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Prologue

I knew it was her the moment we passed each other.

It was during my first long vacation in a good while, after somehow managing to finish a job that was an *intense* pain in the ass. I'd been drowning my sorrows over the unbearable way it ended in cheap booze, but when that didn't make me feel any better, I started dragging my heavy head and legs through the crowds of the royal capital.

But the sudden whiff of a scent painted a vivid scene in my head.

A room without its owner. A room without any of the trappings befitting the owner's high station, and only the overlapping scent of flowers to show that *she* had been there.

I remembered it clearly. There was no way I could forget.

"W-Wait! You. Miss, I bid you, please wait!"

I called out to her before I consciously decided to do so.

There was no way. That was what my mind was telling me. But my feelings, my instincts, were saying something else.

It's her.

Those fruitless days flooded my memory. A kind, honest, hardworking, yet ultimately unacknowledged person. A princess offered as a hostage, without a single gown to her name, or even a portrait. Aside from her lingering scent, there was no proof that she had ever been there.

That was why. That scent was how I noticed. And I couldn't let her go.

She turned to look at me. She looked just like I had imagined. Before I realized it, I was crying.

The moment he called out, I knew he was speaking to me.

I had been born as a princess, yet I'd spent my days shunned and abused. Not only was I deprived of gowns or jewels, but I was barely given an education either, which forced me to desperately teach myself. But my family might've found even *that* unacceptable.

A war had happened somewhere that had nothing to do with me, and it had ended without me knowing anything about it.

"I'm being sent to the country next door?"

After being offered to our enemies as a disposable pawn, I pretended to obey, then fled. I couldn't care less about what happened to my country. If anything, I wanted to cause problems for them.

Having thrown away both my title and status, I became a nobody, which meant that no one would be able to find me—no one would ever call out to me.

But even knowing all that, I knew. The voice now calling out through the busy crowd was directed at me.

It couldn't be. Shouldn't be.

But I still turned around. And he really was looking at me. Right at me.

He really found me, I thought. The moment I realized that, my heart thumped in a way I'd never felt before.

I didn't know. That the story that should have ended was beginning once again.

I didn't know. That the fate that should have never come to me would arrive like this.

Chapter 1: "The Black Wolf" Doubts His Ears

"They've lost track of the princess?!" I shouted, unintentionally loud enough to echo throughout the office we'd set up inside our temporary lodgings.

Seeing my subordinate (who should've been used to me yelling) flinch, I quickly waved my hand to clarify that it wasn't him I was mad at. The guy was already shrinking inside his stuffy knight's armor from the ridiculous report he was having to give me—it wouldn't be fair to scare him any more. After all, it wasn't even his fault. Plus, things had been tense from the moment we holed up in this shady fortress right on the border of the country we'd only recently stopped being at war with, so making the bad vibes worse wasn't going to help anybody.

I took a deep breath and asked in the most normal tone I could muster, "So, what happened? Explain it in detail."

"Understood! As you previously ordered, Your Excellency, our unit arrived at the city on the border with Sylvario to meet Her Royal Highness, but..."

I still can't get used to being called "Your Excellency."

I, Ark McGuine, had been awarded the peerage of viscount at the young age of twenty-five. I'd also been given a suit of black armor to go with my nickname "the Black Wolf." I'd earned the name due to my black hair and eyes, and for the fact that I was so wild in battle that I always came away splattered with dark blood.

Thanks to my rise in rank, my subordinates were now putting me on a pedestal, though some of them put that pedestal a bit too high and were now afraid of me... But whether or not it was out of fear, even the knight in front of me—probably several years my senior—was giving me a brisk report.

But that was the only good thing about it.

"According to the city's viceroy, Her Royal Highness has yet to arrive."

"That's what I'm wondering about first of all... Go on."

As I pressed for more information, I heaved a little sigh. It looked like the nonsense war we had just gotten out of was going to continue to make trouble for everyone.

Originally, the war between our kingdom of Brigandia and the neighboring kingdom of Sylvario was apparently triggered by some small border disputes. I say "apparently" because by the time we in the capital knew there was even a problem, the regional lords of both kingdoms were already in battle. In the end, both national armies got involved, and it ballooned into a full-scale war.

The countries started on even footing at the beginning, but as soon as things started getting drawn out, Sylvario lost their momentum. In the end, Brigandia emerged the true victor.

Afterwards, the two countries reached an armistice, territories were divided up, and reparations were decided on...but something strange happened at that point too.

Sylvario asked Brigandia to reduce the reparation demands. In exchange, they offered their fourth and youngest princess, Her Royal Highness Princess Sonia, to marry into Brigandia and solidify friendly relations between the two nations.

Honestly, they should've just refused the ridiculous request. But luckily or unluckily, it was granted. Brigandia's third prince, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, was still single.

"If she's a princess, she should know of things around their palace, right? I don't expect anything top secret, but we might be able to get some info on the little things," said His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse with a great big smile. It chilled me to the bone.

(By the way, as the leader of the Special Battalion—a troop which directly serves His Royal Highness, and of which I'm a member—His Royal Highness is basically my boss. We've been buddies since we attended the Noble's Academy together, so we often talk casually to each other.)

Having settled the fine print, the loser Sylvario sent Princess Sonia to the winner Brigandia as a hostage-slash-information source in a show of friendship. And, to communicate that "We're still on guard. If you wanna go, we'll go," Brigandia sent the infamous "Black Wolf" (read: me) to the border city to

retrieve the hostage-princess.

But on the day she was supposed to arrive...she didn't show.

We decided to wait; things like health or bad weather could've easily caused a delay. But three days passed, and we still hadn't heard anything. Because it was so weird that they were that late and hadn't even sent anyone to tell us why, I sent a few of my knights to go check things out, and...

"We had guessed that they might have run into some trouble and been unable to proceed, so we questioned some merchants who had traveled down the road, but none of them had seen a single royal carriage. Commander Gale continued towards Sylvario's capital thinking that they might be nearby and sent me to report back to you, Your Excellency."

"I see," I said. "Gale made a good call. I expect nothing less."

Gale was one of my subordinates, and a common-born chevalier. Without the privileges of nobility to support him, he had worked hard to study and hone his skills, eventually beating out the children of barons and viscounts to gain the position of platoon commander. I relied on him heavily because of this, and he met my expectations. Not only was he skilled with a sword, but as you might expect of someone who crawled up the ranks of the knight squad against nobles, his situational awareness skills were especially high.

This time too, he hadn't just checked to see if the princess had arrived; he'd had the sense to gather additional information on the situation and send me an interim report. Long story short, he wasn't one to cut corners like a slacker. Gale's work was instrumental in me coming to fully comprehend what a difficult situation we were in.

"Which means... Ah, thank you for the report. Take the day off and rest."

I gave the knight who rushed back here a break, and tossed out some orders to nearby military officials. "Now, prepare two fast horses, and bring me two skilled riders for them!"

While they were getting me what I needed, I jotted some letters and had them sent to Brigandia's royal capital on another fast horse. One was a report about the situation, and the other...

"Take care of things while I'm gone. I'm going to fetch her myself!" I told my adjutant, choosing a couple of elite knights and preparing to depart.

While Gale was skilled and prudent, his common-born station and rank as a chevalier were ultimately a little too low for the situation. If we ended up needing to do a lot of work while out in the field, then it'd probably speed things up having a viscount like me—the person in charge of the operation who'd been granted a certain authority—to collect the princess and do all the talking.

Which is why I made a written record that was both a declaration that I was heading into Sylvario to join the vanguard in their investigations, and an apology for reporting about it after the fact. The situation was what it was, after all, and as a potentially time-sensitive matter, I couldn't afford to go back to the capital to ask for permission. That was why I had been given the authority to make my own decisions out here on the field.

Just how much of this did His Royal Highness see coming?

Anyway, since my appointment to viscount was so recent, and I was independent without any family members (on paper) who might end up in the crosshairs, it'd be easier for me to take all the blame if negotiations ended up going south. If I said that I forced my subordinates to comply with my orders, I'd probably be able to protect them too. My ma and pops might cry, but there was no helping that.

After preparing several contingency plans and clearing my mind for the task ahead, I headed outside and found that both the horses and knights I'd requested were all prepared.

"Okay, let's go!"

I fired myself up and hopped on my own favorite horse, and at once we started riding in complete unison. We were part of an active duty, highly experienced force, so scrambling was something we had down pat. And these being the elites of a squad like that, they were on a different level entirely.

We rode in sync, as if we were one organism, heading towards the city on Sylvario's side of the border. It was a few hours away, but since we left before noon, we managed to make it to the border city of Vestigo before the sun set.

Since the city was the keystone of the national border, they made sure to lock the gate on Brigandia's side good and tight once the sun went down. We were in the middle of autumn and the days were getting shorter, so if we'd been any later, we'd have been forced to camp outside. And seeing as we left in a rush without much in the way of camping supplies, no matter how confident in our stamina we were, we *really* wanted to avoid spending the night on the cold ground if we could help it.

That said, there wasn't any guarantee we'd be able to sleep somewhere with rooms even though we'd gotten there in time. After all, the hardworking gatekeepers of Vestigo had their spears drawn the moment they spotted our group of Brigandian knights on horseback approaching them. I could admit to myself that their vigilance and high morale—far out on the borderlands of their homeland, and right next to the territory of their most recent enemy to boot—was impressive.

"Pray pardon us for arriving suddenly without notice! I am Viscount Ark McGuine of the Kingdom of Brigandia! I've come on urgent business, and I wish to speak to the viceroy!"

When I announced myself and informed them of my business, they started freaking out. Looked like my name and infamy as "the Black Wolf" worked here too—though probably in a bad way.

I waited for a reply while the soldiers talked among themselves. Once they came to a decision, a lone man—probably the commander—stepped forward.

"Is the business you speak of in relation to that of Sir Gale, who passed through here earlier?!"

The bold way he spoke was admirable; despite his bravado, his knees were quaking. It was impressive how he managed to conceal his fears, understand what we were here for, and also say things in a way that only those in the know would understand.

"Yes, it is! I have summarized those matters in a letter, which I request that you deliver to the viceroy!"

While I spoke, one of my subordinates dismounted and approached me. I handed him the letter I prepared beforehand, and he accepted it while giving

me the sheathed sword he pulled from his belt. With his hands in the air to demonstrate that he was unarmed, he walked towards the commander.

Really, I would have preferred to put myself in such a potentially vulnerable position, but alas—as the one in charge, I couldn't take the risk.

Plus, the knight was one of my finest, and I would have disrespected him by not allowing him to perform this task. He too was prepared to risk his life.

Luckily for us (or rather, it was kind of obvious it'd happen this way), their commander didn't attack my subordinate while he was showing that he wasn't a threat, and accepted the letter.

"We have received the letter! Please, wait there!" the commander said, handing off the letter to one of his men to deliver.

Now, we just had to hope the viceroy would actually read it...but it'd probably be fine.

I'd looked into our neighbor Sylvario in the past, and had (of course) found info on the border cities in each nation. Vestigo's viceroy was apparently a bit of a coward who floundered in the face of unexpected situations, but could be decisive upon receiving enough information to act. That was why he'd let Gale in to investigate the princess situation, and allowed him to continue on farther into the country.

If I were inclined to nitpick, I'd think it would've been nice if he'd sent us word of the princess's no-show immediately, but there was no helping that now.

Not many people could keep a level head if a princess was missing and circumstances suggested foul play. I'd bet the viceroy had just thought it was a fluke in the beginning, and that she'd arrive the next day. But because of those thoughts, things were getting a lot worse.

As I was standing there in contemplation, another soldier returned. Apparently, we'd gotten the response we were looking for.

"We have received permission from the viceroy to allow you inside! We will show you the way, so please follow us!"

"Understood. Thank you!"

I yelled back my response, and we proceeded to ride our horses into the city. We did end up getting a lot of funny looks from the townspeople, but of course a bunch of knights from Brigandia suddenly showing up would make them curious. All in all, they seemed bewildered.

Whatever the case was, we made it to the viceroy's mansion and commenced with our meeting.

"I'm so terribly sorry that someone as famous as yourself had to travel all the way here, Sir McGuine."

"No, let's skip the niceties. What in the world has happened?"

"Yes, erm... We received word that Her Royal Highness had left the capital on her way to marry into Brigandia, but on the day she was scheduled to arrive, she didn't show. I assumed she would no doubt be traveling with a large entourage, and small issues on the road could cause delays. So, I decided to wait. But when she still showed no signs of arriving, I was considering confirming the plans. I was about to send a messenger to the capital, when..."

Damn, it's pretty much exactly what I thought.

But if they *did* send them proper word that she'd been on her way, then we could only assume something happened en route.

"Viceroy, have you heard any rumors of large-scale attacks lately?"

"We've looked into it, but found nothing. It's why I don't believe that anything has happened to them, but..."

It was probably more accurate that he didn't want to believe, but I'd refrain from hounding him about it since that was completely understandable.

"It seems that one of my knights, Sir Gale, has gone on ahead to investigate, but I gather that you haven't heard anything from him since. If that's so, then we'd like to continue on to follow him."

"That is... You'd what?!"

The viceroy was hesitant to agree to my request, but a certain document I had on hand shocked him speechless—he stared so hard at it he could've burned a hole through it. A few seconds later, he weakly nodded back.

The document in question was one signed by His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, designating me as a diplomatic special envoy. Thanks to international agreements, a special envoy was granted unimpeded travel even during wartime, and was immune from arrest without very clearly committing a crime.

In fact, in cases of self-defense, they would even be forgiven for using force. This clause was enacted apparently because some dumbass royal once attacked a foreign envoy inside their palace. Obviously, diplomacy would be impossible if they were dead, so it was decided that if you can't talk with words, then you've gotta use your sword instead.

Not only did they want to avoid anything like that happening, but international agreements such as this were sworn to God, so they were upheld with extreme strictness. After all, God's existence meant that a nation breaking an oath could bring about divine punishment and spell the end of their country.

Anyway, His Royal Highness designated me as one of these incredibly privileged special envoys because he foresaw something like this happening.

Honestly, sometimes His Royal Highness's gift of foresight frightened me.

"Oh, yes. Would you be able to send messengers to the other towns along the road to the capital? With the situation being as it is, I believe that this all would go a lot better if we could travel smoothly to search for Her Royal Highness. Of course, I'll make sure to let His Majesty the King of Sylvario know how quickly you worked to resolve this issue, Viceroy."

"Y-You'd say that to His Majesty? Well then..."

The viceroy was still pretty nervous, but it looked like he was gradually starting to accept what was going on. If he let us through now and we found the princess and her entourage, then he would have contributed to our success. And if I, a special envoy, relayed that to his king, then it would equate to Brigandia itself acknowledging it, and his distinguished service would be known internationally.

If she was never found, then just letting us through would show that he at least did the bare minimum to help. There could likewise be huge problems if I kicked up a fuss about everything, but of course I had no intention of doing that, so that risk was almost nil.

On the flip side, if he stopped and turned us away here, and then Her Royal Highness never showed up, the agreement between our nations would be breached. Either war would resume or Sylvario would have to pay further monetary reparations. There would be no way for the viceroy to avoid taking responsibility for that.

With all this in mind, from his point of view it would ultimately be best to let me through, and maybe even make things more convenient for me.

"Please, allow our knights to accompany you. If you will, then I will assist you."

Oh right—it would be a bit iffy for us to go alone. It'd be different if I was planning on doing something bad, but since I had no intention of doing anything like that, it'd be better for us if they came along.

"I thank you for your assistance, and for your wise decision, Viceroy," I said, giving the man a knight's salute.



And so, by throwing around the privileges that I'd been given, I'd been granted the permission we needed to continue, and we resumed our travels along Sylvario's roads towards the royal capital.

That was all fine and dandy, but what we saw along the road was terrible, to say the least.

"Things are kinda bleak, or should I say unsafe," I said.

"It's the aftereffects of the war," a Sylvarian knight replied. "The front lines were a bit farther away, but it looks like a number of people were swept out here."

"I see. Then we of all people can't really complain."

According to the Sylvarian knight, former soldiers and the like who'd gone broke and resorted to thievery were the most likely culprits behind the heavily damaged carriages left in ruins alongside the road.

If a road important enough for a princess and her entourage to use was in such poor condition, then things within Sylvario must've been worse than we'd

thought. This was a clear visual of how bad the circumstances were, and we picked up the pace immediately at the thought of the princess's entourage getting into some kind of trouble.

As we hurried, we would meet up with the knights that Gale had left for us as contacts in the town inns we passed through, follow the path he'd taken farther, and pick up another one. We repeated the cycle a few times before finally catching up with him in another inn town a few days later.

Yes, we *caught up with him*. Which meant that after all this travel, he'd found neither one of the royal family's carriages *nor* anyone who'd seen one.

"My apologies, Your Excellency," Gale said.

"Don't worry about it. If you couldn't find them even after looking into things, then there was nothing else you could do. But...what in the hell is going on?" I asked.

I thanked Gale for his efforts as he apologized, face downcast with humility, before tilting my head in confusion.

This was the carriage procession of a princess marrying into another nation we were talking about. The scale of it should've caught people's eyes, but so far not a soul had seen even a glimpse of it, even when we'd come so far.

Things weren't adding up. There was a chance the entourage had taken a different route, but the other options were either huge detours or really rough, so I couldn't imagine them choosing to do that.

Then the only possibilities left are...

The moment I thought that, something flashed through my brain.

"Gale, did the townspeople you spoke to *know* about Her Royal Highness getting married?"

"What? Of course they... No, wait. Now that I think about it, some of them may have been shocked...?"

"Damn, it couldn't be, could it?"

I now understood the discomfort I'd had while we were traveling along the highway—no one had welcomed their princess as she traveled to marry, or

mourned that she was essentially being sent to Brigandia as a hostage. Everyone was just living, drained from the war that ruined their lives.

It was the same even when we arrived in Vestigo. If they had known that the princess was coming, they should have just thought we were coming to get her the moment they saw us show up, but they didn't.

And now there was still a lack of acknowledgment, despite the fact that it had been more than a full week since the day she should have arrived and we'd gotten halfway to the capital from the border. It was impossible for the entourage to have come this far without *someone* talking about it.

In the first place, protocol would dictate that an entourage accompanying a princess to her wedding destination would send a notice to every town they passed through to make their trip smoother. But they hadn't, which meant...

"It's like she never even left," I murmured.

"N-No, that can't be true! We truly did get word that Her Royal Highness had left the capital!" one of the Sylvarian knights denied, pale as a ghost.

That's right—if the princess really hadn't left, then it meant that Sylvario had no intention of obeying the agreement. Brigandia would view that as Sylvario trying to pick a fight with us, which would lead to the ceasefire going up in smoke, and would force us to talk with our weapons again.

Honestly, I personally wanted to prevent that from happening, but the decision was up to Brigandia. If they told me to fight, then as a knight, I would fight.

That being said, I had become a bit fond of our Sylvarian companions; throughout our travels, they'd treated us with nothing but the proper decorum and discipline.

"If word did come that she'd left, then she probably had," I reasoned. "But it seems like only you knights and your superiors knew, with nothing said to anyone else. If this is true, then I believe we'll need to travel closer to the capital—no, go all the way to the capital ourselves to investigate."

"That's true," the Sylvarian knight agreed. "Understood. We'll send word ahead for you."

"Please do... For the sake of keeping both of our nations at peace."

As the knight heroically steeled his resolve, I gave him a firm nod back.

After all, their task involved getting permission for their former mortal enemy to gain entrance to the capital, the heart of Sylvario—there was no telling what sort of censure they'd face. Even if this situation was *because* of the royal family, it was, unfortunately, often irrationally treated as a different story. But even so, the war would resume if things were left as they were, and they must have decided that the trial of getting us to the capital would be better than having their comrades and populace suffer.

I myself didn't want things to end in bloodshed once again either. While I didn't know if I'd get back home safely—I had done a lot of damage to Sylvario during the war, after all, and here I was practically waltzing into their royal capital—quitting our investigation here would guarantee that war would start all over again. As much I didn't want violence, I had to resign myself to the possibility.

"Let's go! Time to get this mess under control!" I cried, getting nods back from the knights of both our countries. After all, the scene in front of our eyes made everyone absolutely determined to keep the war from restarting as it was.

With one last exchange, both sides split to do their part. But even when we arrived at the next inn town, other than the region's lord, not a single person knew anything about the princess's upcoming nuptials.

"At the very least, this means the Sylvarian royal family didn't even attempt to keep up the appearance that they were celebrating this marriage," I said.

"That's undeniable. But if that's true, then that would mean that they didn't even hold any functions to say goodbye to her, wouldn't it?" Gale asked.

Gale and I were racking our brains over the testimony we'd gathered. It was just too strange.

Normally, a princess getting married would either get a massive celebration in her honor, or a ceremony mourning her leaving, simultaneously moving the citizens' hearts and progressing things to the next step. But neither of those happened. *Neither one*. It was almost as if Sylvario was trying to send her off without letting the populace know.

"Wait. I've barely ever even heard about Sylvario's fourth princess, Her Royal Highness Princess Sonia..." I murmured before looking towards one of the Sylvarian knights, who was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Her Royal Highness isn't one to be seen in public. I myself have never even seen her face," he explained apologetically.

"I see. So I guess they were trying to keep from rocking the boat too much by choosing a relatively unknown princess to marry into Brigandia."

That in itself would be treating us with contempt, but from their perspective, they were still fulfilling their side of the bargain. So they were treating us with contempt.

Now we'd need to go to the capital whether we found the princess or not. And if that was all we'd be reporting, then they'd have been treating us like a bunch of errand boys this whole time.

"Ahh, this is making my stomach hurt," I accidentally let slip.

Everyone around me gave me a shocked look.

"You're just now feeling it? We've all been on stomach medicine this whole time," Gale said, exasperated, expressing what everyone was thinking.

Oh, shut it. I just have a very tough stomach thanks to all the ridiculous things His Royal Highness forces me to do.

Unable to voice my thoughts without committing a crime, I could only give a vague laugh back.



At the same time Ark was searching for the princess, over in Brigandia...

"I see. So Ark went there himself."

Within Brigandia's royal palace, inside the office of the third prince, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse Zerk Brigandia, who could be considered the boss of

Ark McGuine's boss, narrowed his eyes as he read the letter Ark had sent him. With his blond hair, blue eyes, slim figure, and gorgeous looks, any lady who saw his current expression would probably squeal with glee, but alas, the only people present to see it were male civil officials and knights of the royal guard well acquainted with the prince, so no one responded, squealing or otherwise. Not only did they not respond, but a number of them started feeling cold sweat running down their backs.

They knew. Whenever Alphonse made that face, two things were likely: either an unreasonable request was about to be made, or a major incident was imminent.

But no, Alphonse had just said Ark's name. Ark was meant to be waiting at the city on the border to welcome Sylvario's fourth princess, soon to be married into Brigandia. So where in the world was he supposedly going *himself*?

Though it was unclear if this letter conveyed bad news or not, everyone present was someone who had won Alphonse's confidence, so they were all sharp. Very sharp.

While everyone else was internally deliberating, Alphonse had apparently decided on a course of action.

"My apologies, but can you send word to my elder brother to let him know that I'm coming to speak to him? It's urgent."

Alphonse had directed this request to one of the civil officials, who, upon receiving it, straightened up, replied, "U-Understood!" and left the room as quickly as he could without breaking into a run.

Alphonse's elder brother—the second prince, Artur. Whatever this urgent matter was, it was going to be an unreasonable, major pain in the ass if they needed to get *him* involved.

(The first prince, Adolphe, had excused himself from politics for undisclosed reasons, so he was not to be involved. As a whole, no one was to mention him —he was untouchable.)

"Also, pick ten of your elites to be my guards," Alphonse said to a nearby knight. "It will probably end up being a long trip, so make sure to get the horses

and our traveling gear ready."

"Y-Yes! I'll get that ready on the double!" replied the knight, cold sweat beading along his hairline.

There was only one place Alphonse could be going in this situation, and that was the Kingdom of Sylvario, which they'd just been at war with. What's more, Ark, who usually would have been made to accompany the prince, was apparently already there. Meaning *they'd* be the ones who had to go with him.

"Sheesh, I'm gonna have to bring some stomach meds with me..."

"You should already have them. I told you to always have some on you, didn't I?"

Pretending not to hear his guards arguing very quietly with each other, Alphonse made his way to the second prince's office. The moment the knights guarding the door saw his face, they immediately went inside to inquire, and the door opened a moment before he got to it. The knights acted without pause, and demonstrated that they were both observant and well-trained.

Just what I'd expect from my brother's guards, Alphonse thought to himself as he walked right in, a smile still on his face.

"Pray forgive my intrusion while you're so busy, brother. I came on an urgent matter."

"Hello, Alphonse. If it's something that has you in a tizzy when you're always one step ahead, then it has to be a very serious matter indeed."

While Artur resembled Alphonse overall, his face was softer, and he wore a gentle expression. If Alphonse could be described as having a sharp, icy beauty, Artur's beauty was like sunshine on a spring day, bright with a gentle shine.

Walking up to his similar looking, yet completely different older brother, Alphonse handed Artur the letter from Ark.

"This is a report from Ark, who went to receive Sylvario's fourth princess. It seems as though the situation may be more than he can handle on his own, so I would like to go there directly myself."

"Now?!" Artur exclaimed, before continuing, "No, if you're the one saying it,

then it must be something incredibly important."

Alphonse's sudden request shocked Artur, but in a moment he collected himself and settled his expression once more—as a royal, he had learned to adapt to situations like this. Then, he took the letter and began reading it over.

"That's right, Viscount Ark McGuine writes that he doesn't believe he can handle this alone. His intuition is sharp at times like this," Alphonse remarked.

"Because he's been especially conditioned to sense danger by a certain someone?" prodded Artur.

"Oh, I think he'd already been good at it. Though he might've gotten better at it afterwards."

Artur's wry quip was met with Alphonse's unbreakable smile. The knight behind Alphonse seemed to want to say something, but he stayed silent, and the prince wasn't going to say anything either. Ultimately, it would be wise for Artur to look the other way.

"Well, we'll just have to defer our discussion on just how Ark came to develop such a finely honed instinct for danger for another day. But in all honesty, I find it very difficult to approve for you to go to Sylvario right now," Artur admitted.

"Of course you would," Alphonse replied. "Some people may jump to conclusions if their princess's betrothed suddenly arrived in their country when the political situation has yet to settle down from the war. As royalty from an enemy country, they already hate me. Some might think that they could save their princess from this marriage by getting rid of me."

"Obviously I knew you'd know that, but are you trying to say that there are advantages to going yourself, despite the risks?"

Alphonse nodded slowly to Artur's question with his usual smile—or no, it might have been a few degrees colder.

"Yes, of course. First of all, there probably aren't many people who'd be that shortsighted, but..."

"What do you mean? Ah, because the highways you'd be taking would be far from the war's principal battlefield?"

"That's one reason. It's why I chose that spot for it, after all."

Sylvario's national army was under the direct supervision of their king and in scope, not very large, so they'd needed to mobilize the soldiers employed by nearby nobles. Because of this, most of the families grieving from the war would come from areas closer to the battlefield. If any of them happened to live in the areas around the highway connecting the capitals of both kingdoms, there was a chance that they'd try to sabotage communications between the kingdoms after the war.

With this in mind, Alphonse had shifted the principal battleground away from this area. He had also ordered Ark to the front lines to fulfill his unreasonable requests, and the knight's resulting efforts won him a kill count in the hundreds and the rank of viscount...though it wasn't clear whether he was happy about that or not...

Whatever the case, as a result of these decisions, there probably weren't many people living along the highway who'd have a bone to pick with Brigandian royalty. Yet this also meant that the area would be rife with deserters—former-soldiers-turned-thieves too ashamed to face their families again—though they probably wouldn't be brave enough to attack a group of fully equipped knights.

"My other reason may be because there may not be many people who would go that far for Princess Sonia's sake in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, of course you'd ask. Brother, I've heard next to nothing about Sylvario's fourth princess, but what about you?"

Artur tilted his head in confusion at the question.

"Hm? You're right, I don't think I've heard much at all."

Even though there had been enough tensions between the countries for a war to start, that didn't mean that relations between the nations had paused entirely. So while they were able to get some information on Sylvario's royal family, they had barely heard anything about how Princess Sonia was regarded. That would mean...

"So it was either that she was a more private person, or that she was treated badly," Alphonse surmised. "At any rate, she wasn't a social butterfly, so chances are quite low that she would have romantic admirers, or anyone who would lament her leaving Sylvario. It was Sylvario that offered her hand in exchange for reducing the financial reparations, so she couldn't be the royal family's precious sheltered daughter either."

"Though that's not something I want to agree with, I can't really deny it either," Artur admitted, before saying, "In any case, we have next to no information about her. If what you say is true, then that calls into question Sylvario's reasoning for sending us Princess Sonia when that was how they felt about her..."

After saying that much, Artur suddenly seemed to realize something, and looked over to Alphonse. The second prince stood with a beautiful smile on his face—a smile so wonderful that it had the knight standing behind him grimacing.

"The Smiling Iceberg."

Alphonse's nickname flashed through Artur's mind, and he involuntarily gulped.

"Yes, that's it exactly," Alphonse said. "And if that's the case, with the princess having yet to arrive when she was supposed to, then...wouldn't that be the perfect chance to squeeze even more out of Sylvario?"

"Yes, but if that was your goal, then it would indeed be too much for Lord McGuine to handle alone... You weren't planning this, were you?"

"Of course not. Even I wasn't expecting this to happen. Though I *had* begun making contingency plans after it was decided we would marry, and I did some research on her."

"So you want to go to harvest the fruits of your labor... While I personally don't want to let you go, allowing it is probably the correct choice as a member of the royal family," Artur said, heaving a sigh.

At the moment, the king was ill, sick in bed over the trouble that the first prince had caused, so Artur and Alphonse were the ones running the kingdom.

And, being the elder brother, Artur had to make decisions in the king's place.

From that perspective, it wouldn't be such a bad move to let Alphonse go. In fact, it could probably be argued that it was the correct choice, considering how much money, material, and manpower would be lost if the war resumed.

"Thank you for worrying about me, brother," Alphonse said. "But I'm doing all this because I think we have a good chance of winning."

"I know. I know that very well. I also know that you're purposefully going out to try to get things done."

Alphonse's only response to Artur's loaded statement was a smile.

With the first prince having been taken out of the running, the problem of who would inherit the throne was rearing its head. Alphonse, who had no intention of becoming king, was proactively engaging in outwards-facing work like diplomacy, which included war.

Artur excelled in maintaining the stability of internal affairs, and Alphonse's talents lay at making full use of his scheming mind in external ones. Based on skill and disposition, it was clear that Artur was the backbone of the kingdom, and that Alphonse's efforts to be visible on the front lines between Brigandia and Sylvario was to impress the idea that he considered himself Artur's sword.

Artur understood this, and while his feelings about the situation as an older brother were complicated, as a representative of the nation, he couldn't stop him. This time was no different.

The second prince sighed again.

"I understand. If that's the case, then I'll allow it. But once you get to Sylvario's capital, do everything you can to reach Sir McGuine as soon as possible. Once you meet up with him, stay by his side at all times. Those are my conditions."

"Of course, brother. You could say that this time, it all depends on him," Alphonse nodded, his smile less frosty. "After all, when it comes to protecting his friends, there's no one better in the world than Ark."

Shocked at what he was seeing, Artur couldn't find the words to reply. It was

because Alphonse's smile was an amused one, and for once, actually appropriate for someone his age. Yet Alphonse was the only one who didn't realize it.



After gathering information that did nothing but affirm some of the various unpleasant guesses we'd made, we entered Sylvario's capital.

We headed straight for the royal capital in hopes that we could share what we knew and confirm the situation. Since we sent advance notice that we were on our way, we were granted an audience with the king almost immediately, even despite my fearsome reputation.

Was I let in so quickly because Sylvario also recognized the urgency of the situation? Or were they just as surprised as the rest of us? Whatever the case, it was clear that they were telegraphing to us that they had no intention of making an enemy of Brigandia again.

My speculation didn't end up very far off the mark. Not only was the king present in the audience chamber, but all of the high-ranking nobles were as well, and everyone seemed baffled by the situation.

After performing the bare minimum of social niceties, I recounted the situation and had one of the Sylvarian knights back up my claims, serving to deepen the bewilderment in the room.

"I understand the situation," the king said. "But, Sir McGuine, Sonia did indeed leave the palace."

"What?"

According to the king, Princess Sonia had left for Brigandia with ample time to reach the border by the planned date. Yet there had been no sightings of her at the inn of the town closest to the capital, and the road between the two was among the safest we'd seen in Sylvario, without even a hint of a dangerous atmosphere. If the princess and her entourage had been attacked, then there absolutely would have been evidence left behind.

"But would that not mean that Her Royal Highness disappeared within the walls of the capital?" I asked.

"That's also impossible. If she had been attacked in the capital, guards would have rushed to aid her and reported the incident."

Hmm? Why does that sound off to me?

The king's words were sensible, yet something about it stuck out to me. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I made a mental note to remember it.

The current way things were going, however, seemed to indicate that we might hit a dead end.

"I do not doubt Your Majesty, but with your permission, may I view the records of departures from the palace in order to confirm?"

"Your insolence would normally warrant you a rebuke, but it seems there's no time for such things. I will permit it, but due to the possibility that you may touch on classified information, I will have someone authorized accompany you. Captain Eisendarque, I leave that to you."

"By your will."

The middle-aged man who bowed reverently had been introduced as Count Boris von Eisendarque. Despite the thirty-something man's dark brown hair and eyes, shapely mustache, and gentlemanly attire, his body was well trained.

Our eyes met.

He's the real deal.

He seemed like someone who had plenty of combat experience, and wasn't a mere figurehead; both his powerful gaze and general demeanor suggested a man well acquainted with battle. Had the situation not been as it was, I would've loved the chance to spar with him.

But this was the guy assigned to keep me in line—to put me down if I went rogue. They saw me as a threat, and a big one at that. I didn't blame them for being cautious.

Though all that's beside the point.

Taking into account Sir Eisendarque's busy schedule—his position and abilities would imply nothing less—we made our way first to the palace's gate to view the travel records, however...

"It seems that there are no records of a carriage bearing the crest of the royal family leaving the palace."

"What?!"

After I said that, Sir Eisendarque ripped the log book from my hands frantically, eyes like saucers as he read through it. He reviewed it over and over again, seemingly finding nothing to contradict me before finally turning to me, aghast.

Why are you looking at me like that?

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"I should be the one asking that question. No matter how you look at this, the only thing this proves is that Her Royal Highness Princess Sonia never left."

Whether he was unexpectedly weak-willed or he truly hadn't expected this answer at all, Sir Eisendarque was panicking. I remained calm. But seriously, what in the world was happening here?

It was then that one of the gate guards who'd overheard our exchange chimed in. "Um, if you're wondering about Her Royal Highness Princess Sonia, the lack of record is most likely because she wasn't permitted to use any carriages bearing the mark of the royal family."

"What?!"

Sir Eisendarque and my voices overlapped in beautiful harmony.

According to the gate guards, the elder princesses and queen consort had forbidden Princess Sonia to use carriages that bore the mark of the royal family. Such a thing was common knowledge between the guards at the gate, but hadn't spread far enough to reach Sir Eisendarque as the knight commander.

"Ah, here it is!" the guard exclaimed. "Her Royal Highness left with one coachman and one maid, just like always."

"WHAT?!"

Our voices harmonized once again.

Why in the world would a princess leave with so few attendants...? AH!

"That's it! That's why what His Majesty said sounded strange! He assumed Her Royal Highness's carriage could be attacked, even though that chance would be next to zero if Her Royal Highness was sent with proper protection!"

"Ah, ahhh?!"

After I inadvertently screeched that out, Sylvario's knight commander let out something akin to a scream...and the gate guards just stared at us in confusion.

Yes, from their point of view, they were probably wondering how we *hadn't* known, or were simply surprised that we were only asking about it now.

Since these guards were most likely commoners, or at most the second or third sons of barons, they had no idea that even for the daughter of a viscount, leaving home with only a coachman and a single maid was totally unthinkable. The fact that a *princess* had been sent off like that was something that should never have happened, but apparently it did, and often.

"As the knight commander, how did you go so long not knowing this? Was it out of your jurisdiction?"

"Yes. The Royal Guard handles the protection of the royal family... What in the blazes are they doing?!"

Sir Eisendarque was outraged, roughly scratching his head. Just the fact that he was able to keep himself from throwing hands despite his obvious anger and confusion at the awful situation showed how levelheaded he was. His clear and strong upset demonstrated that he'd really had no idea this was going on.

Every nation had their factions, so there wasn't much that we could do about his ignorance. But in this case, it was his very ignorance that led to this missing princess crisis... No, now was not the time to be pointing fingers.

Is she safe? I hope she's safe.

I was worried, but just worrying would get us nowhere.

"Judging from the date," I said, recalling what I knew, "it does look like they left early enough that if they kept a good pace, they could have reached the border with days to spare. With one coachman and one maid, for a total of three people, it's doubtful they'd have enough luggage to draw attention. It

seems that she truly did leave on her betrothal journey to Brigandia on this date, though she did so with barely anything to her name."

"How, how could this be...? Then Her Royal Highness was...!"

Though it wasn't out of the question for her coachman and maid to have superhuman strength, if they didn't, then chances were high that something had happened to the small party of three as they traveled along all those unsafe highways.

More than anything, the reason we hadn't found anything during our investigations was crystal clear; we had been looking for carriages that bore the royal crest, but Princess Sonia's carriage hadn't had one. Obviously there had been no sightings.

Which, to our deep misfortune, meant that we would have to start our search all over again.

"One more thing bothers me. His Majesty hadn't received any interim reports that Her Royal Highness had passed through the city gates. There's a chance that they weren't even allowed to send one at all. Sir Eisendarque, to start, I would like to view the records regarding all comings and goings from the capital's gate. I'd also like to see any attendants' records regarding what Her Royal Highness had left with in the way of a trousseau."

"It would make further investigation in the towns along the highway easier if one knew all those things. I will have them prepared for you immediately."

Once I saw Sir Eisendarque nod, seemingly composed once again, I began giving orders to my subordinates. Gale and company would join Sylvario's knights in checking the records of who came and went through the capital's gate. As the highest ranking person and the one with all of the special envoy perks, I remained in the palace to check various records with Sir Eisendarque.

And so, as we began retracing Her Royal Highness's footsteps...

"Seems there's no mistaking that Her Royal Highness left through the city gate before continuing onto the highway, but..." Sir Eisendarque started hesitantly.

"Right, but this is kinda," I replied, trailing off.

We were able to confirm that she'd passed through the gate on her way to Brigandia, which meant that we were now absolutely sure that Sylvario had intended on honoring the terms of the treaty. That was all well and good, but...

"Her Royal Highness's luggage. There wouldn't have been enough for a noblewoman going on a short trip, much less a princess marrying into another country..."

"It was just as the attendants and gate guards said: she left with only one coachman and one maid. That's it. Did the royal family want Her Royal Highness Princess Sonia to run into an 'unforeseen accident'?" I asked.

Stay calm. Just stay calm, I told myself. If I didn't, I knew that the venom in my words would show how angry I was.

But this was *awful*. Sent off with hardly anything but the clothes on her back. No escort. And what's more, these orders—which more or less sentenced her to die in a ditch somewhere on the way to Brigandia—were signed by the queen.

Sir Eisendarque's face, a warped mix of rage and disappointment, was only a natural response to the results of our investigation. He hadn't been directly involved with Her Royal Highness's marriage to Brigandia. But even so, he must have felt as if he was also at fault, and was angry at himself for not knowing how the Royal Guard were abusing their power.

"With this evidence, it's clear that Her Royal Highness intended on fulfilling the terms of the treaty, but I cannot help but wonder if the rest of your royal family felt the same. I find that this matter cannot be resolved without further investigation."

"Yes, and I will do everything in my power to assist you. Please, investigate all you like. And if I were to threaten that without their compliance it may be decided that Sylvario didn't hold up their end of the agreement, then it would make working behind the scenes inside the palace easier. I could even use the opportunity to do a bit of 'spring cleaning,'" Sir Eisendarque replied, a great smile on his face.

One impressive enough to even give me the chills.

Once more, I felt a strong desire to spar with him, even just once, but that would have to wait until we'd finished cleaning up this mess.

Finding Princess Sonia came first.

We first gathered a mixed squad of Brigandian and Sylvarian knights, led by Gale, to search the highways. This time they were given further details on the appearance of Princess Sonia, her coachman, her maid, and their carriage. Before they left, I tacked on a little warning. Because of how she'd been sent off, if things didn't go well, Sylvario ran the risk of appearing to purposefully fail to uphold their end of the bargain, thus signaling a restart to the war. The squad's morale was now higher than ever.

Once I'd seen them off, Sylvario's knight commander helped me look into Princess Sonia's living situation. And I wished I never had.

I mean, I knew in my head that it was good for Her Royal Highness's honor for us to look into it, but my heart just wouldn't listen.

"Is this really how your nation treats their princesses...?"

"No, this is completely unacceptable," rebutted Sir Eisendarque.

Princess Sonia had been treated horribly.

She was an unplanned child of the king's concubine, the youngest child of a family already plentiful, with three sons and three daughters.

It might've been because she wouldn't have much responsibility in the future that they treated her as an afterthought. Maybe, in the beginning, she'd just been mistreated a little bit. But before anyone realized it, no one cared about her, neither family nor servants.

For instance, somewhere along the way, she'd stopped being fed the same meals as her family. Not only that, but the quality of her meals had decreased to the point that she was being fed almost the same thing as the servants.

A young girl, who was supposed to be a princess, alone in her bedroom eating a servant's meal—how did that make her feel?

And her mistreatment wasn't just physical. Her assigned tutors neglected

their duties. As long as they bullshitted their reports, they wouldn't get in trouble, and wouldn't suffer any losses in their pay. In these circumstances, there would of course be some people who would gradually start neglecting their charge. They may have been hired specifically for those reasons.

Witnessing Her Royal Highness's mistreatment by others gave the servants permission to start neglecting her as well. Not a single person faulted them for it. Not her father, the king, nor the concubine who'd birthed her.

In all honesty, I might've just been constructing a fantasy of what happened all by myself. But I couldn't understand. I didn't want to understand.

Apparently, Her Royal Highness's mother was much more invested in whether her son the second prince would become king or not, and as a result held no interest in her politically irrelevant daughter.

The immense bullshit of the situation made me want to scream. They might have been royalty, but I couldn't understand how parents could treat their child like that.

Even I was thinking like that, despite being single and childless, but the married-with-kids Sir Eisendarque's face was bright red, veins looking like they were about to burst right out. I couldn't help but wish that he had been in a position where he interacted directly with the princess.

Seeing how their parents treated Her Royal Highness, Princess Sonia's elder brothers and sisters obviously got the wrong idea too. Being royalty apparently didn't change a damn thing about how cruel kids could be once they realized they could bully someone else and wouldn't be punished for it. And it seemed that the third princess, who'd been born from the queen and was closest in age to Her Royal Highness, treated her the worst due to Her Royal Highness being born from a concubine.

If Her Royal Highness had been stupid enough to not realize her position, then things might have been better. But alas, she did—she was the very opposite of stupid.

"Her Royal Highness was a truly wise lady. Even though her tutors barely educated her, she would study on her own to learn the material," said one of Princess Sonia's few maids, tears welling up as she spoke. It seemed that while

most of the servants half-assed their jobs, the few maids Her Royal Highness had were wholeheartedly committed to serving her. According to the maid, Princess Sonia was a princess worthy of that devotion.

"Even though Her Royal Highness was in such a difficult situation herself, she was always gentle and kind, even to us. Her caring smile never faltered."

Those words shook me to my core. At that moment, something like respect welled up within me for Princess Sonia.

Some folks could be kind while comfortable themselves, though there were others who were rotten bastards regardless. Rare were the people who could be kind while in the depths of misfortune. Yet even as a child, Her Royal Highness had been kind. I wondered how purehearted someone would have to be to act like that, but as our investigations continued, I began to understand.

The more we heard, the more we learned what a gentle and kind princess Her Royal Highness was, never without a smile. Yes, always smiling, despite never being able to grin from the bottom of her heart.

My chest hurt at the realization. It *still* hurts. Had she ever been truly happy? Had she ever actually enjoyed herself? My mind was crammed with all these unanswerable questions.

It was true that as a princess, she existed to serve the nation. As a noble, I did too, but it was obvious that a member of the royal family would be expected to do much more.

But this just wasn't right. There was absolutely no way this could be right.

She'd given up. Completely given up on her own happiness. It was why she smiled for others while never for herself—she simply couldn't.

I cried once I figured that out. Why? Why should such a young lady be forced to live such a life? But my question would never be answered. After all, no one had the answer.

If an outsider like me felt this just *hearing* about what she went through, how much must Princess Sonia have despaired? No one knew, even her own maids.

But I couldn't just despair.

"Sometimes, Her Royal Highness would leave the palace and come back with flowers and herbs to make her own perfume. This is one of the bottles she left."

The maid pointed towards a bottle that was incredibly simple, as far as perfume bottles went.

Being unable to buy dresses or jewels, Princess Sonia had comforted herself with homemade perfume. But the queen and third princess hadn't even allowed her to bring more than a bottle or two of that with her. Were these people even human?

How Princess Sonia had felt, passing through the gate after years of mistreatment, I would never know. The bright, fresh scent of her perfume, jarring in such a stifling atmosphere, made me hopelessly sad.





Days passed, and the more I learned about Princess Sonia the more I felt like I was sinking to the bottom of the ocean. As we uncovered more and more evidence, I became sure of one thing: all along, Her Royal Highness had been waiting for an opportunity to get back at the royal family and everyone else who'd neglected her.

If only the people around her had been just a *little* nicer to her. Maybe then, she wouldn't have had to think like that. She had allies, few that they were. If only she had more. If only they had treated her with a little bit more respect.

But that hadn't happened. It just hadn't.

Even saying that, though, wasn't going to be the end of the story. It couldn't be. But unfortunately, I wouldn't be the one to close the curtain.

"Your Highness, I hadn't expected that you would go to the trouble of traveling here yourself."

When enough time had passed to gather sufficient evidence and testimony, the boss of my boss, the third prince of Brigandia, Prince Alphonse, arrived in Sylvario's royal capital.

I'd figured he might come, but the fact he really had... I wished he'd value himself a little more. I could only imagine the mental exhaustion His Royal Highness Prince Artur and his guards felt, since they must have wanted to stop him. There was probably no one who could understand that mental exhaustion better than me, after all!

Even though I considered myself quite skilled in keeping those thoughts to myself, Prince Alphonse probably knew. There was no helping that. It was a waste of effort to try to win against him.

But putting that aside, I needed to focus all my energy on work.

"Good work, Ark. Are these all of the documents you've collected so far?"

While His Royal Highness had been on his way here, I'd sent him as many interim reports as I could through my men. From their contents, he probably understood the meaning of what I gathered, which was why I replied with a

slow nod.

"Yes, this is all of the intel I've gathered with the assistance of Count Eisendarque here," I said. "I will refrain from sharing my opinion now, Your Highness. I request that you review the documents without any preconceived notions."

"I see. All right."

Prince Alphonse's response was light as he began scanning through the intel. First, he skimmed through them to grasp the overall picture. Then, just when I thought he'd gotten through the huge pile of documents rather quickly, he began to flip back to the important points for a more careful readthrough.

It was deeply unsettling just how perfectly His Royal Highness, from a single skim, understood the gist of the intel.

The most important thing to me was how carefully he reread the documents. His ability to discern what was most relevant through a single glance was terrifying. All told, His Royal Highness could process data in a way that I would never be able to match.

And so, not even a half hour after he began reading, Prince Alphonse lifted his head.

"Ark, you do realize what you've put together is riddled with bias, right?" he asked.

"I cannot deny that, but neither can I confirm it. After all, there were only two types of people involved: those who are unspeakably awful, or maids and attendants who sympathized with her from the bottom of their hearts."

"I see, I see. So you're saying that I can take this info at face value."

"There's no way I could pull a fast one on you, Your Highness. You'd definitely notice."

Oh, damn, I'd slipped back into the casual attitude I had with him back in our school days without even noticing. I must have been tenser than I'd realized, and his arrival probably relaxed me a bit.

"Whatever. You show everything through your face anyway, though you seem

to think that you're hiding it," responded Prince Alphonse, speaking informally as well.

Ahh, dammit!

It seemed I was still pretty immature if I found that a bit reassuring.

Once he was finished reading, His Royal Highness smiled, an expression so pure and benevolent it made you think he couldn't even harm a fly. Which meant that Sylvario was screwed.

But, keep in mind—we were still in the very center of enemy territory, and the battle was just beginning. We couldn't relax for a moment.

I took a slow, deep breath in. Then, on the exhale, I pushed every shred of fatigue and weakness out of my body. Of course, this mental exercise didn't actually have any tangible effect, but it convinced me that I'd restored the energy that I'd lost. I'd trained myself for it to work.

"Understood. While it may be fine for you to read my expression, Your Highness, I must not let the Sylvarians do the same. I shall brace myself once again."

I was pretty sure I managed to look pretty good saying that, but Prince Alphonse stared at me for a moment before asking me, "Hmm? Is something wrong? Did you eat something weird?"

"Okay, you *cannot* say stuff like that when I just finished pumping myself up!" I shouted without thinking. As frustrating as it was, it was also true that it calmed me down.

And so, having read through everything, Prince Alphonse said the obvious:

"From the looks of it, it seems Sylvario used this opportunity to pawn an unwanted, undesirable princess off to Brigandia. Can you claim otherwise?"

His tone was quiet, yet sharp, as if he was sliding a knife across their throats.

Since I'd known him since we were students, I knew he wasn't letting his personal feelings get in the way of reason. He was indignant that Sylvario had made light of his kingdom. They'd used us to get rid of a thorn in their side,

after all, even though *they* were the ones who lost the war. They probably thought they could use us in a few other ways too.

"If you have no other explanation, that is fine. Brigandia will just conclude that Sylvario was holding us in rather severe contempt."

"P-Please, wait! We were not looking down on Brigandia in the least!" Sylvario's king said, frantically trying to make excuses.

All this, when most likely he regarded Princess Sonia with nothing but disdain.

I thought seeing the king bungling things up in front of Prince Alphonse, who was my age, would make me feel better. But it didn't make me feel better at all. If anything, I just felt hollow.

The king and queen, who'd treated Princess Sonia so badly, were abasing themselves for Prince Alphonse because he was more powerful than they were. They were just pathetic.

Her Royal Highness sacrificed herself and passed on the road for these bastards?

It was just so outrageous that it made my stomach churn. But I couldn't let my feelings—no, my sentiments affect things. Especially when my kingdom's second prince had come all this way.

"Then why is it that instead of offering one of your other princesses, you offered Princess Sonia in marriage to me, despite the fact that you failed to provide her a sufficient education or understanding in etiquette? Your second and third princesses are also unmarried, are they not?" Prince Alphonse piled on the questions, the temperature of his voice dropping drastically.

By the way, the second princess had only a three-year age difference with His Royal Highness, while the third princess had a five-year difference. Sylvario's king couldn't say a damn thing, because they were much more appropriate as brides.

It was I who'd finally come across the disaster that was Princess Sonia's room, an unfortunate consequence of her awful mistreatment.

The room was smaller than even a maid's, and her closet held only two

dresses that could be worn for tea parties. Said dresses were very obviously not appropriate for a seventeen-year-old lady like Her Royal Highness either. When I looked into it, I learned she hadn't been invited to any tea parties or balls since she was thirteen.

But the funds allocated to her went *somewhere*—into the pockets of her elder sister and the servants. Embezzlement had become standard practice.

We couldn't say much about that, since that was Sylvario's business and what I thought about it didn't hold any weight. But claiming that a princess they despised—one without a single gown to her name—was an appropriate bride for our third prince was another story entirely.

No, they didn't "send" her. They basically threw her out. From a diplomatic perspective, Brigandia was bristling at how little Sylvario thought of us. Which is why Prince Alphonse, Princess Sonia's husband-to-be, had come all the way out here.

For some reason, the thought of that shot a prick of pain through my chest.

But discussions continued with no regard to my sentiments. I say "discussions," but it was more like Prince Alphonse was whaling on them verbally.

"What's more, there's the amount and contents of Princess Sonia's luggage. I can only take this as Sylvario giving nothing in the way of a trousseau and wordlessly telling Brigandia to prepare everything ourselves. What do you think?"

"N-No, we were going to send it along afterwards..."

"It's been more than a month since Princess Sonia left, but I have yet to see anything prepared. Were you planning on just sending us the rest of what was in that nigh-empty room of hers?"

My chest hurt once again at his words. Yes, while we were investigating, more than a month had already passed. The chance that Princess Sonia was safe was slim. One might even say at this point, her chances of survival were hopeless.

By the way, the funds originally allocated to her trousseau had been used up by people like the head attendant. They would probably be getting the death penalty for how badly their actions had damaged the relationship between Brigandia and Sylvario.

"And now, the princess you all but threw out has disappeared before she even reached the border. Sylvario was totally ignorant of this disaster until *Brigandia* investigated. Clearly, there was no way that you were sincere about honoring your side of the treaty."

Hearing how His Royal Highness stated it, my shoulders dropped.

The situation was bad enough as it was, but in our findings we discovered that one of the wrecked carriages we'd seen on our way to the capital had actually been the same one that Princess Sonia had been riding in. And since more than a month had passed since it was attacked, any evidence we could've collected had been blown away by the wind. We just couldn't investigate any further. We were too late.

I had, of course, known this much earlier. I'd been the one heading up the investigation, after all. But to hear it repeated in an official statement hurt. It felt like a formal acknowledgment that the princess was truly dead and gone.

But I couldn't just stand here dejectedly.

"Based on the findings of our investigation, we will be demanding an increase of the financial reparations from Sylvario reflective of their violation of our treaty."

The very moment Sylvario could have objected, I readied all my strength...but my efforts were wasted. When I looked, the Kingdom of Sylvario's knight commander, Sir Eisendarque, was giving me a small nod. He must have been telling me that they'd seized control of the military and everyone else who could've used force.

It was over. I'd done everything I could here. Sylvario would now probably be better off than before. Maybe, thanks to Prince Alphonse's skills, they might even end up absorbed by Brigandia.

But Princess Sonia wasn't here. She was the only one who wasn't here. That was all I thought, but I couldn't do anything or say a word to anyone. All I could do was heave a sigh.



And so, I'd done everything I could for Princess Sonia. Despite my broken heart, discussions continued. The world kept turning.

In the end, though it was ultimately due to negligence, Sylvario had broken their part of the treaty, and Prince Alphonse had used that as a foodhold to gain a number of other territories in addition to the ones Brigandia had initially controlled as part of the ceasefire agreement. We had also obtained preferential tariffs in regards to certain areas.

Since Sylvario had no real use for those territories, they were given to us easily enough. I, on the other hand, had been told why we wanted them, so I couldn't help but marvel at how damn scary Prince Alphonse was.

On top of the territories, Brigandia asked for financial reparations from the royal family's personal coffers, and took jewels and gowns to cover what they couldn't pay. We squeezed the elder princesses—the ones who'd been living large on funds meant for Princess Sonia—especially hard, and when they couldn't pay it all at once, we garnished their annual financial allocation. This meant that they wouldn't be able to buy any good dresses for at least ten years.

Despite Brigandia getting most of our demands met, and from a country we were just coming off a war with, the discussion was unusually peaceful. This was, of course, thanks to Knight Commander Eisendarque assisting us behind the scenes, and (in my opinion) my own efforts in scraping together all of the intel.

Even Prince Alphonse, who'd gotten to do all of the fun parts, had managed to verbally beat Sylvario to a pulp because of all the mental simulations he'd run through prior to his arrival.

All of this meant that we were the victors, Sir Eisendarque included. If we wanted to talk strategically, the fact that we'd managed to get him on our side was huge, and that achievement could be reasonably attributed to me.

But none of that made me proud. Princess Sonia was the one who should've gotten all the credit. Yet she was gone. The one who'd done all the heavy lifting had disappeared. And that cast a hopeless shadow over my heart.

Whether it was related to that or not, even I'd realized that I was sighing a lot more once everything had been cleaned up.

"Ark. You've been working too much. Take some time off."

Prince Alphonse told me to take a vacation. And of course, in response, I replied, "Oh shit, is it going to snow tomorrow? Maybe rain some spears? I never thought you of all people would tell me to take time off, Your Highness."

"Do you really want me to rain spears down on you, you bastard?"

My retort got me a very unprincely reply, and a glare right back.

Oh, he's serious. He actually wants me to take a vacation.

That shocked me to the core.

"Huh? I never expected Your Highness would worry about a subordinate like that."

"Just wait one minute. I'll have you know that everything I ask my subordinates to do is done with full awareness of their limits," he snapped back, offended.

That shocked me even more.

So he wasn't intentionally working us to the grave?!

No, that wasn't the point.

"Wait. It almost sounds like you think I wouldn't break no matter how much you abuse me."

"You haven't broken yet, have you? Haven't become emotionless either."

My shoulders drooped when he answered so lightly... No, in reality they were already heavy.

"But things are different this time. You spent all of that time on edge inside enemy territory. You're more exhausted than you think you are. Though the fact that you can still talk back to me like that is just what I'd expect out of you," His Royal Highness continued, voice unusually gentle.

Oh damn, he can actually make faces like that? Or do I look so terrible that it warrants him looking at me like that? No, wait!

"Please wait, Your Highness! Before I take a vacation, my men—"

"Ah, I've already given exceptional vacations to Gale and the others. If you don't rest, then they probably won't actually rest either."

"Seriously...?"

His Royal Highness had already resolved everything I was worried about. His foresight was probably why people didn't run away from him despite him being the king of inconsiderate and unreasonable requests, me included.

After a long sigh, I replied, "Fine. I'll do it. I'll take a vacation."

"Yep, please do. Or rather, your job this time is to rest."

As I gave up and agreed, Prince Alphonse nodded with a smile. A chill ran down my spine.

Ahh, he's definitely gonna put me through the wringer of unreasonable orders once I return to work.

I mean yeah, there's no way we can let up the pressure on Sylvario in a situation like this. And it would also be unthinkable to remove me from play when I had spent so much time deep in Sylvario's royal palace throwing my weight around. Once I got back from my vacation, I probably wouldn't get time off again until we'd succeeded in making them surrender completely.

"If taking a vacation is gonna be my job, then can't you treat me any better?"

"Of course I can't. Though if you were a tad less useful, it would be a different story."

Damn this sly bastard. There was no way I couldn't work after he said it that way.

"Okay, fine. Then I will take a vacation so I can exhibit the performance that His Royal Highness expects of me."

"Please do. Having all your knights take a break is all well and good, even if you didn't take one too, but it's best to get the whole lot of you rested up."

"Ah, dammit! You really do rely on us, don't ya!"

While my speech got rough, it really was true that getting my subordinates to

rest was a good thing. Considering how dangerous our job was, even fatigue could be fatal. That was why I actively gave Gale and the others time off, and they probably actually rested when they were told to rest.

But there was one person I couldn't keep an eye on: myself.

"For as much as you push yourself, you're kind to your men," Prince Alphonse remarked. "Though it's unfortunate that you've become indifferent to your own limits. At this point it's strange that there haven't been any problems yet. Are you actually human, Ark?"

"How rude! I am absolutely a human!" I declared. "Probably!" I think.

Yeah, it was true that compared to my subordinates (or other people in general) I could push myself further than average, but I was still human. If I got too exhausted, I'd pass out—though that *did* happen very rarely.

"If you're really a human being, then rest. Normal humans get exhausted when they don't rest, right?"

"Urk... U-Understood..."

Having painted myself into a corner with my own words, I had no way to object. Once His Royal Highness spelled it out, I realized I *was* exhausted, if only mentally. My body didn't feel that way.

There was no point in resisting. For various reasons.

And so, I was given a long special leave of absence.



Being given one was all well and good, but...

What do I do with myself now?

I had no clue what to do.

I'd done my fair share of playing around on my breaks before. I'd go hang out with friends, drink, and take trips out into the suburbs. But after I became an adult, joined the knights, and became one of Prince Alphonse's subordinates, war arrived.

My entire life revolved around being a soldier, and now I couldn't think of

what to do outside of my job.

Of course, I'd had occasional rest breaks before. But they were straight-up breaks to rest my body and mind, which ended before I could do anything else. So basically, I hadn't had any time off that I could actually *do* anything with. They were nothing like the mass of free time stretched out before me. And I just had too much of it.

"A vacation... What do you do on vacations?"

When I tried to remember, my brain just fuzzed over.

Should I really be resting? I suddenly thought. Do I deserve the chance to rest, when Her Royal Highness will never enjoy free time ever again? The questions ran through my mind while I was in a bar in the middle of the day, drinking because I had too much time on my hands.

I was aghast. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to do something like day drinking, an activity I'd normally never do when in my right mind. Or maybe the booze unlocked my inhibitions.

Whatever the case, she was the reason I had been moping so much.

I was probably the man who knew her best in the whole world. I mean, yeah, her maids probably knew her better, but I figured my claim would be fair when only limited to men. And each of the maids probably had things they didn't know, but I did. Or I thought I did.

Here I was, infatuated enough to start feuding with absolutely nobody over something completely inconsequential. That was how bad I had it for Princess Sonia, despite never having met her. I was in love with her, like an illusion, a mirage. And now I'd finally realized it.

That said, I really would've preferred if this revelation hadn't made my knees so weak that I couldn't stand for a while. I'd never experienced something like this before, after all.

"You've seriously gotta be kidding me."

Once I realized this about myself, I was at my wit's end. After all, there was nowhere for these feelings to go.

It must have started with sympathy. Then, the more I'd learned about her, the deeper I'd fallen even though I didn't even know what she looked like. I didn't know because there wasn't a single portrait of her remaining. And anyway, she couldn't have been in this world any longer.

"I can't even meet her, y'know?"

I had never met her before, but I was absolutely sure that I'd be able to pick her out just by passing by. But I had no way to meet her, even if I still couldn't accept it.

I stood up, trying to stop my mess of thoughts.

For a bar on the outskirts of the city to be open even though it was the middle of the day, and to charge what they were charging, their booze must have been mixed with some cheap stuff.

Was I just sick from drinking, or was I already in a bad mental space?

Either was fine. It didn't matter—nothing mattered.

"Keep the change!"

Leaving a lot more money than the price of what I'd had, I walked outside. The sunlight was so bright.

"Ahh... Dammit..."

I swore at no one. It must've been at myself.

What if? What if I'd gone to pick her up from Sylvario's capital from the very beginning?

Mind overtaken by impossibilities, I dragged my heavy feet along as I melted into the crowd.

Chapter 2: Now, Let the Story Begin

I had been a caged bird—the kind their owner sometimes forgot to feed.

On paper, I was Sonia, the fourth princess of the Kingdom of Sylvario and a daughter of the king's concubine. You would think that I would be well treated. But unfortunately, I chose the wrong time to be born.

The queen had birthed the first prince, the first princess, and the third princess. The king's concubine had birthed the second and third princes and the second princess. With three boys and three girls each, Sylvario had a wealth of progeny, and while there had been some tensions with neighboring countries, the lack of any major conflict meant they had all the pieces they needed for any political marriages.

From the inside, our kingdom (or rather, our royal family) had a bountiful ocean to the south with a capital boasting a well-maintained fishing and trading port that generated much wealth for the royals. The economic strength of this industry granted us a strong domestic influence.

The royal family hadn't bothered betrothing me to anyone, seeing as I hardly had any political support and having me marry below my station and expand the royal bloodline into the nobility wasn't worth the trouble.

With my status thus decided, I had been left to grow up in conditions far inferior to the average princess's.

The last nice gown I had ever received—that I could wear to tea parties and other social events—had been made for me when I was thirteen years old. And that was all. I had been forgotten, never invited to any tea parties, and completely unable to host one of my own. Now that I thought back on it, I had never gotten to debut either. Without a formal introduction to society, I had been virtually unknown to the nobility. Only my tutor had even known what I looked like.

I'd had the same tutor my whole life. This hadn't been because they were

particularly passionate about my education. It had actually been the complete opposite: I'd once overheard them laughingly say that they'd never leave such a cushy job, where they could get paid well for teaching me next to nothing.

Of course, after I'd heard this, I asked for a new tutor. But I got rejected. I later learned that this was because the head maid and that tutor were in cahoots, embezzling the funds meant for me and inflating the tutor's reward money, among other things. They'd pulled some strings to make sure my request didn't go through.

Because of them, I hadn't been able to get a proper education or use any of the funds budgeted for myself. Once I realized that neither my parents nor any other adults around would help me, I had started studying by myself in the palace library. I thought that if I gathered enough knowledge and was able to train myself mentally, I might find a way out of my situation.

Things had gotten slightly better when Laura became one of my maids. Normally, a baron's daughter like her would never be able to become a princess's maid. All the maids of my elder sisters were the daughters of counts or even higher standings. The first princess even had a maid that was the daughter of a marquis. Having Laura, the daughter of a baron, as my maid was highly strange. The third princess had it out for me and was probably to blame, but only having Laura actually turned out to be a good thing for me.

"You don't need a stupid teacher like that!" Laura had said when she kicked my tutor out and became my teacher instead. She was remarkably learned for a baron's daughter, and thanks to her, my studies had improved immensely. Since it meant they'd now get paid for doing absolutely nothing, my tutor had been just fine with the win-win situation and kept quiet about what Laura had done. I'd had some mixed feelings about the whole thing, but in the end, I'd just let it go—the situation really was good for me, and I had no control over my money anyway.

I had felt a lot better once things had turned around. And even though just that had been a great improvement on its own, Laura would still take it upon herself to take me on trips outside of the palace, saying, "Princess, if you don't get out and get some fresh air, you'll get sick!"

The third princess had made it so I wasn't allowed to ride in carriages bearing the mark of the royal family, so I could only use the simple ones reserved for servants. It might have been for the best; I couldn't bring any guards along, but I also wouldn't attract much attention to myself. It was then that I was introduced to Tom, my coachman.

"He's an old friend of mine and pretty useful. But more than anything, you can trust him!"

"You say 'friend,' but really you just used me."

Seeing how Laura and Tom spoke so casually to each other, I could see that they were quite familiar. That alone had been enough to make me trust Tom since I'd already grown to trust Laura so much.

Tom was quite a cheerful man.

"I am just a coachman, a merry merry coachman!"

It was fun seeing him sing happily as he drove; the long trips had been more bearable that way.

But.

Sometimes, he'd start singing even louder than usual, really hamming it up, cracking his whip with great arching strikes.

It had probably all been an act. I couldn't remember when exactly, but I'd noticed it: whenever he started hamming it up, when his loud singing made it difficult to hear anything else, I could also hear sounds like something being hit, or something slicing through the air. He had probably been fending off attackers.

And when this would happen, Laura would always distract me so I wouldn't look outside. I couldn't be completely sure, though. But her doing so meant that somehow—from inside the carriage—Laura had noticed that we were being attacked. Since I didn't think she'd tell me if I asked, I had kept my mouth shut.

And so, thanks to my slightly unbelievably skilled attendants guarding me, I had been able to safely (from my perspective) go on outings.

"Ahh, so this flower looks like this... Hee hee hee, it's so much more vivid than

it looks in the encyclopedia!" I had marveled. I'd never been given flowers before, so I had no idea, and I'd said as much to Laura and Tom.

This had made Tom tear up, though he had tried to hold it in. He was a cheerful guy, but he was as prone to crying as he was to smiling.

Whenever she saw this, Laura would comment, "Ah, he's pissed," with a smile on her face, so I had learned it would be best not to let them hear me say things like that. Or at least, I *thought* that was what she was getting at.

In this way I had gotten to know the outside world, interacting with this or that and comparing my knowledge of it to reality. It had also been around this time that I started using the flowers I picked to make my own perfume.

"Princess, you could totally sell this!" Laura had said.

I had been pretty sure she was just biased. While I *did* think I'd done a great job, I hadn't known much about real perfumes, so I had nothing to compare it to.

"Oh, stop. You're exaggerating. Anyone could make the same thing," I'd said.

"No way. I'm serious! Okay, I'm gonna go sell it!"

Between you and me, at the time I had thought she was just teasing me when she said that. I had never thought she'd actually go and sell it...

I wasn't sure exactly *how* she did it, but she managed to sell all of the excess perfume I'd made for quite a good price, and thanks to her, I finally had some funds of my own.

Now having some cash, I had used it to expand the scope of my outings. But it was around this time that my full-blooded brother, the second prince, had started pushing his—or rather, started *sharing* his paperwork with me much more often. This led to my discovery of quite a few problems regarding the domains governed by the rural nobles.

But even if I told the second prince about these problems, he wasn't the sort of person who'd actually go out to the sticks to investigate, which is why I went myself. Of course, since my own funds were being embezzled, it was on my own dime.

Going to rural areas, I had learned just how different what we were hearing was from what I saw with my own eyes. Though some cases ended up being much more minor than they presented on paper, many cases had been worse, even severe. Plus, people had an easier time talking to someone who looked more like a noblewoman on a secret trip than someone who would come in a carriage bearing the royal family's crest. While they might have tried to keep up appearances in front of a princess, they were much chattier to a kid.

Seeing how urgently people needed solutions to these problems, I had slipped a petition regarding all of the proposals I'd seen into the paperwork the first prince would deal with. Though Laura had been the one who did the actual slipping.

The first prince was a bit better at his job compared to the second prince, so somehow, he had dealt with the petition. The moment he found out about this, the second prince had blown his gasket—just the reaction I'd been aiming for.

"There's no way I can't do the same thing he can!" he had cried.

Being both younger and having a lower-ranked mother, the second prince had wanted some achievements under his belt to counterbalance his various disadvantages in becoming crown prince.

And so, I had started directing most petitions to him, while slipping the ones I thought were more than he could handle to the first prince. In that way, the work had gotten done.

For whatever reason, Tom had thought I was scary for what I was doing, but when I had asked Laura if my actions were normal, she'd just given me a grin and a big thumbs up.

I had felt more or less fulfilled living like this, so I hadn't really minded the situation. I had thought I was fulfilling my duty to my subjects as a member of the royal family. I might not have gotten any rewards for it, but that was just par for the course.

But I had just been an immature, flawed child. I hadn't known what was important.

No matter how many times I drafted petitions on their behalf, communities in

the countryside had remained in deep trouble. This was because what was really needed was a large-scale reform of the basic systems—all I had been doing with these petitions was offering stopgap solutions to a larger problem. For example, if improperly structured water irrigation was causing fights to break out, then the solution would have been to manufacture a better way to distribute the water in the first place.

What's more, the second prince had *needed* these problems. He'd even started causing issues so that he could earn more points for fixing them.

It would have been a bit better if the king and first prince noticed and stopped him, but they hadn't even tried. In their minds, as long as the second prince eventually solved things, everything was fine. Plus, trouble out in the countryside had absolutely no effect on the port—the actual source of the royal family's money—so they probably didn't care to actually try to fix things.

Was it wrong of me to want the people directly responsible for the country's well-being to take a broader look at things?

Maybe things might have turned out differently if I could have proposed changes myself, but I couldn't. This was when I realized the other point I hadn't understood: I hadn't made any effort to let my family know what I had been doing. So basically, from their perspective, I hadn't done a thing.

But if they had known about the work I was doing, then they might've heard me out, lack of familial feelings notwithstanding. But since they didn't, there was no way they'd take any of my advice.

And so, I couldn't do anything but watch as the country gradually went off the rails. And this also affected my own destiny.

"I'm being sent off to Brigandia?"

"That is correct," said the king's aide.

Suddenly, I was to be married off. A decision that I was only hearing about *after* it had been made—an indifferent report delivered to me after all was said and done.

I'd known we were at war. Sylvario and Brigandia had been an equal match

for each other in the beginning, but at some point our situation had tanked, and the war had ended with our defeat. Thanks to that, there was a sudden need for a political pawn, and wouldn't you know it, they had a spare princess right on hand.

I understood that there was no helping the situation. What I had a problem with was that they decided to tell me through one of the king's aides.

Yes. The king and his concubine—my own biological parents—didn't even deign to tell me themselves about something as life-changing as marrying me off.

I think that struck the decisive blow to my heart.

I was born as a royal. I couldn't do anything about being treated as a political tool. I'd resigned myself to that, or so I'd thought. But I didn't think they'd treat me *this much* like a tool. I'd thought, at the very least, they'd still treat me like their daughter.

Afterwards, too, no one ever came to see me. Maybe that was understandable for the king, being so busy. I could see why the queen and the three children she'd birthed might not visit me either, and in the case of the third princess, it was actually a good thing.

But for my own mother—who had very little responsibility as the royal concubine—or my fully blood-related siblings to not care enough to see me... I took that quite hard.

We might have been related by blood, but to them, I wasn't family.

I felt that fact pierce my heart once again.

Then if we weren't family... If they were going to just use me as a disposable tool...

Then there shouldn't be anything wrong with me getting back at them for how they treated me.

I didn't think anyone would fault me for thinking that. And after a while, I realized how I would do it: bringing their treatment of me into the public eye would be the absolute best way to get revenge.

"Now I'll never have to see your stupid face again! And don't you dare take anything with you!"

The third princess decided to grace me with her presence and, conveniently for me, limit how much I was allowed to take with me when I left. I quietly did as she asked and left the palace with the bare minimum in terms of luggage, making sure that the amount was recorded.

Whatever. Her Royal Highness had no clue what I actually considered important to me, so I didn't have any problem going along with her demands.

Not taking much meant that packing went quickly, and I continued to follow the third princess's demand that I not ride in a carriage with the royal family's crest on it, instead climbing into a basic carriage. Since it was only my maid Laura, my coachman Tom, and myself going on this trip, it didn't take long at all to depart.

It felt symbolic that on leaving home, never to return, I had barely enough luggage for a day trip. Seeing how few things connected me to where I was helped wash away any remnants of sentiment I had left.

And so, after following all of the proper procedures to leave through the palace's gate, and passing through the capital's gate as well, we were out on the road towards Brigandia. While the atmosphere was certainly disquieting, we managed to reach the inn town stationed just next door to the border city of Vestigo.

It was there that we were attacked by bandits...or so I thought.

"Yeahhh, good job, guys! Thanks!" said Laura, a distinctly refreshed smile on her face.

That is Laura, right?

She'd always been a lively woman, but for some unexplained reason, she was interacting with these seemingly hostile bandits as if she was their boss. She hadn't said anything about this plan to me, but since she told me to leave the departure plans to her, I knew she'd had *something* planned.

But seriously, how was she on such good terms with them?

Regardless of what I'd thought, the bandit attack was entirely orchestrated by Laura, and both Tom and I were completely safe. The "bandits" waited for us to get a short distance away before they destroyed our carriage to make it look as if we'd been attacked, then got their pay from Laura and left, all with beaming smiles on their faces. They left two horses behind—a clear way for us to continue our journey.

"You seemed quite familiar with that sort of thing..."

"Yes, well, you might say it's something I learned in my youth!"

When I asked that, dumbfounded, she just answered me like that, smiling all the while. I immediately realized that this was her true personality.

While I wondered what in the world she could have done in the past, she just brushed it off by saying "Past secrets are like perfume for women," as if it was some sort of proverb. No matter how I had thought about it, I had never quite figured out what she might have gotten up to.

Next time, I should get her drunk so she'll talk...

Afterwards, we tied our luggage onto the horses the "bandits" left for us. Laura and I rode one horse while Tom rode the other. Quietly, we passed through the border city, where the Brigandians were apparently waiting for us. It turned into quite the kerfuffle later, but it seemed they were so preoccupied with the Sylvarian side of it all that no one came after us.

"They'd never think that the group that went missing had gone straight towards Brigandia's capital," quipped Laura. And she was right; we reached their capital without any big problems.

Making sure to avoid any prying eyes, we landed at the house Laura had prepared for us in advance. She'd gotten it ready because she knew something like this would happen eventually.

How on earth did she prepare a whole house from another country? I wondered, but I kept quiet because I was sure she'd never answer me.

It was at that time that Brigandia's third prince, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, my husband-to-be, left. Widely lauded as a genius, I was sure he'd pick up all the hints I had left and figure out what I'd been through.

I had been prepared for it, but the whole investigation was completed with terrifying efficiency, and the entire Sylvarian royal family was sanctioned without causing any trouble for the citizens of Sylvario. I was truly grateful.

"With this, you'll have nothing left weighing on your mind. You can start your new life without any worries!" commented Laura, but unfortunately, I hadn't switched modes yet.

I'd gone from being a bird in a cage to no one at all. That was what I'd wanted. The problem was that I'd never thought of what I wanted to be afterwards... *Could* I be someone?

Laura and Tom told me I could take my time to think about it, but I felt really guilty. I'd cut and dyed my hair to make it harder for anyone to link me with Princess Sonia, and melted into the common people. I knew I wanted to get some sort of job so I could pay the two of them back. We'd be able to get by for a while with the profits obtained from selling my perfume and the jewels that Laura had nicked before we left the palace, but that wouldn't last forever.

It was when I was walking through the capital, waiting for some sort of chance, that *it* happened.

"W-Wait! You, Miss, I bid you, please wait!"

Suddenly, a man called out to me as we passed by each other. He was wearing mostly black, and he had black hair and eyes, with a strong, masculine face, like a wolf's. More than anything, I was struck by his powerful gaze as he looked straight at me.

My heart thumped heavily in my chest. It was like something had shot right through me.



I knew it was her the moment we passed each other.

From what I'd heard, she had smooth, straight blonde hair that reached her waist, but she'd cut and dyed it brown, probably in order to blend in with the townspeople. She was wearing clothes fit for a slightly wealthy commoner, and her pale skin I'd heard about had been tanned a bit by the sun.

But still, I knew it was her.

Her room, which I'd thoroughly investigated, had contained the lingering scent of her homemade perfume. The scent's brightness had been what made the room feel so sad, and I'd just thought I'd gotten a whiff of it.

I'd heard once that scent was strongly tied to memory, and it might actually be true. Inside my brain, I was struck by the memories of her bedroom in the Sylvarian royal palace, and of the life we'd come to learn she'd lived.

"W-Wait! You. Miss, I bid you, please wait!"

Before I'd realized it, I had called out to her. If it really was her, then calling her "Miss" would've been a crime against royalty, but I wasn't thinking about that at all. I just couldn't let this opportunity go to waste. A miracle like this would never happen again.

And then, she turned around to look at me. Surprise flashed across her face for just a moment. She put a hand to her chest—a defensive posture, probably because the sight of me put her on guard.

Her reaction to having a well-built guy like me suddenly and loudly call out to her in the streets was sensible. I knew that I didn't have the friendliest look in my eyes either.

In the brief moment that I struggled to find an excuse for calling out to her, the surprise was wiped from her face. It was almost impressive.

"Um, did you need something?" she asked, a smile on her face. The same quiet, distant smile I'd imagined she would have.

"Ah... Aaaaahhh, ah, hahhh..."

Suddenly, I was blabbering.

Her soft, calm, thin smile was now cloaked in an inviolable veil.

She was right there, yet she was so far away. On the other side of the veil, alone. Smiling so that no one could get close, so no one could touch her—so she wouldn't get them involved. The smile I'd guessed she would have, only possible because she'd given up on everything.

The moment I realized that, I frantically slapped a hand over my mouth so I

couldn't make any more weird sounds. But I couldn't cover my eyes. If anything, covering my mouth built up a pressure in me that made the tears in my eyes overflow.

"U-Um?! A-Are you all right?!"

Seeing what state I was in, she quickly approached me, looking between me and our surroundings as she tried to think about what to do. But since not many people would want to get near a buff dude in black who suddenly started bawling, everyone who passed us moved away, as if they were trying to run.

Ahhh... But even though she was one of them, she stayed, seemingly worried about me.

What a kind lady... An indescribable warmth welled up within my chest.

"I-I'm fine... No, I might not be fine, but I'm fine."

"Um... Are you okay, or are you not okay...? You aren't hurt, are you...?"

Her eyes examined me carefully despite her confusion. She was looking me over for injuries. That was why she'd ended her question as if she was confirming how I was, rather than asking a question.

And her calm, precise perceptiveness! No, I was the one who wasn't calm.

I took two deep breaths to somehow calm myself down before looking at her once again.

"I truly am fine," I said. "If anything, I would say I was just overcome with emotion."

"I...see..." she vaguely responded before appearing to suddenly realize something. "Huh?"

The smile dropped from her face. She immediately went on the defensive, composing herself and her expression—trying not to set me off.

So, she knows.

Seeing as not many people would know her face, there were very few people in this capital who would be overcome with emotion merely at the sight of her —someone who'd been searching for her, perhaps. It took just moments for her

to figure it all out.

"I've...never met you...have I?" she asked, tone probing as she searched through her memories. She probably knew the faces of most every servant or knight working in Sylvario's royal palace. Of course she wouldn't have any memory of a knight and noble from Brigandia.

"No, we've never met before. I'm Brigandian, after all."

The first thing I wanted to try to tell her was that I wasn't someone from Sylvario searching for her, but that wasn't enough to make her relax her guard. Being Brigandian didn't necessarily mean I wouldn't harm her, after all. Which meant I'd have to get to the core of the issue.

"Upon my word, I will not harm you. I won't force you to go anywhere you don't want to be, and I won't treat you badly. I would just request that you let me speak to you," I said, before whispering so quietly that only she could hear me, "Princess Sonia."

It seemed she'd heard me loud and clear, because she trembled for just a moment. Then, she let out a heavy sigh.

"I understand. If you know that much...then I don't think I could get away from you, after all."

Upon her face was a slightly more resigned smile than before.

Ahh... If only I could make it so that she would never have to smile like that again. But it's impossible for me right now.

No. I couldn't get ahead of myself. I might not have been able to do it at that moment, but one day...

Admonishing myself internally, I gave her a bright smile to hide my thoughts.

"I'm glad that you understand. We don't want to cause a scene, after all," I said, voice still quiet.

She gave me a little nod back. *Technically*, she was wanted right now... Though in reality they had all but given up on finding her.

I'll have to explain that to her too, I thought to myself as the two of us moved to another location.

"The only place I can think of now to talk privately is where I'm currently living..." she said, leading me to an ordinary two-story house, one a commoner would live in.

Hold on. It's only been two months since her marriage talks began. How is she already living in a property like this? Did she have this planned out in advance? Is that why she already has a base for her life here? I mean, yeah, of course she would've, considering her circumstances... But that would mean that her disappearance was...

While I was thinking to myself, she turned the doorknob halfway before knocking in a *thmpthmp*, *thmp* pattern.

I see...

"Please, come inside," she said, inviting me in.

"Thank you. Don't mind if I do!"

Wearing the exact same smile as before, she urged me to go inside. I followed her instructions, feigning total ignorance.

And then...I projected the most bloodthirsty air I could manage into the room.

"Urk?!"

"Th-This guy...?!"

Inside were a man and woman, both poised to attack me until my intense vibes took the wind out of their sails.

Oh yeah. She'd left with one coachman and one maid. It must be these two.

Seeing as they'd rethought their plan the moment they felt my bloodlust, they were pretty skilled. Their protection was most likely why Her Royal Highness was safe.

"Laura?! Tom?!"

"Ahhh... I'm sorry. I have no plans to harm you, but I hope you'll forgive some self-defense on my part. I'd have to go all out if these two had come at me together," I said, scratching my head and making excuses to Her Royal Highness as the sight of her two attendants frozen in place shocked her.

Nah, really, it'd be pretty bad if I'd let those two pull off a sneak attack on me. That was why I'd summoned my most bloodthirsty aura to hold them down, but that did nothing to make them less cautious of me. I needed to start explaining myself.

"That weird knock you did a moment ago was a signal to them that I was dangerous and you wanted them to capture me, wasn't it?" I asked.

"It was. Who in the world are you?" Her Royal Highness asked.

After I explained her own actions to her, Her Royal Highness gave me a look, as if she was seeing something unbelievable.

No, I'm not a monster! I'm not scary! I explained in my head, only for...

"You. You're the Black Wolf, aren't you?" said the woman-who-was-probably-a-maid.

"Wha, seriously?!" quipped the man-who-was-probably-a-coachman, grimacing.

Yep, I'm famous—in a bad way. I don't think I could've helped myself not to reflexively scratch my head. But I wanted to believe that my infamy could be useful.

"Some call me that, true. But that notorious Black Wolf is right in front of you, doing nothing. Could you please believe me that I'm not planning on harming you?" I said, raising both of my hands in the air lightly.

Laura and Tom, as the princess had called them, seemed much better at sneak attacks than fighting head-on. And, as you might remember, fighting head-on was my forte, so I was pretty sure I could easily take the two of them in a fight. They must have realized this too, because they looked at one another, each giving the other a look to confirm they knew that I wasn't planning on fighting them. Then they nodded slightly between themselves.

"Fine. Let's believe him. Is that okay, Princess?" Laura asked, seeking Princess Sonia's confirmation.

"Yes, if you say so, Laura," Princess Sonia responded, nodding.

I see. So while Her Royal Highness gets the final say on any choices, this

"Laura" is the leader of the group. She does seem to have a lot of experience with stuff like this. Why in the world was she working as a maid for a princess...? Or wait, was that exactly why?

"Thanks. That helps a lot. I want this chat to be peaceful, after all," I told them, waving my hands lightly.

And so, after that very heavy-handed welcome, I sat down in the chair they offered me and introduced myself before getting down to business.

"First of all, Her Royal Highness is currently considered deceased. That's why neither kingdom is going to send anyone after you," I started.

Princess Sonia gave me a slightly complicated smile. Laura, who was standing beside her, gave the princess a worried look.

Just to note, Tom was standing behind me to the left, ready to send me flying if I tried anything.

Really, I'm not going to do anything to you guys! I need to get them to understand that...

"The reason why I recognized Her Royal Highness is because I had been sent to collect her and ended up leading the search for her."

"I... I'm sorry for causing trouble for you all..." Her Royal Highness started saying.

"Oh, don't worry about that at all! I completely understand why you did it!" I replied.

When the smile vanished from the princess's face and she lowered her head towards me gloomily, I shook my head in response.

So she's kind enough to apologize to a lowly viscount like me... Just what I'd expected of her.

While I was sitting there, touched, Her Royal Highness seemed to realize something.

"Um... Now that I think about it, there shouldn't have been any portraits of me, and I've changed my appearance. How did you know who I was...?"

She's really just as smart as I heard she was. Now, how do I explain this...

"Huh? Ah, um, I could only call it intuition," I said. "For some reason, the moment I saw you, I knew."

There was no way I could say that the smell of her perfume brought up the image of her I'd built up in my mind. That'd be way too creepy and delusional.

In order to bulldoze past the issue, I tried giving her an intense, serious look, but for some reason, she looked away. She had a hand to her chest again, and her ears were a bit red...

Oh, shit. Did I gross her out by staring at her? I need to change the subject...

"Oh yes! That reminds me! The peace treaty was renegotiated... Though this is a bit hard to say, your home kingdom is currently in quite a bind, Your Highness. They won't be able to do any further investigation for now."

It seemed that she was curious about the new topic I'd brought up, because she looked at me again. *Thank goodness*.

From the documents she'd left—or rather, the fragments of information she'd left—she'd seemingly wanted to get back at her home country. Or more specifically, the royal family, which she *should* have been a part of. When I explained the sanctions that His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse had levied against the royal family of Sylvario, she looked quite shocked.

Not only had they been sanctioned, but after discovering this whole fiasco was the result of improper information management and a slew of other systemic deficiencies, Brigandia personally took the lead in reforming Sylvario's entire administration. To have another kingdom interfere with their own domestic affairs must have been absolutely humiliating for the king of Sylvario.

While doing so, Brigandia was ensuring that Sylvario's reformed government was restructured in a way that was lenient to us, leaking information to Brigandia all the while. The fact that we'd stealthily got all that going without them noticing was one of the reasons why our Prince Alphonse was so damn scary.

"After all, we've got to make it so that in the worst-case scenario, we can end things without any more bloodshed." I remembered His Royal Highness saying with a refreshing smile, as if it had happened just yesterday.

"Ah, also, we got control over a number of mountains this time as well."

"What? Please, wait one moment. Those mountains are... How in the world did you know...?" Princess Sonia asked, shocked.

"Oh, I see that you knew about them as well, Your Highness. Just what I'd expect from you." I was quite impressed, seeing her like that.

The mountains I'd just mentioned currently only looked like normal mountains, but according to our third prince, they were most likely bursting with gold and silver veins. Sylvario hadn't realized that at all, and they gave them up easily after having done absolutely nothing with them. Princess Sonia alone knew what they were worth.

Seeing as she was so smart, Her Royal Highness had realized what I was saying without me explaining anything at all, and instead of questioning me, she just asked for confirmation: "Could it be...that you also demanded the right to establish tariffs on the highway there too?"

"Yes, we did indeed," I answered.

"Which means... Brigandia has that under control... Oh, my. It seems that His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse really did want to end this without any more bloodshed."

As the princess was probably running through simulations in her mind at a dizzying pace, a strong light had begun to shine in her gaze.

She looks incredible right now... Wait, no. Focus, Ark, focus!

While I was on the verge of being consumed by my baser desires, Princess Sonia's thoughts had seemingly arrived at one conclusion.

"Um, Sir McGuine, do you think that His Royal Highness might have need for an advisor in his conquest of Sylvario?"

"...What?"

"Wait, Princess?!"

Her unexpected offer stunned me speechless, while Laura screeched. But I

understood immediately.

So she'd been bottling up that much...

Everyone in the room knew exactly who she was offering up as that advisor.

"While it would only be regarding places I've been to myself and things I've read in documents, I've got all of the on-site data that His Royal Highness may find useful memorized, and I believe I could give him advice considering all of it," Her Royal Highness stated. "I also have some connections, few as they may be, and I know a bit about the relations between people in high society through Laura. While I may be overestimating my skills, I believe I would be an asset..."

"Th-That's...true. You probably would, but is that really all right with you? Though it seems I don't even need to ask..."

The moment I looked into her eyes, I knew what a stupid question that had been.



Her Royal Highness had set things up so that the royal family of Sylvario would get various sanctions against them. At this point, she probably had zero hesitations. If anything, it wouldn't be odd for her to want to deal the finishing blow herself—that was how badly they'd treated her.

But she herself didn't have enough power to go that far, so just as she was ready to deal a slight, yet painful blow to her home country, she met me—someone who could connect her with His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, the man who could be the blade used in that finishing blow.

Knowing all this, it was understandable that she'd suggest what she did even if it had seemed like she no longer wanted to pursue her revenge. I had no real reason to stop her. But...

"The problem with your suggestion has to do with your status, Your Highness," I explained. "As you are now, you would be treated as a commoner, which would make it quite difficult for you to find a job that would allow you to meet His Royal Highness directly."

He was the third prince of Brigandia, after all. Even nobles who would interact with him were carefully screened. While I was merely a viscount who'd been granted my status for my distinguished services in the war, I'd gotten special permission thanks to being a friend from his school days.

If we could have some noble adopt her...but her background made that too complicated. If her past came to light, a brand new can of worms would open up.

As I began to think to myself about what we could do, Princess Sonia smiled at me.

"If that's the case, then, um...we do have one other option... What do you think?"

She said it bashfully, with a smile that was completely different than the defeated mask of a smile that she'd worn before. She smiled with her true feelings shining through.

"Yes, let's do that!" I replied immediately, struck through the heart by what she'd implied.



The next day...

"Please teach me how to get married."

"What in the hell are you going on about?"

The first thing I did in the morning was barge into the third prince's office, and here I was, asking my question while leaning all the way over his desk. Despite how frantic I sounded, His Royal Highness just looked like he was done with me.

It's just not fair how a blond-haired, blue-eyed, pretty-boy prince like him can make even that look picture-perfect.

But no, that was beside the point. While he may have thought my question unexpected, I was completely desperate, so I wanted him to give me a break here.

"You don't have a fiancée, and I haven't heard a peep about you being in anything close to a relationship. What's the joke here? Ahh, I get it. Your vacation softened your brain so badly that you've started hallucinating."

"Can you please not treat me like I'm having a breakdown?!"

"Then it must have been the booze. That's why I always tell you to quit drinking the cheap stuff."

"I am neither hungover nor suffering from alcohol poisoning. I am completely stone cold sober right now!"

Okay, I might've been a *tad* sick from my vacation drinking, but luckily for me, I was sober when I'd met Princess Sonia. Thanks to that, she didn't treat me like a weirdo... Or that much of a weirdo, at the very least. I wasn't totally sloshed during my vacation though, so I wanted to believe I wasn't bad.

Anyway, I knew I was seemingly coming out of left field here, so His Royal Highness had every reason to wonder what I was on about. It wouldn't have hurt for him to be a little nicer, but I couldn't get discouraged.

I cleared my throat and finally got to business. "The truth is, I had a fated meeting with someone yesterday. Which is why I need to marry her no matter what!"

"Calm down. You're not making any sense... Gimme a break, though. Having my oldest brother go on about fate and true love was more than enough of that."

In the face of my emphatic arguing, putting as much power as I could behind my gaze, all Prince Alphonse did was let out a gusty, put-upon sigh, his reply just as flippant.

He was referencing his eldest brother, His Royal Highness Adolphe, first prince of Brigandia, and the scandal he'd caused over his thwarted engagement. Out of nowhere, he'd started going on about finding his true love, and right after, he'd broken off his engagement with the daughter of a marquis—all without talking to His Majesty, the King, first. On top of all that, he declared that the daughter of a baron would be his bride instead.

In punishment for pulling all of that shit, Prince Adolphe was confined to a tower up north specifically for unruly royals, while the baron's daughter was sent to an incredibly strict convent in the middle of nowhere—essentially a prison for noblewomen.

No thanks to all of that, Prince Alphonse—who'd been planning on getting ranked down to a duke and only somewhat participating in politics—was suddenly thrust right in the middle of them via the subsequent succession struggle. It was completely understandable that he wanted to complain about it. He had a good relationship with Prince Artur, so major conflict had been avoided thus far, but there were some dumbasses who wanted to stir shit up...

But that was beside the point. My situation was totally unlike Prince Adolphe's, so I really wanted Prince Alphonse to hear me out.

"While I do believe our meeting was destiny, I have a very real reason behind this," I said, before telling His Royal Highness all about meeting Princess Sonia, what we talked about, and her proposal. I'd gotten express permission from Her Royal Highness to tell Prince Alphonse everything.

And then, upon hearing the entire story...

"What the hell have you gotten us into..."

Prince Alphonse smacked both elbows onto his desk, the better to completely

cover his face with his hands.

Granted, I'd do the same if I was in his place, but as an authority figure, I'd rather he held back his true feelings.

"I understand your response, but consider the huge advantage this could bring us."

"Yeah, yeah, I know we can't let a chance like this pass us by, despite the massive risk. For goodness' sake, what kind of luck do I have: having to help my would-be fiancée marry someone else..."

The princess everyone thought was dead was alive, well, and under the protection of Prince Alphonse, the same man she was supposed to be married off to. If any of this came to light, people would think His Royal Highness had orchestrated the entire breach-of-treaty situation and war would start all over again. In reality, the timeline was the exact opposite, but there was next to nothing we could do to prove that.

"While there are indeed risks involved, Her Royal Highness hasn't appeared in high society since she was thirteen, so it's doubtful that any visiting diplomats would recognize her. She's also in disguise, as well."

"True. All I would need to do, then, is prevent anyone who might recognize her from seeing her. Well, it actually would be better if I just got rid of the maids you spoke to about her."

"That's an option. If they were to, say, resign over their grief for Her Royal Highness, no one would bat an eye. Few people would feel the need to search out a servant who simply quit. If that happened, then the odds of her real identity being revealed would be nigh nonexistent. The advantages would significantly overshadow the risks," I commented.

"That's right. But Her Royal Highness is quite bold, huh?" Prince Alphonse remarked. "Trying to make you her guarantor by marrying you."

Yes, that was Princess Sonia's plan: marry me, gain a reputable reference by doing so, and thus use that reference to serve Prince Alphonse.

In the countries in our region, marriages were performed via a vow before God. For commoners, marriage was pretty simple, since their usual lack of

ordained witness or strict following of protocol made it so that making a mistake was less likely to get them smote by God. But the higher in rank you became, the more religious you got, and the stricter you followed ceremony. Make a mistake? Heavenly punishment.

But on the flip side, if a noble followed the marriage ceremony properly, it would show that God was vouching for you. And getting God as an absolute guarantor like that was the reason Princess Sonia had suggested this plan.

I had agreed to her proposal immediately without hearing any of the details, but even the details didn't make me change my mind. Of course it wouldn't. This situation was a godsend, and on top of that, it was a win-win situation for the both of us.

Look, I get it. I know that to her, it was just a convenient political marriage. But loving relationships could grow from there, right?! We would, of course, be starting the marriage off chaste, but as long as we were living under the same roof, then I had a chance!

Also, Laura and Tom would be living with us.

Okay, I know, I know, but I couldn't do anything about that! I mean, in some ways, of course they'd be tagging along!

I considered myself incredibly understanding for how I accepted conflicts like this and incorporated their conditions into the plan.

I thought I kept my expression neutral, but His Royal Highness gave me an exasperated look.

"I'm sure you know already, but there *are* cases where viscounts have married commoners. Usually, they're the daughters of rich merchants, but... Do they have any assets?"

"Of course she doesn't, and you already knew that," I snapped.

"Yeah, of course she doesn't," His Royal Highness sighed.

To be specific, they had a good enough amount of cash to keep them living modestly as commoners, but not nearly enough to say they could be rich.

If the matter was purely regarding status, then viscounts would be classed as

lower nobility. But since having a noble lineage wasn't actually considered important in Brigandia, there were some cases of viscounts or their children marrying commoners, few as they may have been.

For me, I'd be marrying someone whose blood was *too* noble instead, but since that would be top secret, then it wouldn't be an issue.

But whatever the case, even if all this would be okay for a baron, a brand-new viscount like me would typically want some benefit in marrying lower, like the bride coming from a wealthy family. The fastest way around this whole mess would have been to have Her Royal Highness adopted into some noble house, but with the situation as it was, we wouldn't want to get any other noble houses involved. Not only would I feel bad about getting them mixed up in all of this, but the likelihood of information getting leaked would spike as well.

This was why I asked His Royal Highness for advice on "how to get married."

Prince Alphonse was quiet for a while, thinking of my response, before murmuring an "aha," as if he'd had an idea.

"How about this? We could make her the daughter of a scholar from another country. The backstory would be that she came to Brigandia to study, and you two fell in love when you had a chance meeting. From what I've heard about her, she's quite smart, so you could say you decided to marry her because her skills would help with governing the domain you're going to get. How does that sound?"

"Great idea, Your Highness! You're a genius at speaking irresponsibly!"

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" Prince Alphonse snapped with a glare.

"No, no. This is heartfelt praise! Her Royal Highness is incredibly educated, so having her be a young scholar fits perfectly!"

Really, the fact that he could come up with a story like that right off of the top of his head was why he was currently thriving in the royal palace, where lies and truths intermingled. I was truly impressed. I never would've been able to come up with something like that.

"Anyway, having a backstory like this would make it easier to snip her out if

she turned out to actually be a spy."

"And this is why people call you the Smiling Iceberg," I said, purposefully grimacing as His Royal Highness grinned a very meaningful grin. He might've been someone who could say wicked things like that just fine, but he wasn't completely wicked. For those he was close to, he did everything he could to protect them. Since I knew the kind of person he really was, I could stay calm when he bad-mouthed Princess Sonia.

"Oh, shut up. Why would anyone give a member of the royal family a nickname like that..."

"Maybe because of how you act every day? But anyways, I think Her Royal Highness should be fine."

At my confident declaration, Prince Alphonse narrowed his eyes at me before heaving a heavy sigh.

"Usually, I would trust your instincts, but that's a bit difficult to do here."

"Why? I'm pretty sure this is the loudest my instincts have ever screamed something in my entire life."

"Which is *exactly* why I'm worried that you're picking up some other signal or something..." His Royal Highness retorted, sighing once again.

How rude! I would never pick up anything weird like that!

"Anyway, be careful not to go around saying your encounter was fated or something like that. We don't want to draw any attention to her."

"You're right. Then we'll have met perfectly normally. I'm the only one who needs to know that it was fate."

"Hmm, you're fine with her not thinking the same? ...Ah, it's because you're the only one who does."

"Guh!"

His Royal Highness's harsh words pierced my heart.

Yes, it's true that Princess Sonia probably didn't think it was fate, but what I do from now on could make it that way! All I wanted was for her to look back on

it someday and think, "Ah, it really was fate!"

Yeah, I was fully aware that I was being a bit gross here.

Prince Alphonse narrowed his eyes at me for a bit again, before heaving another very showy sigh and continuing the conversation.

"Next would be problems with her royal education... She *did* get one, if only on the basics. I'm worried she might act too refined for the wife of a viscount."

"Ahh... Uh, about that... Apparently the royal family, or more specifically, the queen's side of it, planned on marrying her to some viscount or lower noble as a form of harassment. So she only knows viscount-level manners and etiquette."

"There is a lot I want to say about that, but I'll keep my mouth shut because it's convenient for us here," His Royal Highness grumbled, voice low as he massaged his temples.

I understand completely. I have mixed feelings about it too... While it was lucky for us, it was a side effect of Her Royal Highness's misfortune.

But anyway, this did away with most of the problems we'd started off with.

"Then I'll first discuss things with Her Royal Highness regarding how things will be handled. Also, if she says yes, please sign as our guarantor on the marriage contract," I said.

"Yeah, fine, but should you really be bossing a member of the royal family around?"

"I mean, you usually work me to the bone. Give me a break here and I'll make sure to work enough to make up for it later."

"I'm holding you to that, then."

With a little bit of mutual ribbing to finish it off, I left His Royal Highness's office. I thought I might've heard him mutter that I was in the prime of my youth, but...I really hoped that was true.

With that in mind, I speed-walked out of the office—and the palace altogether—as fast as I could without breaking decorum. Then, I dashed to the house where Princess Sonia was living and told her what Prince Alphonse and I

had discussed.

"I see. Forgive me if I sound arrogant, but I'm quite smart, so acting as the daughter of a scholar should work," responded Princess Sonia, very quickly.

I mean, I'd guessed that much. Knowing her, she'd probably already considered the risks of being adopted by some random viscount. Compared to that, acting as the daughter of a scholar would be a lot less restrictive, and also give her a chance to show off her knowledge, so in more ways than one, this decision worked out better for her.

"His Royal Highness will be arranging identification that will say you're a foreign student, so don't worry about that. The only one who could negate it would be His Royal Highness Prince Artur, Brigandia's second prince, and as the two have a good relationship, that isn't likely to happen. Ah, and your name," I added. "'Sonia' isn't a particularly rare name, but it may be for the best to change it."

She nodded. "That's true. Just in case, I was thinking of 'Nia."

Of course she'd already thought about issues like this. And the name Nia was an often-used commoner name in not only Brigandia, but the nations surrounding us, so it would blend in well.

But Nia, huh... It almost sounds like a nickname for Her Royal Highness... And I can publicly call her that? I just keep winning here!

Holding back my ulterior motives with an iron will, I forced a serious look on my face. "Yes, that shouldn't pose any problems. The next issue would be how to answer when asked where you came from, but it seems that Prince Alphonse will be using his connections to request a baronet scholar from a slightly distant land to act as your father. According to His Royal Highness, the aforementioned scholar cares for little but his research, so he should agree if the request comes with a sizable sum for funding it."

Once I told her the country name Prince Alphonse had mentioned, Princess Sonia nodded.

"I see... Ah, if you're talking about that country, then I know the basics about their culture, so I believe I should be fine."

Wait, how does she know so much about a nation that far away? She's amazing... Sylvario really threw away a gem... I, we need to make sure to treat her well.

Oh yeah, speaking of treating her well, there's another important thing we needed to talk about.

"Lastly is where we will live. Do you have any particular preferences?"

Yes, a place to live. Her Royal Highness was currently living in a commoner house with her attendants. While it was a fairly nice place for a commoner, she would be getting married to a noble like me (on paper) so she would need to move.

To our new home.

I was just about to start getting all excited about it by myself, but I used every bit of strength I had to keep my face straight.

Having no idea of the battle that was raging inside of me, Princess Sonia continued being modest. "Oh, not really. You've already done so much for me, so I won't ask for more."

"Such a humble woman..."

"Huh, oh, what are you saying?"

"Oh, shit, did I say that out loud?!"

When my thoughts just jumped out of my mouth, Her Royal Highness fretted a little in embarrassment.

God, she's cute... No, that's not the point, Ark! It's true, but it's not the point!

"Er, um, anyway." I tried to pivot. "I'm terribly sorry, but due to my age and only just being granted the peerage of viscount, I don't have much in the way of an income yet. I don't believe I would be able to give you much in the way of luxury, so to be honest I'm relieved you said that."

After all, we'd just gotten done with a war, so prices were still a tad volatile. The fact that they were only "a tad" volatile was because His Royal Highness Prince Artur kept control over the logistics of goods during the war... Both of the royal brothers were terrifying.

Huh? A first prince? Never heard of him.

With everything that had happened, there were a number of homes that were being sold for cheap because of unhappy reasons like "its former owner is no longer living." If I was alone, I'd gladly jump at one of those homes with zero hesitation, but with Princess Sonia, I didn't want to make her live somewhere with such a history.

There were probably other things that I would need to take into consideration. And I wanted to take them into consideration. Based on how Her Royal Highness had lived up until now, I didn't think there could be a limit as to how considerate I could be, even if she would probably argue against that.

But still, I wanted to do what I could for her.

"It's just that I would feel guilty otherwise, so... I'm going to do as much as I can to worry about your comfort, and to be considerate towards you," I said. "I want you to smile as much as you possibly can."

"Oh my..."

When I came out and said what I was thinking, I barely registered Laura sitting off to the sidelines, an odd look on her face, as if she'd had sugared ginger stuffed in her mouth. Why? Because Princess Sophia had looked a bit shocked for a moment... Before giving me a bashful smile.

I felt as if something had shot right through me. All the blood in my body seemed to rush at once towards my face.

Dammit, now I'm getting all embarrassed!

I scrambled to stand up. "A-Anyway, I think that's all we needed to talk about, so I'll take my leave for the day! I'll, I'll come again, so I'll see you then!"

Mumbling and stuttering, I forced a very uncool goodbye out of my mouth. But Her Royal Highness didn't make fun of me at all.

"Yes, see you later... I'll be looking forward to it," she said, a soft smile on her face.

Oh no, all of my blood is going to my face.

"O-Okay! See you!"

Saying just that, I managed to keep my cool until the door was closed behind me. But the moment the door latched, I started running as fast as I could.



Just after Ark rushed out in a tizzy.

Laura looked over to Sonia, asking worriedly, "Are you really all right with that, Princess? You know you don't have to sacrifice yourself like this..."

From her point of view, her mistress was marrying the Kingdom of Sylvario's nemesis. Or, well, since they'd abandoned Sylvario, she didn't hate him exactly, but... He was still a fearsome warrior that they couldn't let their guard down against.

And just as Ark had judged, Laura and Tom wouldn't have been able to take him down in a proper fight together, much less one-on-one. For the two of them, their main concern in the situation was for Princess Sonia's safety, considering just how close she would get to a former enemy.

Sonia, on the other hand, didn't seem to be worried at all.

"It's fine. And I don't think of it as sacrificing myself at all. No matter how much trouble I may be in, I wouldn't have made a suggestion like that to someone I didn't like at all."

"Huh? B-But he's the Black Wolf, you know?!" Laura screeched in horror.

"Heh heh, he is... A wolf with a very good nose!" agreed Sonia, smiling.

Thinking about when Ark had found her, she recalled that his cracked voice wasn't cool in the least. But it had somehow moved her. And the way he'd looked straight at her—how his franticness had shot right through her heart. She had felt something she'd never once felt before, and had ended up holding a hand over her chest.

He'd found Sonia—he'd found a total stranger.

"The man who found me when I was no one, when I didn't know where I should go, without even knowing what my face looked like."

When she had asked him how he knew it was her, he'd given her a vague answer about intuition. But the fact that he'd picked her out of a crowd, right in

the middle of Brigandia's capital and reached out to *her* made her heart beat funnily once more, and she held her chest again. Despite all of Sonia's extensive knowledge, she didn't know the words to describe their almost-too-good-to-betrue meeting.

"Hey, Laura... You know, I'm just a girl. Can I really think this was all fate?" The maid froze as if she'd been struck by lightning, silent.

The bashful smile on Sonia's face... Was exactly that of a maiden in love.

Chapter 3: Just When We'd Thought It Was All Smooth Sailing...

And so, our political marriage was arranged, and to the public, was staged as a stroke of serendipity. I really wanted to know what sort of karma got me this, but there was no fighting destiny.

Out of everyone involved, Prince Alphonse was probably the one who wanted to ask that same question the most, but with him as my support, I had nothing else to be afraid of.

We'd also finished hunting for our new home quite quickly. After looking at a number of properties, we ended our search on a house that a baron was giving up. It was a bit large for a baron's mansion, but a little small for a viscount's estate. It was the perfect size to be called a townhouse.

But really, it was still too small to be considered a royal's home. Yet when I'd gone over our "wants" list with Princess Sonia just to be sure, she'd said it was no problem.

"I've been living in this house for about a month, after all," she'd laughed, being quite tough for a noble lady. It was true that the house she'd been living in was one for commoners, after all.

And the reason such a perfectly sized house was being sold was...because the baron who had owned it had been crippled in the war and was returning to the countryside.

Yes, it was one of those cheap properties that, in exchange for the price, came with baggage attached.

I'd been sure to explain that to Her Royal Highness, but in reply, she'd said: "If that's the case, then I'd absolutely like to go with this home. If buying this property allows someone who's fought so bravely to return home and rest his weary body, then I will gladly deal with a few bad omens."

When she said that, I'd nearly cried again.

I had heard about her traveling to the countryside, so I had thought she would understand the lives of those who lived out there a bit. But what she said seemed to come straight from her kind heart.

And not just that...

"And you'll be given a domain to rule over in the near future, so you shouldn't spend too much money on the townhouse anyway. From what I've heard of His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse's personality, it's likely that he'll give you a region that you'll be so busy with, you won't be able to leave easily," she added, very realistically.

"Ah, yes, probably. He absolutely will," I replied without thinking, nodding.

Really, Her Royal Highness is so perceptive... Or wait, it might just have been her picking up on it from my complaints about him.

In all honesty, I'd done my best not to think about the domain I was getting. Every time I put any thought to it, a chill ran down my spine. So basically, it'd be bad. I knew I was absolutely getting somewhere really bad. And my instincts were usually on the mark about things like that...like a hundred-percent on the mark. And since things were going to be bad no matter what, I decided there was no difference if I thought about it now or not at all, so I struck it from my mind.

Yes, I was running away from the issue, but sometimes in life, retreat was absolutely necessary. Definitely.

And what's more...

"More than anything, I'm sure that you'll be able to knock away at least a couple of bad omens, Sir McGuine," Princess Sonia said with a smile that completely lacked even a smidgen of doubt.

Being a man means never backing down from a challenge, right?

"I'll pay for this—now. Cash down."

"Huh, ah, okay?!"

My decisive statement shocked the realtor who'd been showing us the place, but I had quite a lot in my savings! His Royal Highness might've worked me to

the bone, but he paid well doing it! I'd just never had a chance to actually use it.

Or maybe, the property might've been cheap, but buying real estate cash down was maybe a little weird... Laura and Tom were horrified, at the very least.

B-But I bought it, so I'm gonna say it was okay.

And just like that, the details regarding our new home were settled, and I would be moving out of the dorms for single knights that I'd been living in for years.

"Our new home." That sounds so nice.

And of course, seeing as I had to explain my moving out with the public story we were going with, I got a shit ton of jealousy thrown my way. But taking 'em all out drinking on my dime and getting them wasted was enough to fix that. Most active-duty knights were just like that.

Gale was an outlier, though—he congratulated me properly. He had a strong sense of duty, so apparently he felt he owed me for picking him of all people for a promotion.

Sure, I may be seen as simple for deciding to give Gale a chance to shine at the next possible opportunity. Gale may have even calculated for this, but in the end, he got results, and I was fine to be used for a bit.

So yeah, despite a lot going on, I was moving out on a weekend, feeling nice and refreshed. And then, an unexpected... Actually, a pretty damn obvious visitor came to me.

"What the hell is this I'm hearing about you getting married, Ark?!"

My pops came at me, screaming.

His panic was understandable; here he was, hearing his son—who'd never had even one relationship rumor and always turned down every marriage offer he'd gotten—was getting married out of nowhere. And only telling his folks after the fact!

"What do you mean? I'm just getting married. There shouldn't be any problem with that," I argued.

"There are huge problems, you dunce!"

My father's screams echoed through the parlor of the knight's dormitory. Couldn't he turn down the volume a bit, here? I mean, I was the reason he was shouting, but...

"What problems could there be? You'd been worried about me staying single forever, hadn't you?"

"That is exactly the problem! Here I'd been trying to arrange a marriage for you and you pull the rug out from under me!"

Ah. So that was why.

Up until now, I hadn't been a very juicy catch for any noble ladies to marry, so I hadn't got any offers.

"So now that the war is over, you got some bites?" I asked.

"Some?! Do you not understand the position you're in?!"

His question prompted me to consider the whole situation: I was a single man who'd gone from a mere chevalier to a viscount—entirely through merit—at the young age of twenty-five. Not only that, but I was highly trusted by Prince Alphonse, given responsibility over various jobs, and getting actual results.

I see. So I'm a hopeful stock now, especially in the eyes of lower nobles and count families who're on the decline.

But thinking about it like that...

"Pops, I think you might be the one who doesn't understand his position. Or maybe calling you 'Baron McGuine' would get my point across better?"

"Urk... W-Well..."

My shot had taken the wind completely out of his sails.

Yep, I'd been the third son of a baron. Since there was little chance I'd ever inherit the family estate, I'd decided to work myself up the rank as a knight, and in the end, I'd managed to outrank my pops and older brothers.

But I wasn't about to pull rank here. My brothers were both working as civil officials. I knew quite well that it was because of guys like them organizing and

preparing supplies that military dudes like me didn't go starving on the front lines.

And plus, my rise in rank was all because Prince Alphonse worked me half to death and I'd somehow managed to survive it. If I was gonna be proud of anything, it would be my ability to get through things.

With that being said...

"Even forgetting which of us is higher ranked now, I'm a single man who's been given a peerage, so the fact that they're even trying to go through you instead of coming directly to me is wrong."

"You're right, but the reason why they went to me is because you've been traveling so much. They had no way of contacting you!"

Oh yeah, that was true. I'd been on the battlefield for ages, and then headed to the border once that was finished before the whole kerfuffle happened, so I understood that they'd have a bit of a hard time contacting me. I understood, but still.

"So you mean the offers coming are all from people who first reached out while I was uncontactable after becoming a viscount. And if they didn't want me 'til then, they're being pretty cocky now."

"Urk...! Th-That's... No, it's because you never go to social events!" Pops argued.

"Well, I can't deny that. So that means none of them actually fell for me. They're all a hundred-percent in it for political reasons, and they're not even attempting to make it seem like anything else. I'm pretty sure I could never end up trusting people like that."

"Gnnrgh..." After my rebuttal, Pops couldn't argue any further.

Quite honestly, I knew that living as a noble meant that marrying for politics was par for the course, but the whole reason I'd run away from all that was because I wasn't good at looking only at money and power. I'd become a knight because I thought that being one meant I might actually be more or less free from it.

If there had been a lady who'd understood my principles and made an attempt at meeting me halfway, then I would've thought about it, at least... But for better or worse, I'd never met any ladies like that, so I had no way of knowing how it would've ended.

Nowadays, I figured it was for the better, since because of it, I'd met the woman I was destined to be with.

Despite having thoughts like that, I deliberately made a cranky face to hide it.

"And even saying all this, you were all geared up to use me too, Pops. I'm grateful for you raising me and all, so I won't deny you everything, but this situation is different. You should've talked to me before moving anything along."

"Yes, but... I couldn't turn down a proposal from a count..."

"What? A count? Who would... No, I see. Viscounts would be in their strikezone."

Just as I was about to ask, I put some more thought into it. That was exactly what I'd been thinking internally. It wouldn't be odd for an up-and-coming viscount to get offers from a count's house.

But that was if a viscount even got those offers in the first place.

"And they made sure to go to a baron like you instead of straight to me... What, did they offer you financial aid or something for this?" I snapped.

"To be honest, that was part of it. But another large part of it was that I thought it would be a good match for you. And as your father, I'm sure of that."

"If you'd go that far, then I'll believe you."

I recognized the strength in his gaze as he looked straight at me; it was the same strength I had in mine.

I had some mixed feelings in really feeling like I was his son at a time like this, but... That would've been fine if it wouldn't complicate things. He really was thinking of me when he started pushing things along. Even if he'd been overeager about it.

"But anyway, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse is backing up this marriage

of mine, so there's nothing you can do about it."

"Huh? Why would it be that big of a deal?! Ah..." He realized as he spoke, and trailed off.

Yep. He finally caught on that things are going on behind the scenes. I mean, I didn't say anything about it, so it's not his fault, but...

"So that's that," I said. "Oh, but I wasn't forced into it or anything. It just worked out, both politically and emotionally."

"Th-That's good, then... No, it's not good at all. The count was all for it. They might try to force it through if you're still only in the engagement phase."

Man, don't say things like that.

It was true that Princess Sonia and I weren't officially married yet. We were "currently in talks with her parents," as in ironing things out with Nia's scholar "father" to get our stories straight. Which is why we'd need to hold off on the wedding for another two or three months or so, but... It seems that might've backfired on us a bit.

"Why're they being so pushy about it?"

Just as the words left my mouth, a theory popped into my mind. If it was *that* house, then it wouldn't be impossible.

And unfortunately, I was correct.

"The proposal was from the County of Barracuda. You understand what I'm saying now, don't you?"

All I could do was nod.

The House of Barracuda was a noble military family. They'd also just taken a massive hit by losing their heir in the war. There were questions about why the hell the heir to a county would die in battle, but in a sense, there was nothing they could do about it. The saying "spare the rod, spoil the child," was exactly something they would stick to.

Their entire problem this time was the cost of their success. They'd sent both the current count and his heir to a fierce battleground, and the current count survived while his heir did not. So while they were reaping what they'd sown, it

was hard to judge them about it since their sacrifice was good for Brigandia as a whole. It was because of their methods that most of the family heads ended up being great men, but this time, it resulted in losing their heir before he could live up to his potential.

So, the end result was that their house was in decline, but...

"Oh, so pardon me tooting my own horn here, but they want to take me in since I showed off my own military prowess. I'm a viscount, but as long as I haven't been given a domain of my own yet, then I could marry into their family."

No, maybe they were thinking they could absorb whatever domain I happened to get into Barracuda County.

Most major high-ranked nobles like them were shrewd, even martial houses. No, it was *because* they were martial houses that most of them were so shrewd.

"That's about the gist of it," Pops confirmed. "Since they fought hard enough to lose their heir, it seems they're getting some land too, so if you added that to what you're going to get for becoming a viscount, you'll have quite a large domain for yourself."

"But that'd be the House of Barracuda's land, wouldn't it?" I pointed out.

"They'd just be taking me in as a stopgap to mix our blood so that everything would come back to them next generation. They wouldn't be losing a thing."

The way they treated the whole family as a single entity might've been something specific to noble families who were counts and higher. I might've been a noble too, but I couldn't really relate.

"I see," I continued. "It'd be hard enough for a newbie viscount like me to rule what I'd be given, so I wouldn't be able to handle being in charge of an entire county. That'd mean that even if I married into the family, the current Count Barracuda could be a magistrate and keep on running things in my place."

"You're right. They would appoint a magistrate, at least until you retired from active military duty," Pops nodded.

"And I was planning on keeping at that for another twenty or so years. As long

as I stayed alive that long, anyway. Oh, damn, now I'm thinking about some awful stuff. Like, if I happened to father them an heir, they wouldn't even care if I died since they would still reap a huge profit with zero investment required."

"Th-They wouldn't be that evil!" Pops snapped. "Probably."

My father probably couldn't help his statement sputtering out at the end like that. After all, Pops just being a baron meant that he'd probably barely ever even conversed with Count Barracuda, who you could argue was the top of military aristocratic society. And of course, I hadn't either, which meant we knew next to nothing about what kind of a person he was.

"Whatever. I'm gonna turn 'em down anyway, so it doesn't really matter. Or it wouldn't if I could just do it bluntly..."

Quite honestly, I wanted to just say that I didn't care about their family situation, but the real pain in the ass here was why I couldn't.

"Count Barracuda brought up how 'knights should look out for each other,' after all..." Pops said.

"Of course he did. And I can't deny that."

Pops looked conflicted as he said that, and he really was. I couldn't just dismiss those words either.

In the countries around us, military folks worked on the philosophy that "knights should look out for each other." Basically, this meant "If you die, I'll do something about it, so if I die, you do the same."

It went without saying that since knights and soldiers risked their lives on the battlefield, they never knew what tomorrow would bring. Almost every soldier experienced laying one of their comrades to rest. They themselves might be the next one to die.

Now, I want you to think about how someone who treated their dead allies' or enemies' bodies like shit might themselves get treated. Just getting their corpse stripped and thrown out somewhere would be one of the *better* possibilities, because sometimes people would use their corpse to get out all of their pent-up anger.

Higher-ups were watched even more strictly, and there were too many cases of knights and nobles who treated their subordinates' bodies like crap suddenly dying a strange, unnatural death overnight, or finding the corpses of nobles on the battlefield with an arrow stuck in the back of their heads. Even aside from situations like those, morale would be low; soldiers wouldn't dare risk their lives for a superior who treated them like shit. They'd die easily in battle, or even run away.

This applied to your enemies as well. Or rather, it applied *because* of your enemies. Whichever was the case, it was an unwritten rule of the battlefield that you couldn't complain if you got back what you'd given. If you treated enemy soldiers badly, then it could come back to you in the end. That was why you treated the bodies of those you killed as well as you could manage, and would need to be surprisingly gentlemanly to captives. Treating them well would make ransom negotiations go a lot better when it was time to give them back.

The reason the Sylvarian knights who'd helped us in our investigation a bit ago had been so polite and reasonable wasn't because they thought they'd suffer divine punishment for Sylvario breaking the terms of the treaty, but instead because they adhered to the same military culture we did.

And so, with a culture like that, you couldn't treat the surviving family of people who'd died in combat coldly. Otherwise, you'd be next, having the family you left behind suffer. Most people wouldn't want that.

On the flip side, if you knew someone would take care of your folks after you died, then it'd probably help you fight more courageously.

I'd heard before of a country to the south that was known for having a tribe with terrifying warriors who fought recklessly *because* of the nation's generous safeguards for the families of those killed in battle, but that might not have actually been a joke.

I was getting off-topic here, but that all was the reason I couldn't be too rude to House Barracuda.

"First off, I'll have to meet with Count Barracuda directly to turn him down myself," I concluded. "But I'm gonna have to talk with His Royal Highness about

exactly how much I can explain to him first."

"Hey, now that I think about it, how much am I allowed to know?" my father asked.

"Ahh... You're probably okay knowing everything I've said today. You'd keep your mouth shut, anyway."

"Well of course I would. If I blabbed, then it would be off with my head, or I might just 'disappear' one day."

He was just talking hypotheticals, but just thinking of it must've put a chill down his spine, because he was rubbing his neck.

Yeah, I get that. His Royal Highness probably would do something like that to anyone who got in the way of his schemes, though it might change based on what degree it went to.

"Other than that, I'll have to tell... Nia too."

Since I wasn't used to calling her that yet, I mumbled it. I was also having to hold myself back from grinning.

The fact that she was Princess Sonia was absolutely top secret, so I'd need to call her by her false name in front of my father. Yep. Part of my job, that.

Nothing I could do about it.

"Nia? Is that your fiancée's name?" my father asked.

"Oh yeah, I hadn't told you her name yet either," I replied. "Nia is a smart, beautiful, wonderful woman. You need to make yourself some time later so I can introduce you."

With everything happening as fast as it had, I hadn't had any chance to introduce them, and it wasn't as if I didn't want them to meet at all. Even Her Royal Highness had wanted to meet them.

Pops was a bit hesitant to agree to my suggestion, though.

"Of course I'd love to meet her, but it probably wouldn't be a good idea for that to happen before we get this mess out of the way. House Barracuda probably wouldn't take it well." "Yeah, that's true."

It was bad enough that I was already engaged when they were making plans with Pops to marry me into their family. Him ignoring the count's daughter and meeting my fiancée instead before we'd settled things would sully their reputation.

While they would probably give up if we had the third prince Prince Alphonse himself mediating things, that would be adding insult to injury. Our culture of always looking out for our own might make that a strike against me. And there was the chance that, if they were really old-fashioned, they'd think it would all be my fault.

"Okay, so first off, we'll have to talk," I concluded with a heavy sigh.



The first thing on the agenda was to report to His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse.

I'd vaguely hoped he'd be able to solve this new problem, but...

"Count Barracuda," His Royal Highness groaned. "I'd really prefer he not know our secret." For once, His Royal Highness had no ready solution at hand.

Though House Barracuda prided itself on being a family valuing brawn over brain, they were apparently some of the smartest muscleheads around. While they didn't have any ambitions to overthrow the kingdom, they were greedy, and would shrewdly go for anything as long as it didn't go beyond their own territory.

"Both the current head and heir of House Barracuda went to battle with zero hesitation. No doubt the other nobles, especially the military ones, would give them a pass right now. And since they just lost the heir to their county to the war, the other houses would have their sympathy as well."

"Hahhh," I exclaimed. "Risking their lives profits their houses. I never expected such an outdated parenting style would turn into something like this."

Thinking that way, their principles could even be considered a variant of those of the southern warrior tribes.

As a military man myself, I could respect risking your own safety for your family and the good of everyone. But I couldn't give up here.

"Then I'll do my best to get through this without him finding out our secret. I apologize in advance if I'll need to let it slip," I said.

"Count Barracuda is no fool. If you tell him what's going on behind the scenes, he'll understand what's at stake and keep quiet. He'll just expect payment for his silence," His Royal Highness said, smiling bitterly. I couldn't blame him.

From what I'd heard about Count Barracuda, he'd definitely understand the effect that me marrying Princess Sonia would have. I also knew that the kingdom would take a huge financial hit if he found out. Which meant...

"I wonder how much it'd cost to keep him quiet," I commented. "You know, I don't even want to think about it."

"Which is exactly why he can't find out. Do your best to keep it from him. You can do it. Probably. Maybe."

"I'd appreciate a little more confidence from you!"

Though I'd quipped back without thinking, I honestly wished he'd cut me a break here—this was a problem that kept snowballing.

But no, this time, it wasn't Prince Alphonse's fault...mostly.

"Anyway, make sure to explain things to Miss Nia."

"Yes, of course. No point keeping this from her!"

My elders had told me that keeping secrets and acting without consulting your partner were the main reasons married couples fought. That was why I was going to talk it out with her and make our marriage a happy one!

With that vow in my heart, I took my leave from His Royal Highness's office, finished up my work quickly, and went to visit Princess Sonia, who was in the middle of moving preparations.

"Oh my. Then if I may, please let me accompany you when you're discussing things with Count Barracuda."

I never expected her to say something so bold with such a big smile on her

face.

"You want to come along? But..."

I thought about what she'd said. Count Barracuda wouldn't know what Princess Sonia looked like, so there was no chance that he'd recognize her. And knowing Her Royal Highness, she wouldn't let anything slip that would expose herself. Other than that...

"And though I doubt it would happen, just based on what you've told me," Princess Sonia said, "if the count gets physical in any way, I'll be safe as long as you're with me, right, Sir McGuine?"

"Yes, of course!"

Princess Sonia said my worry aloud as soon as I thought of it, and so I responded immediately. I mean, if she said it like *that*, of course I would agree. She even might have said it that way precisely because she knew I would respond that way, but to be honest, it felt so good to be wrapped around her little finger.

I stopped myself before my thoughts went any further. I mean, there'd be no harm in me just thinking it, but she'd be disgusted with me if she ever found out. And I wasn't sure I could keep it hidden. Her Royal Highness would definitely see right through me. Which was why I needed to keep the door leading to those thoughts closed tight.

"If I happen to be there at the meeting, then I believe there's a good chance we could clear up this whole mess in one fell swoop," she continued.

"You're probably right..."

I couldn't do anything but nod to what she'd said.

Her being there would put a stop to any speculation that I was just claiming to have a fiancée so I could turn him down. In addition, it would also deter a follow-up meeting if the count didn't accept my answer by itself and demanded he personally judge who was more suited to me.

"Oh, and I would love it if the count's daughter also attended the discussions."

"Y-Yes, that would speed things up..."

Why did her beautiful smile seem so intense?

But it was bold, and bullish. It was as if she was saying that with her in attendance, there'd be no way she'd ever lose in any comparisons.

I mean really, Princess Sonia was at a level where it was questionable if she could ever lose to *anybody*, but she was right. The only people who might have had a chance against her would be the daughters of dukes who'd gone through the education to become queen consort, or another princess. At the very least, the daughter of a count had no chance of winning against her.

Though to be fair, I might've been a bit biased.

Huh? Wait, one second.

"I see. It's because I don't think anyone else could ever match up to Her Royal Highness," I murmured.

"Huh?"

My obvious observation had, surprisingly, shocked Princess Sonia. When I looked at her, her eyes were actually opened wide. I kept watching her—I had never seen her look this way—and as I did, her face slowly turned red.

"Ah, I'm sorry for saying something like that so suddenly. It was gross, wasn't it? Having someone like me say that..."

"O-Oh, not...at all...?"

I quickly apologized, and she clutched both hands in front of her chest, looking away.

Urk... Now I've done it. Lines like that only work when you're handsome.

Whatever the case, I needed to do something about the weird atmosphere I'd created.

"Um, I mean, I would choose you, Your Highness, no matter what lady came my way, so there wouldn't be any problem at all if you came along."

"O-Oh, um, thank you..."

H-Huh? That's weird. That didn't improve things. Gotta think of something

else to talk about...

"Ah, that's right. I heard Count Barracuda has quite the scary face. Will you be all right?"

I'd only ever glimpsed him at a distance, but to me, he seemed more like a bandit leader or a pirate captain than a count. It was enough that I wondered how he was a count, but there he was, so...

This is kind of irrelevant now, but seriously, of all the people we could've had a problem with, why did it have to be this quy?

While worrying about this all internally, Princess Sonia seemed to regain her composure, giving me the same smile she'd given me before.

"I'll be fine. I've spoken to someone that was like a bandit leader before."

Did she just read my mind? No, if she had, she'd look disgusted right now. I should be fine. Probably.

Anyway, if she said she'd be okay, she would probably be okay. She seemed like the type of person who would say so if she really couldn't do something.

So really, there was only one thing I could say. I gave her a nod. "Understood. Then I would love to have you by my side."

"Thank you very much. Let's do our best to convince Count Barracuda... Okay?"

She nodded back, tilting her head a little bit when she said "okay" at the end.

And my heart could've stopped right then and there.

"O-Okay! Let's do our best!"

My heart might not have stopped, but my composure was definitely in jeopardy. I felt pathetic as I answered, voice cracking, but since I'd nearly ascended from ecstasy from her words alone, I was probably just a pretty easy guy in the first place.

It was only for her, though!

Only for her!!!



The day of the discussion...

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Baron McGuine. My name is Nia Farquhar. I'm so terribly sorry that it's taken so long for me to introduce myself to you."

"Y-Yes, nice to meet you..."

Before our meeting with Count Barracuda, I had decided to introduce Princess Sonia to my pops and hold a strategy meeting between the three of us, but after Her Royal Highness—no, Nia's—polite introduction, my father barely replied, staring at her face in shock.

The silence lasted for a few seconds.

I really couldn't leave things as they were, so I shook Pops by the shoulder. "Heeeey, Pops, what's wrong? If you keep being so awkward Nia won't know how to respond."

"Uoargh?! S-Sorry... Wait, Ark! What the hell is this?! How did someone like you, who doesn't know a single woman, bag a wonderful lady like her?!"

"Wait, why are you getting mad at me?"

My dad had snapped at me, seemingly at a loss for how to react. It miffed me that Pops was scolding me like this, but I knew he couldn't be mad at *her*, not one bit. Anyway, I got to see Nia getting all embarrassed about being called lovely, and that was a sight for sore eyes.

"It was by chance, really," I said. "I helped her out when she was in trouble in the capital."

"Yes, I had been at the end of my rope before, um, Sir Ark came to help. He really saved me."

Am I the only one who thought it was cute that she was a little embarrassed to say my name? Princess Sonia... Nia usually called me "Sir McGuine," so it wasn't a surprise that she wasn't used to using my first name. I wasn't used to it either. Honestly, it was amazing. But I couldn't let it show on my face. If I did, I'd look suspicious in a number of different ways.

Put on your best acting face, Ark!

"Wow. So it was just a coincidence. Ark, did you use up your entire life's

worth of luck?" Pops questioned.

"Honestly, I think I did," I agreed.

"Oh, you two are overreacting..."

When my father and I said that, Nia stopped us, fully embarrassed. While I did want to see more of that face, it would've been mean of me to keep going. Plus, we had a real problem we were dealing with here.

"Whoops. The count and his daughter will be here soon, so we really need to talk things out now," I said, trying to change the topic. Nia seemed really grateful for that, which almost distracted me once again before I forced my attention back to the issue at hand.

Anyhow, today, we were having Count Barracuda and his daughter come to talk to us at our new home, Viscount McGuine's manor, which we'd just barely gotten to look presentable. Of course I was worried.

Laura and Tom were the ones to decorate, and would serve the guests when they arrived. Laura especially had gotten all the tea prep sorted out. Just what you'd expect from a princess's maid.

But where the hell did she hire an interior decorator? How did she have connections like that?

When I asked her, she just smiled and said it was a secret. She really was unfathomable... But thanks to that, we managed to get the townhouse set up to a point where it'd be acceptable for a count to visit.

In Brigandian etiquette, it was standard for lower-ranking nobles to visit the higher-ranking noble's home when the two met. But with adjacent ranks like count and viscount, it was more common for the requestor to make the visit. If it was between a count and a baron, on the other hand, then the baron would still be the one to visit.

And so, annoyingly enough, Count Barracuda himself had wished to be the visitor. Since I was going to turn down the marriage proposal to his daughter, etiquette would dictate that I, as a viscount, should have gone to visit him. But the count had flipped it around, saying he wanted it to be not a refusal, but a discussion, and thus would visit me.

I was beyond fed up. Just a pain in the ass. Not the arrangement, but the count himself.

I couldn't read him at all, and the fact that he was forcing me to suspect everything meant he absolutely didn't just have muscles for brains. All of this to say that convincing him to rescind his proposal wouldn't be easy. He was already higher ranked than me too, so it was all way too big a pain in the ass.

Which was exactly why I wanted all of us to be on the same page before the count and his daughter arrived, but...

"Shouldn't we be fine?" Pops asked. "Miss Nia looks like she'll have no problem."

"Pops, no. While she probably will be fine, we still need to get everything straightened out between us," I sighed. Nia had already rendered my pops toothless.

We had to be ready for the worst-case scenario, and my father and I were much more likely to trip up than Nia was—especially Pops.

And while a supposed commoner like Nia could be expected to make mistakes, it'd be a much bigger problem if Pops and I—the nobles in the discussion—were to slip up.

Anyway, once we'd somehow managed to finish our strategy meeting, Count Barracuda and his daughter arrived. The two of them were both wearing mostly black, most likely still in mourning for the family's recently deceased heir.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry for barging in on such short notice! And to think that I would be the first one to visit you when you've only just purchased your new home!" Count Barracuda greeted us.

His strong greeting, the way he doesn't seem sorry at all... This guy really is a pain in the ass.

Setting aside what he might be thinking, the count was doing a number of things with this greeting. He was displaying that he was trying to get past the death of his heir while smoothly implying—by highlighting, through our bare preparations, how recent my engagement to Nia was—that I still had a chance to call the whole thing off.

Standing in the entranceway where Nia, Pops, and I had gone to greet our visitors was Count Barracuda, a big man with an unshaven face and a messy head of dark brown hair, so overwhelmingly wild it was like a lion's mane. He had a great physique, comparable to my own, though I'd heard he was in his forties. More than anything, his gait, his vibes... They were proof that he was a seasoned warrior. A bandit leader or a pirate captain, indeed.

Honestly, if the situation wasn't what it was, I would have loved a duel with him. He'd be a good match for Sir Eisendarque too... I wished all three of us could've done a round-robin battle.

Right in front of me was a warrior great enough to make me instantly space out and fantasize about battling him. And he was supposed to be a count—a high-ranking noble.

Or no, Sir Eisendarque had been a count too, hadn't he? How did such busy guys like them even find the time to train?

Anyway, the guy really was a count, so I had to give him a proper welcome.

"Oh, no, I'm truly honored to have you here, Count Barracuda," I said. "Your Excellency's military fame is so great that even an ignorant youngster like myself has heard tales of your deeds."

"Ha ha ha, I've heard about your own deeds myself!" the count replied. "I'm thrilled that I'll be able to have a relationship with the famed 'Black Wolf'!"

"Thank you for your kind words, Your Excellency. Though I'm unsure what sort of relationship we'll end up having..."

Ahhh, dammit! I have to be careful about every single response!

He was talking like we'd be becoming family, when I had no intention of that happening. What's more, he was saying it in a way that I couldn't completely shoot down... This is why I was bad with military types who were good at the machinations of high society!

But dealing with the Smiling Iceberg at the center of high society every day had hardened me. I wasn't going down easily.

Hmm? Did a chill just run down my spine, or am I imagining things?

I rolled my shoulders slightly, attempting to locate the source of the chill, but eventually had to clear my throat and face the count once again.

"Oh, yes. This is my fiancée, Miss Nia Farquhar."

"I see, so this is..." Count Barracuda began, cutting in so quickly that he nearly cut off my introduction. Dammit, he was really intent on controlling the entire conversation.

But Nia wouldn't lose to him.

Perhaps the count had been about to introduce his own daughter, stepping forward with a preparatory inhale. Or maybe he'd been shocked at the dress Nia was wearing. Though it was a plain navy blue, the color managed to be both deep and dignified.

Whatever the case was, he'd very literally had his breath taken away, and in the few seconds he'd lost his timing and been speechless, Nia showed him a perfect curtsy. It was comparable to the ones I'd seen princesses and daughters of dukes do from a distance, maybe even better, and it knocked even Count Barracuda off his feet.

And, after using the few seconds she'd gained control to show off her presence, Nia gave him an excellent, ladylike smile.

"Just as Viscount McGuine introduced, my name is Nia Farquhar. Tales of your valor have reached even my country, Count Barracuda, and I am absolutely honored to meet you."

Her voice was a perfect volume, neither too loud nor too quiet, while her tone was neither too cold nor too friendly, and was appropriately soft.

There wasn't a single thing for him to find fault with, and as Nia gave a perfect, irreproachable introduction, Count Barracuda was at a loss for words. Not only had she destroyed his timing, but her perfect ladylike attitude stopped him in his tracks. It must have been quite humiliating for him.

But he was only silenced for a few seconds.

"Oh my, I'm touched by your kind greeting! I see, she really is a lovely lady!"
Count Barracuda immediately bounced back, and even showed off his

composure by complimenting her. Though was probably freaking out a bit internally, he didn't show a hint of it.

Such a pain in the ass.

But he wasn't the only pain in the ass here, which made things even worse.

"But my daughter won't lose to you either," Count Barracuda proclaimed. "Emilia, introduce yourself."

"Yes, father."

The graceful woman who stepped forward upon her father's urging looked nothing like the count. Or no—rather, it was the intensity in her sparkling emerald green gaze that showed that they were parent and child. Her softly wavy golden hair fell down to her waist, and every single strand was properly looked after, from root to tip.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Emilia, daughter of Count Barracuda. Viscount McGuine, Miss Nia Farquhar, I'm pleased to see the both of you in good humor."

And then, she showed that she didn't just *look* like a lady. The curtsy she gave us was tremendously refined. It was graceful enough that a duke's daughter would have nothing on her. In a word, it was superb. I could understand why she hadn't backed down.

But for some reason, it did nothing for me. She was undeniably pretty. Yet even so—nothing.

"Thank you so very much for such a courteous greeting. It's an honor to meet you. Now, I cannot leave guests standing, so please, follow me," I said, taking her greeting without pause and motioning for them to follow me into the parlor. The count's face didn't move an inch, but for a split second, Miss Emilia looked shocked.

It must have been incredibly rare for Miss Emilia to find a man who wasn't affected by her greeting or looks. Most noblemen's sons she would meet were probably descended from either counts or viscounts. They'd likely have almost never met another lady who could put up a fight with a duke's daughter. My lack of response, and Nia's perfect curtsy, must have hit them hard. If I had

been the same as I was before meeting Nia, then maybe I might've faltered.

But that's all meaningless conjecture!

We'd managed to sidestep their calculations in the first battle, but they showed no signs of giving up.

As I thought of what had transpired thus far, we made it to the parlor and sat down: Count Barracuda and Miss Emilia on one side of the table, and Nia and I on the other, while my father was in the middle, or rather, to the side.

The look on his face practically screamed "between a rock and a hard place," but he needed to suck it up for now. It was because he moved things along without consulting me that we were in this situation in the first place.

"Oho. This is quite a good cup of tea."

Laura had served us all tea as soon as we were seated, and just as I was about to take a sip, Count Barracuda, who'd taken a sip first, gave her an honest compliment.

Thinking to myself that that was just like Laura, I took a drink. It truly was good.

Wait, I've never drunk anything like this. Where the hell did she get these tea leaves from?

I gave Laura a look, but all she gave me back was another secretive smile. Did she buy high-quality tea leaves with her own money or something? We shouldn't have had something like this in our home.

It troubled me a bit to know that Laura's connections could even procure something like this. I really don't want to get on her bad side.

"My thanks for the compliment. Laura here is a maid that Nia brought along with her, and she's incredibly skilled," I said, introducing her.

Laura gracefully gave them a bow. Since she was originally the daughter of a baron, even her movements were meticulously executed. She wouldn't lose to a ducal maid either. Neither Count Barracuda or his daughter could complain about her.

But that was just for Laura.

"It's true that her maid is incredibly skilled. But what of Miss Nia Farquhar herself?" Miss Emilia asked.

"Oh? That's quite a fine thing to say. Why would you think that?" I asked in reply.

I let a little bit of annoyance seep into my response to Miss Emilia's sudden provocation. That much shouldn't be enough to offend her or the count, especially since they were the ones to sass first.

"Well, it's true that the wife of a newly appointed viscount like you, Sir McGuine, would need to have good manners," Miss Emilia explained. "But there are other things that are even more important."

"More important? What would those be?" I asked.

"Knowledge, personal connections that could support you in governing a territory you aren't familiar with, and a proper education," Miss Emilia stated, looking proud.

She was right. Those *were* necessary. Especially the connections—I would need as many of those as I could get for a territory I still had no clue about. But.

"I thank you for your concern, but on the matter of connections, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse will be assisting me."

Miss Emilia and her father couldn't immediately refute my answer. After all, His Royal Highness the third prince had a ton of connections, and if he asked, most houses would probably accommodate him. Of course, when compared to the connections that Barracuda County had built on their own, the connections I was claiming via Prince Alphonse were secondhand, so they would be weaker. But they weren't so weak that they could be dismissed immediately.

Which was why Miss Emilia started going after it from another angle.

"I see. Connections like that would indeed be reassuring. But what about her education? I've heard that Miss Farquhar is from a foreign country, but for example: would she know where to import food supplies if your future territory has issues with food production?"

"You're quite correct that a situation like that would be worrisome," Nia

replied. "If I were to think of territories to import from..."

In response to Miss Emilia, Nia proceeded to name a Brigandian noble whose territory produced an abundance of grain. And not just one or two nobles, but *ten*. What's more, her answer encompassed the *entire country* in terms of who to buy from. Not only were Count Barracuda and his daughter shocked, but Pops and I were too.

"But there would be problems with that as well. Let's say, if Viscount McGuine were to be given territory to the east. Do you know what those problems might be?" Nia asked in turn.

"Ghh! Those issues would be the state of the roads and public safety! You would need to implement tariffs and such in the impacted large cities—those would have been raised with the change in viceroys..."

When Nia shot a question back, Miss Emilia immediately replied.

To the east was the border with Sylvario, who we'd only recently been at war with. Those concerns were, of course, plausible, but all in all, Miss Emilia had some good opinions on them.

While I was wondering what the hell was happening, Miss Emilia shot back another question, which Nia answered before posing another question herself. The cycle continued. The two of them were holding a quiz battle, or rather, trying to one-up each other on their knowledge, while the men in the room just watched, stunned.

Nia—Princess Sonia—had actually guessed that something like this might happen. While we hadn't had much time to gather information on her, apparently Miss Emilia Barracuda was quite prideful. She also had caught onto the fact that one of the supposed reasons I'd chosen Nia was to use her knowledge to help me govern my territory, so chances were likely that in our meeting she'd try to turn things around via a battle of wits.

And then, that actually happened. But...

"Then where are the houses of the Three Families of Ceramics located along the Edith Highway?!"

"That would be House Colorport and..."

Where the hell did you two get local knowledge like that?

I really hadn't expected things to heat up over slinging around extremely niche information I had no idea how to respond to, let alone keep up with.

Really, the both of them were too good to just be the wives to a viscount. But despite that, they were seriously going all out against each other's knowledge. I was pretty sure at that point that they'd gone past even thinking about marrying me.

I wasn't sure whether it had been a half hour or a full hour that had passed. The verbal battle-slash-quiz tournament, which we men hadn't managed to get even a word into, came to an end.

"I see," Miss Emilia finally said. "Just what I would expect from the lady that Sir McGuine has put his trust in. Miss Nia Farquhar, you are amazingly well-educated..."

"Thank you very much. But I must say that you are just as educated, Miss Barracuda."

Miss Emilia held out her right hand as she spoke, which Nia grabbed in kind. They were shaking hands. Their battle was over, and what's more, they were showing each other that there were no hard feelings over the results. Then, Miss Emilia suddenly grabbed Nia's right wrist with her left hand, bringing it high into the air.

"Amazing. Though I won't go so far as to say that I lost, I must acknowledge that it is *you* who is the most suited to marry Viscount McGuine. Could your meeting have been fate...?"

"Miss Barracuda... Thank you so very much."

So basically, Miss Emilia had acknowledged Nia's victory and raised her hand high into the air. At the end of their knowledge battle, it seemed that friendship had bloomed between the two.

The rest of us had been completely ignored.

"W-Wait, Emilia, you're admitting you lost...?" Count Barracuda asked, shocked, looking as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Really, judging from Miss

Emilia's personality, she probably wasn't one to honestly admit when she'd been beat. But with Nia, she had no choice but to accept her loss.

Go Nia!

Wait, no. That wasn't the important part. I mean yeah it was important, but the problem lay elsewhere.

"Miss Emilia, what exactly do you mean that it must have been fate?" I asked.

I knew from this meeting alone that Miss Emilia wasn't one to accept defeat so easily. But she *had*. And, despite all the pressure Nia had put on her, it wasn't her knowledge, or lack of, that decided the match. *Then what did?*

"She was quite knowledgeable about the Stonegaze region, which until recently was within the borders of the Kingdom of Sylvario."

"I see... I see?"

Miss Emilia had given me a precise answer, but my reply to her was evasive. Why would that have been the deciding factor, I thought to myself, but immediately a reason emerged—though, it was only a guess.

"Um, Viscount McGuine, could it be that you haven't heard about it yet?" Miss Emilia asked, surprisingly timidly when she saw how I had reacted. Judging from the sigh that Count Barracuda let out, it seemed that she'd just either let something slip or had misread something.

All I could do was answer with a guilty smile. "No, I haven't heard anything yet about which territory I'll be given."

"R-Really?!" she replied, shocked. "I thought you surely would have been involved in internal discussions about it..."

"In a meeting the other day, 80% of those present voted for you to receive the Stonegaze Province. We had thought His Royal Highness would have informed you about it," added Count Barracuda afterwards.

Unfortunately, I hadn't heard a thing. His Royal Highness being His Royal Highness, though, he probably had a plan... That included just wanting to surprise me.

"No, not a thing. But I see Your Excellency had been in attendance for this

meeting regarding the conferral of honors."

My words were less a question than they were asking for confirmation, and with a guilty nod, Count Barracuda confirmed his attendance. This all explained why he was trying so hard to push for my marriage to Miss Emilia.

If I were to receive Stonegaze Province and then also be married into House Barracuda, they would be able to expand their territory without impacting the other Brigandian noble houses, since Stonegaze was formerly a Sylvarian province. It'd be an enclave, but that would be of benefit to them; they could leave the unstable, newly Brigandian region to me while the current count could keep throwing his weight around as magistrate to their original land even after giving up the title.

Their insistence on this possible marriage might have been because they thought that if they could catch me while I was still in the capital *and* consummate the marriage before I went to Stonegaze, then they could raise the subsequent heir back in Barracuda County.

They were so damn calculating and crafty. I honestly liked those kinds of people...as long as they weren't pulling anything on *me*. Unfortunately, the fact that their entire plan depended on me marrying Miss Emilia meant that I couldn't go along with it.

Wait. But didn't...?

"Nia, I'm sure you had no idea, but... Why did you bring up Stonegaze Province in the first place?"

If I remembered right, it was Nia who first brought up Stonegaze. That had ended up cinching her victory, so she couldn't have pulled it out without thinking about it beforehand.

Nia bashfully smiled in response to my question. Cute.

"Um... From what you've told me of Prince Alphonse's personality, I gathered that he would probably assign you Stonegaze. I'd also figured that the odds of Miss Barracuda knowing as well was about fifty-fifty, so..."

Her answer was quite a bit far off from "cute." It was more "cool," maybe? Her forethought was practically godlike.

But Nia was right. His Royal Highness *would* probably give me the most pain-in-the-ass territory. And I had Nia as the best advisor I could possibly get too.

"Other than that, I've actually visited Stonegaze during my fieldwork," Nia continued. "Miss Barracuda was just so knowledgeable that I thought the only way I could win was to use what I knew from my own experience."

At Nia's explanation, everyone in the room understood how things ended up the way they did. Though the cute smile she had on wasn't really appropriate for what was actually coming out of her mouth... I'd heard some of how she'd been brought up, but the "fieldwork" she mentioned was probably actually her on-site inspections. Since she'd actually talked to a lot of different Stonegaze residents, the quality and amount of her knowledge about the region would of course be different from Miss Emilia's.

"So it was indeed true that the problem I posed was one that came from someone familiar with the area. I lost because I was supposed to lose," Miss Emilia said, refreshed and smiling. "You and Viscount McGuine meeting might truly have been fate."

Not only had Nia known about the province, but she'd actually been there herself—everything suggested that her knowledge made her an overwhelmingly better fit to support me.

Miss Emilia extended her right hand to Nia again. "Allow me to acknowledge and commend your victory. And, if you would be willing... May I refer to you as Miss Nia, out of respect and companionship? I'd like for you to call me Emilia, as well."

Her completely unexpected request stunned both Count Barracuda and my pops. Me too.

Nobles usually referred to each other by their family names. The use of a first name was reserved for people who you were close enough to call a friend (though members of the royal family were an exception). And here we had a very prideful daughter of a count asking a baronet's daughter—practically a commoner—if they could be on a first-name basis. Seeing how surprised Count Barracuda was, this kind of behavior was very unlike Miss Emilia.

Nia, of course, probably knew all this, because she grinned and gripped Miss

Emilia's hand back, almost as if she was showing the handshake off to the count. "Yes, of course. It would be an honor, Miss Emilia."

"Hee hee, thank you, Miss Nia."

With a firm handshake and a smile, a friendship was born—one beyond social status. The discrepancy between their public statuses and actual statuses was wildly different, but the Barracudas didn't need to know that.

"Gnnngh... I never thought Emilia would..." groaned Count Barracuda. He seemed to have mixed feelings about the situation; he probably never expected Miss Emilia to lose, let alone have her initiate a friendship with her rival after losing. I didn't expect that either.

But whatever the case, it seemed that Miss Emilia had given up on me. What's more, since she and Nia had become friends, Nia wouldn't have to fear retaliation for her win. All we needed now was to do something about the count, who seemed to understand that he'd lost, but hadn't quite accepted it yet. And that's where I probably came in.

"Your Excellency, it seems that your daughter and Nia have come to a consensus."

"Nnngh... It seems so..."

He nodded, but he also mumbled—deep down, he was still resisting.

"Logically, the issue is decided. But now, Your Excellency, *you* need to accept it. That's why I'd like to ask if we can *talk*, man to man," I said, punching my right fist into my left palm.

Count Barracuda looked surprised, but once he got what I was getting at, a grin crossed his face.

A man-to-man talk. With our fists.

Normal nobles probably wouldn't go for something like this, but I figured a martial man like Count Barracuda would. And I figured it would be the best way to make him emotionally accept the conclusion.

"My good Sir McGuine, you understand how this works. Then let us have a good old chat to make you rethink your choices!"

Oooh, that's a good smile on him! A chill ran down my spine, and I couldn't help but smile back.

"Yes, let's. But..." I started, intentionally pausing. "You might not be able to succeed in that, Your Excellency." Saying that, I grinned, showing off my canines.

And so, Count Barracuda and I headed to the courtyard to have our fist-to-fist, man-to-man talk. Nia, Miss Emilia, and my pops followed us, but Miss Emilia groaned out a "Men," while she did. Having been raised in a martial county surrounded by muscleheads, she might have developed an aversion to things like this.

Nia came along, half-worried, half-curious. It was a bit of a surprise, because I had thought she wouldn't like things like this. If she was okay with it, then I guessed I could fight all I want.

"Now, Your Excellency," I said, "No balls, no eyes, and no throwing moves, unless it's to rip the other off. How's that sound for rules?"

"Hrm. So headlocks and chokes are all right? Just as I would expect from a man like you, Sir McGuine. You truly understand."

Count Barracuda happily agreed to the rules I put out. Going so far as to make it no-holds-barred would be too much even for us, and since the courtyard wasn't built for any training, a throwing move might end with one of us slamming our heads on a rock. But making attempts at ripping each other off kept us safe from breaking the rules and ruining all the fun.

These rules were also common for martial arts training drills in the Brigandian royal military, so they were also used for physical *talks* like this too. And I was sure His Excellency Count Barracuda was familiar with them; he seemed like he'd "talked things out" like this before. It was easy enough to see why he would accept my offer.

The two of us took off our jackets, stripping ourselves down to a single shirt. Just as I'd expected of him, his muscles didn't look like ones you'd expect on someone his age. His body was also well-balanced, showing how he'd tempered it through training and actual combat. I knew it'd be like this, but it told me that if I let my guard down for even an instant, this fight would be over. But, well, it

was good for talks like this to have some stakes.

"Well then. To show my respect, allow me to let you get the first hit in, Your Excellency."

"Hrm? You're going to let your guard down for me because I'm older?"

"Of course not. I can't underestimate you at all—not with your physique. I'm just letting you get a hit in as an apology for turning down your offer."

"If that's how you feel, then I guess I'll take it!"

With a savage smile—one that made me think he might gnaw through my windpipe—Count Barracuda silently lifted both his fists in front of his face and squared off. And I left both of my arms down, taking the hit without guarding. His unforgiving right fist landed a direct hit on my unguarded left cheek, and a loud, dull sound rang out.

"Ghaah... Just like the rumors, Count Barracuda! That hurt..." I said, wiping my mouth.

"Hah! You say that, yet you look completely fine!" commented Count Barracuda, amused, savage smile remaining.

No, but it really did a number on me. His fist was hard, heavy, and painful. He had the perfect straight. But I was trained too, so I wasn't weak enough that a single punch would take me out.

I shook my head lightly before squaring off with my own fists in front of my face. "May I, Your Excellency?"

"Of course! Come at me!"

"Brace yourself!"

I stomped forward, using the force from my step against the ground as momentum to twist my body and funnel all my strength in my right fist, which hit him right in the left cheek—just like he hit me.

"Gah ha, ha ha! Pretty good for a youngin!"

Despite it feeling like quite a good hit, the count heartily laughed it off. It should've done a number on him, but adrenaline was probably winning out

right now. Well, he was who he was—and it was because the count was like this that he even agreed to this *chat*.

By the way, this exchange of punches was a common practice meant to gauge each other's strength. If there was too much of a gap between opponents, then it'd be fine to give up now.

People forcing themselves past their limits—and causing unfortunate accidents—wasn't uncommon, so rules like these were put in place beforehand to minimize the risk. It showed that these fights weren't just barbaric brawls, but structured bouts, with actual spoken and unspoken rules.

So, after we'd taken each other's punches...

"Can we continue?" I asked.

"You don't even need to ask!"

"Right?!"

The same instant I agreed with his reply, both of us raised our fists in front of our faces and got into fighting poses.

Shockingly, despite the count being in his late forties, our strength was roughly even.

How strong had he been in his youth?

But I was fighting... Or rather, *talking things out* with the current Count Barracuda, not the past. The man in front of me today was a more-than-fearsome opponent.

"Hrng!" he groaned.

"Shhaaa!" I cried.

Intense, loud slams and thuds rang out as we punched each other. The lack of guarding on either side at the beginning was an etiquette thing. I really would've preferred not to have to take his punches, which rang right to my core, but etiquette was etiquette.

After a few punches back and forth, we started wrestling, trying to get each other in a headlock. Though this appeared a simple battle of strength,

successfully pulling off a headlock required getting a firm grip on your opponent's neck while hitting them in the chest, all the while using the principle of leverage to pull at their neck and get them to lose their balance. If you could do that, you could get 'em with your knees or elbows as much as you wanted.

But since your opponent wasn't going to just let you do that, it became a plain battle of offense and defense, one that needed constant vigilance.

We each took small steps, searching for a more favorable position, and while doing so, kept our center of gravity low—but not low enough that the other could come from above and take us down. From an observer's standpoint, it looked pretty boring.

From her spot at Nia's side, Laura suddenly began a live commentary. "Their wrestling is fifty-fifty. Count Barracuda has more experience, but Master McGuine has better reaction time, so they're an equal match." She was right on the money. Ah, she's a pretty good fighter herself, so of course she'd know.

Just like she commented, both the count and I were unable to get each other down in the end. Since it was clear that the fight would stay like this indefinitely, both of us let go and put some distance between us. The fight might've been simple, but the back-and-forth took a lot of stamina, and when Count Barracuda smirked, both of us were breathing heavily.

"So 'the Black Wolf' nickname wasn't just for show."

"Honestly, I don't really need a fancy nickname like that. It's a bluff."

And that bluff didn't do a thing against my current opponent. What's more, the sly old fox used the few seconds our little conversation took to get his breathing pretty much under control.

My youth should have granted me better endurance, but the count was getting through it all with his experience and tactics.

He's seriously a pain in the ass.

"All right, let's get back to it!" I yelled.

"Okay, come at me!"

Getting all of the etiquette out of the way, we could now use all of our

strength to really talk. The two of us took a step and raised our right fists, hitting each other in the face almost simultaneously. We each braced ourselves so we wouldn't stumble, then went in with our left fists. Those hit not our faces, but our bodies.

I'd thrown a straight near his midriff, while the count aimed a hook near my liver.

Dammit, the way he twisted his arm was so good that his damn hook hit me at almost the same speed as my straight! But... Knowing a hit to my vitals like that would stop me for a second, Count Barracuda then aimed a right upper at my jaw.

I just knew he'd try a move like that, so I used just my neck to dodge it by a hair's breadth. Then, I took advantage of his arm being raised to use my right fist to throw another straight punch at his body. It was a direct hit, but his left fist got me right in the right cheek too.

Damn, this guy is strong! Not only were we repeatedly attacking and defending, but we were attacking while defending, and attacking while dodging too. Our arms, eyes, and brains were all working overtime. Count Barracuda's attacks in particular were more desperate than anyone I'd ever fought before, and I knew that if I accidentally took too many of them, I'd get knocked out.

Yes, I said "desperate." Even though he was so experienced, and acting so calm, he was becoming desperate. That was why his moves were incredibly strong, but also so risky.

He had a lot on his shoulders. Way too much. And of course he did. I wasn't sure exactly how it had all gone down, but he'd sent his son into battle, where he'd ended up killed. The count might have even seen his son die with his own eyes. Sure, from a military point of view, it all might've been incredibly heroic, but... I wonder how he felt as a parent. And still, he had to make sure that the Barracuda County would thrive—all so his heir wouldn't have died in vain. The stuff riding on his shoulders was way heavier than anything an upstart viscount like me could imagine.

"Nnahh... Punches from a guy with so much on his plate hit real hard!"

That was why I verbally acknowledged it, and by doing so took the pressure

off of myself. Yeah, those hits were having an effect, but an effect is all it was; it wasn't enough to stop me.

"Hah! So you've still got enough in you to mouth off!" the count retorted, though his spirits seemed to be very slightly dampened. Me calling out the stakes of this deal might've made him think about it.

This all might have been too heavy, even for a man like Count Barracuda. But unfortunately, I couldn't share his load; it was his cross to bear.

"That's not all I can do!" I roared. I got a clean hit with my fist, and he wobbled slightly.

As a viscount, my responsibilities couldn't hold a candle to his. But as a person, it was a different story.

I threw a glance over to Nia. She was worried. But even more than that, she was looking at me with trust in her eyes.

If I lost, I might be forced to leave her. And that was absolutely unacceptable!

Just as Count Barracuda's fist hit my face, mine hit him right in the solar plexus. It wasn't something as clean as a counter. It just hit at the same time. But, even though it was just by a tiny bit, I was starting to overpower him.

I'd thought meeting her would be impossible. I thought she was *dead*. But I *did* meet her, and completely by coincidence. Here, in Brigandia's capital. All of it was by chance.

And there was no way I was letting this chance—this miraculous meeting—go to waste.

Because you know what? That woman who'd given up on everything had *smiled*. Of course I'd want to make her smile even more. Of course I would want to make her even happier. And, if possible, by my own hands. Even if the only thing they were good at was punching people.

My tightly gripped fist hit before his did. I'd tried to time it so we'd hit at the same time... But it seemed mine had been a little bit faster.

"It seems we might be reaching the end soon!" I boasted.

"This isn't over yet!"

Count Barracuda swung his fist with all his stubbornness, pride, and repressed feelings. It was fast. It was heavy. It hurt.

But it wouldn't overpower me anymore.

I wanted to make Nia happy. I wanted her to be happy.

The Barracuda house had other options for a groom, right? But the only person who could make Nia happy was me. Only me. I'd decided that. And I hoped that Nia would think the same, if she could.

And that was why I didn't have time to waste fighting here forever!

My fist—full of all of my power, all of my feelings—hit him in the chin.

"Nuh, oh, ohhh..." Count Barracuda groaned. Then, it seemed he lost consciousness for a moment; his knees gave way, and he fell back, arms and legs spread out.

But I still stayed on guard. I brought my right fist back under my chin, and thrust my left fist towards the count to keep him down. My stance was to show him that I wasn't letting my guard up and thinking I won, that he was still conscious.

And even a few seconds later, he didn't show any signs of getting up.

Can I believe I won?

Just as I thought that, Count Barracuda let out a heavy breath. "Fuhahh... Ahh, you got me! I lost!" he announced, still on the ground with his limbs all splayed out around him. And he looked pretty satisfied.

Hearing that, I slowly lowered my fists, and looked up at the sky.

"Whew..." I put pressure on my abdominal muscles, squeezed the ones on my back, and breathed out as if I was pushing all of the air out from my stomach. As if I was letting all of my tension out, yet still keeping myself from going limp. I couldn't stay in "Black Wolf" mode forever, after all, and I was pretty sure if I relaxed even a little, I'd collapse.

As I breathed out, I brought my attention back to daily life.

Count Barracuda was probably able to let a little bit of the weight off of his

shoulders. Maybe, up in the sky, his late son was a little relieved too. The count probably wouldn't answer me if I asked, but I felt like he'd gotten to process things a little bit.

After my slow breath out, I brought my gaze back down to earth. And the first thing that my eyes fell on was, of course, Nia.

Huh? Her face is red, and she looks teary-eyed. Wait, did the fight worry her that much?! Ah, yeah, it probably did. Especially the end bit.

Seeing a fistfight where we kept hitting each other at the same time might've been a bit much for a former princess and a noble lady... Or wait, Miss Emilia looked fine. She must've been special.

Laura? There was nothing normal about her, so she didn't count.

And so, I forced my aching cheeks into a smile, and gave Nia a wave.

And now she's covering her mouth and looking like she's about to burst into tears. What should I be doing here?! W-Wait, I should probably be getting Count Barracuda off of the ground first. It's only polite.

As I was freaking out a little bit...

"Um, Master McGuine. Sir Gale Berdinand has arrived. It seems he has an urgent document from His Royal Highness the third prince."

"Huh? From Prince Alphonse?"

Tom, who was playing the part of my butler, had come to the courtyard to announce Gale's arrival.

I was confused. I'd rushed over the past few days to finish all of my paperwork and get time off for today's battle, which was why I couldn't think of anything His Royal Highness would need me to urgently get to.

"Whatever. If it's urgent, it's urgent. Bring him through."

I couldn't leave Count Barracuda outside on the ground right after we'd finished our talk and go inside, and it wouldn't be a good idea to force him up. Which left calling Gale directly to the courtyard as my only option.

"What in the world happened here, Commander?"

That was the first thing out of Gale's mouth when he saw the state the courtyard was in.

I know! I know exactly why you'd say that! I would say the same thing!

Count Barracuda had finally recovered enough to sit up, and I was just barely standing myself. Asking us what had happened was obviously the first question he'd ask.

Just when I was about to tell him how there was a reason behind all of this... "Oh my..."

My ears caught a tiny whisper. When I looked around for the source, Miss Emilia had whipped a folding fan out of nowhere and had it up covering most of her face. When I followed her gaze, which wasn't hidden, she was looking my way... Or rather, at Gale.

The second I saw it—and the expression on her face to boot—a bolt of lightning shot through my mind. I suppressed and hid my thoughts, giving Gale a bright smile as I took the envelope that was apparently the document Tom mentioned.

"Oh, yeah, Count Barracuda and I were just having a little chat. Sorry for making you bring this all the way here. Since you've got the chance, you should greet His Excellency yourself," I told him.

"Yes? I-I see," replied Gale, a bit flustered. "It's true that it would be an honor to be able to greet Count Barracuda himself, but..."

Just as you'd expect from the smartest one of my squad (aside from His Royal Highness, of course) he knew exactly who the count was. I kept my smile up and looked over to Count Barracuda. "Your Excellency, please allow me to introduce my up-and-coming young subordinate Gale Berdinand," I said, introducing him.

"Just as my captain said, my name is Gale Berdinand." Gale had given a well-mannered greeting. It was a good one, showing his meticulous personality.

Gale had a head of light brown hair and brown eyes, a prevalent combination in commoners, and was pretty plain-looking. But he also had a well-trained knight's body, and his smarts showed in his expression—these attributes

allowed his sincerity to shine through.

Upon being introduced, Count Barracuda answered with a great smile as well. "Hrm, so you're Sir Gale Berdinand? I've heard many rumors about you. I hear you played an important role in the incident a few weeks ago."

His expression and tone made it clear that the count knew *exactly* what I was hinting.

As Gale was trying to gratefully refute Count Barracuda's praise, I asked him a question I already knew the answer to: "Hey Gale, you're single, right?"

"What are you asking all of a sudden? You know I am."

"Oh, don't be like that. So you don't have a fiancée or anything either?"

"Of course not. I haven't had the time to find one... Although saying that to you, when you were busier than me and still able to find a fiancée for yourself, makes me feel a tad conflicted."

Gale had worked very hard, joining the knights as a commoner and becoming a chevalier. That was how he was in the position he was in now while additionally being well-trusted by His Royal Highness. He worked so hard that he'd had no time for romance, and as a commonborn knight, had absolutely no proposals from any nobles.

"Oh, that's right. I haven't introduced you to Nia yet. Your Excellency, since we have the chance, would you permit me to introduce him to your daughter as well?"

"Yes, that's absolutely fine. Emilia, come here," Count Barracuda said, calling her over, but...her fan couldn't hide all of the blushing she was doing.

Gale had been focusing on us two, so he was surprised when two beautiful women walked up to him. Of course he'd be surprised. I was fine because I was used to Nia, but Miss Emilia was a real beauty. Seeing her must have been a huge shock to him, since while at work, he saw nothing but men.

I shouldn't think like that. I would've been the same up until a while ago.

"Miss Barracuda, Nia, allow me to introduce you to my most trusted subordinate, Gale Berdinand."

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Gale Berdinand. I'm sure the captain is just exaggerating, saying that he trusts me the most..."

He must've been nervous in front of such beautiful ladies, because he was mumbling a bit. But that didn't seem to do anything to worsen their opinions at all... Miss Emilia especially.

"I am Sir Ark's fiancée, Nia Farquhar. And he's not exaggerating at all. He speaks of you quite often," Nia introduced herself first—Miss Emilia seemed to have become a bit nervous getting up close to Gale.

"I-I'm slightly worried what he might have told you..." he replied, giving her a safe reply before turning to Miss Emilia.

Hrm, this doesn't look like it's going badly at all?

"I-I am Emilia, daughter of Count Barracuda. It's a pleasure to meet you..."

"Y-Y-Yes, it's a pleasure to meet you as well..."

The two exchanged greetings, gazing at each other.

I almost felt like I wouldn't even have to do anything else here. But nobles required a few advantages for any prospective marriage.

"Gale is currently a chevalier, but his achievements a few weeks ago have started discussions on granting him a higher peerage. Weren't they arguing between baronet and baron?"

"Though I hesitate to call it 'arguing'... Yes. While I would normally be given the title of baronet, His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse has suggested that I be made a baron," Gale nodded.

"Sounds right. You did a great enough job to deserve it. Once I'm given territory for myself, it'll be harder for me to move, so having you become a baron would be helpful in the future."

For instance, the privileges I'd been given a few weeks ago as a special diplomatic envoy could only be granted to a noble with a rank of baron or above. Since it was so powerful, it was a given that they couldn't pass out those privileges to just anyone. And if it came down to who to give those powers to in His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse's Special Battalion other than myself, Gale

would be the other top pick.

"Helpful? Wait, would that mean I would be following His Royal Highness's unreasonable orders as well?"

"His Royal Highness already has you delivering urgent documents to me. Just imagine who would get sudden orders on the battlefield," I told him.

"That's, um... It does feel a bit nice to be thought of like that, but..." Gale was a gentle and smart-looking man, but he had of course been whipped up to shape, and knew how things worked on the battlefield, as well as what being considered that way would mean. And, also of course, Count Barracuda knew *very* well the value of people treated like that, because his great smile deepened.

"By the way, Sir Berdinand. Would you be glad to be made a baron?" the count asked.

"Hrm... If a commonborn man like me could reach that status, then yes," Gale replied, a bit confusedly.

Normally, being given the rank of baron would be the goalpost for those born as commoners, and there were very few who ever reached it. The fact that Gale had done it while in his twenties showed exactly how hard he worked and how much talent he had. He might've been gentle, but he was ambitious—he wanted to rise in the world. If he didn't, then there wouldn't have been any chance of him rising up to chevalier.

And that was what was most important to Count Barracuda.

"I see, I see. Then I wouldn't be averse to backing Prince Alphonse's suggestion," he said.

"Huh? Th-That would be absolutely wonderful, but..." Gale had no idea what to do with Count Barracuda's sudden offer. Of course he wouldn't, seeing as how he was probably the only one here who didn't get what was going on.

"Viscount McGuine, what would you say of Sir Berdinand's skills in combat?" Count Barracuda asked, turning to me.

"Allow me a moment to think. He's second to me with a spear, but just in

regards to grappling, I wouldn't be able to let my guard down against him."

"My! For Viscount McGuine to say that much speaks volumes!"

"W-Wait, Captain! Aren't you exaggerating a bit there?!"

As Count Barracuda praised him merrily, Gale was in a tizzy. But seriously, he really had improved himself to that point.

Lemme give him one more assist.

"No, I'm telling the truth. Oh, but saying you're second to me with a spear doesn't mean you can slack off on training with them, you hear me? By the way, how do you feel about strong-willed ladies, Gale?"

"What kind of question is that all of a sudden? I've never really thought about my preferences, but with my work in mind, a strong-willed, steady-hearted lady would be desirable," he answered.

I see. From how he answered, he didn't have anyone special come to mind. Miss Emilia's expression brightened when she heard and understood that. It seemed that, personality-wise, they were a good match.

At this point, there was no way Count Barracuda would let him slip away, and the likelihood that Miss Emilia had a happy future ahead of her was high. For you see, while it was very rare, there were cases of commonborn barons marrying into the families of counts in the past. In those cases, there were very few houses as influential as the Barracuda County, but with Gale's service during the war, along with Prince Alphonse's and Count Barracuda's backing, there probably wouldn't be anyone who could argue against it.

And.

"His Royal Highness knew all of that too, didn't he..." I murmured.

Gale, Count Barracuda, and Miss Emilia in particular were speaking excitedly, with not a glance going my way. I finally opened the envelope I'd been given as I watched them, and it was a normal-looking document that had "How's Gale doing?" written in code.

So basically, sending Gale out to deliver an "urgent document" to me was all a scheme by Prince Alphonse.

"Looks like he's doing perfectly," I murmured, quietly enough that no one else could hear me, and softly closed the envelope once more.

Chapter 4: Schemes and Love

And so, Barracuda County—who had tried to butt into my engagement with Nia—found a new hopeful groom-candidate in Gale. Since there was no way they could jump straight to engagement after only just meeting, the Barracudas were probably going to do some background checking. If that came up clean, then they'd get serious about moving forward, removing any potential obstacles in their way. So basically, since Gale's squeaky clean background was practically bar none, he was as good as got.

"So in the end, everything worked out."

"And quite honestly, that's something to celebrate."

The day after our meeting with Count Barracuda, I was in Prince Alphonse's office, reporting what happened while he listened with his perfect, princely smile on his face.

Absolutely perfect. Too perfect—to the point where it gave you chills.

"Aside from myself, you could say that it worked out well in a number of ways," I continued, counting the other successes on my fingers.

First off, Miss Emilia Barracuda didn't seem upset at all about Gale. He actually seemed to be her type.

"I actually started looking into Barracuda County and Miss Emilia in the short time I had after you told me about them," Prince Alphonse explained. "And from that, I learned that Miss Emilia prefers intellectuals over the grizzled knight type. Her issue was that despite that, she wanted someone muscular too, so she couldn't find any noblemen who met her standards."

"I see. And since Gale's got an intellectual's face and a built body, he fit into her strikezone perfectly," I said, thinking back to Miss Emilia's reactions from yesterday, and coming into a total understanding of them.

She'd just seen two rough muscle brains duke it out in front of her, only for a knight that hit all her buttons to appear. The gap between the two must've

made Gale look even *more* her type. Normally, this effect would've lessened as time passed, but then his other abilities had fit her criteria exactly, so her feelings probably weren't going to fade anytime soon.

I'd wanted to say it all went as planned, but apparently, it hadn't.

"I only just learned her type a moment before, so Gale getting there in time was purely by chance," His Royal Highness admitted.

"Wow, so it really was by the skin of our teeth," I exclaimed. "You were a huge help, though... Wait. Then why didn't you tell Gale anything about the plan?"

"If I'd told him, he'd have choked. He's not good at that kind of stuff, after all," the prince commented, a wry smile on his face.

"Ahh, I see." I couldn't do anything but nod. Gale was the type that went all red when ladies hit on him at the pub. It was good he'd found someone before some strange woman got her claws in him.

"To be completely honest, I didn't think it'd go this well. I won't say it wasn't well planned, but it was definitely also a gamble. It's quite surprising that things have gotten this far this quickly."

"Well, Count Barracuda seemed to be mostly sure of things that same day," I said, giving His Royal Highness a forced smile. I thought about what happened yesterday. The count had eventually requested a bout with Gale after he'd recovered somewhat, and after a little duel, he confirmed Gale's skills. And with that, Miss Emilia—who was already crushing on him—didn't show any signs of objecting with the way things ended up.

All that was left was for them to get rid of any potential problems, and, with the count now backing him too, Gale was basically set to become a baron. His promotion would allow him to marry into the Barracuda County, and Prince Alphonse would have an easier time using him.

Gale was getting something out of it too; not only was he achieving his goal of a barony, but he'd even be on the way to marrying into a county. From House Barracuda's perspective, they'd be getting a brave, wise, and upright knight as a groom, one with a promising future, so he was more than welcome.

"To think that Gale has grown enough that even Count Barracuda has acknowledged him... My ability to raise my subordinates is enough to make me shiver," Prince Alphonse boasted.

"Ah... Yeah, you sure do raise us."

I gave him a look I couldn't describe. I was one of the subordinates he'd "raised," after all. And his methods were brutal. But to be fair, it wasn't as if he worked us to the bone and only picked up those who survived. It was exactly like he said before: he knew each of our limits and within them, made us do unreasonable things. Probably.

"And as a result of your raising, one of your underlings is now in Count Barracuda's inner circle. That has to be beyond your expectations," I remarked.

"That's right. And for it to be in such an ideal way too. Though I hadn't had any plans to make a pass at the count—there was no need to."

According to His Royal Highness, Count Barracuda would deploy for any battle that was logical and would benefit him, so there hadn't been any need for him to maneuver the county into listening to him. If anything, the fact that the county would go on the defensive and become hostile if they sensed any plot against them made messing with them all pain and no gain.

This time, one of His Royal Highness's trusted subordinates would be marrying into the count's own family—a boon for any of Prince Alphonse's future strategies and tricks.

"It'll be another ten years or so before Gale and Miss Emilia lead House Barracuda, so I'm not planning on making them cooperate with me fully right now... But even so, it looks like I'll be able to accelerate our plans on conquering a certain kingdom," His Royal Highness said, a wonderful smile on his face.

The "certain kingdom" he was talking about was, of course, Princess Sonia's home country of Sylvario. In Prince Alphonse's case, their show of contempt towards Brigandia made him want to conquer them immediately, but that, of course, wasn't just an emotional response.

"No matter how you spin it, their royal family is just leaving that port of theirs to rot. The two generations before them must have been quite smart, but the

current king and his sons aren't putting it to good use in the least," His Royal Highness said seriously. I couldn't do anything but agree.

The port that was in Sylvario's capital was the biggest among all nearby countries, and apparently made the royal family a pretty penny. Even if they couldn't have used its transportation power during the war that was happening within its own borders, it would've been a massive pain for us if they'd imported food or munitions from outside of the country, but...they hadn't even tried.

"How could they have just kept buying the exact same things during a war as they did during peacetime? And it was all jewelry and luxury foodstuffs. There should have been other priorities," he grumbled.

"I'd had the thought that they might just have not made any orders in time since the war had been so short, but when we inspected the logs there had been no attempts at all," I commented. "They seemed to believe they could hold on to what domestic products they had, but had the war dragged on, they wouldn't have made it."

When we'd been in Sylvario during the whole Princess Sonia incident, we'd taken the opportunity to sneak a look at their account ledgers while they were cooperating, and that was when we'd learned about their supply history. We'd gathered that they'd decided they could cover their food needs with domestic products. With the money they had on hand, they could've procured an alternate route if the worst-case scenario came to pass, but there was no record of them trying. I mean, it was probably because the war itself hadn't been planned, so they didn't intend on hunkering down that hard, but... The fact that their folly led them to have to cede land to Brigandia meant there was no saving them.

"Whatever the case, we won't have to hold back if Sylvario's that inept."

"Which is why you're sending me to the territory you stole? Are you planning on treating it like a forward base?" I said, glaring, taking the opportunity to mention the information the count and his daughter had leaked.

His Royal Highness the Smiling Iceberg didn't even flinch, a big smile still on his face. Not only did he not flinch, but...

"Part of it is because I need someone I trust to keep their mouth shut, and also has achievements under their belt, since we'll be doing some mining while we're at it," he said.

"That is NOT something you just do 'while you're at it'!"

As he just smiled in amusement, I barked at him, tone quite serious. We were talking about a territory we'd only just taken. If Sylvario had any sense, they'd want to take it back, and to do so, would deploy quite a number of spies into the territory. The minute they noticed we were gathering mining engineers to do something, it'd trigger a brand-new conflict...

"Your Highness, please tell me you aren't planning on them catching us and then pulling something else."

"Oh, Ark. What other reason would I be making it a forward base and sending in a brigade for?"

"You want to garrison troops in my viscounty that bad?!"

He proceeded to tell me that the McGuine Viscounty would have roughly 5,000 royal military soldiers, knights, and supporting logistics officers stationed there, and that they'd already sent 2,000. The viscounty's total population was currently about 30,000, so when we'd be adding in a force equal to a sixth of the population, you'd pretty much be able to just throw a rock and it'd hit a member of the military.

"Brigandia will be covering their food expenses and everything, right Your Highness?"

"Of course we are. My elder brother will be managing it, so there's no chance anything will slip through the cracks."

"Urgh... While it's true that I don't remember ever going hungry over the course of the war..."

As I'd mentioned earlier, the second prince Prince Artur had kept the distribution of goods stable, even during the war. If someone that great at logistics was handling this, then nothing could be more comforting. They said that the limit to the size of the standing army a nation could support was three or five percent of the total population, after all. Having a few times more

soldiers than that stationed in the viscounty would be next to impossible, especially since it would still be unstable due to just being acquired, and we still had no idea how much it could produce agriculturally.

The fact that we wouldn't have to worry about that was a huge weight off of my shoulders.

"All right. If you've got it all set up that well, then I'll just have to do it," I sighed.

"What are you talking about? You never had a choice in the matter."

"I knew that, okay?! I was just trying to pump myself up!"

I very unintentionally yelled at him. It was really a miracle I hadn't been executed for being rude to a royal yet. *Unfortunately for me,* I thought, staring into the distance, *this had become all too commonplace for that to happen*.

"So with that all said, I'd like to tell you to get your marriage settled quickly since you'll be busy, but... I have to admit that it would be rather boorish of me to try to rush you," His Royal Highness said, suddenly seeming slightly anxious about it.

"What? You're showing consideration, just like a person...? Ah, it's because Nia's involved instead of it all being on me, right?"

"No, I'm trying to be considerate of your feelings too, but you didn't have any wishes for your wedding ceremony, anyway," Prince Alphonse pointed out.

"I mean, that's true, but... I wonder about Nia..." I murmured, thinking about it.

Now that we'd gotten our engagement sorted out, all that was left was to leave a little bit of a gap before having the wedding. We'd begun talking about the ceremony, but...

Oh, I knew that you'd normally take a year or so preparing for one. I knew that, but with the circumstances and ulterior motives behind our marriage, we'd be rushing and finishing everything within two or three months. Nia understood that too.

"There's no use asking me what she thinks. Try asking her."

"I have asked her, but she just says that she doesn't have any wishes for it all," I grumbled, troubled.

"Ahh... She *is* the type that understands things a little too well, isn't she," nodded His Royal Highness, similarly troubled.

In the first place, my marriage to Nia was entirely for the purpose of putting her in a social position that would let her serve Prince Alphonse. What's more was that we were going to use that position to conquer Sylvario and absorb it into Brigandia. It was absolutely a political marriage, albeit a bit different from usual ones.

Another reason why it was different from a usual political marriage was because of my feelings, but I had absolutely no intention of forcing them on Nia. If anything, I felt as if the situation was testing my worthiness as a man, so I was planning on thoroughly wooing her first.

But I was getting off-topic.

Anyway, forgetting about how she probably hadn't had dreams for her wedding in the first place, I was pretty sure she had none at all with ours...

Though I held on to the faint hope that maybe she did. I thought I should be allowed to hope that much.

But even if she did have wants and dreams, I was worried that her consideration of the current situation would keep her from actually voicing them.

"I know we can't actually do much for the ceremony, since considering her true identity, we would want to keep as many eyes off of her as possible. We're planning on putting some effort into the wedding dress and rings, but there's only so much we can do..." I continued.

With three months at the most to prepare, we had just enough time to have a made-to-order dress tailored for her, but making it something worthy of a royal would be really difficult. And pathetically enough, I was already struggling a bit with the financials. I could get her a dress fit for marrying into a viscounty, and she'd definitely claim that would be enough, but... I didn't know if that would be how she truly felt.

"You know, since this is an absolutely political marriage, she might even want to just get it all done and over with on paper," His Royal Highness joked.

"You may be right, but could you please not?" I replied, face serious.

I mean, yeah. That was the scariest possibility out of them all. But since I would be the only one hurt in that case, it really wouldn't matter.

"Sorry, sorry. But you're not going to get an answer arguing with me about this. First, you should talk things out with her."

"I know that, but... Would she even answer me honestly...?"

"Hrm. So I guess that's the problem," Prince Alphonse nodded to himself, making me puzzled. When I gave him a look asking for an explanation, he gave a pompous answer. "While in a way, it's a natural problem for you two to have, wouldn't you say it's true that you and Miss Nia don't trust or understand each other enough yet? If you don't know if she'd tell you, or if you're in a position to hear her answer, then that's the explanation for it."

"Uugh... That's certainly true..."

When His Royal Highness pointed it out, I couldn't do anything but agree. Nia and I hadn't even known each other for a month yet. While we'd been speaking to each other since, it was more business talk, like reports and meetings. I couldn't give you an answer on whether talks like that could bring about emotional understanding or trust, so I couldn't be sure if what she told me was coming from the heart.

"What do I do?" I asked, helpless.

"Unfortunately for you, there's no right answer for things like this. The only thing you can do is talk to her more."

"Yeah, that's true... We could talk all we wanted, if we didn't have a time limit over our heads."

While I'd mentioned earlier that—after getting "permission" from Nia's fake father and making all of the arrangements we needed for appearance's sake—a period of two or three months was needed to make everything natural, three months was really the longest we could afford to hold off the wedding. After all,

we wanted to conquer Sylvario as soon as possible, and we had no idea how long it'd take to develop the mines.

Lastly was the simple fact that if we left Stonegaze, a border region, without someone to run it yet full of Brigandian soldiers, there was the possibility that it'd provoke Sylvario into doing something unnecessary. That was why I needed to get to the province as soon as I could, and needed to bring Nia with me as an advisor-slash-consultant, which would only be possible if we were married.

The situation really has us really bound up in the necessities here.

"So we're aiming to get married in about three months, and that's nonnegotiable."

"Yeah. There's no way you could bring a woman you weren't married to to a frontline base, and we need her help to do our work out there. Which means that we need you to have the wedding, at most, three months from now... Or no, wait." Prince Alphonse suddenly paused.

"Huh? What's wrong? Your face looks extremely evil right now."

"Would you like to be executed for talking back to a royal?"

His Royal Highness was giving me little threats like that, but the black-hearted smile on his face was seriously at a level of darkness that I rarely saw. But since I didn't want him to actually get angry with me for sticking on the subject, I kept my mouth shut... He probably sensed what I was thinking, though.

"So? What is it you're planning this time, Your Highness?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about how you could just get married on paper and have your ceremony at a later time."

"Ah, yeah, I guess that could work. I had honestly thought of that before, but I had no way of knowing when we would end up getting a chance to do it," I commented.

"Then we just have to make it so you'll know when."

Damn, that was really spine-chilling! Like I'm shivering here... Wait, is he thinking something crazy?

"In the first place, the reason you can't have a fancy ceremony is because we

can't let Sylvario know that she's still alive, right?"

"Yes, that's true... Your Highness, you're not thinking..."

"Yes I am. If we were to get rid of the Kingdom of Sylvario, then there'd be no problem if people found out that Princess Sonia was still alive."

Shit. What is he thinking? The shivers won't stop!

But my shivers weren't out of fear.

"So you're going to wave the fact that if we conquer Sylvario, I can have a big fancy wedding ceremony in front of my face like a carrot."

"Miss Nia might be just as interested as you are," he added lightly.

Ahh, dammit, "the Black Wolf" inside me just might wake up here.

Suppressing an expression I really shouldn't show His Royal Highness the third prince, I forced a smile as I asked, "Wouldn't this be the first time anyone has ever overthrown an entire kingdom so they could have a nice wedding ceremony?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. Waving your wedding in front of your face is just a means to an end. Our objective is to conquer the Kingdom of Sylvario for the benefit of our nation of Brigandia," he stated, the smile on his face a good deal colder than usual.



The scary thing about him was that he was completely serious, yet at the same time, he was sincere when thinking of Nia and myself. His self-interest and sentimentality coexisted, and he was sitting there composed, swallowing both the discord and distortions from it all. *This is what a real royal looks like*, I couldn't help but think, and I felt real reverence towards him.

But...

"Would you not call a strategist who understood people's psychology and used it to get what they wanted a demon?"

"If you don't shut up, I really will have you arrested one of these days, you bastard."

When my true thoughts slipped from my lips, he threw me a glare. He was still smiling, though... How could he smile while saying something like that?

Well, whatever. I was already one of his henchmen.

With those thoughts in mind, I began discussing future plans with His Royal Highness.



Right around when Alphonse was letting his black heart run free...

"Hahhh..."

Inside her room, having gotten to a good stopping point in her preparations to move into Ark's new manor, Nia had her elbows on her desk, resting her chin on them quite uncouthly as she sighed.

"What's the matter, princess? That was a big sigh," asked Laura, who had just moments prior walked in to ask if her mistress wanted another cup of tea.

Normally, Nia would have responded immediately, but she didn't react. Her breathing wasn't fast, and from her posture, it didn't look like she was feeling weak, so she probably wasn't sick or feeling ill.

The moment Laura concluded that something else must be amiss, Nia slowly sat up.

"Hey, Laura?"

"Yes, princess?" the maid responded immediately. The fact that she'd disciplined herself to immediately reply to her mistress might have made her the perfect paragon of a servant. If you forgot the rest of her, that is.

And, after starting her question... Nia didn't finish it. She closed her mouth and averted her eyes.

Hesitation, shyness. It was all well and good that her mistress was cute like that, but Laura couldn't just be happy about it knowing just who it was that was causing Nia to act like that. Or the fact that the man would be marrying her mistress and becoming her employer in one fell swoop. As Laura hid her growing resentment of Ark behind a cheerful smile, Nia finally brought herself to speak.

"Sir Ark... Really seems to, like me, doesn't he...?"

Her face as she hesitantly said it was flushed, with eyes looking down slightly in uncertainty... She looked every bit a maiden in love.

At this point in time, it was quite a bitter blow to Laura. Her façade nearly shattered, but she quickly plastered a smile back on her face and answered, "Yes, it seems like he does quite like you."

"So I'm right..."

Nia's sigh at her answer was quite passionate. Her wise, yet pure and innocent princess was ascending the stairs to adulthood. Despite how aghast Laura was, she held on. But it was her fault that Nia had caught on to Ark's feelings in the first place.

"I never knew that I could see a simple punch as so passionate..." the former princess continued, letting out another heated sigh.

It had all, of course, started with Ark and Count Barracuda's fistfight—or rather, their conversation with their fists. While Ark's attention had been pulled elsewhere, Laura had continued her play-by-play and color commentary on her own. Part of it was to comfort her mistress Nia. After all, a fight between two warriors on the level of great men was too much for an ordinary person to follow, other than knowing that it was incredibly intense.

Or, it would be, normally.

Having gotten through a lot herself, Nia had been able to focus on the "discussions," as Ark would call them, but was still unable to follow them. That was why Laura had started her commentary, but... That wasn't good. For Laura.

"It's true that martial folks would find this matchup—between a count with his house's pride on the line and a viscount with a will of steel, completely unwilling to give up—to be a must-see bout..."

Vexingly enough, it had been an amazing fight, and an amazing win. The fact that Laura had to admit that was even more frustrating. After all, it was the reason her mistress had fallen even harder.

"Right? Right?! Count Barracuda's strength, the weight on his shoulders as the head of a famous military family, was just splendid to see! But... The way that Sir Ark confronted him, and even surpassed him... Um, that would mean that the feelings in his fist were...like that, right?"



"Though I'm not sure what you're talking about, you're probably correct," Laura replied, giving a rarely seen offhand response when she saw how Nia was practically floating on air.

To be honest, Laura was miserable inside. She hadn't wanted to see her mistress so wound up like this. But the fact that she'd found someone who she felt strongly enough about to get like this was something to be happy about.

And that person just so happened to be "the Black Wolf."

While Laura almost wanted to thank him for beating her former nation to a pulp, he was a brave warrior with a kill count in the hundreds. Such a vicious and bloodthirsty man was out of the question for her mistress. But in some ways, this man was someone Laura owed a debt to. It made her uneasy. Not to mention that she had to witness Nia fret about her love.

"I know this is uncivilized of me, but... When I saw how Sir Ark fought to keep our engagement... Swinging his fists filled with all the force of his feelings for me, my heart just throbbed. It's still throbbing today. Oh, Laura. What should I do?"

If she was to be honest, the maid would have told her that there probably wasn't anything she could do about it. But Laura resisted. Desperately. Using all of the patience she had in her. Even if she got carried away a lot when it came to Ark, Nia was her beloved mistress, and she couldn't abandon her. She just really wanted the former princess to do something about the way she was talking—was she actually worried, or was she just boasting about the way her beau made her feel?

She couldn't really say that though.

"Why don't you try being honest with him then?" Laura said, putting everything she had into implying that she really did not care at all, but Nia just looked embarrassed. Which was incredibly adorable, but. The fact that it was because of *him* was horrible.

"Oh, I could never! It would be terribly immodest to tell him that the sight of men beating each other to a pulp made my heart skip a beat!"

"Well, yes. A normal lady would have fainted at such a sight, after all," Laura

said, staring off into the distance. Ark and Count Barracuda's "conversation" had been amazing enough that just remembering gave her the shivers.

Ark had been fine, since he was used to things in that domain, but a normal military person could never be at the level of skill those two men had demonstrated. And unfortunately, Laura was near such a level, and watching them made her realize that she could never reach their level herself. It *forced* her to realize it. Which made her feelings towards Ark even more complicated.

"It would have been a waste to faint! I didn't want to miss even a second of his ardent expression of love!"

Laura's feelings were even more complicated after circumstances had been communicated so accurately. Which was why a bad thought popped into her head.

"Then how about this, princess?" Laura suggested. "If you act as if you haven't realized his feelings, then you might get to see even more expressions of love like that!"

Were Ark in the room as she said that, he would have screamed at her, but she said it without hesitation while looking completely sincere and natural. Things might've gone differently if someone like Tom were also present, but unfortunately (for Ark), the former coachman wouldn't dare enter a lady like his mistress's room often. This meant that no one could challenge Laura's claims.

"Th-That... You might be right, but... It feels like a mean thing to do to him."

"It's fine. Withstanding that and doing his best anyway is a measure of a man's competence."

Probably. It must have been. Though she might've been wrong. But Laura put a smile on her face, not breathing a word of that.

Nia was wise, but she wasn't familiar with the subtleties of relationships between men and women, so she was dubious of Laura's statements. Which also meant that she partially believed her. Nia wholeheartedly trusted the woman, after all.

While it pained her to take advantage of that trust, Laura would do it if it meant she could see "the Black Wolf" fretting over it. The two would realize

their feelings were mutual sooner or later, so it should've been okay for her to throw a wrench into things for now.

Just as she was thinking that, Tom knocked on the door to announce the arrival of a guest.

"Oh my! For Sir Ark to come visit now of all times... How should I act when I see him?" Nia fretted.

"Maybe act normally? In a few different ways."

"R-Right. He might find it odd if I suddenly change my attitude towards him."

Nia took Laura's slander seriously. Really, if Nia suddenly acted like a lovestruck maiden towards him, Ark would just get red and flustered. If they wanted to get through this, the ends would justify the means.

Giving herself that as an excuse, Laura began getting her mistress ready to meet with her guest.

Chapter 5: A Long, Faintly Sweet Day

"...Or so His Royal Highness suggested. Er... What do you think, Nia?"

I was sitting at the table across from Nia in her house, which was gradually getting emptied out as she prepared to move to her new home.

Calling her Nia when we're not somewhere we need to act is a bit embarrassing.

The suggestion, of course, was the one that the third prince had suggested in our earlier talk, where we would get the marriage settled on paper first and then have our ceremony or debut or whatever after Sylvario had been conquered—when their royal family couldn't do a damn thing about it.

It seemed that Nia got the gist of what I meant without me having to explain it.

"I see, so he's telling us to put our best effort into conquering Sylvario if we want to have our wedding ceremony as we'd like," Nia reasoned. "And seeing as how it's one of his top priorities, he's implying that he'll pay us back in full for our contribution."

Whoops, the smile on her face is a similar temperature to that of a certain prince. You really can't judge a book by her cover... Though seeing as she grew up in a complicated, neglectful situation, that's to be expected.

I'd passed over everything I'd learned about the way Nia, or rather, Princess Sonia, had been raised over to His Royal Highness back when he was denouncing Sylvario. And, of course, Prince Alphonse understood how she felt in that situation, and for what purpose she'd stealthily left records of it all. So when we found Princess Nia alive *and* she volunteered to assist us in conquering the Kingdom of Sylvario, His Royal Highness decided to accept her as an advisor with full knowledge of the risks.

This meant that for the cost of Nia giving us all the information she had, we'd have to go forward with our plans to seize Sylvario. There was a possibility that

a less trustworthy person might accept all of that information before turning around and saying they had no idea how long the seizure would take. Which is why Prince Alphonse's way of wording things was to show that we were sincere, and we were actually going to do it.

But he was also telling us to work for our reward too.

"That's the gist of it. But even saying that, it was just a suggestion, not an order. Speeding up our invasion comes with its own risks, of course. It seems he's not going to force the matter through."

She didn't seem angry, per se, but she was kind of letting off... Murderous vibes? So I made an attempt at smoothing things over. Her bloodlust was probably not directed at His Royal Highness, but towards Sylvario, just like me. Or at least I wanted to think that. I just wanted to be doubly sure.

It seemed that my words had more impact than I'd expected, because Nia sighed, murderous vibes lessening quite a bit.

"I see, that's probably true. His Royal Highness probably has a number of strategies to reach checkmate. He must have just been suggesting the one that would have the most merit for us."

I was going to keep the fact that I was slightly, or no, VERY happy at the fact that she'd said the words "for us" my little secret. I mean, from her point of view, being able to live without worrying about Sylvario finding her was a big benefit for her, so that was probably what she meant. I knew her very well.

Wait...I'd just gotten through a conversation with His Royal Highness where he'd relentlessly suggested that I didn't know her well at all. But forgetting all that, it was true that Prince Alphonse had a few different plans swimming around his head, only some of which he'd shared with me.

Some of those plans involved the province of Stonegaze, which I was going to be made lord of. But only His Royal Highness knew which one of those plans he'd be going through with... Or if he'd be going with multiple.

"I believe that's the case. While the conquering of a country could span ten years or so, he shouldn't consider that span as a private individual."

The war we'd just gotten through could've been thought of as just a squabble,

so it had only taken a few months, but it was common for cross-national wars to take years. Looking back at history, there'd been wars that spanned nearly a century, so ten years was obviously possible.

But if it did take ten years, Nia would be 27. That was an incredibly late age for a noblewoman to marry. I mean, since she was technically a commoner now, we could use that as an excuse, and it didn't really matter to me at all. But what about her? That was something we'd have to have a proper talk about.

"To be quite honest, I don't see it taking as long as ten years," Nia said, her quite sharp judgment meaning I might've been worrying over nothing.

"That's quite the claim. Would you say that His Royal Highness's preparations will influence it?"

"Yes. I believe that in two or three years, Sylvario's management of their resources will begin to fail gradually. When that happens, it's likely they simply wouldn't be capable of fighting that way for so long."

"I see you've thought it through," I said, unable to do anything but smile wryly and agree as she spoke without a bit of hesitation.

From the treaties our nations had signed after the incident, the war had officially ended, and we'd been given the right to do as we wished with some tariffs, and... His Royal Highness was putting them to good use.

For example, he'd lowered the tariffs on goods coming Brigandia's way in one region, which was leading Sylvarian nobles and merchants to increase how much food and other necessities they sold us. The war had taken a toll on Sylvario's product distribution system, not to mention the increased costs of hiring guards and things to keep the shipments safe while public safety and order deteriorated. It wasn't strange to imagine that they'd decide to just sell everything to Brigandia, which they'd profit off of, but the fact that that wouldn't be the end of the story was the scary part.

"Are the high profit margin products like luxury foodstuffs still going towards Sylvario's capital, while the everyday products are flowing towards Brigandia, where they profit less yet get quicker returns?" Nia asked.

"That is exactly what's happening. Which is why the people working at

Sylvario's royal palace haven't caught on yet. Though if I was to speak more precisely, Sir Eisendarque and his compatriots probably have," I nodded.

Sylvario's Knight Commander Sir Eisendarque, who'd helped us investigate when we'd arrived at their palace, had apparently completely given up on the royal family. I mean yeah, of course he would after seeing what they'd pulled...

Anyway, he was currently gathering up all of the nobles in the nation who had any common sense. Considering his personal virtues, he'd probably have enough backing to pull a successful coup d'état in a few years. And one of the many reasons why Prince Alphonse was so damn scary was because he was already thinking about how to get those nobles with common sense on our side.

"They probably won't tell the royals anything about the situation. They would still have enough goods in circulation that they wouldn't let the citizens starve, after all," I continued.

Not only did we have a scheming demon on our side, but we also had His Royal Highness Prince Artur, the god of supply and demand. Sir Eisendarque was following his advice, keeping things at a precise level where the citizens wouldn't starve, yet the military wouldn't be able to stockpile food.

Even if you included Sir Eisendarque's efforts, Prince Artur was really something.

The royal siblings could probably take over the entire continent if they wanted, though they also probably didn't have enough of a desire to expand our borders.

As I was sitting there spooking myself, Nia was clearly relieved.

"I see, thank goodness... While I might resent the royal family for various reasons, I don't have anything against the citizens... Though I gather that all of that isn't just for humanitarian reasons."

"Ah, yes. His Royal Highness said that he was focusing on how our actions would impact future governance after our conquest."

The relief on her face only lasted an instant before a smile like Prince Alphonse's returned. The way I straightened up and spoke more stiffly was,

sadly, a conditioned reflex by now.

Yes, His Royal Highness wasn't doing it out of the kindness of his heart. Between an occupied people weak and vulnerable from starvation and a safe, satisfied, and emotionally stable people, it was obvious which one would be easier to govern. What's more, things would be absolutely perfect if we used bards to spread exactly *who* was to thank for them not starving.

He really is a demon.

"If everything goes as planned, then Sylvario's strength will have decreased dramatically in two years, and we would be able to get everything settled in five."

And there's someone right in front of me who's able to understand that demon's plans.

After saying that, Nia fell silent, thinking for a moment. "But if that happened, there wouldn't be any need for my help... It feels as if His Royal Highness is asking me for my permission," she said, giving me a wonderful smile. One that made my spine tingle.

Damn. She really is the best.

Though maybe my thinking that way was a bit problematic.

"You're probably correct. So... Judging from the look on your face, I don't even need to ask what you'd like to do."

Even without her saying anything, I was absolutely sure of what she was thinking at that exact moment. She gave me a nod, that wonderful smile still on her face, but...

"While that does get me determined... It's a bit of a pity that I can't do anything at the present," she said, reining in the black aura that had been radiating off of her and forcing a smile. I felt the exact same way, so I could only nod.

"Unfortunately, there's only so much I can tell you as things are now, and we can't use our troops. But that's exactly why His Royal Highness asked if we would get married on paper first."

After all, Nia was still publicly just the daughter of a baronet, nearly a commoner. Everything I'd just told her was very barely acceptable, so I couldn't go into any more detail on what His Royal Highness would be doing. But even saying that, issues would arise if Nia and her servants went about acting on their own, so they were stuck in a position where they couldn't do anything at all.

Though Laura and Tom seemed to be gathering intelligence bit by bit on their own... And it seemed that they were quite used to it. Whatever the case behind those two was, there wouldn't be any problems, since they were absolutely loyal to Nia and weren't hostile to the Kingdom of Brigandia. They seemed to have some conflicting thoughts about me, though, but all I could do was hope that they'd warm up to me later. We had time, after all... Though it was only enough time that we'd be out of it by the time we noticed anything.

"So you don't have any problems with getting married in three months, once we've got all of our ducks in a row?" I asked.

"Yes, that's completely fine with me. If anything, I'm thankful for the consideration you're showing me," Nia replied with a smile, which I stared at.

She's beautiful. Wait, that's not the point here!

My instincts were telling me that she wasn't lying or dodging the issue. But that in itself made me a bit depressed. She was *too* understanding. Lies were one thing, but dodging the issue was completely different. That meant that she wasn't suppressing any emotional troubles.

So basically, her habit of giving up on everything was still kicking, which made it hard for me to be happy about things going so smoothly.

Nia suddenly turned her face away.

Oh, damn. I was staring at her too much as I thought... Her face is red. I hope she isn't angry.

"I apologize, I got caught up in thought there. Anyway, regarding how we're planning things... Even if we were to put off a big ceremony until later, it being a noble marriage means that we can't avoid having a ceremony at the temple. I'd like to have a dress prepared for you for then."

"Ah, no, I apologize for being rude. The dress, yes? I'm sorry to have to ask, but I would need your help with that," Nia responded, looking really sorry for it.

I mean, we'd be having the ceremony in front of God, so I didn't want to make God think we were making light of them by cheaping out on the dress. It'd be a problem if it didn't go well and Nia didn't get their backing.

Saying that, though... Like I mentioned before, God really did exist, and would smite anyone who broke any vows they made in the church.

That divine retribution could come in many different forms: one person might be struck by lightning, while another who used to be healthy might be suddenly stricken by a serious illness and be taken out, suffering until they finally died. While only some people had their life instantly ended, most people got there eventually.

Making a vow in the church essentially meant putting your life on the line, which was why there was great meaning in vows. And since nobles had so much power and responsibility, they needed to make their marriage vows to God, and the restrictions those vows came with were why it counted as a personal reference. As she was using her marriage to me for that reason, the way she would be treated would differ greatly between before and after we married.

On a related note, while commoners weren't required to make vows like that, most rich merchants and the like would. It was pretty obvious when you considered their wealth; they'd want to do everything possible to avoid getting tricked by someone trying to get their hands on it.

Anyway, if we were going to make our vows in front of God, then we had to have a dress and the like prepared for that purpose alone—which meant *I* needed to show how dependable I was.

"Then let's make plans to go to the tailor. My next day off is in two days. Is that too soon for you?" I asked.

"Ah, that's fine. I don't have anything scheduled for then... Do I?" Nia turned towards Laura, who gave her a quiet nod as an answer.

Was it just my imagination, or was Laura putting more pressure on me than usual? I mean, I understood why. I could tell how important Nia was to her from

how she acted normally, and here was her precious princess getting married. Of course she'd be conflicted, especially with me being the groom.

I had lots of blood on my hands, and with the way my life was, I could die at any time, so Laura probably couldn't welcome the idea. But with the world as it was, I hoped she'd give in eventually. I also hoped she'd allow me to try to get closer to Nia too.

"And after that... Would you like to take a walk around the capital and maybe get a bite to eat somewhere?" I said, taking the opportunity to invite her out.

Good job, Ark. You didn't stutter! But damn, I tried to be casual, but I can feel my face burning. My eyes are looking everywhere... Calm down. Calm down, Ark!

As my eyes darted around, I got a glimpse of Nia... Looking completely shocked.

Cute. Wait, no! She was cute, but that wasn't the point!

Did I surprise her by asking so suddenly? I really hope she didn't think I was being a bother...

"U-U-Um, Sir Ark. Do you mean..."

Seems like she got what I meant. Or maybe I should've said in this case, she realized it. I wanted to believe that the red spreading across her cheeks wasn't out of disgust. I was probably fine.

"Yes. Um. I'm... Inviting you on a date."

I said it. I said it! Should I regret this?

I was painfully embarrassed, but I was pretty sure glossing it over would be bad. I might've been a beginner at romance, but my gut was telling me that I shouldn't try to dodge this. My gut was completely unreliable at the moment, but this was a battle of sorts.

Which was why I was pretty sure I'd end up glaring at Nia if I stared straight at her, so I hoped she'd give me a break on the eyes-going-everywhere thing.

Ah, dammit, what am I doing? I'm too old for this!

As I glanced in her direction, she was flushed to her ears, and looking down. Judging from the air about her, she didn't...seem to be angry...? I wanted to believe that she was bashful or embarrassed too. That'd be nice...

As I tried to feel her out, waiting for her to answer me, she just stared down in silence. It could have lasted mere seconds, or a few minutes.

"Um... Er, absolutely, I'd love to go out with you..."

She finally answered, smiling with a blush on her face. The shy, happy way she did it shot right through my heart, and I nearly collapsed right there.



Two days later.

"I-I'm sorry for making you wait..."

"Oh, no, I just got here..."

We were standing outside of Nia's house, trapped into exchanging awkward clichés.

We were doing this at Nia's request. Apparently, according to the novels she read, a date meant meeting up somewhere, and meeting up somewhere meant saying those words.

Though I had zero romantic experience to speak of, even I knew that kind of thing only happened in fiction.

I mean, first off, I didn't think "outside of her house" really counted as meeting somewhere, but... Laura had vetoed Nia and I meeting somewhere out in town, so there was nothing else we could do. And for once, I agreed with the maid.

Anyway, we compromised by meeting up outside Nia's house. Nia seemed to get the vibes she wanted, so it all worked out.

First of all, when nobles and royals traveled anywhere, they generally had a carriage come right to their front door, so "meeting up" wasn't something that was done. And, as you might guess... I came here on foot instead of by carriage.

This was another request of Nia's: she wanted to go on a date like a

commoner.

This all started with *Holiday in the Royal Capital*—a romance novel that had recently become popular—and was about a princess disguising herself as a commoner so she could go on a date about town. Nia, of course, had apparently read it.

Incidentally, I had not, but I knew the summary. That's why my date plan wasn't going to follow the plot. In the first place, the capital in the book was a fictional place with a fictional layout, so there was no way we could ever follow it exactly, and Nia understood that. So all we needed to do today was enjoy our date, but...

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"Um... Let's get going... Then...?"
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"Y-Yes! Let's!"

When I suggested that, she nodded, but.

Um. How is this going to work?

The two of us were frozen in place, with both of us unable to take that first step.

After all, knights aside, normal nobles or royals always traveled in carriages when they went out, so the idea of walking somewhere together just wasn't done. The only time you'd do something like that would be if you were escorting someone on a walk through a castle or estate or something, the act of which would stick out like a sore thumb out in town.

Which meant...

Uh, how do commoner couples walk together?

My brain only got that far before the word "couple" sent me into an internal panic.

Yes. With this act, we'd be considered a *couple*.

So what do I do? I have no idea. I can't just start walking by myself and leave Nia behind. That means...

"Um, Nia. Would you...like to hold hands?"

"Huh?! Ah, um, y-yes..."

I stuttered while holding my hand out, and she took it.

Oh, damn, her hand is soft! Is this really a human hand?! I mean I know it is, but it doesn't feel anything like the hands I'm used to. My hands are all bumpy, and my skin is thick... Huh? Wait.

"I'm sorry. My hand isn't hurting you, is it?"

"Huh? N-No, not at all. If anything, it feels strong and reliable..."

Ah, dammit. I'm about to ascend.

Nia shot me back a confused look at my sudden question. *Cute!* And her answer came with a little bashful smile. *CUTE!!!* My heart wasn't going to be able to stand up to her repeated adorable-attacks. *Shit.*

"Why are you suddenly looking like you're about to pass out in front of our house, Lord McGuine?"

While I was trying to keep myself down on earth, Laura shot in some biting jabs—just as I imagined she would—while looking as if someone had just shoved sugared ginger chunks into her mouth. It was then I finally realized that we hadn't taken a single step from where we met outside of the front door of Nia's house.

"So what is it? You don't know any good date spots since you have no experience, so you're trying to waste time here before finally being like, 'ahh, damn, we don't have time to do anything but go to the tailor and get a meal anymore!" the maid continued, sounding as if she was disgusted with me, or picking a fight.

"A-A-Absolutely not!" I cried, out of reflex. I mean, I needed to deny it, to keep my honor as a man!

Or so I thought...

"So you do have a plan?" Nia asked curiously.

I froze. What should I do? To be completely honest, I didn't have a plan. But I didn't want to admit I had no experience dating! That'd be embarrassing!

But no, wait, Nia might feel a little conflicted if I had lots of experience.

Nonono, of course she wouldn't get jealous! Snap out of it, Ark!

No, nonono, wait, we still have a slim chance here. Don't just jump to the worst possibility! That's too sad!

No. Look at the reality here. Am I really that good a catch?

Start thinking like you are, for Nia's sake!

I thought all that in the span of half a second. Even I could admit I was getting desperate.

"I'm sorry. I lied. I have no experience," I said, bowing my head as I did.

Thinking on it a bit more, no matter how much I boasted here, Nia would absolutely figure out I wasn't used to going on dates eventually. She was smart. There was no way she wouldn't. Which meant that it'd hurt me less to be honest and admit it right now. Or at least I hoped it'd hurt less...

As I tried to make excuses for myself, in front of me... Nia smiled, looking relieved.

"I see... Hee hee, I'm sorry. But that actually makes me a tad relieved."

Her voice was steeped with bashfulness. She looked shy. And her cheeks were bright red.

The vicious triple-whammy almost knocked me to my knees.

What did she mean by that? How am I supposed to take that? Would it be okay for me to get my hopes up? No. Of course not. Calm down, Ark. Be cool.

"Then if you're relieved, let's get going," I said, expression gentlemanly as I tried to talk myself down.

But I'd forgotten one thing.

"Yes, let's!" Nia said with a smile as she squeezed my hand.

Yes.

We were still holding hands.

I seriously thought my heart was going to stop. I nearly expired right there,

but I managed to hold on.

And so, feeling like I'd lost half my stamina, Nia and I began our date... Just the thought of it made me woozy, but get used to it already, Ark!

But even saying that, we already had our first destination planned, so it should be okay to be a bit giddy, right? No. Wrong.

"Whoops. Are you okay, Nia?"

"Ah, yes! Thank you!"

We headed onto the main street from where Nia lived in the commoner district in order to get to the tailor, which was located near the noble district. Since we were in the capital, the main street was incredibly crowded, and overflowing with people. It wasn't so bad that we couldn't walk, but it was still hard to walk through. A man had nearly run straight into Nia, but I tugged her hand to pull her out of the way before he could.

I checked in with her to see if she was all right. "That guy was probably fine," I said, "but there are pickpockets about. We need to be careful not to bump into anyone. I'm on the lookout, so we should be safe from all but the most skilled of them."

"Ah, I see. We'll have to be careful! Wait...have you caught them before?" Nia asked.

"Yes. Back when I first joined the knights, I went out on patrol here. I arrested a ton of them, so the pickpockets here probably hate me."

It sounded like I was just bragging about it, but it was the truth. The intuition that His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse trusted was as effective here on the city streets as it was on the battlefield. Once, on the day of a festival, the number of pickpockets I caught got somewhere into the double digits. After that, they ended up keeping a low profile for a while.

"But if you're that famous, wouldn't that mean the pickpockets would stay away from you?"

"While I'd like to say that you're right, not all of them know my face. Some might even know me, but still want to catch me off guard," I told her, glancing

over and meeting the eyes of a thirty-something man. He immediately turned away and scurried off somewhere.

If I remembered right, he was one of the pickpockets I'd caught. He had the devil's own luck if he was still alive now.

In Brigandia, pickpockets were punished by getting their hands branded, before being whipped. Said whipping was intensely painful; in many cases the criminal had died of shock from the immense pain.

I, by the way, had experienced just how painful it was in my own training against torture.

Anyway, since caught pickpockets had a brand on a highly visible part of their hand, they usually quit pickpocketing and figured out another way to survive, but... It looked like some kept on with it. Those who got caught a second time got another brand and whipping, while a third time resulted in execution—by then, it was assumed that they wouldn't ever change their ways. Apparently that man had avoided that. From the look in his eyes, he hadn't picked up a respectable job, so he was probably still pickpocketing.

"Hopefully, I'd be the only one they resented, but... Nia. Just to be safe, always take Laura or Tom with you when you go out," I warned her.

"All right. I'm in a different position than I was before, so I understand," Nia said, nodding.

The guy probably wouldn't remember Nia's face from the glance he got, but I wanted her to be on guard for the worst-case scenario. Laura and Tom would probably accompany her happily, and I couldn't see any pickpockets pulling anything around them.

It was all well and good if criminals wanted to resent me, but I would *not* let them make a move on the people around me. Should I send a *message* to some of the pickpockets I recognized?

In the midst of my dark thoughts, Nia and I arrived at the fountain plaza. The road crossed in all directions here, so it was even more packed than before. Plus, some street performers were taking advantage of the foot traffic, adding to the bustle.

"Nia, let's make sure we don't get separated," I said, gripping her hand a little bit harder and tugging her towards me slightly.

"Okay!" she replied cheerfully, a bright smile on her face.

That smile completely wiped out the bloodthirsty thoughts I had just a moment before, piercing straight through my heart. But I couldn't let my guard down here.

"Not only is it busy here, but people are distracted by the performers. That means there'll be more pickpockets out."

"I-I see... And that's why you've been looking around so much?"

"Yes. My glaring makes it harder for them to succeed... But just to let you know, I'm definitely not looking at other women, okay?" I said before clamming up.

I might've only known the plot to *Holiday in the Royal Capital*, but there was one line even I knew. And it apparently came up at a time like this. I glanced at Nia, who was giving me an expectant look. She probably wanted me to say it.

C'mon, Ark, a man needs to be courageous!

"I no longer have eyes for anyone but you."

Gahhh! That was so humiliating! How the hell did the male lead in the book say that?! I mean, I managed to say it, but!

But was it really okay for a guy like me to say stuff like that?

"Then look at only me forevermore. Would you gift me your gaze?" Nia replied, cheeks flushed.

It looked like she was satisfied, but I didn't have more than 1% of my brain to think calmly on that. We'd just done that humiliating exchange right in the middle of the city. My face was like a tomato, and I couldn't stop the weird sweat dripping off of my body. I wanted nothing more than to run away as fast as my legs could carry me, but I couldn't leave Nia alone. I guessed this is what people meant when they said they were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

But while my brain was short-circuiting, Nia looked thrilled, so my embarrassment was probably worth it. I wanted to get to the point where I

could think that way. Couldn't right now, though.

"Ah, Sir Ark, look!"

Nia tugged at my hand as I stood there at the end of my rope, using her free hand to point towards the market stalls. A few of them were selling snacks and drinks, which people bought to either enjoy while they watched the performers or take a break near the fountain.

"Is there a scene in that book where they bought and ate food from a stall?" I asked, managing to turn my head towards her.

"Yes, there is! I've been dreaming of trying one of those hot dog things..." she replied with a bashful smile.

Cute.

Ark, no, that's not the point. Though she is cute.

Hot dogs, by the way, were long, thin pork sausages sandwiched between long, thin pieces of bread. They were something the baron's daughter—the one that seduced the first prince—conjured from her childish mind, and that came into vogue; it also appeared in *Holiday in the Royal Capital*. A lot of the things that woman created appeared in the book, actually, which briefly led to rumors that she was the author. I was pretty sure that couldn't be true, though.

Why this dish was called a "hot dog" was a mystery. Apparently even the baron's daughter didn't know why she named them that. It really made you wonder what the hell she was on about, but that was all over and done with.

But anyway, once she got sent off to the boonies a few years ago, she could no longer hold on to the monopoly she had maintained in selling the hot dogs, so you could see a couple stands around town nowadays. With all the trouble the woman caused, I found I felt a little conflicted every time I ate one of the things, despite how yummy they were... But Nia probably didn't know that much about it, so I'd keep my mouth shut.

"Then let's go to that stand there. From what I've heard, they sell the best ones."

"Really? Then let's!"

Nia's bright smile healed me as the two of us headed over to the hot dog stall. But.

I hadn't known.

The heroine and male lead of *Holiday in the Royal Capital* shared one hot dog. In just a few moments, I was to be subjected to an even deeper humiliation than when I'd recited those lines from the book to her.

"Here! Sorry to keep ya waiting!" the dude running the stall said cheerfully, holding our hot dog out towards us... One that was twice as long as the ones I was familiar with. I thought I could be excused for the confusion I displayed when I took it from him.

"W-Wait, why is it so long?" I asked.

"You don't know, man? This is our special 'Holiday in the Royal Capital' hot dog!" bragged the hot dog man.

"Special? Because it's this long?"

I gave the hot dog another look. I was able to hold it myself, but it'd be far too big for Nia. She'd struggle to eat it alone in a lot of ways, at the very least.

"I thought the novel was more popular with women than men. Why is it this long, then?"

"You just don't get it, sir. It's *because* it's popular with women that it's so long!"

"Huh?"

I thought my confusion was appropriate for the situation; no matter how I thought about it, it just didn't make any sense. But it turned out that the reason I didn't understand was because I was lacking in experience.

"A woman can't hold it, so her boyfriend's gotta hold it and feed it to her!"

"I see... Wait, huh?!"

I'd reflexively nodded before screeching. Dammit, I felt my face heating up again.

"Did you happen to know about this, Nia?" I asked, turning back to look at

her And she shook her head, beet red.	



"Th-There was a scene where the male lead had realized that the heroine was truly a princess, and took a bite to test it for poison before she ate it from the other side, but I didn't know this sort of extra service was popular!" Nia replied.

I see? I guess that does count as feeding her. But my brain caught onto one word of what she said.

"Huh? Popular?"

I looked around us, only to see a bunch of couples and good female friends feeding them to each other here and there. Oh yeah. If most of the book's fans are female, then that'd mean that more women would be trying to act it out. The men in each couple ranged from eager to embarrassed to do it, though.

And.

"Th-The both of us eating from different ends...?!" I exclaimed.

Yes, Nia had said that the heroine ate from the other side, but you normally wouldn't expect them to eat at the same time, now would you?!

"Ah! So you mean they're this long because two people will be eating the same one?!" I screeched again.

"Of course," the stallkeep said. "That's why the sign says they're only for couples."

"You're right... You're right?!"

I had missed it on account of just picking the first stall that caught my eye, but he was right—the stall's sign had written "Special 'Holiday at the Royal Capital' Hot dog *For Couples Only" written right on it. From the pairs of girls I saw around, "couples" probably just meant a group of two people. Yeah, they might have actually been romantically involved too, but it wasn't good to pry. Plus, that wasn't the problem here.

"So we're supposed to eat this together?"

"I mean, a guy like you could probably eat the whole thing, but I can't promise that won't upset your girlfriend," the stallkeep said with a smirk.

"G-Girlfriend...?"

The word caught in my throat. There was no problem with treating Nia as my girlfriend logically, since we were actually engaged, and technically past the dating stage. But my issues with the word were emotional, rather than logical.

I looked over at Nia. She was bright red.

Wh-Why is she getting red? From her expression, she probably isn't considering the thought absolutely out of the question, but I shouldn't jump to conclusions...

The advice one of my married senior knights had given me was "Always verbally confirm things," though apparently his habit of asking his wife about damn near everything made her angry enough to say he lacked tact. Another one had told me that "Sometimes, making them say things out loud pressures them, so the slick way to get through it is to just guess." That one nearly got divorced because of all the assumptions he was making.

Dammit, I can't rely on either of them! Why are my seniors so bad at this, anyway?!

I tried to gather what to do from Nia's expression, but when our eyes met, she looked down, which didn't help at all.

As the two of us fussed, the hot dog vendor gave us a hearty laugh. "You're a lot greener than I thought, man!"

Shut up, leave me alone! I didn't say it out loud, but I gave him a glare.

"Whoa, that's scary! But my shop happens to offer a service to cut the hot dog in half for inexperienced couples, so you should just do that."

"You should've mentioned that sooner!"

This guy was definitely having fun making me panic. Actually, he probably offered that just because he wanted to laugh at people.

I grumbled internally as I handed the guy back the hot dog, and he cut it in half with a practiced slice. But he didn't do it in the very middle, but diagonally instead.

"Huh? That's a weird way of cutting it," I remarked.

"Ah, yeah. Most of the people who order it are women, so cutting it like this

makes it easier for them to bite, since their mouths are smaller."

"Oh... I see. Yeah, they'd have trouble with the first bite, wouldn't they?"

If you cut a hot dog in half, then most people would eat it from the cut end. The problem was that the middle was the thickest part of the thing, so while someone with a huge mouth like mine would be fine, it'd be harder for a woman. Plus, some people considered opening their mouths wide to be vulgar. I was impressed at the guy's thoughtfulness offering that service when his primary target was women.

"And cutting it this way makes it easier for couples to feed each other," the man continued.

"Wait, so we're still supposed to do that?!"

"Yeah? I mean, this makes it even easier to do."

"So what?! I've never done it?!"

I ended up yelling back at him, but then I realized that I was basically just admitting that I had no romantic experience. I frantically looked around, only to see a few people very obviously looking away from us. They totally knew.

Dammit, this is so embarrassing!

"U-Um, that doesn't bother me at all, okay?" Nia added. Though her support made me happy, I also felt bad about it too. At least my inexperience didn't ruin her view of me. I'm grateful for that, small consolation though it may be.

And so, Nia and I ended up eating the hot dog I bought through all of that humiliation normally, each of us with one side.

I know. I know I'm a failure.

We did actually go to try to feed each other, but it was then that I realized two things:

If I fed the entire thing to her, my fingers might touch her mouth.

If I gave her a few bites before eating the rest on my own, that would qualify as an indirect kiss.

"I could never do that!" I would have screeched, had the street not been

completely full of people.

It was clear to me that if two people wanted to reenact scenes from a romance novel, they'd have to both be seriously into doing stuff like that, and high on the romance of it all.

Would I ever get to that point? Probably not, but if Nia wanted me to do it, then I'd just have to buckle down and do my best. If that happened, then I guess that'd be okay in its own way, but I was a bit afraid of becoming like that. Also a little disgusted.

Anyway, since I was definitely not cut out for that sort of stuff, and it didn't seem like Nia had a burning desire to do it, I'd leave that alone for now.



After making a great number of sacrifices during the hot dog saga, we collected ourselves and headed towards the tailor. It was farther north than the fountain plaza, just inside the noble district.

The tailor was in a cozy spot a street away from the main road, and the dresses they made were more subdued than you'd expect. One could even be rude and call it plain, but that apparently wasn't all the shop was.

"I've been waiting for you, Viscount McGuine and Miss Fiancée."

Just as soon as we stepped in front of it, the door opened, and an older gentleman appeared. It was as if he really *had* been waiting for us. I mean yeah, he'd know about when we'd show up, since we'd made an appointment, but he was way too punctual. Had he been waiting by the door? Or...

From the moment the man stepped out, I'd noticed that the way he stood didn't leave any openings. If you only judged from looks, you'd clock him as a gentle-mannered tailor, but for some reason, I was getting "former warrior" vibes from the guy. And because of that, there was a chance he'd sensed us arrive. Whatever the case was, I wasn't about to go stir up any trouble with this guy, so there was no use in wondering.

"Thank you for coming to greet us. This is my fiancée, Nia. We appreciate your help today."

I gave the gentleman a simple introduction to Nia, who bowed to him at the same time. His Royal Highness had recommended we use this specific tailor, after all, so any haughty behavior we showed him would reflect badly on Prince Alphonse. That aside, this was the person who we were asking to make Nia's dress, so we wanted to be polite so that he'd feel good about making it. After all, it rang true in most industries that a good relationship was required to do a good job.

It seemed he didn't find anything wrong with our attitudes, because his kind smile never wavered. And it probably wasn't one he just plastered on his face either.

"Yes, I will be pleased to work with you as well. I mustn't leave you standing out here, so please, come in," he said, ushering us inside the shop.

The interior of the tailor shop was... Kinda more subdued than I had expected it to be. You might've even been able to call it "solemn." It was probably because they specialized in outfits for weddings and other rituals. The lighting was subdued, and the interior was mainly blue, with designs here and there you'd often see in churches. All in all, the space carried the same still atmosphere as a church, or a similar religious institution.

Nia, who'd been looking around the shop, asked me, "Um, Sir Ark? Could it be that our wedding is going to be held at a very venerable church?"

Her question shocked me, because she was right on the money. "Yes, it is... How did you know?"

"The embroidered patterns on the dresses displayed here are quite elaborate, so I inferred that the church we'd be going to would require very formal outfits."

Ahh. I was impressed she'd caught on to that.

There were a number of churches around here that had been built specifically for weddings by other serious religious institutions. And apparently, for the churches constructed for marriage between lower-ranking nobles and commoners, God wouldn't strike you down if the crests you used weren't precise, or if your outfits didn't strictly match religious doctrine.

There were many theories why. Maybe the people who used them weren't very religious due to getting into it late, or maybe God didn't pay as much attention to churches built like that. Maybe God was being understanding of people who weren't in the position to get everything absolutely perfect. But since there was no way to ask God about it, no one knew the truth.

The one thing they were sure of was that when the church was venerable, married couples who didn't play strictly by the book would face discord. This "discord" wasn't just something like divorce—the worst cases ended in bloodshed. But along the same vein, God would bless you if you did everything properly, and in turn you would have a long, harmonious, and peaceful marriage.

Most commoners and lower-ranking nobles didn't care as much about all of that, but since the two of us were going to be headed to a dangerous territory, a blessing from God wouldn't be remiss. As a result, His Royal Highness had pulled some strings for us.

The fact that he was perfect about all of this stuff was one of the reasons I served him.

Furthermore...

"Thanks to His Royal Highness's kindness, our wedding will be held at Nearcove Church," I said.

"Nearcove... Isn't that the former foremost church in the area?!"

"Yes, it is."

In an uncharacteristic reaction, Nia was openly shocked. I couldn't blame her; by "former foremost church," she meant that it used to be the number one church in the area. A few decades ago, a larger church closer to the middle of the capital was designated as the new foremost church, but from a venerable standpoint, Nearcove was obviously above it.

Because of that, most of the weddings held there were for royals other than the king or crown prince, or second and further sons of dukes, who were venerable in their own right, but not in a position to hold a huge ceremony in the bigger church. At the very least, it wasn't somewhere that would happily

hold a strict, solemn ceremony for a lowly viscount, but would allow Nia, who had a royal education.

I, by the way, was going to have everything drilled into my head by His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse within the three months until our wedding. *Dammit*.

But this was all necessary.

"The stuffier their attitudes, the firmer their lips."

"Ah... I see, so that's why..."

It seemed that Nia understood my roundabout explanation. She really was smart.

It went without saying, but there was no way we could lie to God. Because of this, we couldn't marry under the name of someone who didn't actually exist, so we'd need to change Nia's name from "Sonia Halfa Sylvario" to "Nia Farquhar" during the ceremony before changing it to "Nia McGuine." This, of course, would reveal her true identity to the church's staff, but since it'd be in a church used by royals, there would be no one but priests—already sworn to God—to keep things confidential.

Honestly, the biggest reason we were having the ceremony at Neargrove was to make sure there were no information leaks, but we were using the "needing a blessing from God because we're going somewhere dangerous" pretext as camouflage.

"The reason we were recommended this tailor was because they can prepare a dress worthy of a ceremony held at Nearcove."

"I see... If that's the case, then I'll be sure to carefully consider what the dress should look like," Nia said, face serious. I mean, that look was great on her too, but... I felt like I'd messed up on my explanation somewhere. But it was too late for regrets, because she went on to make decisions regarding her dress without a single shred of the happy vibes you'd usually feel when planning your wedding.

After a long discussion with the gentleman owner, the design was mostly finalized. But most of the talk had gone to the selection of crests...

"So these are the crests that the dress will include," I said.

I'd stayed back while they talked because I knew that I didn't have much in the way of a fashion sense, but I considered it time well spent because I got a glimpse of Nia's tastes.

The crests that were chosen were "Faithfulness," "Strong Bonds," and "Trust." Why only three? Because it was a custom that viscounts could only have up to three. Really though, four or more would drive the tailoring costs way up, so the only people who could afford it were counts and higher. So the three Nia had chosen were very fitting for her to choose within those restrictions.

These three things were crucial to a marriage, so it wasn't unnatural at all for her to pick them. But the secret reasoning was that by marrying me, Nia would be parting with her identity as a member of Sylvario's royal family and by doing so, swear her sincere loyalty as a Brigandian noble, promising to never betray us.

"Just what I'd expected from you, Nia. They're good choices."

"I'm glad you think so. I was worried they might be a little too formal..." Nia said, still fretting a little.

"Too formal is just what we need for our ceremony," I answered with a little shake of my head.

Most of what we needed from the ceremony was for both God and the Brigandian royal family to acknowledge Nia, so that much was fine. As you may have realized, because all of her choices were for that reason, "Love" had not been one of the crests she'd chosen. But I was fine with that.

"We'll be having a huge one later, anyway, so you can go crazy with crests or different dresses or whatever you'd like then," I said with a smile.

Nia looked shocked for a second. "That's true. We can do whatever we want then," she agreed, giggling.

Does that mean I might have a chance? She was a little disappointed she couldn't choose any of the crests with more tender meanings. That means she wants to do them later, right? She must have thought that. But wait, no, I shouldn't jump to conclusions. Calm down, Ark!

But at the very least, it was clear she wasn't completely unmotivated about the wedding we'd be having later, so I was grateful for that. If I could manage to get her to fall for me by then, then we'd be able to have a marriage that wasn't purely political. But whatever the case, we needed to get both God and Brigandia to acknowledge the two of us with this wedding ceremony first, so that's what I needed to focus on for now.

"Next up is the fabric and shape of the dress... Shape-wise, I think something basic would be best," Nia said easily, and the old gentleman didn't seem shocked by it.

The design on the paper was for a simple A-line dress. It was basic, and since it wasn't stuffed with panniers to puff it out, the skirt would naturally fall with gravity. She could just wear a shawl over it. There were apparently cases where the fabric would change below the bust, but Nia had chosen a design where it changed at the waist, and would pair a simple belt with it.

Visually, it looked similar to the vestments that priestesses wore in ceremonies, but Nia was probably going for that. Normal noblewomen would want this and that added, since it was their wedding dress...or so I'd heard. But Nia was prioritizing the fact that it was for a ceremony, and had no intention of doing such a thing.

That was probably why the old gentleman owner was in such a good mood, since he was used to fussy noblewomen. If we were able to keep ourselves in his good books here, then that'd be another reason why leaving the fancy ceremony for later was a good choice.

But while there hadn't been any problems up until then...

"What should we do for the color?" Nia wondered, looking towards me. My heart skipped a beat before her gaze went to my hair. Then I realized what she was getting at.

"Both my hair and eyes are black, after all... And there's no way we can use that," I agreed.

A pure black ceremonial gown. That'd just be a mourning dress.

Around here, it was the trend to use your partner's colors in your clothing. For

example, I was thinking about making my tie or something blue to match Nia's eyes. I couldn't very well use her real hair color after all, and going with brown like how she'd dyed it would feel like a lie. So in this case, I was okay, but Nia had a problem. If she chose her dress color according to my colors, then it'd look just like mourning clothing.

"We could go with white as a base with black for the crests..."

"That would probably make it look like a cultist ritual," I countered.

Depending on how someone saw it, they might think she was a priestess in some cult. That'd be way worse.

With this issue in front of us, I could understand why people with black hair and black eyes weren't very popular. I never thought it'd end up being such a demerit in a serious relationship. I wanted to believe that I was overthinking it, and that no one would consider the color of their wedding dress when they started dating, but that might've just been because I was a man.

Women would have party dresses and stuff to consider while dating or engaged, so... They probably *did* worry about how it'd look. Which meant that they might've thought through that when considering who to date, or even approach. The thought was too scary for me to ask, though.

"In cases like this, most use a dark blue in place of black."

As we fretted over the color, the old gentleman offered us a helping hand. Of course he knew his stuff.

"Oh yeah. There are painters who use deep blue for the night sky, aren't there?" I said.

I only remembered it when the man brought it up, but I could remember some art teacher saying that while I was still in school. And thinking back to the very few high-society parties I went to, I could remember that there were a lot of dark blue dresses worn by the ladies who accompanied black-haired men.

Ah. Me not thinking it was one thing, but the reason why Nia hadn't thought of it was probably because she almost never showed her face in high society anyway. But I decided not to confirm my guess, since it wasn't something we should talk about here.

"But in that case, then... Ah, no, never mind."

I began saying something meaningful, but then shut myself up. This, of course, made Nia wonder what I was about to say. It even seemed like the old gentleman was curious too.

"'Never mind?' So you were about to say something?" Nia asked.

"Yeah, I was, but I figured it'd be a better idea to keep my mouth shut."

"Oh, no. You never know what we may find useful. By all means, do go on," the old gentleman owner added.

Hrm... It's not something I really want to say out loud, but... I looked around the shop. I wasn't sure if it was because we'd made an appointment, but we were the only ones in the store at the moment... I may as well tell them. It was their own fault for asking.

"I was just thinking about how since people call me 'the Black Wolf,' maybe a dark red would work too. I dismissed that thought immediately, though."

I'd tried to back myself up there, but the two of them did indeed seem put off. Of course they would. No one would ever want to wear a wedding dress the color of blood.

"Th-That's exactly why I wasn't going to say it! You two made me do it!" I spluttered.

"I mean... That is technically true, but..."

When I frantically tried to make excuses, the two of them didn't shoot my idea down, but... They very clearly had other things they wanted to say on the subject. Of course they would. I might not have actually suggested it, but the fact that I had the idea in the first place probably classified me as a dangerous guy.

And so, I'd put Nia off a bit, but... At least I managed to cover up the fact that Nia's knowledge was a little bit unbalanced.

After that, I kept my mouth shut, and they safely decided that the dress's fabric would be dyed dark blue.



And so, despite a few issues, we got the dress ordered safely, and the two of us walked out of the tailor shop.

"Oh my... The sun has already gone down," Nia commented.

"Yep... We've gone through a lot today."

Too much, in fact.

Hot dogs for lunch at the fountain plaza and ordering Nia's dress at the tailor. In reality, we'd only actually done two things today, but they were actually pretty intense activities. The hot dog thing only took a short span of time, but was the main source of my mental fatigue for the day. The tailor's wasn't a cakewalk either, but it was a bit easier, since by then I'd gotten the hang of things a bit.

But still.

"I feel like you've only seen my sloppy side all day," I murmured, scratching my head. What I'd managed today was very far off from cooly escorting her. I mean, it was mostly filled with things I was bad at or normally didn't do, so there wasn't much I could do to help it. But since it was our very first date, I really wanted to seem cooler.

As I stood there, internally stewing in regret, from beside me Nia giggled. "My, but I had so much fun seeing all sorts of different sides of you!"

Is this woman an angel?

Thinking back, while she had laughed at some points while I was being uncool, it hadn't felt as if she was looking down on me. She'd definitely been a little put-off at the dress color thing, but that was understandable; I would have been put off by it too. So I mean, it was probably true that she enjoyed it.

The idea that she was actually pretending to enjoy it and was hiding her true feelings so well even I couldn't sense it was way too scary to seriously consider. The only person I'd ever met so far who could do that was His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, so I would really prefer not to add another person to that list. Though I couldn't help but feel like it'd be pretty nice if Nia actually had me wrapped around her little finger...

"If you really think that way, I'm relieved... Ah, here we are."

As I stopped, Nia stopped beside me.

"Oh, this is...?" she began, eyes sparkling.

"Yes. I'm a regular here, but I can assure you that their food is really good."

Her excitement had me conflicted. The restaurant I'd brought her to mainly catered to viscounts and barons, but was nice enough that you could technically even bring a count without them being able to complain.

All that said, I was still a bit worried about bringing a former royal like Nia to this place. But at the same time, the fact that a restaurant of this caliber thrilled her reminded me of how she had actually grown up. To be blunt, despite her status, she'd never even been able to eat somewhere as good as this.

This was the kind of place where someone like me—a knight-made-viscount from a baron's family—could dine a few times a year, if I saved. If a royal was ever brought here, not only would the restaurant be horrified, but the royal would be pissed.

His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse didn't count; he was the type to enjoy even back alley pubs. Speaking of Prince Alphonse—the one and only time I bought him with me, he'd been unable to suppress his natural aura, so despite the fact he wore a disguise he intimidated the other patrons too much for us to go unnoticed. He bugged me to take him back every once and a while, but I was absolutely never doing it again.

But I've gotten off topic.

Anyway, I'd known Nia had probably never come to a restaurant like this before, but realizing it once again brought up some feelings. Namely, the desire to make her happy. I knew that made me sound arrogant, but it was less out of obligation and more just being something I genuinely desired to do, so it was probably okay for me to think that way. I wasn't sure exactly how much I could really do, but if I could do it, no matter what it was, I would.

"Let's go on in, then," I said, holding a bent arm out to escort her inside.

"Yes, let's!" she replied, gently resting her hand on my elbow.

What am I doing, getting all happy about this? But Nia looks thrilled and excited, so this is probably fine.

Nodding to myself, I turned to the entrance, and the doorman gave me a little bow as he opened the door. On the other side stood a handsome old waiter, who also bowed politely to us.

"Welcome, Viscount McGuine."

"Hello. We're looking forward to tonight. I've even brought my fiancée with me this time."

"Yes, I've heard. She's quite the beauty. I'll have to get serious!"

I'd told the restaurant ahead of time that I would be bringing my fiancée when I made my reservation. Of course, the staff had then informed the waiter, who now made sure to tactfully compliment Nia. Or no, there was a chance he was just telling the truth—Nia was gorgeous.

Either way, no doubt this is just lip service, but Nia's still bashful 'cause she's not used to this kind of treatment. How cute.

"Oh, I'm not beautiful... Thank you very much for tonight."

The way she gave him an embarrassed smile as she bowed her head was priceless. And it looked like her response—not the usual basic smile the waiter was probably all too used to—made the waiter happy too. Just what you'd expect from Nia.

Sorry. I know I'm biased.

"Rest assured I'll put my all into giving you the best service possible tonight... Viscount McGuine, you have quite the wonderful fiancée."

"Right? That's why I wanted to show her my good side today," I answered the waiter's compliment with a completely serious face.

"Huh, Sir Ark?!"

Nia tugged lightly at my arm, flustered. Her adorable reaction just made me want to compliment her even more, but it wasn't really something we should be doing in the restaurant's entryway.

The waiter must have realized what I was thinking, because he smiled. "Understood. I'll do my best to see that both of you leave satisfied. Now, please, come inside," he said, leading us farther indoors.

If I had to describe the inside of the restaurant, I'd say it was subdued. The furnishings weren't too assertive, and were all of the type that people would call *refined*.

"Oh my... Is this piece by that maestro in his youth?"

"You have a good eye, miss. You are correct. It's..."

As you might tell from the conversation that Nia and the waiter were having, the goods were all real too. The pieces that they were talking about were by an artist, now famous, back when he'd just started. The owner had acquired them after they caught his eye, and apparently, they hadn't even been very expensive at the time.

Nowadays, they'd probably go for a pretty penny, but the fact that the owner didn't even try to sell them was one of the reasons I liked him. The reason this restaurant was so comfortable was probably because of his aesthetics.

After hearing the whole story, I'd gone and read up everything I could on the pieces, so I had some knowledge of the artist. His Royal Highness had told me to memorize it early, so I wouldn't be in trouble if Nia ever asked about it. One of the surprising things I learned during my research was that there was a potter who gained fame all because the restaurant's owner had bought their art.

And all of that was exactly why I wasn't about to butt into Nia and the waiter's conversation. I'd be a fool if I tried to show off my shallow knowledge about the topic in a restaurant fully furnished with things that showed off the owner's aesthetic sense.

Plus, I was already enjoying myself just watching the conversation in front of me unfold. There was Nia, sparkly-eyed at the opportunity to see early works of such a famed artist, while our waiter—energized by interacting with someone who truly understood what they were seeing—was allowed to be fully in his element, explaining each and every piece with pride.

Nia and I were led to our seats, and by this point, I was sure this had been a



After that, I shouldn't even need to mention how everything—from the appetizers all the way through to dessert—was absolutely wonderful. What's more, Nia's every mannerism and gesture throughout our meal was so elegant that I nearly stopped eating because I was so enchanted by them. Strangely, the meal was even more delicious to me because of it. It really showed me how important table manners were.

I mean, yeah, I knew that in theory, but this might've been the first time I actually, truly felt it. Having a proper meal in a proper restaurant, with someone I didn't have to show off to, and could really be more comfortable with—it all felt different.

I liked having fun eating and drinking in back alley pubs too, and really, they suited me more than a restaurant like we'd gone to. But with my new rank, I couldn't afford to only visit those kinds of places anymore. Once I had my own territory, it'd be my turn to welcome guests. And with Nia as my wife, I'd probably be able to entertain them without offending anyone.

"Is something the matter, Sir Ark?"

As I was thinking to myself on our walk home, Nia suddenly spoke up.

"Huh? Ah, no, I was just thinking about something."

Get it together, Ark. You're in the middle of escorting Nia home. Don't get distracted.

I shook my head to tell her nothing was wrong before smiling. "Just thinking about today. I really am so lucky to be engaged to you."

"Oh my! What's with the sudden flattery?"

When I was honest about what I'd been thinking, she gave me a smile back. I didn't know if it was the wine she'd been drinking, but her smile and voice were a little bit softer than usual. Fluffy, or maybe flighty. It was rare to see her like that—or rather, this was the first time I was seeing it.

"I'm not trying to flatter you, I was just being honest about how I felt." Unlike

a certain black-hearted prince, I thought to myself, but I had enough presence of mind to keep myself from actually saying it.

"Hee hee, 'being honest'? How embarrassing."

She giggled, voice like a bell. The little tug she gave our entwined hands was probably her trying to hide her bashfulness. This date was worth it just to see her make all these faces I'd never seen before.

"But you know... I'm glad to be engaged to you too, Sir Ark. From the bottom of my heart."

"Gwofuh?!"

I had been deep in my feelings, so her unexpected attack caught me off guard, and I literally choked up in response. When Nia saw that, she laughed again.

Dammit, which kind of laugh is that?! Oh wait, it doesn't matter, as long as she's smiling.

"It's a bit strange. You didn't flinch at all in front of a scary-looking man like Count Barracuda, but in front of me, you're so flustered," Nia commented.

"Well, yeah. I've faced dozens of guys like His Excellency before, so it's no big deal to me."

Though to be specific, I didn't run into many that were quite as intimidating as he was all that often. The fact that it just wasn't *often* was the important part.

I thought I responded in a way that showed just how normal stuff like that was for me, but it just made her even more amused. She kept laughing.

"Hee hee, hee hee hee... I'm glad."

"G-Glad? For what?" I asked, getting another giggle out of her.

Was I imagining things, or were all the side glances she kept giving me just the slightest bit flirty? My heart wouldn't stop pounding. *Are we okay, Ark?*

"Hmm, let me think... I'm just glad that you don't seem to have much romantic experience."

"I don't know how to feel about you being happy about something like that!"

I said, raising my voice without meaning to. It was just a complex issue for me—as a man—okay?

Ah, damn. Can't go doing that.

Nia must have realized that I wasn't actually angry, because she just kept on grinning, but... I really didn't want her to misunderstand and be scared. Though knowing her, she probably wouldn't misunderstand, I guess?

Look, it was just that all my seniors had told me that ladies preferred an experienced man—one who could take the lead. But now that I thought about it, their perspective on anything romantic at all seemed dubious. And really, the most important thing wasn't what the average woman thought, but what *Nia* thought.

As I was thinking to myself, Nia (luckily) realized I was thinking of her.

"Well, it makes *me* happy. I get to have all of your firsts and lasts for myself." She got me.

That shot me through the heart so badly that I was left utterly speechless. How could she say something so cute? How could she be so possessive of *me*?

I nearly passed out, to be honest. But my sense of reason remained. That was an absolute.

"Are you really that happy to get to monopolize me?"

"Yes, very!"

This is bad. Is this what total happiness feels like? I'm pretty sure my heart just made a sound it had never made before.

"I understand. Then you can monopolize me all you want. In exchange... Can I monopolize you too?"

"Hee hee, yep! Of course you can! If I didn't want you to, I wouldn't be marrying you!"

I'm dying. Her smile will be the death of me. I could drop dead at this very moment and be completely satisfied.

Wait, no, I would have regrets. I can't die yet.

"Then... You're going to need to be happy. If I'm getting the chance to keep you all for myself, then I want you to be happy," I said.

That's right. We couldn't just monopolize each other and have that be the end of it. We weren't living in a fairytale; life would go on even after the happily-ever-afters. None of this would mean anything if I couldn't make her happy her whole life, and I might have been a bit conceited in saying this...but I'd have to be with her too. I didn't want anyone else standing beside a happy Nia but me.

I spoke guided by feelings I wasn't quite sure were possessiveness or not, but Nia just tilted her head, confused.

"Hmm... Being happy, huh... What would that actually look like...?"

I almost cried at her words, just as I had before. Once again, I was reminded that Nia's life, up until recently, had been far from happy. True happiness had become just a concept to her—she'd had no clue what it felt like.

The life she'd gotten for herself now wasn't bad at all. But while it might've been peaceful, it wasn't one where she could actually feel happy. It was hard to tell whether getting revenge on the country that abused her could be considered "happy" or not, after all...

Damn, I still have a ways to go. But I could also say that from now on, I'd have to make a real go at things. Or so I thought.

"Then let's look for what happiness is together. And once we find it, we'll be happy together."

The words came out of my mouth naturally. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted to make her happy. But I didn't want it to be for my own self-satisfaction.

If that was the case, then the fact that we needed to figure out what happiness was was actually a good thing. I could handle anything that came our way.

It seemed that Nia hadn't expected my response. She blinked twice, three times.

"Really? Then, if it's with you, Sir Ark, I'd like to find out what happiness is," she said, little by little.

I hugged her.



"Of course," I said. "I don't want anyone but me by your side as you look for happiness."

Actually, if anyone tried to get in her way or take my place, I'd kick their ass. It was a pretty violent thought, if I do say so myself, but I was sure I could be forgiven for it. After all...

"Hee hee... I'm glad."

Nia was smiling in my arms. That meant that she agreed.

Bodies touching, we looked into each other's eyes, and...

"Welcome home, Lady Nia. You're right on time."

Laura's voice interrupted us, simultaneously forcing us to come to our senses. Nia and I flew away from each other, each looking in a different direction.

Dammit... Why'd she have to do it right *then*... She'd probably been watching us for a while, that jerk... And shame on me for not even noticing her...

"My thanks for escorting her home, Lord McGuine."

"Ah, nah, of course I would bring her back home."

"Get lost" vibes were positively oozing from our seemingly normal exchange. As Nia's guardian, the one in charge of protecting her up till now, Laura's belief that our relationship should stay pure until we were officially married was understandable, but I thought that we should've been allowed *that* much. But no, it wasn't. She just wasn't that sort of person...

"Well then, Nia. Thank you for today. I had a lot of fun."

"Oh, I should be the one thanking you... I had a lot of fun as well, Sir Ark. I'm sure I'll never forget this day."

As I said my goodbyes and thanks, Nia thanked me back. And she really seemed happy when she said it. Which was why...

"While I'm happy that you would say that, we're going to have many, many more fun days just like this," I added. "I'll make sure of it. As long as you want it, I'll make many more of your days just as fun as this."

A true man should be able to say at least this much.

Nia didn't seem to expect me to say that; she looked shocked. But immediately after, she gave me an even happier smile than before.

"Okay! Can I look forward to it then? Is that all right?"

I couldn't fault her for still being so hesitant, which was why I responded immediately afterwards.

"Of course!"

Chapter 6: The Black Wolf Bares His Fangs

The day after the eventful, but overall successful, date...

"I'm so happy that I'm scared. What do I do?"

"Seriously. Are you trying to pick a fight with me right now?"

I'd come to His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse's office for some advice, and he responded with a glare and verbal abuse. The room had, of course, been emptied first.

"You come to me for advice, and end up just bragging."

"I'm not bragging! I seriously don't know what to do!"

"No matter how little experience you have with such things, don't you think you're getting too flustered here?" His Royal Highness complained, looking totally done with me.

It was on the tip of my tongue to point out His Royal Highness's lack of fiancée, but I swallowed the words. I knew next to nothing about His Royal Highness's experience with women, but that didn't necessarily mean he had no experience at all.

Unlike me, whose status as the third son of a baron meant I had to create a name for myself from scratch, any steamy flings a member of the royal family like His Royal Highness could have had would influence national politics. Plus, after the stunt the first prince had pulled, everyone around him was on high alert about anything of the sort. It was for that reason His Royal Highness distanced himself from women back in school, or in society.

That meant that there were probably things I didn't know about going on under the surface, and there were probably also things he couldn't say to me. No matter how friendly we were with each other, there were certain lines we still couldn't cross.

And so, I decided to play the fool and let what he said slide. "I just can't help

it! Nia is so cute!"

"Yes, yes, whatever. I'm relieved that your relationship hasn't suffered. On that note, I'd be happy if you could do something about these," His Royal Highness grumbled, plopping a massive pile of envelopes onto his desk.

"What are those?"

At first glance, they looked like normal letters in normal envelopes, but for some reason I felt a dangerous aura rolling off of them. Or wait, maybe it's weird to say I was feeling any aura off of an inanimate object...

Unfortunately, I was right on the money.

"Challenge letters for you."

"Who the hell is sending me challenges all of a sudden?!"

I instinctively lashed out while His Royal Highness looked on, amused. It wasn't his fault, so he didn't deserve me having a go at him, but I couldn't help it.

Despite my outburst, Prince Alphonse didn't seem to take it badly at all. Just what I would've expected from him.

"You see, it seems as though news of your incident with Count Barracuda has spread," His Royal Highness explained. "The story stands as him challenging you and losing. And, while I have no idea how in the world it got twisted this way, it also seems that rumor has it that whoever beats you in a fight will get the territory you're supposed to be getting."

"Seriously, how could someone twist it like that?! There's no way you'd reassign territory ownership like that!"

This shouldn't even have needed saying, but the matter of who would be given territory seized after a war was an important matter of national strategy. There was no way that something that important could be decided based on personal duels. And you generally just weren't allowed to complain about decisions from higher-ups like that. Anyone with half a brain could figure that out, so how in the world...

"There are higher-ranking nobles behind it, aren't there?"

"On the surface, it's two marquises that have complained about you getting the land. They'd prefer if an older viscount got the land instead."

"Really, this late in the game? But who in their right mind would even want a dangerous territory like that..."

As you may remember, the territory that I was supposed to be given was a former Sylvarian province that had been ceded after the war. It was a highly volatile place—chances were high that another war could start there. The talk about mining plans was a secret, so... Or wait, were they good enough at snooping that they'd found that out?

His Royal Highness had, of course, already thought of what was racing through my mind.

"The complaints are less about you gaining the territory than about the fact that you'll be given the reins of the brigade that'll be stationed there."

"Ahh... I see... But still, what exactly did they mean by that?"

Even that would be a pain in the ass, I thought, heaving a sigh.

From previous discussions with His Royal Highness, it was revealed that a brigade several thousand men strong would be stationed in my viscounty. The fact these men would be from the national army made things a little complicated; though I, as the lord of the territory, would be given command of them, I'd also be assigning the commander who would ultimately lead them. But if I really wanted, I could command them myself. That didn't mean the soldiers would listen, though.

Anyway, in this situation, the two marquises either didn't want to let me have command over the brigade, or wanted to have a viscount they already had under their thumb to have command. Identifying which was their true motivation would change things.

If they didn't want me to have command, that really wouldn't be a problem—I could understand them not wanting a young guy like me to have that power. But if it actually was because they wanted one of their lackeys to have control over the brigade instead, that brought forth new questions about what they could be plotting.

And that wasn't the end of it.

"Even if the marquis hadn't come forward, other people probably would have instead," His Royal Highness added. "Apparently, some of the idiots are talking about how Count Barracuda must be getting old if he lost to a greenhorn like you."

"No. What the hell?"

My tone became unintentionally harsh as I looked right at His Royal Highness, but I knew what he said wasn't true. I knew that, but it *still* pissed me off. That really wasn't a good thing, though.

After we talked with our fists, I felt like Count Barracuda and I had come to an understanding. And, though I'd been a bit rash towards him, that didn't change the fact that the count was a military man I respected. People trash-talking him pissed me off.

All that said, I knew acting on my anger would be a mistake. I knew that logically, but... Ah, dammit! I'm not calm right now. Take a breath, Ark.

"I know that angers you, but just stay calm. The people saying that have no idea what the count is actually like if they're spouting all that nonsense, now do they?"

"That's... True... Either that, or they're just blind...or ignoring the truth."

Prince Alphonse's admonishment calmed me down a little bit. He was right. I knew firsthand how strong and intimidating Count Barracuda was. Anyone talking shit about him either had zero clue about the kind of man he was, or they did know, but were intentionally averting their eyes. And if it was the latter, that meant that they weren't much of a threat at all.

Though I still wanted to show them a thing or two.

"In the first place, people who dislike Count Barracuda for his military prowess are a dime a dozen. They brag and boast because they think that if they beat you, they could call themselves the strongest person in the kingdom without actually having to fight the count. Though that's a foolish idea," Prince Alphonse quipped, a great big smile on his face.

Ahhh, His Royal Highness is pissed too. When I thought that, it ended up fully calming me down... Though I had to wonder if His Royal Highness had actually planned for that to happen.

"I see. So what you're saying is if they're the type to try to look down on Count Barracuda, of all people, then there's no way they know anything about me. It's safe to assume they think my win over the count was a fluke, and that I'm actually pretty easy to beat," I said, putting things together.

"We can't be sure, but it's not unlikely. On the other hand, the people who apparently *do* have an idea of you backed off, since they knew they had no chance of winning," His Royal Highness replied, an icy smile on his face.

Oh yeah. This situation is definitely pissing him off too. I mean, of course it was. Here he was, about to wrap everything up in a neat bow, and then these guys just had to butt their heads in. Of course he'd be angry. But that would mean...

"So basically, my job is to make these guys who don't get it, get it."

"Yep. If you wreck them all, the problem goes away."

"Was there no way for you to word that any differently?!"

I might've snapped back out loud, but inside, I was relieved. If I could fix this all by going wild, then there was nothing easier. I wasn't planning on being careless here, but there weren't many military men who could surpass Count Barracuda. I mean, it'd be a different story if there was someone out there just trying to selflessly improve their skills, but if there were, that person would never stick their necks into a political issue like this in the first place. For everyone else, I just had to give them a very *physical* demonstration.

"But you can do that easily, can't you?"

The way Prince Alphonse said that—like the answer was right in front of my face—meant there was only one response I could make.

"Of course."

And so, as a result of various conflicting situations crossing together, I was given the simple yet difficult task of beating the shit out of everyone who

challenged me. But what I still hadn't fully grasped yet was just how much of an impact my fight with Count Barracuda would have, once news of it had properly spread...



Around the same time, in a different place...

"Oh...? To think that there would be a woman that Lady Emilia would admit defeat against, and end up considering a tough enemy and friend..." a man muttered, ensconced within his own room.

The man was just about in his midtwenties, with blue eyes and brown hair so light it was nearly blond. From his face, one could find him attractive enough to be considered princely, but everything from his neck down was well-forged muscle.

This man was Philip, heir to the County of Gandril. He was a member of a military family that claimed themselves to be on the same level as the County of Barracuda—he himself was a knight in the kingdom's army. Currently, he was reviewing some documents with quite a bit of enthusiasm.

"Lady Nia Farquhar... No, as the daughter of a baronet, she can't really be called a lady... But to be so talented as to win against Lady Emilia despite her position..."

His murmurs might have led some people to ask about his character, even question it. But no one could fault him because no one was there. He was in his own room, after all. And the lack of anyone there to stop him allowed for his delusions to grow unchecked.

"That upstart of a viscount isn't worthy of her."

If anyone who knew either Nia or Ark heard that, they'd respond to Philip in different ways. If they were someone who knew what kind of person Ark was, then they would have absolutely, frantically tried to get him to take back his words.

But no one did. No one was there. And that was why Philip headed straight for ruin.

"I shall take Miss Nia Farquhar as my wife! We shall join hands and together, conquer Sylvario!"

He loudly declared that, nearly singing the words. No one was there to hear him, though. No one was there, so no one could stop him, which was why the problem wasn't solved instantly.

For better or worse, very literally, the situation was progressing somewhere no one else knew. Inside his head.

"If she's someone that Lady Emilia admitted defeat to, then she must be incredibly lovely!"

Still, no one was there to challenge the motivations he so loudly announced.

It was at this point that his fate was sealed, but... He had no way of knowing that.



"Hey, Laura. I've felt like someone's been watching me lately."

"Yes, Princess. It seems some insolent fools have started sniffing around."

What Nia had said quite suddenly while they were in the middle of moving preparations got a nod from Laura in response. Seeing that, Nia gave her maid a small nod back. Laura was skilled in espionage, so the fact that she hadn't done anything despite noticing it herself meant...

"I see. So they're people we can just leave alone," the former princess confirmed.

"Yes. From what I've seen, they don't seem to be assassins or spies from Sylvario, so I decided that we didn't need to deal with them immediately."

"Which means they must be Brigandian," Nia concluded. "If it isn't the royal family, then... No, what could their goal be?"

If they weren't spies from Sylvario, the likelihood that they were either working for the Kingdom of Brigandia or one of its nobles was high. And, seeing as how the royal family already knew of Nia through Brigandia's third prince, Prince Alphonse, the only possibility left was that they were spies employed by someone from the Brigandian nobility.

"They aren't showing any signs of planning to attack us, which would mean...
They're investigating me? Maybe they want to find out who Sir Ark's future wwife is... The only other option would be someone related to Lady Emilia."

Nia stuttered a little bit uncharacteristically, still feeling bashful about calling herself Ark's fiancée or wife. Laura gave her a look as if she'd just had sugared ginger stuffed into her mouth, an expression that had appeared more frequently as of late. After clearing her throat with an, "ahem," the maid answered her mistress.

"It's unlikely to be Lady Emilia. There are rumors spreading about how *that* Lady Emilia admitted defeat to someone, after all."

"I don't really like the emphasis on 'that' there, but... I do understand why people would be shocked," Nia said, nodding at Laura's answer. She'd learned very well what sort of person Emilia von Barracuda was from directly confronting her, and with that knowledge, could see why people would wonder about the woman who defeated her. It was something she'd come to realize after their confrontation. She hadn't ever thought Emilia could be that much of a big deal before they'd met.

"That being said, even if we were to say that Lady Emilia wasn't that smart, then that might prompt people to look down on me and think I wasn't much of anything either."

"But we avoided that, didn't we? So let's shelve that thought for now. I believe that our current problem is what we should be doing in *this* situation."

"That's true..." Nia heaved a small sigh after Laura got her back on track.

In Nia's situation, it wasn't good for anyone to be looking into her. Though they may not have any intentions in doing so, if it ever came to light that Nia was Princess Sonia, the missing fourth princess of Sylvario, things would get very messy. Personally *and* politically.

So how would they solve this issue?

"Hey, Laura... Do you think Sir Ark would be bothered if I asked him for help?"

"No. In fact, I believe he'd throw a fit and be a bother to you if you didn't tell him, screaming 'Why didn't you tell me?!'"

Nia nearly burst out laughing at Laura's unnecessarily accurate Ark impression. It was true that this was nothing to hold back about; Ark was far from being the kind of person who'd view helping someone as a pain. That was exactly why she was so drawn to him.

"Laura. I'd like to send Sir Ark a letter."

"Understood. Preparations will be made immediately. By Tom."

The maid wouldn't let Tom say a word otherwise. As she let off an aura that literally kept him from opening his mouth, Nia did a little clap, as if to emphasize how much she relied on him. It went without saying that all this was possible because of how much the former princess trusted Tom. Though he might complain, he'd get the letter to Ark.

"Can you please fetch me my stationery and an envelope, Laura?"

"As you wish, Princess."

Laura immediately changed her tune at Nia's request. In the end, this was necessary to keep her mistress safe. While acknowledging it pissed her off to no end, when it came to both personal and political power, there was no doubt that relying on Ark would get the situation settled the fastest. Plus, the man would happily do anything and everything he could for Nia's sake.

What bothered Laura most was the fact that at this point, she herself had begun to trust Ark quite a bit. She had no intention of ever letting him know, though.

"If he ever betrays her, then I'll have his head before morning."

That day would never come. That was why Laura could safely mutter such things when venting her frustrations.



I'd received a letter from Nia. The moment I read it, I broke into a full speed run. Luckily, I wasn't in the middle of work or anything, though Nia had probably thought of that already. Go Nia. I had myself pretty well trained, so I could sprint while thinking and have no issues.

I soon arrived at Nia's current house, taking a couple deep breaths in front of

her door. As I caught my breath, I cast my senses outwards, looking for another presence, and found someone distancing themselves upon witnessing my arrival... I didn't feel any bloodlust coming off of them, so it was probably safe to leave them be for the moment.

With that decided, I cleared my throat and knocked on the door. A few moments later, Tom, acting as the butler, opened the door. After getting the basic pleasantries out of the way, I had him take me to where Nia was waiting, and confirmed what had been written in the letter. "I did indeed notice someone watching your house when I got here. Unfortunately, you were right."

"So someone really *is* spying on me. The next question, then, is how we should respond... What should we do?" Nia said, glancing over to Laura, who gave her a small nod.

"If you give me the order, Princess, I'll catch them even if it means chasing them to the ends of the earth. I could also make them regret even being born."

"Wait, Laura, I wouldn't go that far!"

What kind of violent stuff was this maid spouting off like it was completely normal stuff to say? She was even disturbing Nia. But by doing so, Laura had just confirmed my theory that her skills were of *that* kind. But I wasn't going to pry... And more than anything...

"You could say that Laura and Tom are our trump cards, so it'd be a waste to pull them out this early in the game."

This was the main thing. Those two—as potentially former spies or whatever—were quite strong, so I wanted to avoid having anyone catch on that they were doing multiple jobs.

When I said that, Nia nodded, Tom looked a little proud, and Laura made a weird face. Did I describe them weirdly or something? But yeah, I guessed Laura might've had some mixed feelings about it.

"Whatever the case, the fact that they aren't hostile means we could technically just leave them to it, but... That still wouldn't feel very nice, would it?" Also, I wouldn't be able to relax.

My question was more a statement than anything else, and Nia nodded back.

It wouldn't feel great, and while I didn't think they would, the chance they'd figure out Nia's true identity technically wasn't zero. There was also the chance that this whole thing might've been linked to another pain in the ass we had.

"Actually, a problem has come up on my end as well..." I started, and explained the recent challenges to my viscounty.

Rather than being surprised, Nia just looked like she understood. She'd already gathered that it probably had something to do with Lady Emilia.

Go Nia once more. It was really careless of me, but I should've realized that if word was getting out about me winning against Count Barracuda, then it wasn't strange that word about Nia winning against Lady Emilia would get out as well. Nia was sharp, so she'd noticed earlier, but I should've been more aware and careful of something like that. One more regret there.

"With things like this, there's a chance that one of the people challenging me might decide to take you hostage, Nia."

"Even if they did that to try to beat you, I'm sure His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse would have some countermeasures in place, but it's probably true that there are some people out there who might think that way."

"Yep..." I groaned.

Count Barracuda was a musclebrain, but he could still use his head. It was once he figured out that something political was going on behind the scenes that he agreed to use brawn to resolve things. But not everyone could catch onto things like that, and for those people, they tended to think the quickest solution was the best one. The fact that they usually went full blast in a bizarre direction meant that dealing with the aftermath was a pain.

"Which would leave... I'm sorry to ask this, Nia, but would you be able to move up the date you move in? That way, it'd be harder for them to do anything to you."

The house that Nia was currently living in was one suited for commoners. Though she was currently engaged to a viscount, there was the possibility that someone could fake a robbery and kidnap her in order to take her hostage. With Laura and Tom around, they probably wouldn't succeed. But if they tried

to pull something like that at the manor I'd bought for us, then things would be different, and they wouldn't be able to do much. Plus, we'd have people hired for security.

No, I wasn't thinking at all about how this would ensure I'd get to live with Nia earlier, okay? Maybe a little, but!

And in response to my slightly selfish suggestion... Nia gave me a little nod. Her face was a little red too.

"A-Actually, I was thinking the same thing. I just didn't know how to suggest it myself..."

How beautiful... Wait, this isn't the time to get all sappy!

Now that I thought about it, I was the only noble Nia could stay with right now... Or wait, she might've been able to borrow a guest room in Count Barracuda's manor if she explained things to Lady Emilia, but. She couldn't impose on them like that. Speeding up her move was the fastest option.

"Oh, you shouldn't have been worried about that," I said. "It would have been sadder for me if you hadn't asked at all."

What's that look for, Laura? Nia's giggling too. But nah, everything's fine as long as Nia's smiling, so whatever.

"Sir Ark... Can I... Rely on you?" Nia asked bashfully.

Agreeing was the only option any man would have made when she asked like that.

"Of course. I'll protect you, Nia."

"Sir Ark..."

I kinda felt like I was putting on airs a bit too much, but from her reaction, I didn't do a bad job at it. Laura was pulling her usual face, but I ignored her. This wasn't going to completely solve the issue, after all.

"And on that note, there's another thing I want to do..." I started, before explaining what I intended and what steps we would take.



"Our spies haven't returned?" Philip Gandril repeated what his subordinate just reported to him, anxiety seeping into his voice.

The people who'd been watching Nia were spies that he'd sent, and... The scheduled reports from those spies had just stopped. They'd been trained by a military county, so they were strong. What could it mean, then, if they hadn't returned?

Philip wasn't sure of the specifics, but he could tell that something bad was happening.

"Yes," the subordinate confirmed. "I believe you'd been told when Miss Nia Farquhar had her luggage loaded into a wagon and began to head to Viscount McGuine's manor, but..."

"That's right. I gave them delayed permission to follow them after the fact."

"We lost contact immediately afterwards."

"What?!" Philip couldn't help but exclaim, aghast. They'd lost contact with the spies as soon as they followed Nia and company on her move. That meant...

"It was a trap?"

"Most likely. I've heard tales that Viscount Ark McGuine is quite skilled at spotting enemies, so I gather that he lured them in."

"That's the only explanation for this... There's zero possibility someone like him would have skilled spies on hand..."

Since the identity of spies was something that obviously could not be made public, employing them cost quite a pretty penny—it came down to having spies personally trained on one's behalf by a family in your employ, or paying a hefty sum to employ them separately. To do either of these things required deep pockets or a highly reputable background, often both. There was no way, then, for a viscount born from a baron's family to have either. That led a member of a storied count's family like Philip to assume that Ark had done the capturing himself.

"What shall we do about the spies, sir?"

"Look into what happened to them. We haven't committed any crimes just by

watching them from afar. While we can't do anything about them having been captured, I can lodge a formal complaint if any of them were harmed."

"Understood."

While it might sound strange, in a country that didn't have any concept of stalkers or laws to criminalize such actions, Philip was legally in the right. While there were laws over *foreign* spies, House Gandril's hadn't actually done anything they could be punished for.

While there was nothing they could do about the spies getting caught for the unpleasant, misleading things they were doing, in this case, not only could a viscount not make any judgments regarding a county's underlings, if Ark chose to do so, then the Gandril family could lodge a formal complaint. It might have sounded absurd, but that was just class-based society for you. And part of that was considering the lives of these spies as just another bargaining chip in and of itself.

All of this was why Philip's subordinate didn't even blink at these proceedings.

"But if they really have been captured, then that must mean Viscount McGuine is quite skilled," the subordinate said, seemingly impressed.

As Philip was still only the heir rather than Count Gandril himself, the spies he had available to use weren't actually the cream of the crop. But even so, as spies in service of a count's family, they were skilled nonetheless. The fact that someone could capture them alive was a big deal.

"Just what you'd expect from the special battalion's jack-of-all-trades. He *did* manage to claw his way up through the mud. But someone like that wouldn't suit the beautiful Miss Nia Farquhar, would he?"

"No, of course not."

Philip didn't even try to hide his contempt, and his subordinate just gave a standard agreement as he bowed his head.

Ark was a lowborn human being—the third son of a baron, who'd gained his position through blood and filth. For someone like Philip, the heir to a traditional county, that's all he was. That a man such as that could take the woman who Philip was attracted to as his fiancée and drag her to his own home

was unacceptable. And there was no one present who could point out how egotistical that assumption was.

"Then I shall boldly defeat him in battle and save Miss Nia!" Philip declared, his delusions being something that Nia herself would have shot down wholeheartedly.



"You really have a thing with counts, don't you?"

"A thing that I really, really do not need!"

As usual, I was disrespectfully raising my voice inside His Royal Highness's office.

There was a new letter on top of the mountain of other challenge letters. It was excessively fancy, and when I got a better look at it, it had the crest of the famous martial County of Gandril on it.

"They've got some nerve, pulling this after what they did," I grumbled.

"They probably think their apology has cleared up any wrongdoing," commented His Royal Highness amusedly.

The guys who'd been surveilling Nia's house—the ones I'd caught during Nia's move—were all working for Count Gandril. They were probably spies of some sort, but unfortunately, they hadn't had anything on them that would let me pin them down.

I took the lead in apprehending them, with Tom acting as my assistant. Laura had hidden herself and kept watch in order to make sure none of them got away, so they probably hadn't caught on about either Tom or Laura.

Anyway, for the fact that they'd done something as distasteful as stake out my fiancée's home, I lodged a formal complaint against House Gandril as Viscount McGuine and got an apology back. Apparently it had all been their heir Philip acting on his own, but the fact that I'd just received a challenge letter from that same Philip made me want to ask how shameless the guy could be.

"Even if I'm just a lower-ranking viscount to them, couldn't they be at least a little bit embarrassed?"

"They're a pretty authoritarian house, so it wouldn't be odd if they thought you should just be grateful that they apologized at all."

"Eugh. I could never be friends with someone with that kind of attitude."

"You say that, but they wouldn't want to be friends with you anyway. They probably wouldn't even give you the time of day. I've met this Philip once, and he was definitely the type who treated people according to whether they were above or below him."

I unintentionally grimaced, but it was in front of His Royal Highness, so I was probably fine. The fact that Prince Alphonse regarded Philip in such a way meant I definitely would never get along with him.

But even so, his challenge was actually sort of a help to me.

"For someone like that to go out of their way to throw a challenge at me... Of course I can go all out on him, right?"

"He challenged you. As the son of a military family, he probably wouldn't dare do anything shameful after losing to you."

Looks like His Royal Highness is mad about this too. He was basically telling me I could fill my boots. I'd just have to take him at his word, then.

"Your Highness, I'd like to make some conditions for taking the challenges. Would I be able to get your assistance with them?"

The conditions I laid out surprised Prince Alphonse for a moment.

"You have some good ideas too. Sure," he said, giving me a great smile back.



And so, a few days later...

Once I'd agreed, things progressed quickly and smoothly. Arrangements for the duels—or rather, the competition—were organized, and now I stood in the arena where tournaments between knights were usually held. In the spectators' seats were His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, the two marquises who'd had a problem with me, people who'd heard about the fuss and were here for fun, and the guys who actually challenged me.

Nia, by the way, was also watching, sitting somewhere hidden from view. Really, I hadn't wanted her to come watch; I was gonna go crazy today. My appearance alone was already going to make me look unhinged.

The moment I showed myself, the spectators' seats started buzzing. The pitch-black metal armor I was wearing—given to me as a reward for my military prowess—already made me look pretty damn intimidating. But that wasn't it. What made the people in the stands buzz was the fact that I had no shield, and only carried a single long-handled weapon.

"H-Hey, is that 'the Black Wolf's Fangs'?"

"I'd heard rumors of it, but it looks so dangerous..."

I overheard the chatter of two nobles, maybe counts, who tried and failed to be quiet. My ears were sensitive enough to pick up their conversation.

The "Black Wolf's Fangs" they referenced was what I was currently holding, and which had been my main weapon on the battlefield. Called a "Wolf Tooth Cudgel," the weapon originated from a nation far to the east, and was a long-handled mace with sharp spikes coming off of it.

The weapon came in various forms, with varying lengths for the handle and the bludgeon came in different styles and weights. If I was to compare it to a weapon from around here, then I'd say it was similar to a morning star—just think of it as having a longer spikey bit. There was even a spike mounted right on top, so it could be used as a spear. The one I wielded was like a longspear; it had a handle over two meters long, with a thin-spiked bludgeon at the end.

So here I was, fully decked out in black armor and with a crazy-big, scary-looking weapon in hand. Of course I looked intimidating.

With clear hesitance in his voice, the older knight acting as the observer of the duels asked me, "S-Sir McGuine... Will you truly be using that weapon?"

To which I replied, quick and simple: "Of course. It's not for show."

Once that exchange was finished, the first challenger, a viscount, entered the ring.

Yes, I said "first challenger."

These were the conditions for these duels: the fight can be no-holds-barred as long as they're nonlethal; all weapons used had to be something no larger than what a person could hold; and each challenger would fight me one-on-one, in succession. If I lost to the first challenger, then the whole thing would be over. But if I kept on winning, my stamina would gradually be whittled away, giving my opponents an advantage. I made sure that the guys that were confident they could beat me were scheduled early, with the other ones following behind to give them a slightly better chance for victory. Or so the cover story was. It probably wouldn't actually work like that.

Anyway, the first viscount I was up against was clad in full-body metal armor, with a metal shield in his left hand and a longspear in his right, in a fairly orthodox style. I could tell his armor was custom-made to fit his body, was well maintained, and allowed him to move fluidly. His spear looked well-used as well, so it was safe to assume this guy had actual combat experience.

While his longspear and my cudgel looked to be around the same length, mine was clearly top-heavy. This would, of course, make my movements slower, and as a whole my weapon was harder to wield compared to that of a skilled spearman. It was understandable, then, that the observing knight thought I didn't have a chance at winning, even though I did.

Anyway, the viscount I was up against...didn't look terribly pumped to be there. If I remembered correctly, he was only first because he was sponsored by the two troublesome marquises.

"Sir McGuine, um... Please don't beat me too hard," the viscount said.

"Same here. We both seem to be at the mercy of a higher power, after all," I replied, quiet enough that only he could have heard me. The man gave me a wry smile back. I was absolutely right on the money in thinking this guy was forced into this by his superiors: in short, we were two peas in a pod.

If that was the case, then I'd feel bad if I beat the shit out of him. But since he was strong enough that he'd been brought out here in the first place, I really couldn't let my guard down or hold back.

Now, what to do...

As I was thinking to myself, the time came.

"All right. Combatants, separate yourselves."

At the observer's call, the two of us stood apart at a distance, facing each other. Because we were both using long-handled weapons, we needed to stand farther apart in order to land a proper hit on each other. Though close combat would probably have been fine for me too, if we weren't far enough to properly hit each other, then people watching would complain about it not being much of a competition. It was for that reason that I followed the observer's instructions, and got far enough away that the both of us could comfortably swing our weapons.

My current opponent held his shield in his left hand, hiding his body with it. With his spear clenched in his other hand around the middle of the handle, he assumed an orthodox fighting stance, defending himself while looking for an opening. I held my cudgel on one end with both hands, pointing the tip at my opponent like a spear.

"Begin!"

At the observer's signal, the two of us stepped forward and began the fight. Both of our weapons were around the same length, but because my opponent had to hold his with one hand in the middle, I had more reach. But I could tell from the way he carried himself that any carelessness on my part would end with him getting into my space in an instant, and throwing me into a panic. I needed to get him while I still had the advantage.

"Hmph!"

The moment the tips of both of our weapons met, I made a sharp breath out as I put some additional power behind my hit.

I learned how to use the cudgel from an old man I'd met when I was a kid. He'd come from the far east, and despite his small size was terribly strong; he'd send me flying with a single punch. His strength was the reason why I begged him to teach me—to teach me both how to use my body and his basic training regimen.

The old man was prone to traveling based on his whims, and so didn't have a lot of time to teach me. Instead, he taught me the basics, things that I'd just need to do over and over and over again. This ended up being the right choice.

Probably. His training let him—a tiny, scraggly old guy—exhibit freakishly strong power, so it was obvious what it would do for a big, muscular guy like me.

"What?!" the viscount I was up against screeched, shocked at the unexpected speed and weight behind my attack.

For example...

I'd made a sharp movement with my cudgel—already much heavier than the average spear—and was able to knock the tip of the viscount's weapon away. I hadn't trained enough to be able to do it very well in a bare-knuckle fistfight, but I was good enough to do it with a weapon. Plus, my cudgel had spikes on it, and those spikes caught the tip of his spear and nearly pulled it out of his hands, forcing him to quickly adjust his grip.

And of course, I didn't let the opportunity I'd been given go. I used the force from my cudgel being repelled to swing the tip in an arc, aiming for the viscount's shield.

"Here we go!"

I hit it hard with a sideblow, swinging it all of the way.

There were reasons I loved using my cudgel, and the biggest one was that while it would pierce things, it wouldn't pierce them too deep. Piercing through armor was difficult, and often when enough force was applied for it to stab through the metal, the weapon itself would get lodged inside and get stuck there.

My wolf tooth cudgel, on the other hand, could hit hard enough for the spikes on the bludgeon to pierce to just the right depth for me to pull them out before they got stuck. Thanks to that, I was able to swing it around without having to worry about how hard I was doing it, making fighting on the battlefield easier. Of course, it wasn't something that you could swing around very easily in the first place, so my ability to do so was all thanks to the practice I'd put in to nail the basic forms.

As an aside, the reason I ended up being known as "the Black Wolf" was because my weapon left fang-like holes in all of the enemy soldiers I went up against.

The viscount I was fighting responded immediately, pulling his shield closer to his body and tilting it slightly, trying to shift the weight of my side blow upwards. Good job. But it was exactly because I expected him to do that that I chose that direction to hit from.

A strange crunching sound resounded. The fangs of my cudgel pierced the other viscount's shield, leaving a number of holes in it, despite the fact that it was a slab of metal. The bludgeon hit soon after, and the metal shield buckled.

The force of my hit would normally send someone flying, with the spikes of my cudgel being ripped out from the force. By tilting his shield my opponent aimed to deflect the force of the hit upwards, and in doing so the spikes weren't ripped out, and instead, the bludgeon itself slid upwards, completely warping the shield as it scraped by. When the shield finally warped to its limit, all the metal buckles in the leather belts attaching the shield to his arm snapped, and the entire shield went flying.

The viscount's arm had nearly joined it, but the shoulder joint of his armor kept his arm from being twisted beyond its limits, avoiding dislocation. Only properly made armor could have prevented such an injury, and it was something I fully expected.

The clump of metal that was once a shield slammed to the ground. As the arena fell silent, I used the momentum of my cudgel being swung upwards to lift it above my head.

"Will we be continuing?" I asked the viscount, who was looking at me, frozen.

The guy was pretty good. He hadn't shut his eyes when I hit his shield, and upon impact, frantically tried to move his shield. He wasn't even dumbfounded now after seeing what I did. If he'd been a less skilled warrior, he wouldn't have tried to avert the impact, and would have had his arm—possibly some ribs too—broken. This viscount had managed to take the blow and control it so it wouldn't hit him in the head.

I attacked him the way I did because I suspected he was skilled enough to defend himself. Thanks to that, I got to put on a more impactful show than I would have if he'd just been blown away. Aside from His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, who was still smiling away, all of the spectators were stunned, not

saying a word.

"No, there's no point in continuing any longer. I yield," the other viscount said, putting down his spear and raising both hands into the air. The hand he'd been using to hold the shield looked a bit numb, but still mobile. He really was good. Even from the ranks of my own men, there were few who could still move their hands after taking a hit like that from me. It was visible proof of his prowess, and because I was able to put up a show like I did, his honor was probably safe, with people just thinking he was up against the wrong person.

"Th-The winner is Viscount Ark McGuine!"

Despite the observer coming back to his senses to announce the outcome, no one moved an inch. His Royal Highness ended up being the first to clap, which got the rest of the spectators to give me some applause.

Good, good. Looks like I made a good impact.

"Now, who's next?" I asked, looking up into the seats. My eyes landed on my other challengers, who were all pale and averting their eyes. It seemed that my first attack made them realize just who they were picking a fight with. Even though I wasn't trying to kill anyone, they seemingly all understood that taking a hit like that would usually end up with broken bones.

But anyway, there probably wouldn't be anyone else challenging me unless they were sure they were just as good as that viscount. It was why I'd planned all the duels to take place on the same day; I'd guessed most of them would yield once they got a better picture of just who they'd be up against. And I was right on the money, because almost all of them seemed to have lost their will to fight, but...

"If no one else will fight, then I will!"

There was one single challenger left with some fight in him. From the crest embroidered on his clothing, he must have been Philip von Gandril himself.

I see... So his body is well trained, at least.

"It seems as if the rest of the challengers are yielding, so I have no problem with that."

"It seems so! How deplorable for them to have been cowed by such recklessness!" cried Philip, taking a somewhat pompous pose.

Yep. Definitely could never be friends with this guy. No way it'd ever happen.

Our falling out was cemented by his next words:

"I am Philip von Gandril! Once I defeat you, I shall become Nia Farquhar's fiancé!"

"Hah?"

The sound I made was lower than I ever remember making in my life. What the hell kind of nonsense was this guy spouting?

All the blood in me nearly gushed straight into my head, but I managed to calm myself. The look on his face and what came out of his mouth were both incendiary, seemingly trying to mask the searching look in his eyes.

He's trying to provoke me and make me lose my cool.

"What foolishness are you spouting?!" I screamed, faking rage, only for Philip's lips to warp into a smirk. I was right.

I made a show of faking heavy breathing, as if I was livid, but what I was actually doing was mindfully breathing in and out as I dropped my anger into my stomach. I wasn't *actually* dropping it into my stomach—just imagining it. It felt as if the heat that swarmed to my head was gradually settling in my abdomen.

Emotions were a pain, and nothing good came of letting them control you. But there were times that feelings like anger could move your body and exert unbelievable power, so it would've been a waste to let that go completely. I'd trained myself to be able to use my anger and other hostile emotions somewhat, and this was one example.

The old man had once told me that letting anger get to one's head dulled their judgment, but actually being mad was no problem in and of itself. And right now, I was incredibly pissed. So much so that acting as if I'd flipped my lid didn't take much effort.

"If you say that much, then how about you come down here already?! I will

make you regret ever spouting off those delusions!" I howled.

"Hah! You're finally barking, you mutt! I'll have you taste my blade!" Philip laughed, putting on airs, striding down from the spectators' seats. It seemed he really did believe that I was raging. I would just have to take advantage of that.

"C-Combatants, ready your weapons!" the observing knight instructed, voice shaking in a different way than before... It seemed he'd noticed the change in my vibes. Just what I'd expect from someone good enough to be asked to observe.

Across from me, Philip was, of course, decked out in well-maintained metal armor, and had a two-handed sword with a massive blade in his hands.

Is he screwing with me?

"Lord Gandril, is that the weapon you'll be using?" asked the observer.

"Of course! This sword, that has been passed down through generations, is most worthy of being used in a duel over honor! I'd ask that you not group me with someone like him, who freely wields such a barbaric weapon!"

"Understood." With a shake of his head, the observer backed away. He seemed a bit fed up with Philip, if I had to guess, and in this case I was pretty sure I was guessing right.

Part of me thought that Philip was acting this way on purpose, and that he had some larger plan at work, but there were just too many drawbacks to what he was doing. Whatever the case, the important thing was for me to beat him, and I had no need to go along with his fluff. I raised my wolf tooth cudgel in the same way as I had before.

"Begin!"

At the signal, I charged.

He had his sword's tip pointed at me in an orthodox swordsmanship stance, with a composed look on his face as he saw me suddenly rush towards him...

Bang! A dry clang rang out.

Philip was frozen, a look of disbelief on his face, and a few seconds later, his two-handed sword clanged loudly to the ground. I had hit the sword tip he had

pointed at me hard with my cudgel, lifting it up from the bottom. The hit was more than his grip could handle, which led to his sword being knocked away.

"Please, pick it up," I told him in a low voice, backing up slightly.

It seemed he didn't understand what had just happened. Once he did, he made a grabbing gesture with his hands a couple of times before frantically picking up his sword and getting into his stance once again.

"Now, let us resume."

After I said that, I charged again, and knocked his sword out of his hands the same way as before.

"Please, pick it up," I repeated, moving a slight distance away once again.

He rushed to pick his sword up again, and seemed to have caught on to what I was doing, changing his stance to lift his sword above his head. When I charged defenselessly at him again, he swung down, right towards my head.

It seemed he had training, at the very least. But that wasn't enough to stop me.

"Urr, uaaaaaargh?!" His voice rose in something I couldn't distinguish— something between a shout to pump himself up and a scream—but it changed into a clear shriek. Just as he'd aimed for my head, I'd hit his sword with a blunt smack with my cudgel, knocking his sword away once again.

"Please, pick it up," I said, once again. Then, once he'd taken his stance, I charged and knocked his sword away again. This repeated a few more times until he finally seemed to understand the reality of the situation.

"W-Wait, I yield! I lost!" Philip cried, tossing away his sword—now warped in a few places from being knocked away so many times—and raising both of his hands in the air. I almost pitied the poor sword, having to be used by an owner like that.

"Please, pick it up."

"I-I said I yield!"

I repeated the same words once again, unwilling to let him give up so easily, and in response he started crying, tears in his voice. I just shook my head.

"You yield? Surely you jest. You can still stand on your own two feet," I said, voice restrained.



He looked down at his own feet, as if he'd just realized they were there. After a moment of silence, he understood what I was trying to say, and trembled. "I-I've lost! Please, let me yield!" he sobbed, both knees buckling to the ground as he begged me for forgiveness.

Knowing that going any further would be throwing mud in the face of the Gandril County, I decided to let him off there.

"Understood. I accept your surrender. You heard that, correct?"

Accepting the bastard's surrender, I looked over towards the observer, who nodded a few times.

I must have been imagining the tiny bit of fear in his expression. But I didn't really care if anyone thought I was scary.

"Are there any other challengers?" I asked, slowly ending my question as I looked around. No one responded. It seemed that they'd all lost the will to fight. I appreciated the farce from the future Count Gandril, if only for that.

"Then we'll end things here... Ah, one more thing."

A few people gave me terrified looks, their faces telegraphing fear at the possibility that I still somehow wasn't done. I honestly wasn't about to do anything like what they might have been thinking, so I wished they wouldn't look like that.

I walked towards the spectators' seats, climbed the staircase...and approached the seat where Nia was. As I did, she moved like she knew exactly what I was about to do, gracefully walking forward towards me. Her sure movements cemented for me that she was a real princess. But from now on, she was my princess.

"I, Ark McGuine, swear that my heart belongs to Miss Nia Farquhar. Thus, I ask that you all refrain from bringing forth any unnecessary talk of engagements," I announced. I knelt before Nia and gently took her hand before kissing the back of it. Then, I stood back up, locking my eyes with Nia's, whose own gaze seemed to be tearing up from either nervousness or embarrassment. I gave her a nod, and she nodded back.

"I, Nia Farquhar," Nia said, "swear that my heart belongs to Lord Ark McGuine... I ask that Lord Gandril, and any other gentlemen who might have an interest in me, to please understand that fact."

The bit specifically calling out "Lord Gandril" was probably an ad-lib she thought of after seeing the prior fuss.

Ending her declaration with a thankful bow, I heard someone make an admiring sound. Nia might have been the daughter of a baronet on paper, but inside, she was a true princess, and you could really tell the difference.

I knew it would be, but this bit was *intensely* embarrassing. But I forced myself to keep my face straight, knowing that if I didn't make things clear here and now, then we probably wouldn't be able to put an end to people butting into our engagement.

We looked into each other's eyes for a moment before I turned to look towards the spectators' seats. And while His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse was struggling to contain his laughter, the rest of the gawking spectators were dumbfounded. I'd made a clear statement after showing irrefutable proof of how skilled I was in battle. The members of high society—used to trickery and deceit—apparently couldn't make a peep.

"If there are no further objections, then I declare these duels concluded!" I announced, hearing a resigned sigh from the audience.



And so, the fuss around my engagement to Nia came to an end.

It turned out that the two marquises who had started the entire kerfuffle had no intention of replacing me with that other viscount; they'd actually wanted to construct a scenario where they could gauge how serious I was. They'd figured out that we were trying to use the territory we'd recently gained from Sylvario as a foothold to conquer the nation as a whole, and were trying to decide whether they would back such efforts or wait and observe.

If they were to actively participate in conquering a kingdom like Sylvario, with their big port and its booming trade, and get a stake in said port afterwards, then they'd have a lot to gain. But the truth of it was that investing in a war effort like that was a very high-risk gamble.

They'd wanted to get a measure of me, the guy assigned to the territory, so they could finalize their decision. But it seemed my rampage far surpassed their expectations, and they invested just as Prince Alphonse told them to.

"It seems that seeing you swinging around that dangerous weapon scared the daylights out of them," His Royal Highness had added.

To tell you the truth, I'd used my cudgel during the war to pummel the enemy's will into dust, so I wasn't sure if it was okay to smile at that.

In the end, this whole affair resulted in us receiving material and personnel support, so it was a good thing for my eventual relocation to Stonegaze.

Speaking of breaking people's wills, Philip von Gandril, the son of Count Gandril, had been so shocked by the way he'd been beaten that he broke down and had apparently locked himself away in his room. For him to break over something so minor was deplorable.

"No, that was actually pretty scary," commented His Royal Highness.

"Really?" I asked. "But at any rate, with the way he is, it's a good thing he didn't end up becoming a regional lord for some border territory."

It was true that Philip von Gandril was well-trained. But he didn't know the battlefield. He'd never been on one. If someone like him had been sent to the border to rule over Stonegaze, then we might have ended up losing the territory we'd managed to acquire. And we wouldn't just lose land in that scenario, so it was a good thing we'd avoided that.

"That was good for both him and Brigandia. Apparently Sylvario hasn't learned their lesson."

"What, seriously? When they'd been in such shambles during the ceasefire?"

I couldn't hide my shock at His Royal Highness's words. Yeah, the war had ended with a ceasefire, but they hadn't made a nonbelligerency pact—an offensive strike by them wouldn't technically violate any agreements. But did they really think they could win?

His Royal Highness gave me an exasperated smile in response to my question.

"Apparently, they think that the only reason they lost was because they couldn't afford it."

"I mean, first off, not being able to keep supplying the war *is* a defeat, if only strategically. But is the reason why they're so quiet now because only one group misunderstands that?"

"Looks like it. Which means that garrisoning a brigade near the border was a good idea in a number of ways."

"Yeah, you really couldn't expect them to think so optimistically," I said, astonished.

Prince Alphonse shook his head. "It's understandable. They've managed to get all the soldiers they'll need, after all."

"All the soldiers they'll need... What? Are they gathering mercenaries?"

"They've got money at least, after all. They're also using their boats to get them from outside the country, so the mercenaries probably haven't heard anything about you."

"Completely neglecting their reconnaissance. They're making a fundamental mistake."

Mercenaries would do as much as they were paid for, but on the other hand, they didn't like taking on jobs that weren't worth the money. As a result most of them were skilled at gathering intel—or it might be better to think that the ones who were good at it survived. If someone hired a mercenary and explicitly omitted relevant, vital information, it wouldn't be a surprise if said mercenaries rioted over essentially being tricked.

"Well, it's because these are the kinds of people we're dealing with that the situation is what it is," His Royal Highness said, "which is why the two marquises understood that they'd get a good return on their investment."

"I see. So by investing with money, men, and resources, they could buy the most important thing: time."

"You've got it. That port brings in a massive profit in just one month. Who knows how much it'll bring in a year?"

"And you got those marquises on your side because they understood that," I concluded.

Prince Alphonse gave me a smile that let me know I hit the nail on the head.

Damn, he's scary. This campaign might not even take us a year if they're careless...and he worked it to be like that.

"So, seeing as how it looks like we've made enough preparations in that regard, now we just need for everything to go well with your wedding ceremony so you can get on God's good side. Which means that I'll be going all-in on training you."

"A-Aha ha. U-Understood."

I could only return His Royal Highness's grin with a dry laugh of my own.

It had already been decided that I would have extensive training on the wedding ceremony's procedures and etiquette. But now that things had developed this way, His Royal Highness would insist that I perfect each and every step and mannerism so as to avoid making any mistakes that would have God turn on us.

So, I had just a little over two months to learn what a high-ranking noble had years to acquire. If necessary, I was going to have the knowledge beaten into me.

Thinking about the days that were ahead of me, I just rubbed my stomach.



Unfortunately, my fears were right on the money.

"Ghaah! I'm so drained," I grumbled, swaying back and forth on my horse as I slowly headed back to my manor.

His Royal Highness was putting me through the wringer at the palace, so I was going home way later than usual; the sun was already starting to set. Lately, I'd been going home around this time every day, and I felt as if this time slot was becoming my normal one. I absolutely did not want to keep on living like this.

It's just until the wedding ceremony, I told myself as I fixed my grip on the reins. Plus, since Nia had moved in, I'd started looking forward to going home.

Since we had Tom as our carriage driver, I could've started coming and going in a carriage like a proper viscount would. But we only had one carriage, and Tom was our only driver. Plus, since they'd moved in he'd also started doing the jobs a butler would, so there was no way I could make him bring me to and from work.

Though he had a tendency to hide behind Laura, Tom was pretty skilled. The way he moved clearly indicated education that far exceeded the usual. I wondered what sort of upbringing he had, but I was sure of his loyalty to Nia, so I wasn't about to go digging up his past. I'd be happy if he decided to tell me one day, though.

"Dunno if we'd ever have time to have a chat, though," I muttered, heaving a big sigh.

I was studying for my position as a viscount, studying for the wedding ceremony, and then brushing up on it all once I finally got home. I probably wouldn't have a moment to relax in my own home until the ceremony was done. And then, once it was, we'd have to head straight over to Stonegaze, the province I was being given. Once we were there, we'd be busy again, our daily life transformed into one where we would be constantly tense and on edge.

But maybe toughing those things out together might make us some kind of war buddies? He could open up then. I knew it was sort of a muscle-brain-y line of thought, but I didn't think it was too much to wish for.

"Ah, welcome home, master!"

"Yep, I'm home."

Dropping my horse off in the stable once I was back at our manor, I was about to walk in the back door when a woman greeted me. It was one of the Sylvarian palace maids that had a positive view on Nia—or rather, Princess Sonia.

With Prince Alphonse's help, we'd managed to bring a number of other people who had loved Nia over to Brigandia, and they were working at our manor as maids and other servants... But, as they were close to Princess Sonia, most of them were, of course, female. As a result, there were only three men in the manor: myself, Tom, and the gardener.

Some might think that a manor full of women would be heaven, but it was far from it. In the first place, Laura headed the group, and they all considered Nia their mistress. I mean yeah, they did treat me like their employer, but there was no mistaking that Nia owned their hearts. If I was to leer at anyone but Nia there, I'd instantly be loathed by the entire group.

Not that I would ever do anything like that. I was just making an example.

What's more, possibly because they knew Nia back in her dark days, they had a strong sense of camaraderie. I didn't really have a problem with them having a clique, but it was inevitable to feel small, as part of the minority. Which led to Tom, the gardener, and me feeling a little bit of camaraderie of our own, or so I thought. It felt as if it was easier to talk to them now.

By the way, the gardener was apparently also a former servant that Laura had pulled out of Sylvario's palace. He was a man in his forties with an overall calm demeanor, but there was something in his watchful eyes and in the smooth way he moved that had me wondering if he might have actually been a *garden keeper* rather than a *gardener*. It's all speculation on my part—garden keepers were part of a spy organization based in the far east. There was no way one could be here. It was just that the guy didn't have the aura of a normal gardener. Whatever the case, I was glad to have him for the safety of our manor.

"Nothing happened today?" I asked.

"No, not that I know of. I believe Tom should be able to give you a more detailed report," the maid replied.

"Thanks. I'm going to get changed and head to the dining room. Can you let Nia know?"

"Understood."

At my request, the maid bowed reverently, waiting until I'd passed by to head towards Nia's room.

Yeah. Nia and I were still just engaged rather than actually married, so we slept in different rooms. It was something all the female servants decided, and with Laura at the helm, I couldn't protest. In all honesty it did feel like the safer

choice to me.

The simple fact that we were living under the same roof was already bad for my heart. If our rooms were closer too, then my blood pressure would just keep on getting higher while I was home. No matter how sure I was in my youth and health, I was afraid a blood vessel would burst. It was something I wanted to manage better before we got married.

I mulled all this over as I changed into something more casual to wear around the manor, and then made my way to the dining room.

"Welcome home, Sir Ark."

And, of course, Nia was there to greet me with a smile.

Aahh, my fatique from the day is being healed...

But I didn't breathe a word of that thought, and took my seat across from her. I really wished I could keep my smile under control.

"I'm home, Nia. You've already eaten dinner, haven't you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for eating before you."

"Oh, it's my fault for coming home so late. Don't worry about it."

In the first place, I'd told her to eat first *because* I would be coming home late. But the fact that she still honestly apologized about it was proof of her character. She was so precious.

Wait, Ark, this isn't the time to get carried away!

"Nothing changed on my end today. How about you?" I asked.

"Hmm, today..."

Asking each other about our days felt like something a real married couple would do. Or at least that's how I felt. Nia proceeded to tell all about what she'd studied today, what information she'd gotten a hold of, and offered suggestions for how to use that information when we got to Stonegaze.

Okay, so it was more like a territory administration meeting or a strategy meeting than a conversation between a married couple! I knew that there was nothing I could do about it! There was a mountain of things we needed to get

done when we got to Stonegaze, and it was better to get ourselves emotionally prepared and run mental simulations while we had the chance now.

But I don't think it was too much to ask for something a little warmer!

But that wasn't all.

"Ah, Sir Ark, the way you just moved your knife was incorrect. It made a noise when it touched the plate."

"Okay, sorry..."

"And you're looking down at your hands too much. You need to keep your gaze on the person you're speaking with, and keep yourself calm."

"L-Like this...?"

While we were deeply engaged in intellectual strategy, I was additionally drained by the simultaneous lessons on table manners. But this wasn't something I could do anything about either. I might've had a handle on the absolute minimum in manners, but I was far from perfect at them. Also, though there hadn't been any problems with me eating while looking at my hands back when I was a chevalier, it was a whole different story now that I was a viscount. Now, while having conversation and getting a mental commentary at the same time, I also had to mind my manners on top of it.

His Royal Highness was already skilled at that, but unfortunately for me, I wasn't that clever. Which was why I had Nia drilling me on it every evening in order to gain experience. According to Prince Alphonse, it was important to make more opportunities to train your thoughts and actions at the same time. I might not have been able to believe others if they told me that, but if someone like His Royal Highness said so, then all I could do was believe him. At the very least, I could imagine the movements to be like exercising. Once I mastered the physical aspect of things, it'd be easier to use my brain. Plus, it was a chance to spend time with Nia even though she'd already eaten, so I absolutely needed to make some results.

"Sir Ark, you're tensing your shoulders too much. Relax, relax!"

"O-Okay!"

Damn, I was thinking so much I'd tensed up. I rushed to relax... And the way she said it was so cute that I was relaxing pretty naturally.

Oh, this could be handy.

I replayed her little "Relax, relax!" in my head, and it helped me hold myself a bit looser.

But just when I thought I got it...

"Um, Sir Ark? Have you been listening to what I've been saying?"

"What?! S-Sorry!"

Aaand this time I ended up not paying attention to our conversation at all. It looked as if my becoming a Manner Master was still far off.

Refocusing on the matter at hand, I resumed eating, paying attention to both the conversation and my movements.

Final Chapter: And So, the Two Begin Their New Life

After spending a little more than two months doing next to nothing but intensive training, the day had finally come.

"That makes you look handsome," commented His Royal Highness Prince Alphonse, who'd suddenly come to the groom's waiting room. It was rare for a prince to come to a mere viscount's wedding ceremony, but in our situation, he had to be there. We needed to show multiple people that I had the third prince's support.

"That's generally a compliment, so why am I feeling that you said it in a weird way?" I grumbled.

"Not really. I wasn't implying in any way that you should care about your appearance more at all."

"Says the person who works me so hard that I have no time to care about how I look!"

We were doing our usual casual back-and-forth, but I couldn't blame the priest and other church people in the room for panicking. They didn't know our relationship, after all.

I was currently decked out in black ceremonial clothing, decorated with golden embroidery and matched with a blue tie to complement Nia's eyes. I was impressed at the fact that men's ceremonial clothes could be made in black without looking like mourning clothing. Was it a combination of physique and social rank? Nia would probably tell me all about it if I asked.

"What's with that sudden gross look on your face?"

"Are you trying to pick a fight with the groom, Your Highness?" I snapped back without thinking. *Thinking about Nia made me all smiley again*, I thought to myself as I schooled my face once more. A smile on my face was one thing, but it'd be absolutely awful if I relaxed too much and messed up during the ceremony. But being too nervous wasn't good either. I had to find the

emotional sweet spot between the two.

"You're usually the one trying to pick a fight with me, so can't I do it back sometimes?"

"Do I really? I don't think I say anything out of the ordinary."

"The fact that you don't realize it makes it even worse. I'm pretty sure the other guys would agree with me if they heard," His Royal Highness complained.

Well yeah, they would, since you're their boss and the third prince. I wouldn't say that though, because it wasn't actually true. In general, we as his underlings were allowed to speak frankly, and were told to be unrestrained with voicing our opinions. And really, the only people with a rank higher than platoon commander were the people who could actually pull that off. Thinking about His Royal Highness's personality, you could say that was a given.

And, of course, guys like that wouldn't surmise anything about a freshly made viscount like me... I wasn't trying to boast about them, but if they thought like that, they probably would come right out with it.

"Anyway, if you're calm enough to make a face like that, then you won't be nervous enough to mess things up in some weird way, right?" His Royal Highness continued.

"I hope so, at least. I'm a bit worried I'll end up blanking out on everything, though."

"Don't worry. I beat them into you too hard for that to happen."

"And that makes me worry in other ways," I mumbled, thinking back to the intensive training he'd given me for today. Once he'd taught me the procedure for the ceremony, he'd had me practice it over and over and over again. He'd told me to burn it into my muscle memory so that my body would move without thinking—basically, like combat training. He was right.

I knew quite well how important and unforgettable this day would be, and that made it easier to practice and put all my effort into training. In a way, I needed to bring the same desperate fighting spirit to this ceremony as I would to the battlefield.

Today would change Nia's life. Definitively. She'd said so herself, and I know that she'd resolved herself to it. I also knew that I was just putting the pressure on myself here. This was all something I was taking on by my own choice, which made it even worse. But it wasn't like anyone could do anything about it for me.

"Hrm. Ark."

"Yes? Whoops?"

When His Royal Highness suddenly said my name, I turned around. I caught his fist in my hand, without any prior preparation, and with it coming at me from outside of my line of sight and from below, at a strange angle.

It probably goes without saying, but Prince Alphonse was skilled in almost everything, and he'd trained in self-defense to quite a high level. The punch he just did was sharp, and even Gale might not have been able to react to something thrown at him with such sneak-attack timing.

As I was stunned into silence, not sure why he'd suddenly done that. His Royal Highness gave me one of his usual smiles.

"That's the level of muscle memory you have. Do you think you'd lose that just because you were somewhere a little bit stricter than usual and with history?"

"I mean, I don't think 'a little bit' covers how strict this situation is, but... I mean, yeah... I get what you're trying to say."

I really didn't think it was okay to summarize a ceremony in the kingdom's oldest church in history conducted by priests who normally performed these services for royalty as just "a little bit stricter." But I could see what he was getting at.

I wasn't on a bloody battlefield, where a single mistake could cost me my life. He probably wanted to tell me that if my muscle memory could perform life-saving maneuvers under potentially fatal circumstances, then there was no way it would fail me here. The length of my training with them was completely different, but His Royal Highness himself had beaten them into me, so that probably helped. Thanks to that, I was able to calm down a little bit.

"In the first place, you try to shoulder too much. Even things that aren't there

yet."

"I try to shoulder too much?"

I knew I was taking on a lot of responsibility. But I hadn't intended to take on so much that someone would call me out on it.

But His Royal Highness just looked at me and nodded. "Yes. This ceremony isn't going to decide the rest of your entire life, you know. If it was, then everybody less skilled than you would be utterly miserable."

"I mean that's...true?"

"This is saying something," His Royal Highness continued, "but among all of the knights, you've got quite a good memory. Now, think of the married older knights... Or wait, some of them have messed up, but most of them have good marriages, don't they?"

"Y-Yeah... If they didn't, then things would've been pretty bad around now."

While most of the senior knights who went on about the marriage doctrine had flubbed things, the ones who didn't say anything seemed to have pretty good relationships—those guys were the majority. If they didn't have good relationships, then the knights as a whole just wouldn't be able to function with everyone in the middle of divorces. And that meant that the majority had done their wedding ceremonies properly.

"But didn't most of the senior knights have simpler ceremonies?" I asked.

"Don't worry about that. That just means that they had even less practice than you've got."

"Y-You're right, but..."

Thinking back, some of them had even been on night patrols literally up until the day before their wedding. If they could do that, they'd either practiced a ton, or hadn't needed much practice at all... And most of them had really happy family lives.

His Royal Highness continued as if he was reading my mind. "First off, God probably isn't there wanting to jump on every mistake we make. The important thing is that you *want* to do the ceremony properly. As long as you do, then

God will probably overlook some stuff."

"You're kind of being super blunt right now. Is it okay for you to say stuff like that?"

"Of course. God is a lot more tolerant than you think. Right, Father?"

When Prince Alphonse brought the priest into the conversation, he immediately nodded, despite how sudden it had been. Without any doubt.

Seeing their exchange, I felt as if I finally got what His Royal Highness was trying to tell me.

"Now that you put it like that, I don't think I'd thought about how God would feel about things like this."

"That's not like you," His Royal Highness chided. "It's not quite a 'know thine enemy, know thyself' thing, but you can't have much of a competition if you don't get a grip on who you're up against and what they think."

"It's not a competition, but I understand what you mean. God would probably be a bit insulted if I was unnecessarily on guard, wouldn't they? They sort of created us, after all."

But that didn't mean I was going to make light of things, of course. I'd treat today's proceedings with the respect it deserved, but I wouldn't fear it more than necessary. The same thinking applied to human relationships. This whole thing was like an extension of that.

"Say a child messed something up. It would be one thing if they'd been screwing around, but you wouldn't get angry with them if they were doing their best, would you? It's probably the same with God," His Royal Highness continued.

"I'm not sure whether that's an example that's okay for me to say I understand or not, but... It's true that I wouldn't get angry."

If it was like that, then I probably didn't need to get so worked up about it. It was strange how I'd come to feel so twisted up inside.

"And isn't there someone else you should be worrying about?"

"Yes, Nia... She wouldn't put all of the responsibility of the ceremony on me."

This time, I was able to answer Prince Alphonse's question without having to think. Yes, this ceremony wasn't just for me. It was for both me *and* Nia.

"So that's that. Her life is her life, and she should be the one shouldering it. It's just that she's asked you to take half of it. That's it. Though it's heavy, of course, and she's a smart woman, so she must understand that she'll be shouldering half of your life in return."

"It feels even heavier now that you say that."

I'd had vague thoughts about it before, but the way he put it out there in actual words made it sound pretty rough, especially the "shouldering half of my life" bit. It was one thing if it was for a mission, but the thought of someone shouldering your own life was scary because you didn't know how heavy it was. You'd worry that it might crush them...though Nia would probably be fine.

"Give it up. She must know exactly how heavy it is. You don't have the option of running away," Prince Alphonse said bluntly.

"Couldn't you have said that more nicely?" I shot back, but my mind was completely certain. More than anyone else, Nia didn't have the choice to run away. She was doing this to make a place for herself in this kingdom. So what good would getting scared do?

"Thank you, Your Highness. You've calmed me down."

"Yeah? Then get going."

"Yes!"

Spurred on by Prince Alphonse's words, I headed to the bridal waiting room where Nia was. It wasn't much of a walk, and once I got to the door, I gave it a little knock.

"Nia, can I come in?"

"Ah, I just finished getting ready... Go ahead."

When I asked, she immediately answered. From what I could hear from inside, they weren't rushing to clean things up, so she probably was, in fact, finished and not just saying it for my sake. I couldn't be sure about the "just finished" bit, but it'd be rude to ask.

"Then I'm coming in," I said, opening the door. I walked inside and immediately froze. "Oh."

"How does it look?" Nia asked bashfully, and the only thing I could do was nod my head.

The simple dark blue A-line dress perfectly suited Nia's tidy demeanor. The fabric changed under her bust, and the slowly widening skirt coupled with the embroidered crests on it made it look just like the clothing of a goddess.

I mean, she was my goddess, but...

She had a shawl just where the dress was nearly coming off the shoulder, and the way it hid her shoulders, neck, and neckline was slightly sexy, but also made her look quite elegant.

Her brown hair had grown a bit since we'd first met and was long enough to go slightly past her shoulders. She'd previously wondered if she should change it back to her original hair color, but upon confirming with the priest that dyed hair wouldn't be an issue, she'd left it brown. A silver hair ornament was neatly coiled within it. Part of the reason it was silver was because that was the best a viscount's wedding was allowed, but I also felt that it just suited Nia better.

She wasn't wearing any other accessories like bracelets or a necklace, so she shouldn't have looked too dazzling. The way she drew the eye and never let it go must have been because the outfit was bringing out her natural charm.

"It looks amazing on you. You're like a goddess."

"Hee hee, jeez, you didn't have to go that far... But thank you."

"I was being completely honest, though," I said when she got humble, and for once, Laura was nodding in agreement from her spot behind Nia.

Unlike a normal wedding dress, the one she was wearing put an emphasis on the ceremonial aspect. It gave her the vibes of a priestess, making her seem more mystical than usual. So I didn't think saying she looked like a goddess was very far off the mark.

Ahh, that must be why.

"With you in that, then I'm sure that God will accept our vows without any issue."

"It's really embarrassing for you to go that far..."

Nia was adorable when she was bashful. Absolutely adorable.

Wait, that wasn't the point.

"No, I didn't mean that as flattery, I really do think it. From your dress and decorations, you can tell just how seriously you're taking the ceremony. I'm sure God will get that, and there's no way they won't appreciate it."

His Royal Highness had said that God wasn't there watching for us to mess up. Seeing Nia like this made me finally feel like I understood. When someone showed their sincerity, it made you want to face them seriously. It was such an obvious thing that I was embarrassed I hadn't realized it sooner.

"Thank you, Nia. Seeing you has wiped away all my tension."

"I'm not really sure if I should say that's a good thing..." she said.

"Ah, no, I don't mean it like I'm discouraged or anything like that!"

I mean yeah, it'd be an insult to say that seeing her in her dress demotivated me. Nia wasn't serious, of course, giggling like she was just joking. Whatever. I was even less tense and mostly calmed down.

"Let's get going, then."

"Yes, let's."

It was around time for the ceremony, and when I held my hand out towards Nia, she took it with a smile.

Everything would be fine as long as I didn't forget the warmth of her hand. I had no proof of that, but still, it was what I thought.



After that, we left the waiting room together and headed to the church's ceremonial hall. Laura had accompanied Nia to the waiting room, but from this point on, it was just the two of us.

As we walked inside, there was a long white carpet stretching straight to the

altar. The guests—maybe I should call them witnesses—weren't in the ceremonial hall. They were sitting normally in the arena seats on the second floor. Seeing as Nia's identity was a secret, the only two in attendance were His Royal Highness and Pops.

Speaking of Pops, when I'd told him the truth about Nia beforehand, he'd fainted. I couldn't blame him. And now here he was, all alone beside Prince Alphonse and his bodyguard. He looked like he'd pass out with just the littlest poke.

Sorry, Pops. Just hold on a little bit longer.

Anyways. As soon as I'd walked inside the ceremonial hall, I was sure.

"I see, God does exist," I murmured quietly, and Nia nodded back.

God really was here. Looking at us. Warmly too. Which was why we did things in the right order, walking at the right speed.

It was *because* God was generous that we wouldn't take advantage of their generosity. If anything, we would pay our respects to it. God wasn't our enemy; they weren't some tyrant who would drop divine punishment on humans for the little things. As long as we were respectful and reverent, then we'd get the same in return. It was only natural.

It must have been the same for a marriage. Nia might have been a kind person, but I shouldn't take advantage of that. I had no intention to. I'd give her the respect and reverence she deserved, and we would compromise. We'd talk, tell each other our opinions, and reconcile our differences. Those little things must be necessary.

This ceremony was just us doing the same with God, though without using human words. With each and every step of the process, the true meaning of each action would be impressed upon our bodies.

We would swear to God.



"Sonia Halfa Sylvario," the priest said, once we reached the altar. "You will change your name to Nia Farquhar. Are you certain?"

"Yes. I, Sonia Halfa Sylvario, will change my name to Nia Farquhar."

The moment Nia responded to the priest's words, it felt as if a warm breeze blew. God had probably agreed. That meant the real time was upon us.

"Then, Ark McGuine. Do you vow to take Nia Farquhar as your wife for as long as you may live?"

"Yes. I, Ark McGuine, vow to take Nia Farquhar as my wife for as long as I may live."

"Then vow before God."

Urged on by the priest, I walked up to the altar just as I was taught. I stood before it, lifting the large needle that had been purified in holy water with both hands and lightly touching it once to my forehead, throat, heart, and stomach in turn. My thoughts, my voice, my heart, and my intentions—by touching the needle to where each was said to dwell, I showed God that I was telling the truth.

I wasn't sure if it was because I'd prepared myself or because of the atmosphere in the ceremonial hall that made me feel close to God, but I moved naturally. I absolutely wasn't lying. I felt as if I was telling God to do whatever they needed to be sure.

Lastly, I held the needle in my right hand and lightly pricked my left ring finger, letting a drop of blood drop into the chalice. That was the end of my part. Next up was, of course, Nia.

"Nia Farquhar. Do you vow to take Ark McGuine as your husband for as long as you may live?"

"Yes. I, Nia Farquhar, vow to take Ark McGuine as my husband for as long as I may live."

"Then vow before God."

At the priest's signal, Nia took a different needle and showed God that she was telling the truth just as I had.

The priest poured blessed wine into the chalice we'd both dropped our blood into. As he said a prayer, ripples suddenly unfurled across the surface of the wine... Was I just imagining how strong it looked, like it was shaking? The priest kind of looked a bit shocked too.

"You have gained God's approval," the priest eventually said. "From this point forward, Nia Farquhar will become Ark McGuine's wife, Nia McGuine. God blesses you. As long as you live hand in hand in sickness and in health, then God will watch over you. Do not forget it."

"Yes. We swear to live hand in hand in sickness and in health, and accept God's blessing."

Urged on by the priest, I drank half of the wine in the chalice.

Huh? What is this? It feels like I swallowed something warm along with the wine.

Apparently Nia felt the same thing, because her eyes widened in surprise when she did it too.

As we stood there in confusion, the priest cleared his throat to bring us back to reality.

"The wedding ceremony is hereby complete. Please, exit through that door."

"U-Understood."

There were a ton of things I wanted to ask, and it seemed like the priest wanted to say something too, but they weren't things we should discuss in the ceremonial hall. Urged on, Nia and I got back on track and followed the procedure to exit, safely leaving the hall.



"What was that?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

As soon as we'd left the ceremonial hall and met back up with His Royal Highness and Pops, Prince Alphonse questioned us. But we wanted to ask the same thing. And so, His Royal Highness, Pops, Nia, and I all looked towards the priest.

"This is the first time I've ever seen it so strong, so I cannot be sure, but..." he began, before telling us something shocking.

It turned out that when you had a ceremony inside somewhere as close to God as the first church, God would often literally bless you. But that was usually something small, something that only the priest would feel due to their experience. But the blessing Nia and I had gotten was big enough that not only the two of us felt it when we drank the wine but His Royal Highness felt it all the way from the second floor.

"As far as I am aware, that is the first time God has given such a strong blessing."

"How in the world..." I murmured.

It seemed God really liked Nia. Either that, or it was all because she was a member of the Sylvarian royal family. Unfortunately, the priest didn't know either. The one thing we were sure of was that we'd gotten a blessing that a veteran priest had never seen before.

"So basically, Ark's been given a body that won't die even when taking on unreasonable requests?"

"I-I don't know about that..." the priest mumbled in response to Prince Alphonse's words, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Yep. He was definitely half-serious with that. But that was okay.

"If it means sad and unhappy things won't reach Nia, then I'm grateful," I said easily, getting a look from His Royal Highness, Pops, and Laura like they'd just had sugared ginger shoved in their mouths. Why?

Seriously though, we were about to go to a territory where there was a high probability that we'd end up in danger. With that said, I wasn't going to go down without a fight, so of course I'd be happy about that.

"Well, whatever. Ark, I expect you'll work hard so you can have the real deal," said His Royal Highness.

"Yes, of course." I nodded immediately.

We were finally really moving forward. For the sake of conquering the

Kingdom of Sylvario—and for the sake of letting Nia have a massive wedding banquet without any regrets.

"I'll do my best too, okay?"

And more than anything, for Nia's sake—for her to keep smiling by my side.

This ceremony really was the beginning of our new life. Everything would start from this moment on, and I etched that fact straight into my heart.

Afterword

Nice to meet you everyone, I'm Ajigozen. Thank you so much for picking up this book of mine.

Incidentally, I had worked under the name "Iwashidukushi" in the past (iwashi meaning sardine), but a lot of people got the kanji wrong. A number of people mistakenly used the kanji for Tai (sea bream) or Maguro (Tuna) instead. It taught me a lot about what people think, like how maybe people are just bad at fish names or how people automatically assume I would use the kanji for a more auspicious or expensive fish instead of a cheap one.

Like, no, they weren't just being mean, they were serious.

But by the time I regretted it, it was already too late, and I'd already done too much work under that pen name to change it now, which is why the pen name I'm using this time is one that's harder to get wrong.

Anyway, this novel, written by someone like me who'd had an easily mistakable pen name, is one of my debuts. Yes, one of them. The truth is that I've got another one releasing through another publisher next month. Both of them got offers for a novel release around the same time, so in my heart, they're both my debut works... Thinking about it that way, I've got a pretty luxurious professional debut, huh?

By the way, the protagonist of my other story is a knight with the rank of viscount. The heroine is a princess from another country that is skilled, but was mistreated.

Yes, the protagonist of this novel...is a knight with the rank of viscount. The heroine is also (omitted).

I'm sure that some people might say I reused the same idea, but there's a reason for this! I had an idea for the short story that would be the basis of this work, wrote it, and then somehow it hit number one on the daily ranking. I got cocky, thought of another idea that'd work well with the same type of

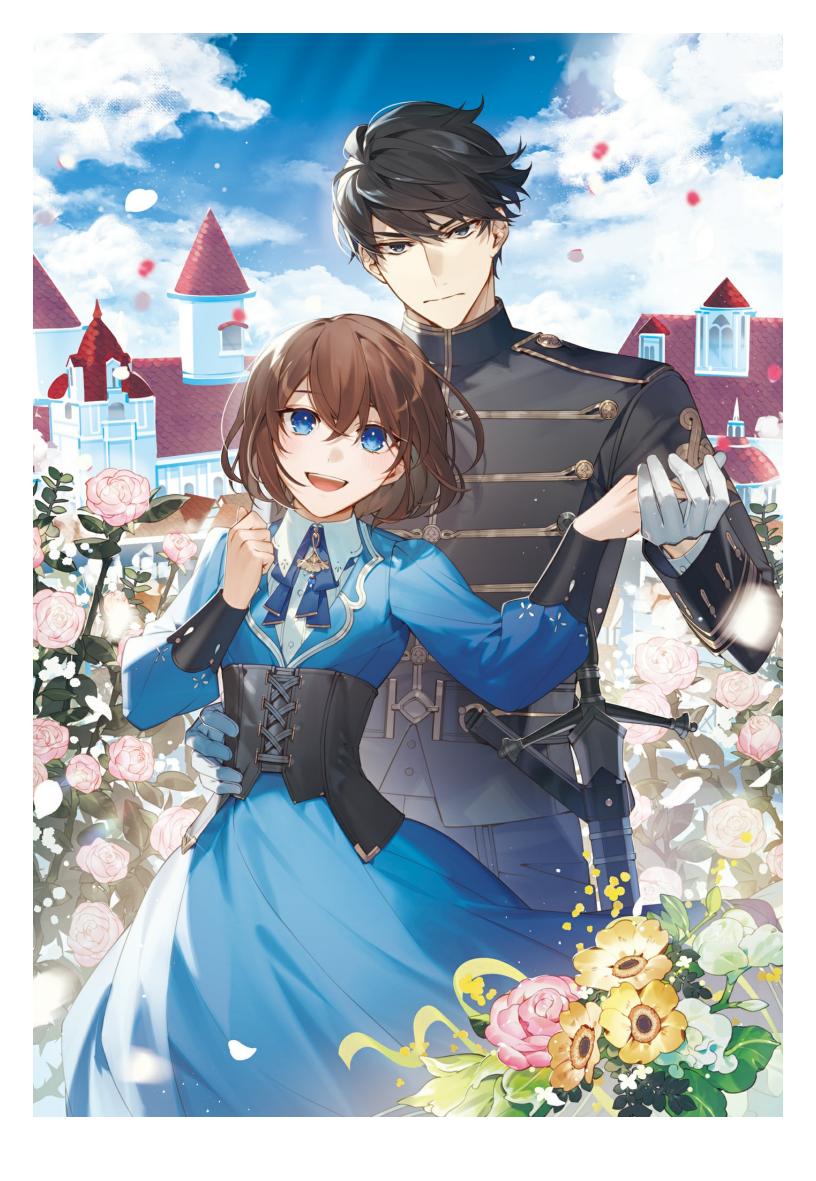
character, wrote it as a short story, and it hit number one on the daily ranking too!

After that, while they had minor differences in the details, I was lucky enough to get book offers for both stories. Honestly, I want to ask "How could that even happen?!" too.

But it did, and they've both ended up like this, so you never know where life'll take you. And even though the details were the same, both works ended up completely different. Stories are so strange.

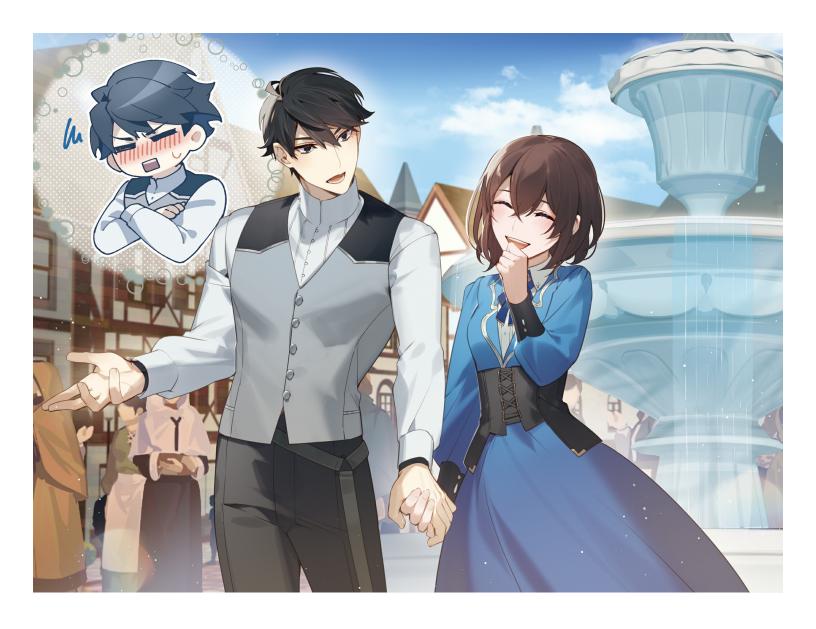
Oh yeah, another thing that's luxurious about my debut is the cover and insert images. I'm so grateful that Yura Chujo-sensei made Nia look so adorable and Ark so cool. I went around showing off the cover to people, and everyone called it cute! Ark's armor and weapon also had proper designs, and Ark was super Ark-like. (My vocabulary has vanished.)

This novel was super luxurious to me, and by being blessed with the luck that you've all picked it up makes it even moreso. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. And if possible, I pray that we'll meet in the next volume too.











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The Royal Hostage Has Vanished: The Black Wolf Knight Yearns for the Persecuted Princess Volume 1

by Ajigozen

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