn't done it already. "

"Oh." I frown. "Does that mean you're not going to stay at the castle?" A weird feeling settles within me.

"I don't know," he admits. "I don't really know what's going to happen."

There's a part of me that wishes I could blurt out that I don't want him to go, but I know it isn't my place to say that. I shouldn't stop him from pursuing his career.

"Let's not talk about it," he says. "I thought we could make some shortbread, it's not going to take long, but it'll be tasty."

"Shortbread sounds good," I respond, taking an apron off the wall and putting it on.

Even though I haven't started baking yet, I already feel the calmness settling in.

I think it's being in the kitchen with the soothing sounds of the fires, and the smells of

things cooking, that make me feel more at home than the bustle of court life.

But when I'm baking, and following a recipe with set instructions and clear steps, it makes my mind calm in a way that nothing else does. And I'm grateful for a chance to be away from everything in the castle above, even if it's just for a couple of hours.

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The sun shines through the great window of the mountain solar, illuminating everything. It's a cheery morning, even if I did spend the first part of it being lectured on decorum and my apparent lack of it by Mama.

My brother looks up from the table as I enter, surprise on his face.

"I didn't expect you to be awake so early," Arthur says.

"Mama came to my room to tell me about how I'm not supposed to say the first thing I think when we're entertaining foreign dignitaries.

"I take my seat at the table and reach for a slice of bread.

I wonder if it's the same loaf that Nate was working on last night.

I like to believe so, but I know there'll be lots of other bread being made in the kitchens.

Arthur laughs. "You were a little blunt."

"I can't help it," I mutter. "What am I supposed to do with a dragon?"

"I have a book that might help," he says. "I'd have brought it with me if I'd known you were coming to breakfast. I assumed you were going to be later after going to the kitchens last night."

A yawn escapes me as if trying to prove him right. "A couple of hours more sleep

might have been helpful."

He laughs. "I can get you the book later."

"Thanks, Artie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Not know what to do with your dragon egg."

"I put it in the oven," I say. "Well, Nate put it in the oven. I thought that was a good place for it."

To my surprise, my brother nods. "I would have put it in the fire in my room, but the oven is probably better. It'll have a more even heat."

"That's what I thought." I spread some butter and jam over my bread and take a bite.

It's good, which isn't a surprise. My father makes sure that we employ the most talented bakers in the kitchens.

That's why Nate is as good at what he does as he is.

He's learned from the best, and that means I've been able to learn from the best.

None of the cooks were particularly pleased about me trailing around after them at first, probably because they thought that I was just a princess underfoot.

Only Nate had been patient enough to actually talk to me properly at first, though in hindsight, that's probably because we were the same age and he was bored being the spit boy.

When he started learning how to bake from his father, he let me listen, and it soon

became normal for us both to get a lesson at the same time.

I'm not really sure when that changed to the two of us baking together alone, but I don't mind. He's my only friend, or my only friend other than my siblings, and I like being able to spend time with him when no one else is around.

"Evie?" Arthur waves a hand in front of my face.

"Hmm?"

"I was asking if you were going on the picnic today."

"I didn't even know there was one." I put down my bread and turn my attention to making myself some tea.

It's a recent discovery after one of the foreign delegations brought it as a gift.

This is one that I can get behind, even if I think that the reciprocal gift giving should cancel one another out.

"It's for the ambassador."

"Well, then I should avoid it in case I say anything else that will potentially damage relations between our kingdoms," I say.

Arthur laughs. "Probably wise. I know you don't mean to, but you do have a tendency of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

"You don't think that Ambassador Zixin is angry about what I said last night?"

"He seemed more amused than annoyed to me," Arthur assures me with a shrug.

I let out a sigh of relief. "I don't want to insult anyone."

"I know you don't."

"Maybe I need to take diplomacy lessons or something."

He laughs. "I don't think that would help you."

"I can learn things," I protest.

"I know you can." He leans back in his seat and looks out of the window at the mountain. "You can practice next month when the delegation from Someil arrives."

I groan. "Another delegation?"

He nods. "This one's different, though. Supposedly, the King of Someil himself is coming, along with his daughter."

"Let me guess, Father is hoping that you fall madly in love with her?"

Arthur laughs. "I'm seventeen, as is she. I doubt anyone is going to be falling madly in love."

"There must be a reason the King is bringing his daughter, and she's your age," I point out. "And they're hardly hoping that she'll make a match with Ernest, are they? I suppose they could be trying to match her with Veronica, though."

Arthur laughs. "Our parents would never force one of us into marriage."

"Maybe. But logic would say that they would like an advantageous marriage for each of us. Especially one with a kingdom as wealthy as Someil." I take a sip of my tea.

"I don't like it when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Think about things without taking any feelings into account."

I frown. "That's not what I'm doing. I'm just saying what makes the most sense to me."

"I think it would make you a good ruler."

"Well, that's immaterial because Kathryn is going to sit on the throne after our father," I remind him.

"For now," he mutters.

"What do you mean for now ?" I ask.

He shrugs. "You never know what could happen."

"Nothing is going to happen. Father is in good health, and Kathryn too.

All of her children would be ahead of me in the succession as well.

The chances of you ever calling me Queen Evelyn are very small.

And if they become higher, I'll just abdicate and then the throne is Veronica's problem, or yours if she doesn't want it. "

He laughs. "I'll pass."

"Right, then Ernest it is." I finish my tea and set it down, leaning back in my chair.

Arthur grins. "So we should start preparing for him to be a king, then?"

"Exactly. Kathryn can have her dresses, you can care for your animals, I can bake, and Veronica can do whatever it is that she sneaks off to do when she thinks no one is paying her any attention."

"The gardener," Arthur mutters.

"What?"

He clears his throat. "She goes to the gardens."

"Oh, I would never have guessed that. I didn't think she liked flowers that much." My gaze falls to the teapot, and I wonder about making myself another cup of tea. I don't have anywhere to be, and I can't go down to the kitchens until later, so maybe I should.

I pick up the pot and pour myself a cup. "You never said if you were planning on going on the picnic?"

He shakes his head. "A farmer sent a message this morning about one of their goats having a problem, I'm going to go down and take a look."

"Ah." I should have known he had plans involving an animal. He truly has a way with them.

"I'll get you that book on dragons first."

"Thank you." I'd much rather spend the day reading about baking techniques, or even

better, trying them out, but I can't go down to the kitchens while they're busy making all of the meals for the day, that's a good way for me to find myself banned in the future for making a nuisance of myself.

Besides, I do need to know what to expect from my dragon. It might not hatch, but I don't want to take the chance that it does and realise that I don't know anything about it.

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I lean over the book Arthur gave me and try to make sense of the words on the page. If I have a book of recipes in front of me, or anything that talks about the history of cakes and pastries in the various kingdoms, I can find myself enthralled for hours. Anything else, and reading is just painful.

But I'm determined to learn about my egg.

If the delegation from Shengda ever chooses to return, I want to be able to tell them that I did everything I could to ensure that the egg hatched and the dragon is healthy.

I know it might not hatch even if I do everything right, but I certainly don't want to do anything wrong .

A familiar knock sounds on the door to my chambers and I jump up to go answer it, completely ignoring the book. Nate stands on the other side with a piece of paper in his hand and a curious expression on his face.

"Where's your lady's maid?" he asks.

"I said she could start her break early," I respond. "She was breathing too loudly, and I know she was bored watching me attempt to read." I gesture for him to step inside.

"You know how to read."

"Not books about dragons, apparently," I mutter.

He laughs. "Where did you even get one?"

"From Arthur. It's actually been helpful, I just find it dreadfully boring." I wave for him to come and look at it. "I think this is my egg." I tap a drawing of a green egg with ridges a little like the one in the oven.

"It does look like it," he agrees. "It's a green oak dragon. What does that mean?"

"They make their nests in oak trees," I say, pointing to another drawing. "It isn't a species that's native to Shengda. But I don't know what that means in terms of them giving me it as a gift."

"I don't think it has to mean anything," Nate responds, stepping back and leaning against the wall so he could face me. "We have peacocks here," he points out.

I frown. "So?"

"They're not native, but there are so many of them, you'd think they were. Maybe it's the same for green oak dragons? They might not be native to Shengda, but lots of them live there."

"Huh, I never thought about that." I look back at the drawing in the book. "I suppose it does make sense. Shengda is known for its people's dragon keeping."

"They're known for a few other things too," Nate says.

"Oh?"

"Want a look?" He holds the paper he's holding up.

"What is it?" I ask, eagerly taking it from him. I know there's only one thing he's going to act like that about.

"It's a recipe," he responds. "It turns out that Lady An is quite particular and brought one of her chefs with her. It took a little bit of coaxing, but she gave me a recipe when I promised her that I'd give her mine for apple tarts. Apparently, Her Ladyship has taken quite a liking to them."

"What's it for?" I ask, scanning down the page and trying to work it out.

"It's called a bao. It's a kind of dumpling," he says.

"It's nothing like our dumplings," I respond.

Nate nods in agreement. "She told me some of the fillings they often use.

There's a pork filling that's traditional, but can take a long time to make.

We should be able to replicate it with some of the roast pork from yesterday though.

Or you can make them sweet with a custard filling, but she hasn't given me the recipe for that one yet, I'm hoping I can ask her later. The choice is yours."

"Both."

He laughs. "I should have known you'd say that."

"Am I that predictable?"

"Predictable enough that I might have used your name to get Chef Martina to give me the ingredients we need to try it out," he admits.

"You are brilliant," I announce.

"I'm glad you think so, because if anyone found out that you didn't actually want the ingredients, I could lose my job."

"I won't tell a soul. And if it helps, I do want the ingredients, so it's more that you knew exactly what I wanted before I wanted it."

He flashes me a grin that says he knew I was going to say that. "It does make it much easier to learn when I have a princess wanting to bake with me."

"I'm glad I can help. When can we make this?"

"Dinner is in an hour, so after that?" he suggests.

"I hope you realise that I'm going to be counting down the moments until I can sneak out of the dining hall."

"I wouldn't expect any less," he says with a lot of affection in his voice.

"How is the dragon egg getting along?" I ask.

"Well," he promises. "It did give my father a fright when he saw it this morning, he thought something had gone wrong in the oven overnight."

I cover my mouth to stop my laughter from escaping. "I'm sorry. I should have thought to send him a message about it."

Nate shrugs. "As soon as he realised it was yours, he shrugged it off and went back to baking pies for the picnic."

"Maybe I should have gone after all, your father's pork pies are delicious."

"There are still some left," he assures me. "And it's not going to be the last time he makes pork pies."

"True. They really are delicious. Do you know how to make them?"

He nods.

"Can you teach me? Not tonight, I know we have something else to try tonight. But later?"

"If that's what you want. It's a different kind of pastry than we've made before."

I nod. "Hot water crust, I read about it in one of the books I found in the library."

"I'm surprised there is one on pies there."

"Mama wants a copy of every book that has ever been printed in Falhaven," I respond. "She believes it's the only way to preserve the full history of the kingdom."

"Ah, so that's how you manage to get all of your books on baking."

"The ones from Falhaven, yes. Though I wish I had a library with all the books on baking from the other kingdoms."

"Perhaps you should say as much in front of some ambassadors, then they might start bringing you recipe books instead of dragon eggs as gifts," he says.

My eyes widen. "Do you think that would work?"

"I was joking, Evie."

"But it could work." I tap my fingers against the wood of my desk, feeling comfort from the repetitive motion.

"If it does, I'm not going to complain," he admits. "You never know what we might be able to find when it comes to new techniques."

"I'll see what I can do," I promise.

"All right. Well, I'd better get going, if Father discovers I've snuck out of the kitchens this close to dinner, I'll pay for it."

"Sorry."

"My choice," he points out.

Even though I know that's true, I still don't want him to get into trouble on my account. "I'll see you after dinner?"

He nods. "I look forward to it."

I watch him slip out of the door, already missing his presence, even if I have something to look forward to.

I look down at the recipe he gave me. I should add it to my own recipe book so that he can have this one back.

He always says that I can keep them, but I know he has a collection of written recipes like this, and he has every reason to want to keep this one.

I set aside the book on dragons. There'll be plenty of time to read it before the egg hatches, and pull my leatherbound journal to me.

I flip to the first blank double-page spread and prepare to transcribe the recipe.

Tomorrow, I'll add a drawing of what we make tonight, along with my own notes about what could be improved, and other flavours that might go along with it.

I'm sure no one will ever care about my thoughts as a baker, but I enjoy looking back over the recipes I've made and seeing how I've come.

I just wish I'd started the journal sooner, as I'm missing a couple of years' worth of baking exploits from before I did.

I suppose there's nothing that can be done about that, I just have to ensure that I don't miss any of them yet to come.

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The kitchens are busier than they were after the banquet, which makes sense considering I've been able to escape down here earlier today.

I smile at the people I pass, and most of them return the gesture, but don't stop to give any of the platitudes they would be expected to outside of the kitchens.

I'm glad about that. I understand that I'm a princess and there are certain things that are expected of me, but I'm in their space when I'm in the kitchens, and I don't expect anyone to stop their work because of me.

Besides, I think most of the kitchen staff are used to me being down here, and they're used to being able to ignore me.

I head into the small kitchen where I normally meet Nate to find him already there, putting some bread into proving boxes and setting them to the side. His father comes into the room before I can say anything and I smile at him. "Good evening, Mr Matthews."

"Your Highness," he responds.

"The new pastry you served tonight was delicious," I say. "With the lemon filling." It had been so sweet and tart at the same time, the perfect combination.

He nods. "Thank you, Your Highness. I was trying it before the visitors from Someil arrive, I've heard they like lemons, but I haven't had much of a chance to cook with them, they're expensive."

"I'm sure my father will approve the budget for more of them if I tell him it's to help impress the delegation from Someil," I say.

"If you would, that would be much appreciated."

"I'll see what I can do," I promise. I'm not sure if my father particularly cares about that kind of thing, but he normally approves extra budget requests for the kitchens when I ask for them.

I suspect that's why none of the cooks have ever really complained about the fact I'm here.

I suppose it could also be because I'm a princess, but I don't think so.

They made a big show of complaining about the time Arthur came down to the kitchens and stole some apple tarts, especially because he destroyed several other items in the process.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Nathaniel, would you soak the fruit cake once you're done here?" he asks Nate.

"Of course, Father."

Mr Matthews gives his son a curt nod and leaves the room, presumably to deal with something else.

"The lemon pastry was really good. Did you come up with it?" I ask Nate.

He laughs nervously and runs and runs his hand through his curly light brown hair before realising that means he has to go wash his hands. "What makes you ask that?"

"Your father is a good baker, but he likes things to be tried and true. You're the one who thinks about new flavours." I lean against the work table and watch him as he kneads the final round of dough.

Nate doesn't meet my gaze. "He made them."

"But it's your recipe," I finish for him. "One day, you're going to be running this kitchen, and Falhaven will be known as the kingdom to come to for tasty pastries."

He laughs. "I'm glad you have so much faith in me."

"Of course I do. I've seen you bake. I've eaten a lot of your baking. You love trying new flavours. I would bet that you're already thinking about how you can adapt the recipe from Lady An's cook into something new."

He chuckles. "I haven't even tried to make them yet. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Then we should get started," I announce.

"Hold on, there's something we should do first." He drops the dough into one of the proving boxes and pushes it over to the side of the room where it will benefit from the heat of the fire.

"Intriguing, but you know it's dangerous to get between me and baking."

Nate laughs. "I promise, this is in the pursuit of your baking," he assures me. "I might have managed to convince Lady An's cook to make us some tasters," Nate says.

"All right, tell me more."

He opens the oven door and uses an oven cloth to carry a tray with two buns over to

the table, setting them down for us. He pulls a bowl closer to him and brushes each of the two buns with a clear sweet smelling liquid.

I pull a stool around so I can sit.

"There are a couple more in the steamer over there." He points towards the stove. "But they still need to rest for a couple of minutes, and they're sweet. These ones are savoury." He picks up one of the buns and holds it out to me.

I take it from him and pull it open. My mouth waters as a savoury-sweet smell hits my nose as the filling is revealed. "It's red."

"Yes, I was surprised about that too," Nate says as he sits down and opens his own bun. "She said that it was made with something called red yeast rice, but when I asked her if I could have some from her, she laughed."

"Oh. Is that going to be a problem for making them?" I try not to feel too disappointed about that. It wouldn't be the first time we've struggled to get hold of a specific ingredient.

He shakes his head. "She also admitted that it was just for colour, and that we could either leave it out, or use something else."

"Like beetroot juice?"

Nate smiles and pulls over a small bottle. "Already one step ahead of you."

"I'd expect nothing less," I respond. "The bun is so fluffy. It's almost like that bread your father made one time, with the butter."

"Brioche," Nate says. "It's a recipe he learned in Gaullesse, but he says it's a waste of

butter."

"That's a shame, because I think Mama would love it." I pop some of the savoury bun into my mouth and let out a satisfied sigh. "That's beautiful bread. And the filling is good too."

"It is," he agrees.

I savour the insides, trying to work out what the flavours I can taste are.

The meat is definitely pork, but beyond that, I don't recognise much of it.

There are some spices within it, but they don't taste like the ones that come from Raajad across the sea, but it's definitely there.

I'm surprised by how sweet the whole thing is, while also being savoury.

"What's in it?" I ask, assuming he knows, because he's seen the recipe already.

"Some kind of roasted pork," he says. "But she basted it in something. She wouldn't give me the recipe for that, though."

"I suppose she has to keep some of her secrets," I grumble.

He laughs. "Maybe you can get it out of her."

"I don't think so. I know you're all happy for me to spend time in the kitchens, but I doubt she's going to be the same considering she doesn't know me."

"I hate to break it to you, Evie, but you're still a princess, and this is your kingdom. She'll likely have to do what you say."

I wrinkle my nose. "It's fine. I don't want to ruin my father's trade alliance by accidentally insulting a visiting cook." I put another bite of the bun into my mouth. "What's the sweetness on top?"

"Honey glaze." He gestures to the pot next to us. "I'm not sure it's necessary, but the cook said it was traditional."

"Then it stays," I respond, finishing it all. "What are the other ones?"

"Salted custard buns," he says, going over to the steamer and lifting something out of it.

"Oh, they sound nice."

They look different from the baked buns, with a shiny domed top which looks kind of like it's got a film over it.

"Try one." Nate holds the steamer basket out to me.

"Thank you." I take one and bounce it between my fingers. It's springy, especially compared to the other bun, which is probably because it's steamed rather than baked.

Slowly, I dig my thumbs into it and pull the bun open, causing a spurt of custard to shoot at me. "Ah."

An amused smile lifts at Nate's lips. "It's hot."

"Mmm, I got that," I respond. "It smells good. I think I get the salt. Is it just like when we make salted caramel?"

He shakes his head. "It's made with salted egg yolks," he says. "But the cook has only

given me the recipe for the salted egg yolks and not the baos themselves, so we can't recreate these tonight."

"Oh." I try not to sound too disappointed, I know he's going above and beyond to make sure that I have some exciting new things to make. And I love him for it.

"I think I'll be able to persuade her," he promises. "What do you think?"

"That's so good. I love the salt." It cuts through the sweetness of the custard, giving it more dimension than it would have done otherwise.

Nate nods. "It is good."

"And the dough is too. It's so fluffy." I let out a contented sigh. The only thing that could make this better is if I got to make one of these.

"You said that she gave you the recipe for the salted egg yolks?"

He nods.

"And they're not just egg yolks with salt in them?"

"No. Salted egg yolks." He gives me a hand gesture that I assume means he needs a moment.

I wait patiently as he disappears into the storeroom and appears with a tiny piece of paper.

"She told me the instructions so quickly that I didn't have time to write them down better," he admits. "And my handwriting is terrible."

"Here, let me try." I hold my hand out for the piece of paper. Normally his handwriting is neat, but maybe that's because he's usually writing it for me, rather than scribbling himself down a note.

"I mean, you can..."

"I've had practice." I scan over the words on the scrap. "That's a lot of salt."

"Yes, I thought she was joking at first, but she was very insistent that's how much is necessary," he responds.

"Then I guess that's what we're doing. I'm glad she told you today if they need eight hours in the ice house."

"Me too, though she did say something about me buying some off her if I needed to. Apparently, Lady An loves to have them grated over her salads."

"Then we should be glad we can make our own rather than depriving Lady An," I respond. "Though I am somewhat intrigued about what they're going to taste like."

"Salty, one would assume."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "I gathered that much."

"You can find out tomorrow if we make them now."

"That's true. So, we need eggs, salt, and some wine of some kind?"

"Oh, right, the cook said something about that, she called it Shaoxing wine and said there was a bottle somewhere..." He searches through a load of bottles and pulls one out that contains an amber liquid. "Here we go."

I get out a couple of small ramekins and fill them with a layer of salt.

It feels like a bit of a waste to use so much, but I'm going to trust the recipe and hope that it tastes good when we're done.

The eggs are slippery as I use my hands to separate the yolk from the egg whites and slip them into small dips in the salt.

I look at Nate, hoping that I'm doing this right. The last thing I want to do is ruin our recipe because I don't know what I'm doing.

He just nods along, and I cover the yokes in another layer of salt before he pours on a splash of the Shaoxing wine. It smells a little like sherry, but also different at the same time, and it soaks into the salt quickly.

"Is that it?" I ask, checking between the scrap of paper containing his instructions and the eggs. It doesn't seem like a complicated thing, and yet it's not something I've come across before.

He nods. "That's it. We'll put them in the ice house and look at them tomorrow."

"It feels too simple."

He laughs. "We haven't tried to use them to bake with yet," he points out.

"Fair enough." But I'm looking forward to it. Discovering a new ingredient is always exciting, and this might even help me feel like I have common ground with the Shengda delegation, which can only be a good thing.

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With everything cleared away and the salted egg yolks safely in the ice house, it's finally time for baking. I'm both nervous and excited to be recreating the pork buns made by Lady An's cook.

I flip open my leatherbound journal to the right page while Nate gets some of the ingredients ready. "I already wrote the recipe down for myself, so this one is yours."

"You didn't have to do that, you could have kept the one I gave you."

"Well, now you can." I'm pleased with myself when I see the small smile on his face. I'm not very good at reading people, but it's possible when it comes to Nate.

"All right, well, everything's ready." He waves to the selection of ingredients.

"You don't have to do everything for me, you know," I say.

"This helps me too, Evie."

I open my mouth to say something, but he shakes his head.

"I get that you love baking, and I'm glad that you get to do this.

But I'm not just doing this for you. I'm doing it for me too.

Do you think I'd be able to try half of what I do if I couldn't tell my bosses that a princess wants to do it?

I'd never get a chance to try and make something just for fun.

So yes, I got everything ready, because this isn't just about you. "

I nod, looking down and trying not to let his words sting when they shouldn't. "I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," he assures me as he heads over to the sink to wash his hands.

"But you also don't need to pretend that I'm doing you some huge favour just because you're my friend.

I mean, I am doing this because I'm your friend, but I'm also doing it because I enjoy trying out new recipes and finding new methods.

The fact I like spending time with you is just an added advantage. "

"I like it too," I respond softly.

"Good. Do you want to check on your egg before we get started?"

I nod and head over to the oven. I grab one of the cloths to protect my hands and pull it open.

The heavy metal door is hot even through the protection, and the fire warms my face the moment the oven is open.

To the left, my green egg sits nestled between some hot stones.

The firelight glints off it, but it's otherwise unchanged since it was in the box

Ambassador Zixian gave me.

"I wonder how we'll know when it's ready," I muse.

Nate laughs. "Presumably, when someone opens the oven and they find a dragon sitting there instead of an egg."

"Maybe I should have thought it through and put it somewhere else."

"It will be fine," he assures me. "What are the chances that I'm not going to be in here when it hatches?"

"I'll be glad if your face is the first my dragon sees," I respond. I close the oven door and go to wash my own hands so I'm ready to bake with Nate. "All right, what's first?" I ask as if I haven't read the recipe multiple times.

"We need to make the filling. Luckily, the delegation brought most of the ingredients we need with them." He waves over to where a couple of glass bottles sit. "We don't have several of these."

"Except for the red yeast rice."

"I think they have it, they just don't want to give it to us," he points out.

I make my way over and pick up one of the bottles. I unstopper it and smell it, wrinkling my nose. "That's strong."

"Yes."

"What is it called?"

"Soy sauce," he responds. "There are two types. The other one is dark soy sauce." He taps one of the other bottles.

"What's the difference?"

"I've honestly got no idea. But if any of your family members like it, then we're going to have to hope that trade negotiations go well and it can be imported from Shengda."

"I have no say in that."

"No, I didn't think you would."

"What else is there?"

"Some of the usual ingredients. Cornflour, honey, red onion, and roasted pork." He points to each of them in turn. "Then we have some oyster sauce." He picks up the bottle and holds it out to me.

I take it from him and unstopper the bottle. The smell isn't like anything I've smelled before, it's kind of malty. "You said it was oysters?"

"Mmhmm."

"It's not very fishy."

"Maybe it's how they make it?" he suggests.

"I think there's a lot still to learn about Shengdanese cooking."

"We can find out more now." The excitement is really starting to build now as we start to prepare.

"I need to cut the pork."

"I can do it if you want?" I suggest weakly. I'm not that good when it comes to chopping meat, but I'll still do it when I need to.

"Definitely not. I don't want to cut the onion." He picks up the red onion and holds it out to me. "All yours."

I laugh and take it from him. "Just because you don't want to cry in front of me."

"They don't affect you the same way they do me," he protests. "It's like you're immune to onions."

"Hardly. I suspect I don't cut enough of them to be affected by the worst of them."

"I set the onion down on the workbench and collect everything I need, only pausing to tie an apron around myself.

I wish I had one of my own, but I've never found anywhere selling them, and I haven't plucked up the courage to ask the royal tailor to make me one.

The knife moves through the onion seamlessly, and I enjoy the soothing clack of the metal against the chopping board. On the other side of the table, Nate dices the pork with ease. I'm not sure how he does it, especially after he's been in the kitchen for hours already.

"Are you ready for the next step?" Nate asks.

I nod and grab a jug from the shelves on the wall, adding about the right amount of water to it.

I put it on the table in front of the bottles of sauce and look at them a little nervously.

Not having used any of them before, I'm starting to feel a little uncertain about the prospect of mixing them together in case I get it wrong.

Nate doesn't seem to have as much of a problem and starts using the teaspoon measure to add the right amounts of each ingredient with the confidence of someone who feels like they might have made this before.

"What happens if I get the proportions wrong?" I ask Nate.

He shrugs. "Then we'll know for next time. Or we'll love it and it won't matter."

"Yes, but that's not the recipe."

"It's not the recipe yet," he reminds me. "Aren't you the one who always tells me that recipes can be improved on?"

"True, but this isn't a recipe from Falhaven. I don't want to get it wrong."

"Trust in yourself, Evie," he says.

"Right. Yes." I take a deep breath and add the soy sauce, followed by the oyster sauce and spice blend. The latter is gloopier than I expect it to be, almost like honey rather than a liquid like the other two. I'm not sure what I expected, but this isn't that.

I mix it all up and lean in to smell it. I hold it out for Nate who does the same. His eyebrows shoot up, and he nods.

"It smells good," I say.

"It does," he agrees. "Hopefully, it will taste good too." He takes it from me and sets it by the stove where he's already put the oil on to heat.

I grab the onions from the bench and drop them in, hearing the satisfying sizzle as the oil begins to brown them.

"Will you grab the skimmer?" he asks.

"Which one is that again?" I look over at the hanging rack of utensils and try to remember which is the skimmer. I'm not so good at this part.

"It looks like a spoon with a sieve on the end of it."

"Oh, got it." I grab the one in question and hand it over to him.

He scoops out the onions as they finish cooking and puts them back in the bowl to use later. Or not, I don't recall reading that as one of the steps. "Are we supposed to put the onions in with the pork once we've cooked the sauce?" I ask.

Nate pauses in what he's doing, a confused expression on his face. "I don't actually know."

"I don't remember seeing it in the recipe."

"I guess we can decide when we get there," I respond. "Or assume that because they're not mentioned again, we don't do anything else with them?"

"Maybe you should make a note on the recipe about that when we're done," he says. "Then we can consider it for next time."

I nod and pick up a bowl of flour, pouring it into the oil and using a whisk to mix it.

"Ready for the sauce."

He nods and picks up the jug, pouring it into the flour and oil mixture.

It sizzles for a moment, the aromas of the various ingredients mingling into a sweet spiced steam.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, really letting it sink in.

My mouth waters, and I realise that he's right about how all of it is going to taste together.

"Evie!"

"Sorry." I continue to stir the ingredients together until the sauce thickens.

Nate turns off the heat and brings over the dish with the pork in. "We can mix it in this, then I'll put it in the ice house until we're ready."

I nod and use one of the heat cloths to pick up the pan, being careful not to burn myself. I've had several nasty burns in the past, and they make my already frustrating-to-wear dresses even worse.

Nate mixes it up and nods. "All right, will you warm up the milk while I put this in the ice house?"

"Of course." I smile at him and start doing as he asks.

All of the thoughts of my day are already drifting away, thanks to the comfort of being in a kitchen I know and working alongside Nate. Working on something new just adds to that.

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It doesn't take long for Nate to return and the milk to be ready, and I take it off the stove to add the yeast to it. I've made enough bread to know that I have to wait until a foam forms on the top, but there's still a part of me that's impatient and just wants to get onto the next stage.

Nate seems to recognise the response in me and slides a bowl with two eggs in front of me, along with a whisk.

"It's hard to be patient."

He chuckles. "It is, but you've got to be. You know what happens if you don't."

"More bread disasters will haunt my nightmares."

"And mine, I remember the tantrum you threw the first time you tried to make bread."

"It wasn't a tantrum," I mutter. "I was just having a bad day. And it's not like you can talk. I remember the jelly incident."

He closes his eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "I put the gelatin in."

"You can't have done, it spilt all over the ice house floor," I point out. "At least you've never forgotten to put the gelatin in again."

"Mmm. Your eggs are done."

"Oh, right."

He grabs one of the mixing bowls he usually makes bread in and adds the dry ingredients to it. "All right, add the milk and the eggs for me."

I do as he asks, watching captivated as he kneads the mixture together.

Even if I wish it wasn't the case, I know I don't have the stamina to do the same as he is, and he mixes it with ease, working on the dough until it stretches without breaking.

I add some butter to the bowl and he carries on kneading it, working hard until he lets out a groan.

"Are you all right?"

"I slept funny," he says.

"I can get you some sleep tisane..."

"It's fine, Evie," he promises.

"If you're sure..." I don't know what makes me think that it isn't, but something feels off.

"I still have some from last time you gave it to me," he says. "I'll take some tonight."

"Thank you."

"Anything for you, Princess."

I roll my eyes at him, knowing he's only using the title affectionately.

"I'm glad it's time to prove it," he says as he drops the dough into one of the proving boxes.

"How long do we need to leave it for?" I ask.

"About an hour, maybe an hour and a half, it depends on how well it grows." He heaves the box so it's close to the oven where the hot air should help with the prove. "And it's just the first." He flips over an hourglass so we know when the time is up.

I nod, knowing as well as he does that the time is necessary. Yet another thing I've learned from baking mistakes made along the way.

The two of us clean up our workspace in comfortable silence. I like that we can be like this. There's something truly comforting about it.

"What now?" I ask, leaning against the workbench. There's still time left according to the hourglass, but as far as I can tell, we've not got anything else to do for these buns.

"We wait," he responds.

"You know I'm bad at that." But we always seem to manage to fill the time we spend together, and as if to prove that to be true, the time passes quickly, and the timer is finally done.

Nate goes to get the filling from the ice house, leaving me alone in the kitchen with the comforting sounds all around me.

I check the instructions and prepare the table for the next step, sprinkling flour over it, making sure that we have a dough scraper to hand.

"Ah, I see we're ready," Nate says as he reenters the room and sets the box of filling

we made earlier down on the table.

"I think so, but I haven't looked at it yet."

He nods and grabs the proving box, bringing it over to the table.

Excitement builds within me as I consider what we're going to find with anticipation.

I know it's not going to be much different from when we make bread of our own, but it feels different.

This is a recipe from a kingdom that's thousands of miles away.

It's exciting to be able to discover it like this.

Nate removes the cover, and I sigh in relief to see that our dough has doubled in size.

It looks just like I think it's supposed to be.

He sprinkles some flour over the top and presses down on it, I think to remove any air bubbles that might have formed.

I wish I had a book about Shengdanese cooking so that I could understand some of the processes we're using a little better.

"All right, I think we're rolling the dough into a log," he says. "Do you want to do the honours?"

"Yes." I lift it out of the proving box and pop it on the table in front of me.

The smell of fresh dough reaches me and I let out a satisfied sigh.

It'll be even better when it's baking, but I still love this part.

It's everything. The smell, the repetitive movements of working with dough, and the way it feels under my fingers.

It's smooth and sticky, but all that means is that it holds the promise of the bread to come.

Once it's in a log, we split it into equal portions. I'm excited to see how these buns turn out. The dough feels a little wetter than I expect it to, but I suppose it's making something I haven't had before, so that's probably normal.

Nate picks up one of the lumps of dough from his end and deftly rolls it into a ball, while I do the same from my end. It doesn't take us very long to have twelve perfectly sized dough balls sitting between us.

"And now we wait," I say dramatically.

He laughs. "Not for too long." He covers the dough balls with a cloth and heads over to wash his hands.

I do the same, pausing on the way back to turn over a smaller hourglass that only counts for a quarter of an hour. "I know it needs time to rest, but it still makes me impatient. I want to find out how it all comes together."

"I know you do." It's possible to hear the smile in his voice.

"And you don't?"

He bumps his shoulder against mine, making me smile. "You know I do," he reminds me. "But patience is part of baking."

"I know, I know," I promise.

"But this wait is basically up," he says, nodding towards the hourglass.

Rather than rushing, I head over to my journal and check the next part of the instructions. "We're filling the buns," I say. "We need to flatten the dough balls and put a tablespoon of mixture into them, then put them onto a tray with the bottoms down."

He nods and slides a tray covered in a layer of baking paper.

"I'm nervous," I admit. "What if we get this part wrong?"

"Then no one will know," Nate assures me. "And we'll get rid of the evidence."

A laugh escapes me without me meaning it to. "By eating it?"

"Only if it tastes good," he says as he pulls the cloth off the dough balls. "I'm not going through the debacle where you overcooked the custard again."

"As if that's worse than when you set the almonds on fire," I counter.

"That one was bad too," he agrees. "So, what do you think?"

"They look good," I say as I examine the dough balls.

Nate pulls the bowl with the filling in closer, putting it between the two of us and adding two spoons so that we can both work at once.

I flour my hands and pick up the first dough ball. "What do you think? Flatten it with my hand? Or a rolling pin?"

"Hands, I think."

I nod and start working on my first dough ball, making sure it's a perfect-ish circle. I pause before moving on to the next one, trying to decide if I want to roll out all six before doing any filling, but I don't think I really have the space for that.

I pick up the wrapper and add a spoonful of the filling.

It's surprisingly red and has a sweet but savoury smell about it.

I kind of want to try it already, but it's too late for that.

Maybe once the buns are in the oven, I can.

The edges squish together fairly easily, and I pop the bun down on the baking sheet next to the one Nate made.

We barely speak as we make the rest of them, mostly because we're used to baking like this together, and it feels comfortable.

I don't think there's anyone else in the castle I can spend this much time with and not feel overwhelmed by their personal habits.

Though maybe it's just because there are a lot of things for me to focus on in the kitchen, and it drowns out the sound of his breathing.

I've never really thought about it too much.

"I'm going to pop these on top of the oven for their final prove," Nate says as he picks up the tray, setting it in place.

I nod and use my spoon to scoop up some of the remaining pork mixture. I know it's cold, but I'm curious about how it tastes.

Nate turns around and raises an eyebrow. "And?"

"It's good." I put my spoon down and use his to get some more of it, holding it out to him.

He leans in and eats the mix off the end of the spoon, nodding a couple of times. "That's going to be great hot."

"And surrounded by fluffiness," I respond, thinking about the ones we tried earlier. I hope ours are just as good. Or maybe better.

Nate clears away the dishes while I prepare the egg wash.

"My father has been talking about sorting me out an apprenticeship again," Nate says after a moment.

"Where?"

"Gaullesse."

I turn around and look at him. "Gaullesse?"

"Yes. It's where he did his apprenticeship, so I think that he wants me to go there too so I can learn some of the same skills."

A lump forms in my throat. "I see." Why do I feel like I want to cry? It's not as if I didn't know this could be a possibility, most of the apprentices in the kitchens have gone somewhere else for a year or two.

"I want to tell him I can't go," Nate says, taking me by surprise.

"What? Don't be ridiculous, you have to go." My voice cracks as I say the words.

He frowns. "You want me to?"

"I don't want you to leave," I say quietly. "You're my friend, and I'd miss you. But that doesn't mean I should stand in the way of you progressing your career."

A strange look passes over his face, but I'm really not sure what to make of it. "You're just saying that because you want me to bring back recipes."

"That hadn't even crossed my mind," I promise. And it's the truth. "Though now you mention it..."

He laughs. "It's not even a done deal yet, so let's not worry about it." He grabs the tray of buns from the top of the oven and sets them down on the bench. "We should egg wash these, then we can put them in the oven."

I nod, accepting that the conversation is over. To some extent, he's right. If there are no actual plans, then it isn't something we need to worry about.

"Your impatience is nearly at an end," Nate promises as he takes the egg-washed buns and slides them into the oven. "You only have to wait for ten minutes now."

"And for us to glaze the buns," I remind him, not wanting to forget the final step. I'm sure we could go without it if we needed to, but I don't want to skip a single step in the recipe.

"Ah, yes. Will you grab the honey?" He hands me a small bowl so I can put some in.

The room fills with the scent of baking bread. My mouth waters, and I can't wait to taste what we've created.

"You ready?" Nate asks as he grabs the oven cloth and pulls open the door.

A waft of steam fills the room, along with the heat from the flames at the back of the oven.

Carefully, he pulls out the tray filled with twelve beautifully golden brown buns.

He slips them onto the table, and I quickly use the pastry brush to cover them all in the honey glaze.

They glisten in the light of the kitchen, looking even more inviting than they did before.

I finish with the glaze and look at them longingly. I know they're going to be a little bit too hot for me to eat right this second, but I definitely want to.

"Want me to cut one open?" Nate asks, knowing exactly what I'm doing.

"Or tear it. That feels more like how they should be eaten."

He nods and picks one up, digging his fingers into it and tearing the bun in half. Steam rises from within and the dark red pork filling spills out. I commit the sight to memory so that I can draw it in my journal tomorrow.

"All right, I'm ready to try it," I say, standing up and getting one of the buns for myself. The bread is springy to touch, but beautifully golden and a little crisp on top. It's perfect for what the recipe says it needs to be.

I can't help tearing mine open too, even if I could just take a bite instead. The bread pulls apart easily and I pop it into my mouth. "Mmm, that's good."

"It is," Nate agrees. "I'm surprised the filling hasn't made it dense."

"The people from Shengda know what they're doing when it comes to filled buns," I say, eating some more of it.

The fluffy bun and the denser pork filling go well together, with the spices and sauces from the filling giving the whole thing a satisfying savoury taste, followed by a sweetness that pairs with it perfectly.

"They do," he agrees, grabbing another one. "Luckily, baking makes me hungry."

"Mmm, me too." It's been a surprisingly long time since dinner, and these are delicious.

I smile at Nate as we eat some more of the buns, feeling a lot of affection for my friend, and for the time we get to spend together.

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After last night's baking, I'm tired but happy as I make my way into the mountain solar for breakfast. I love coming into this room, there's something peaceful about it, even if there are other people in it.

Veronica looks up from her breakfast, taking me by surprise, as she doesn't normally eat in here.

"You look tired," she says.

"I was in the kitchens with Nate last night," I respond, taking a seat and pouring myself some tea.

"Ah, the cook's apprentice?" she asks as if she doesn't already know. Sometimes, it feels as if my younger sister knows everything about everyone, especially around the castle. In contrast, I know next to nothing about anyone.

"Yes."

"Are you sleeping with him?" Veronica asks as she pulls apart her pastry and pops some in her mouth.

"What?"

"Sleeping with him," she repeats.

"Why would I sleep with him? Sleep is something I do on my own," I respond, a little confused about why she's asking.

Veronica gives me a look that I think means she can't really believe what I'm saying.
"Not sleeping, sleeping with ."

"What's the difference?" I sit down and start preparing my breakfast.

She groans in frustration. "Sex, Evie. Are you having sex with him?"

"Oh." I blink a couple of times. "No."

"Then I guess I owe Arthur a new hat."

"What?" I ask.

"Never mind. But seriously? What do you do when you go down the kitchens at night?" she asks.

"We bake." I pick up some bread and tear it open.

"That's really all you do?"

"Mmhmm." I add some cheese and take a bite.

"Have you never thought about taking things further?"

"Than baking?" I check. "I'm not really sure what that would be."

"Wow, you're oblivious," my sister mutters.

"I'm just not really sure what you're talking about," I admit. "How would I take things further?"

"By sleeping with him."

"I don't want to do that." I frown as I think about what I'm saying. "Should I?"

"You're the only one who gets to decide. Do you think he's attractive?"

"I've not really thought about it." I eat some more of my bread and conjure thoughts of Nate. "I like spending time with him, and he's my friend. That's really all there is to it."

"Fair enough." She goes back to eating her breakfast. "Have you ever met anyone that you want to sleep with?"

"I don't think so. Should I have?"

She shrugs. "It's fun, why wouldn't you want to?"

"I can't say I've given it much thought," I admit, watching the rain as it patters on the glass in front of us.

Veronica sits back and sighs. I'm not sure if her frustration is to do with me, or something else.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

She gives me a weak smile. "I'm fine. I just suppose that I was hoping you were sleeping with your baker."

"But why? It doesn't change anything for you, does it?"

"I suppose not." She chews on her bottom lip. "I've always just thought about my

future as marrying a royal I don't necessarily even like that much. Our parents' choice, naturally. And then being sent far away from everyone else."

"I don't think they'll make you marry anyone you don't want to. They might hope that you marry another royal because it's helpful for Falhaven, but I don't think they're going to force you."

"I hope not. But every time I think about it, I end up worrying that it's not going to be the case. Or what if they don't approve of the person I love?" Her voice cracks as she speaks.

I reach out and touch her arm, hoping that it's comforting, but worrying that it isn't. "I'm sure our parents wouldn't want you to feel this way," I say softly. "And that they'll love whoever you love just because they love you."

She raises an eyebrow. "You can't possibly believe that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I respond. "They always tell us that they married for love, surely they will want that for us too?"

"You say that as if the delegation from Someil isn't coming next month. Everyone is going to want Arthur and their Princess to marry."

I shrug. "Maybe they're bringing the Princess for you."

"I doubt that."

"You never know. It would be an advantageous match no matter if it's you or Artie who marries her. And I still don't think that's going to happen. Artie said himself that he didn't think our parents would make him marry against his will."

She raises an eyebrow. "You've talked to Artie about this?"

"Yes. It was only in passing," I respond. "But he was certain, so I am too."

"It must be wonderful to live in your mind."

I grimace. "I wouldn't go that far. Sounds are often too loud, and I hate the way formal dresses feel against my skin."

"Then you need to get different chemises that won't irritate your skin as much. I can help you talk to the seamstresses, if you want," she offers.

"You would?" I can't help but feel hopeful over that. "Whenever I deal with them, I want to say something, but then I hear Mama's voice in my head about being proper and not complaining about our dresses because not everyone has such fine clothing."

"That's no reason for you to be uncomfortable," Veronica responds. "But if it shall make you feel better, we can take your old chemises, and any dresses you no longer want to wear, into town and give them to anyone who needs them."

I nod. There's a part of me that hates the idea of going into town, though not because of the people, just because of the noise. But sometimes, needs must, and I would feel better about having new chemises if my old ones are helpful to others.

"I can help tell Mama about your love, if you want," I offer.

Veronica laughs and leans back in her seat. "Oh no, absolutely not. I don't even know if it's going to last, there's no reason to tell anyone."

"Well, if you need help, I can...do something? I'm not really sure."

"Maybe just talk about pastries really loudly if the subject ever comes up."

"I'm sure I can manage that," I promise.

"Good." She flashes me a grateful smile that I hope means she appreciates the little I can do. I don't really understand the predicament she's found herself in, but I love my sister, and I'll do everything I can to make sure she doesn't suffer for it.

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The box with the salted eggs in it sits in the middle of the table. I've no idea what to expect when we open them, but I'm excited to find out, especially as they're like nothing I've had before.

"Have you used a method like this on anything else?" I ask Nate as he finishes putting away a couple of bowls.

"No, it's new to me. It uses a lot more salt than most of the methods we use here."

"Hmm, it does seem a bit wasteful."

He shrugs. "We'll bake it after we're done and it can still be used for something. Maybe even more salted egg yolks if they're good."

"Father likes things salty, maybe he'll enjoy a custard like this," I muse.

"He might," Nate responds, setting a bowl of water down in front of me. "Want to do the honours?"

I'm sure my entire face lights up in response. I wipe away some of the salt and pull out one of the egg yolks. It's a vibrant orange and firm to the touch, though it still has a little bounce. Definitely not something I'm used to when it comes to egg yolks.

I knock off as much of the salt as I can and carefully lower it into the water to wash it. I half expect it to break, but it doesn't.

"It's not like I thought it would be," I say to Nate, slipping it into his hand.

A curious expression crosses his face as he examines it. "It isn't."

"How many do we need?" I ask as I clean the second one.

"Just two, but if you wash them all, we can put the others back in the icehouse. I might be able to get another recipe from Lady An's cook if we like this one."

I nod eagerly and keep washing off the rest of the egg yolks. A couple of them are a bit misshapen, but others look perfectly round with the bright orange I'd only ever expect from dried apricots.

Nate slides a pot towards me for the others, and I put them inside carefully, satisfied with how they've come out.

He takes two of them and puts them in a small pot. "I borrowed a steamer from Lady An's cook," he says, gesturing to the wicker-like basket, but that can't be right because it doesn't look dry enough.

"What's it made of?"

"She said it was bamboo."

"I have no idea what that is."

"A plant from Shengda, I think. I used one earlier, and I like it. I was going to ask Chef Martina if she thought we could buy some from the delegation."

"That's a good idea. If they're good, anyway."

Steam is already rising through the slats in the basket, and Nate wastes no time putting the bowl in it and closing the lid. He flips one of the hourglasses, and the

waiting begins.

While the salted egg yolks steam, we collect several of the other ingredients we need to make a custard. It's almost second nature to me at this point, it's only the incorporation of the new ingredient that I'm mostly curious about.

"I think we're done," Nate says, carefully extracting the pot from the steamer. "Now we need to crush them."

"Crush them?" I echo.

He nods. "Hand me the knife?"

I grab it from the block and hand it to him, watching intently as he removes the egg yolks from the pot and puts them onto a board. He pushes the flat of the knife against them and they squish easily. After repeating the motion a few times, he pushes the remains into a pan.

"What now?" I ask.

"I think we make a custard the normal way," he responds. "Will you check the recipe?"

I nod and grab the piece of paper with his handwriting on it. "Yes, we just need to add the ingredients, then cook it."

"We can do that," he says as he pops the pan on the stove and leaves me to stir while he gets the ingredients ready for the dough.

I pay close attention, knowing that any slip, even for a moment, could end in disaster.

It isn't until the custard has thickened, and tiny bubbles appear at the edges that I remove it from the stove.

"Do you think we should try it?" I ask Nate.

"Maybe."

"I'm curious," I admit.

He passes me a spoon and I dip it into the pan, getting a small amount of it so I can taste. My eyes widen as the salty sweetness hits my tongue.

"That's good," I say. "Salted caramel good."

"You can't just say that," he responds, using his own spoon to swipe a taste. "Oh, that is good."

"Father would love that. I think he might want you to keep making salted custard if he tries this."

"If it goes well, maybe we could use it for some other custard dishes," he says.

"We should."

"But after we've done this one. I'm going to put this in the ice house."

I nod and let him leave, taking the time to wash my hands and look over the ingredients he's got ready for the dough. It isn't dissimilar to those that we used for the other dough, or for the breads we make here, but it's still interesting to put together.

I check the recipe and get the yeast mixture ready.

"Ah, good, you got started," Nate says as he comes back into the room.

"Just the yeast," I respond. "Is this going to be any different from the one we made the other day?"

"I think so, we're steaming it when we've assembled them, rather than baking them."

"Oh, right." I can't believe I forgot that.

He shrugs. "It's just what Lady An's cook said we were supposed to do." He empties the right amount of flour into a bowl, and adds the yeast mixture after checking that it's ready.

When he puts the bowl in front of me, I take it as an indication that I'm the one who is supposed to be kneading the dough this time. The dough is still rough when he gestures for me to stop and adds a bit of butter.

"How long do I need to knead for?" I ask.

"Not long. Just make sure the butter is mixed in, and then it's time for proving."

"Oh." That's not a method I've used before getting the recipes from Lady An's cook, but I like the idea of finding out if it's going to work or not. The pork buns worked perfectly, and they used a similar method, even if it wasn't the same.

I put the dough into a proving box and cover it, sliding it over to the perfect spot by the oven.

The two of us tidy up, talking a little about what we expect from the recipe, but not

much more than that. Time passes quicker than I expect it to, and Nate is soon bringing the custard back from the ice house.

"It looks good," he says. "Probably your best custard yet."

I look into the pan, easily admitting that he's probably right about that. "Though the one I made for the custard tarts was good."

"Oh, yes. But I think it was the pastry that stole the show on those."

I snort. "You would say that. You made the pastry."

"Ah, so I did," he teases as he mixes the custard so it's easy to handle. "We've got to make it into seven portions."

"Seven?" I echo. "What a strange amount."

"It's considered a lucky number in some parts of Shengda," he responds. "That's what Lady An's cook said when I asked her about it."

"Oh, well, then seven it is." Mostly because that's what we should do if the recipe says we should.

I roll a custard ball between my hands, the heat of them making it stickier than before. I set it on a plate that will go back into the ice house until we're ready for them and move on to the next one.

Once we're done, I pick up the plate and head out to it.

The cool evening air makes the hairs on my arms raise, especially compared to the heat of the kitchen, and it's even worse when I enter the cool of the icehouse.

I have no idea how it works, but I'm grateful for its existence, especially when it helps us with our baking.

Nate is already kneading the dough when I return to the kitchen, and I stop in the doorway to watch him. He uses his body weight to push his hand and the dough forward in a method I don't think I've seen him use before.

He looks up and catches me watching him, giving me a curious look that I assume is him wanting to know what I'm thinking.

"Why are you doing it like that?" I ask.

"Lady An's cook said that it needed the irregular air bubbles taking out of it. She gave me a method for checking too." He shapes the dough into a ball and grabs his knife, slicing through it.

I step closer so I can take a look, surprised to find some large air bubbles around the edge of the dough.

"It needs more," he says.

"Let me," I respond. "You shouldn't do all of the kneading."

"Be my guest."

"How is it that you were doing it?" I ask, realising I should have checked that first.

"Use the heel of your hand and push with your weight," he says. "Here." He steps closer and puts his arms around me, using one hand to guide me.

We're surprisingly close, and I can smell the clinging scent of the fire and baking

bread on his clothes. It's nice, and there's a part of me that's tempted to lean closer to him even if I don't understand why.

He clears his throat and steps back. "You get the idea."

I nod and carry on kneading until we check it and the dough no longer has the large bubbles. It only takes us a few minutes longer to have it divided into the seven pieces we need.

The dough is drier than the other one we made, but it's fairly easy to work with.

I follow the instructions scribbled on the recipe, folding the dough in half, pressing it into itself, and then repeating until a smooth surface forms. It's surprisingly soothing, and I think I could do this for hours, rather than just for seven wrappers.

"Do you want to roll them out while I get the filling balls?" Nate asks.

"Sure, if that's all right?"

"Yep." He disappears out to the ice house while I use a rolling pin to flatten the dough balls, lifting up the wrappers so that I can make the edges slightly thinner.

I'm done with five of them by the time Nate gets back, but he waits until I've done the final two to start filling them.

It's satisfying to push the cold custard into the centre of the wrappers, making sure there's no air trapped between the components.

I wet my finger and run it around the edge so that I can pinch the bun together, and stick it on a piece of baking paper.

After a quick reshape to make sure that it isn't too flat, I step back to admire my handiwork.

It looks a little wonky, but I like how smooth the cream surface of the dome is.

I've not made anything exactly like this before, so it's interesting to see the different parts of the process.

"All right, now we have to wait for them to prove," Nate says. "Twenty minutes in the steamer, then we can turn it on."

I nod and carefully move each of them into the steamer, being careful not to let any of them fall. The last thing I want is to ruin the work we've done, especially when it's already taken a good amount of time.

Just a little more to wait and we'll be able to taste the rewards of our labour.

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I look longingly at the steamer, knowing that at any minute, the buns will have finished resting after their steam and we'll finally be able to taste them.

"I can feel your excitement," Nate says with amusement in his voice.

"Are you not excited?" I ask. "I want to know if they'll taste right."

"I know you do, but they need a couple more minutes to rest. Maybe one of your notes on the recipe should be that the waiting makes you impatient." He leans over and taps the page of my journal where I've written the recipe down.

"It does not," I counter. "I know that it takes time to get good bakes."

"I'm just teasing, Evie," he promises.

"I know. I recognise it from when my siblings do it. At breakfast, Veronica was..." I trail off, realising that I don't really want to tell him what Veronica was teasing me about, especially because part of the conversation was about what I was and wasn't doing with Nate.

"Veronica was?" he prompts.

I clear my throat. "She was actually really helpful. She suggested that I ask the seamstresses for new chemises, but give my old ones to people in the village who might need them."

"I didn't realise you had a problem with them."

"That's because you mostly see me in day dresses," I respond, waving to the dress I'm wearing now. "It's not too bad when I'm wearing these because the fabric of the dress itself is softer. But when I'm wearing a formal gown, or worse, a dress for a ball, it's stiffer and it itches."

"Ah. Then it sounds like Veronica might have a good idea."

"She does, but you can't tell her that," I respond.

He laughs, but stops before he says anything else.

"Nate?"

"The hourglass is done," he says.

"Oh, good." I can feel the faint rumble of hunger, which is normal at this point in a bake. I love to eat what we make as well as make it.

He brings the steamer over to the table and sets it down before pulling off the lid. A waft of steam greets me, rising off the perfect white domes of the buns within and making them look even more enticing.

I pick the one closest to me, almost burning my fingers despite the fact that we switched the stove off about a quarter of an hour ago. I pull open the bun, surprised to find that the custard has gone a little runny inside, even if I know it's supposed to have.

Carefully, I take a bite, letting out a small moan as I taste the salty sweetness of the custard along with the fluffy bun around it. "That's so good."

"It is," Nate agrees, reaching for another one. "It's a good thing there are only seven."

I laugh and eat a second one for myself. My memory is going to have to serve for drawing the inside of the bun, because there won't be any left to draw from at this rate.

Custard dribbles down Nate's chin, and I do everything I can not to giggle at the sight. It's not the first time he's ended up with food on his face while the two of us are baking together, but it never fails to make me laugh.

"What?" Nate asks.

"You've made a mess." I grab a cloth and step closer to him, wiping it away without even thinking about it.

"Thanks."

"I didn't even get it all," I say, leaning in again and getting the rest of the custard. His warm brown eyes peer into mine, friendly and comforting all at once.

Nate is closer to me than I think he's been before. Except that can't be true. We've been baking together for years, there's no way that we haven't stood closer than this. Maybe it's just because of what Veronica said to me that I'm even noticing.

"Evie," he murmurs.

"Yes?"

"I..."

Crack .

We both jump, turning to look in the direction of the oven. For one horrible moment,

I think something is broken, but then there's some kind of scratching sound from inside it.

"The dragon!" I rush over and grab one of the oven cloths, pulling open the heavy metal door as if it's nothing. My eyes widen as I take in the cracked egg and the tiny green dragon sitting at the centre of the oven as if it hasn't just scared us. "Hello," I say.

The dragon cocks its head to the side and blinks its large eyes as it looks at me. It lets out a loud chirp.

I hold out my arm, not entirely sure what I'm supposed to be doing.

The dragon has less hesitation and climbs onto my arm.

"Ow, you're hot," I protest as the tiny claws dig into the skin of my bare arms, leaving some red patches in their wake.

I'm going to have to use some of the burn ointment I have stashed in my room later.

Nate hands me one of the oven cloths, but it's already too late, the dragon has made its way to my shoulder where the sleeve of my dress protects me from any more burning.

"Are you hungry?" I ask the dragon.

It chirps again.

"Well, I only have custard buns. Do you like those?" I pick one up and hold it out.

The dragon leans forward and sniffs it before taking a nibble. It must decide it likes it,

because soon, the entire custard bun has disappeared.

"Is it allowed to eat that?" Nate asks.

"I have no idea," I admit. "I might have gotten bored reading Artie's book. I'll do better now." I scratch the dragon behind its horns. It closes its eyes in response and lets out a low rumble that I assume means that it likes it.

"Hi," Nate says, stepping closer. The dragon looks at him, seeming to welcome his attention.

"What do you name a dragon?" I muse.

"Whatever you want," he responds.

"Well, yes, but what kind of name do you give one?"

He shrugs. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"I've no idea. So maybe a name that works for both. And something to do with fire," I respond. "What about Ember?" I ask the dragon.

It just gives me a blank look in response.

"All right, how about I call you Ember for now, and we'll change it if it doesn't feel right."

The dragon lets out a chirp. I'm not sure if it's because it understands me or not, but I suppose it doesn't matter.

"The book did say that hatchlings were best kept in a nest in the fire for the first few

weeks. Should I put Ember back in the oven?"

"Maybe best not," he responds. "An egg is one thing, but I don't think my father will be pleased about a living creature in her oven."

"Oh, right. I guess you'll be coming to my bedroom with me, then," I say to Ember. "But we'll come down here to visit all the time."

Nate chuckles and leans back against the workbench. "I wouldn't expect any different. Maybe you should go get Ember settled so that you can find out what they need?"

"Are you sure? We still need to tidy up here."

"I've got it." He flashes me a reassuring smile.

"All right, but don't forget to use my name to get whatever ingredients you want for yourself tomorrow," I respond.

"I'll make sure of it, Princess," he says with an amused smile.

I roll my eyes at his use of my title, knowing he's only doing it to tease me, but enjoying it all the same.

"Come on, Ember, let's go make you a nice bed in my fire.

"I'm going to have to learn a lot about dragons very quickly, because I didn't expect her to hatch so soon.

At least the delegation from Shengda is still here, and I might be able to ask them some questions about dragon care, because I'm going to need some answers.

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A chirp sounds from the fireplace and I look over to find Ember rearranging herself on a log.

It's only been a couple of days since she hatched, but she's already bigger, and is definitely more confident.

Mostly because of the information in Arthur's book, and some tips that the Shengda delegation was able to give me on rearing a dragon.

Ambassador Zixin had been surprised to discover that Ember had already hatched, but he also seemed pleased.

Maybe there was something auspicious about returning to his Emperor and being able to tell him as much.

I head over to the fire and use the prongs to put another log on. Ember immediately sees the need to try and set it on fire, breathing in its direction but not managing much.

"You're going to have to wait until you're a bit bigger for that," I remind her.

She gives me an unimpressed look, but I'm sure she'll get over it.

Steps sound behind me, and I turn to find my lady's maid entering the room. She dips into a curtsy. "You have a visitor, Your Highness."

"Who is it, Betsy?" I ask.

"Master Matthews, from the kitchens."

My heart skips a beat in response. "Show him in."

She gives me an odd look, but disappears to do as she's asked.

Nate appears in the doorway a few moments later and I smile at him. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

"I needed to talk to you," he says.

I frown. "Why does that sound serious?"

"It is."

I swallow hard and gesture for the two of us to take a seat in the sitting area of my drawing room.

Ember seems to realise who has come to visit and uses her limited flying skills to float across the room with a couple of sparks floating behind her. She's lucky nothing has set on fire yet, because she's definitely a fire hazard.

She lands on the table in front of Nate and chirps at him.

He cracks a smile and leans in to scratch her behind the horns. "Hello, Ember."

She chirps again.

"She likes you."

"I suppose I was there when she hatched. Maybe she thinks we're her parents?" he

asks.

I shrug. "According to the book, green oak dragons often hatch alone because their parents move on. So she just likes you. And me, I guess."

"Interesting." He takes a deep breath. "Father has sorted out my apprenticeship."

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, especially with the abrupt change of topic. I lean back in my chair. "Oh."

"I'm to go to Gaullesse. He wants me to stay there for at least a year, but he's already talking about me taking another job after that and moving on to Sovranetti, and maybe Karvellos."

"He wants you to go away for a few years?" I echo.

"Yes."

My whole body feels weird as I try to take in the news. "I see."

"Yes," he repeats, looking down at his knees.

I might not always be able to read situations right, but I can work out this one. He wants me to ask him to stay, and I want to ask him that, but we both know that I can't and that I shouldn't. "You'll learn a lot," I say instead, breaking my heart as I do.

His shoulders slump. "That's what my father says. He thinks I have the potential to be an even better pastry chef than he is."

"You're already a better pastry chef than your father," I say, meaning every word. I know that a lot of Mr Matthews' best creations in the past couple of years have

actually been things that Nate came up with. He's just not allowed to tell anyone else that.

"That's a matter of debate," Nate says.

"I can't believe you're going to be gone for years," I whisper, my voice cracking as I do.

Nate looks up, a pained expression on his face, as if my reaction has told him something. I'm not sure what. He already knows he's my best friend and that I'm going to miss spending time with him. It isn't any kind of revelation to him.

"When do you leave?" I ask.

"Next week."

"Next week?" A strange squeak escapes from me. "Sorry."

"It's all right, my reaction was the same."

"That's so soon." I watch him continue to fuss Ember and think about all the time we're going to miss with one another.

"It's sooner than I'd like," he admits. "I thought maybe we could make some of our favourite bakes. You know, a good way to say goodbye."

A lump forms in my throat. "I would like that.

" I'd like it better if he wasn't going, but I'm not selfish enough to suggest that.

He could have an amazing career ahead of him as one of Falhaven's best pastry chefs,

I'm not about to ruin that just because I might be a bit lonely.

"Do you know what you want to make?" I ask him instead of voicing any of my thoughts.

"Apple and blackberry pie."

"That's the first thing we made together."

He nods. "We overfilled the pie and it ended up overflowing in the oven."

I laugh as I remember the mess we made. "Your father wasn't happy."

"And he was amazed when you helped me clean it up. I think he expected you to run away at the first hint of getting your hands dirty." The smile on his face almost chases away the hurt.

"I wasn't going to abandon you when it was my mess too," I point out. "If I can make the mess, then I can tidy it up."

"I think he knows that now," Nate responds. "But then he wasn't so sure."

"I'm glad I proved him wrong."

"What do you think you want to bake?" he asks.

"I'm not sure," I admit. "We've made so many tasty things. And a couple of disasters."

He laughs. "The Eve's Pudding?"

"I don't know what went wrong, it was cooked in the middle when I tested it with the skewer," I protest. "It was only when I turned it out that it fell apart."

Ember decides she's bored with our conversation and makes her way back over to the fire, stretching her wings as she hops back into it.

"You know what, we should make Eve's Pudding," I say. "A do-over."

"All right, but only if we can also have a do-over for the cheese scones I burned."

"Absolutely." I meet his gaze and smile, sharing a moment that's just for us.

It's going to take a moment to work through the reality of him leaving, and I'm going to miss him every day, but I know that this is a good thing for him, and I can't stand in his way, even if it hurts me.

And I definitely shouldn't let any of that get in the way of making the most of the time we have left together, because it's going to run out sooner than I want it to.

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My bag bumps against my leg as I rush down the grand staircase and into the kitchen. Ember makes some unhappy noises from my shoulder, but I ignore her. I can't believe I'm running late to say goodbye to Nate after spending so much time trying to make sure I wasn't.

The kitchen we usually bake is empty and my heart sinks.

Ember doesn't have any of the same qualms and jumps off my shoulder to make her way over to the oven, where she curls up happily.

I leave her to it, glad that she's going to be content while I say my goodbyes, it's one less thing for me to worry about.

I hurry out of the kitchen door just as Nate turns around. Surprise flits over his face even as I throw my arms around him. The touch takes him off guard for a moment, maybe because we don't normally do this, but then he closes his arms around me and holds me tightly.

He smells of comfort. Of the only person I'm truly myself around, and the person I least want to leave the castle. Except that I know I have no right to ask him to stay. Silent tears roll down my cheeks as I hold him, completely unaware of anything around me.

"Evie?" he asks softly. "Are you all right?"

"Of course not," I respond as I pull back, wiping my sleeve under my eyes and hoping that chases the tears away.

"Here." He pulls out a handkerchief and holds it out to me.

"Thank you." I use it to dab my eyes, wishing he wasn't seeing me like this, but grateful that he's the only person who can see me this way. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me too," he says. "I'll be back soon."

"In a year, maybe more," I point out. "It's a long time."

"I know." He looks at me with a strange expression on his face.

"Will you write to me?" I blurt out.

"You mean, will I send you recipes?"

"No. I mean, yes. I would like that. But will you write to me," I ask. "I don't want to go a whole year without talking to you." Every time I've thought about that reality, I've ended up frozen.

Surprise flits over his face. "I'll write to you," he promises. "So long as you plan on writing back."

I laugh through my tears. "Of course I do."

"Good."

"Oh, I erm, brought you a present," I say, remembering that I'm still carrying the leather journal I got him in my bag. I pull it out and hold it to him. "For you to write down all of your discoveries. If that's what you want to do. You could sell it if you don't like it, I don't mind."

He raises an eyebrow. "Don't you?"

I clear my throat. "I would like it if you used it for your recipes and notes, but you really don't have to."

"Thank you." He takes it from me and opens the front page, finding where I wrote an inscription for him. "I will definitely use it for recipes and notes." The way he looks at me feels like it means something, but I'm not sure what.

I let out a shaky breath, glad that my gift is a good one. I worried constantly since it was delivered that he wouldn't like it.

"Nathaniel!" Mr Matthews calls from the carriage.

"I think that's my cue," Nate says, but he doesn't move.

I nod, not really knowing what else to say. I want to ask him not to forget me. Or better yet, not to go, but my mouth stays shut. I refuse to ruin this for him. It's an amazing opportunity, and one I don't want to ruin for him before he's even less.

Instead, I wrap my arms back around him and listen to the rhythmic beat of his heart. His hand touches my back, and I find a surprising amount of comfort from the touch.

"I'll think of you when I'm baking," I murmur into his chest.

"Same," he responds.

"And I'll be here when you get back."

"I hope so." He pulls back and looks as if he wants to say something else, but doesn't.

His father calls his name again, and he turns to leave, stopping to wave at me when he's halfway to the carriage.

The lump in my throat is painful, even as I try to swallow it down. I know I shouldn't feel this bad about him leaving, but it feels like there's a pain I've never experienced before lancing straight through my heart as the carriage with my best friend inside rolls away from me.

It's going to feel like an age until he returns, and even if I know it's good for him, it still hurts for me. I watch until the carriage is out of sight and turn around to head back into the kitchen.

I step back into the room we usually bake in, and the wave of emotions breaks over me. There's no stopping the tears and I sink to the ground, wrapping my arms around my legs and letting out all of my hurt.

A chirp comes from the direction of the oven, followed by some clumsy flapping of wings as Ember abandons her perch to land on my shoulder.

She nestles her head against my cheek, making me feel a little bit better.

"I guess we're going to have to get used to baking just the two of us," I tell my dragon, my voice scratchy from the tears.

She chirps in response.

I give her a weak smile. It's going to be fine. It'll be strange at first, but then it will be normal, and by the time Nate returns, I'll have all kinds of baking tricks and treats to share with him.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:50 am

I enter the kitchen, a sense of disappointment passing through me at the realisation that Nate isn't waiting for me when I step inside. Even though he's been gone a few weeks, I still find myself hoping that he'll be here when I come to the kitchens.

Ember doesn't have the same kind of feelings and lets out a small screech, launching herself off my shoulder and gliding over to the oven.

She stretches out her wings before turning around in a circle a couple of times and flopping down with an exhausted sigh on top of it.

It brings a smile to my face. It seems like I'm not the only one who likes being in the kitchen.

Everything is exactly the same as it always has been, but it doesn't feel that way.

I let out a sigh and flip through my journal, looking for the perfect recipe to make.

There are notes in the margins of some of the recipes, most of them in my handwriting, but every now and again, there's a note written in Nate's. It just makes me miss him more.

Footsteps sound from the doorway, and I look up, half hoping that it's my best friend telling me that there's been a mistake and that he's not already back.

I know that's a selfish thing for me to wish for, especially when this is an opportunity for him to further his career, and I'd never want to take that from him.

"Hey, Evie."

"Artie," I respond with a weak smile in my brother's general direction.

"Do you like my new hat?" he asks, touching the rim and smiling in a way that makes it seem like I should know what he's on about.

"It looks a bit impractical to me," I respond. "The feather is going to be ruined the moment it gets wet."

He shrugs. "Then maybe I'll get Veronica to replace it."

"Why would she have anything to do with your hat?"

"I won it from her," he says.

"Right. So, did you come to the kitchen just to show me your new hat?" I ask. I assume not, he has to know that I don't particularly care about hats.

"I didn't," he responds. "I came to give you this." He holds out a letter.

"What is it?"

"I don't make a habit of opening your letters."

"I never get letters."

"It has your name on it," he says.

I take it from him, my curiosity outweighing any confusion. My breath catches in my throat as I recognise Nate's handwriting even when it's only Her Highness, Princess Evelyn of Falhaven written across the envelope.

"So, who is it from?" my brother asks.

"Does it matter?"

"Ah, it's from your baker," he responds.

"If you don't want anything else, then maybe you should go."

He chuckles and heads over to the oven to tickle Ember behind the horns.

"I'm sorry the delegation didn't give you a dragon egg," I say.

"It's all right. At least I get to see a dragon. I never imagined we'd have one living in the castle."

"I'm going to teach her how to bake," I say.

Arthur raises an eyebrow. "You want a baking dragon?"

"She likes the oven, and she'll breathe fire properly when she's older. Why can't I teach her to make meringues?"

"I guess?" He sighs. "Anyway, I should get going, I'm heading out to the stables for a ride, that's why I said I'd bring you the letter."

"Thanks." I smile at him and wave him off, content to be alone so I can open Nate's letter.

I'm surprisingly nervous as I break the seal and unfold the letter. There's a second piece of paper folded inside, and I take it out so that I can read everything he says.

Evie,

You'd love the kitchen here in Gaullesse, it's bigger than the one we have at Falhaven Castle. The head pastry chef is already working me hard, and you wouldn't believe the amount of butter that's being used, we definitely haven't been putting enough in our pastry.

There's not much to update you on, as I spent most of the past fortnight travelling, but the first night I was here, I made blackberry and apple pie again.

I know we only made it the week we left, but I was missing home and it made me feel like I was there again.

I even found our original recipe. I've enclosed it in case you wanted to take a look.

I hope Ember is behaving for you, I look forward to hearing about her adventures in the kitchen along with yours.

Nate

I smile to myself as I read the words. He may not be here, but he's thinking about me just like I'm thinking about him, and that's reassuring in a way.

And now I know what to bake. I pick up the recipe and unfold it.

The recipe is printed in someone's handwriting, but I can't remember whose.

The notes in the margins belong to both of us, and I find myself smiling as I read them through the smear of blackberry juice on the top corner of the recipe.

I can't believe he still has this. Or thought to take it with him to Gaullesse, but it means the world to me to have it here with me.

I'm going to make sure I look after it as if it's the original, so that when he comes

back to Falhaven, it will be waiting for him, along with any other recipes he thinks to send me.

As much as I'm going to miss him, I can still feel close to him by baking and writing to him. And before I know it, my best friend will return.

Thank you for reading Dragons & Dumplings , I hope you enjoyed it!