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NOVEL
2



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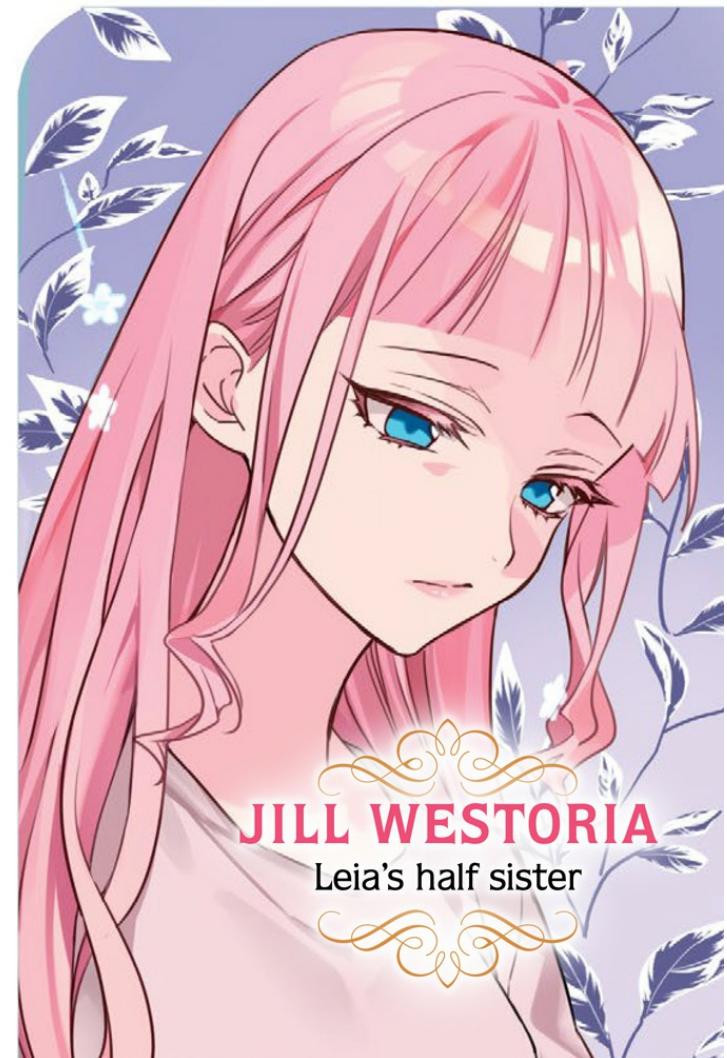
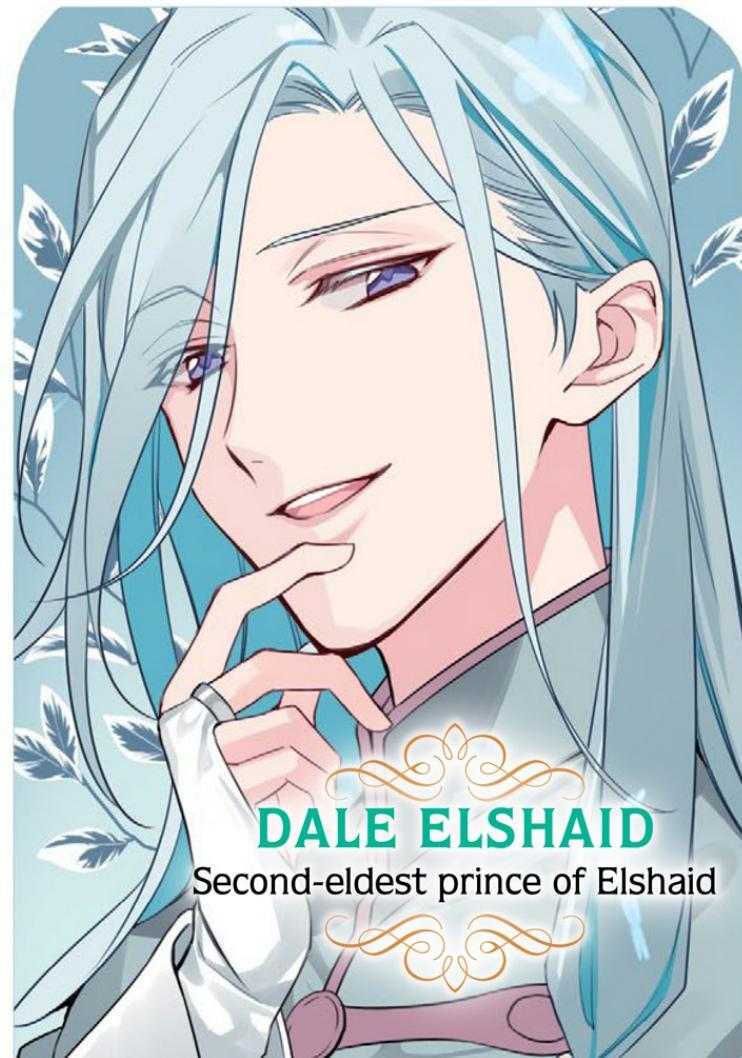
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I Abandoned My Engagement

BECAUSE MY SISTER IS A **TRAGIC HEROINE**,
BUT SOMEHOW I BECAME ENTANGLED WITH A
RIGHTEOUS PRINCE



WRITTEN BY
Fuyutsuki Koki

ILLUSTRATED BY
Haduki Futaba



Seven Seas Entertainment

I Abandoned My Engagement Because My Sister is a Tragic Heroine, but
Somehow I Became Entangled with a Righteous Prince (Light Novel) Vol. 2

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Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

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Prologue

“HIS MAJESTY THE KING is going to revoke the special rights of the dukes.”

“M-my goodness... I can’t believe he would do such a thing...”

“Johann, what is *reef oak*? Is it some sort of new candy?”

As soon as I closed the door to Prince Eric’s study, he revealed to Johann and Lingsha that the king was going to revoke the special rights of the most powerful lords of the land.

I can’t believe His Majesty would do something like this.

Even now, I only half believed it. The king was going to abolish the special rights of the highest-ranking nobles. It was a revolution that would shake the very foundation of Elshaid.

Johann’s face was soberly pale—he knew just how serious this was. The highest-ranking nobles—the dukes—had special privileges in the government. They had the power to appoint government officials and set their own laws on their lands, and they also enjoyed various tax exemptions. The lesser nobility had none of these rights.

Prince Eric had publicly stated that he wanted to carry out these reforms. That was why the four greatest noble houses—the Great Four—decided he was unfit to inherit the throne and sent assassins after him.

In other words, once the king’s desire to enact this revolution went public, he would be the one in mortal danger.

“This will shape the history of Elshaid...” Johann said. “It will be the biggest revolution in the kingdom since its founding. And since you have earnestly wished for this all along, won’t you also play a hand in its realization?”

“I would love nothing more than that, Johann. As I told Leia, I wish *I* were the one to trigger this reform. Hence my ambivalence.”

Eric had indeed told me the same thing earlier; it was very true to form for him. He was a pure idealist, which made him somewhat childish at times. It was only natural for him to feel ambivalent now that the goal he pursued with such devotion would be realized by his father.

“But, Your Highness, we are in a pivotal moment now. Once this revocation of rights goes public, the kingdom will fall into unrest. Now more than ever, we will need your deft hand to guide us.”

“Yes, you’re quite right, Johann. I should be grateful that my father granted my wish, and I will do everything I can to accomplish the task he has given me.”

“That’s the spirit, Your Highness. And I shall continue to eliminate the evildoers who would stand in your way and help you make your ideals manifest to the utmost of my abilities.”

Johann’s trust for Eric ran deep—a testament of their lifetime of friendship. He knew exactly what to say to the prince to inspire him.

“Oh yes, and your Lingsha will blast away anybody who gets in your way!”

“Thanks, Lingsha.”

Lingsha was the twelfth imperial princess of the Ren Empire, a massive nation in the east. She was a refugee in Elshaid and Eric’s bodyguard. Hardened by violence and mayhem beyond anything we could fathom, she was cool as a cucumber no matter what situation she found herself in.

“I trust all of you,” Eric said. “We have about one week until the revocation of rights will be announced. Until then, you must keep it a secret.”

The dukes would surely cause an uproar once the news reached their ears. Except for Philip’s father, Duke Gilbert, the other two dukes would surely condemn the king. Those were the same men who had openly condemned Prince Eric and backed his younger brother, Prince Dale, for the throne. That much was expected.

“It will take at least one month for the revocation of rights to go into effect

once it's announced. During that time, attempts on His Majesty's life will be inevitable, but I will do everything in my power to stop them."

Eric foresaw the same future I did. Elshaid's laws could not be changed overnight. Only His Majesty the King had the authority to revoke the rights of other nobles, but even his decree couldn't be enacted in a day. There would be a month-long transitional phase. If the king were to die during that time, his decree would be annulled—that was why Johann was so certain the kingdom would become quite unstable.

Prince Eric believes there's an even bigger puppet master pulling Jade Berklein's strings. And he thinks our best chance at catching this puppet master will be when His Majesty makes his decree.

The king was putting his own life on the line out of respect for his son, who had done the same. It was only natural that Eric would want to honor his father's courage by living up to his expectations.

"And I will do everything in my power to help you, Prince Eric."

"Thanks, Leia. I couldn't do this without you." Eric nodded. When I saw the look in his eyes, I remembered what he had told me yesterday.

"I want to be beside you when that day comes."

What was in his heart when he spoke those words? The way he was acting now—like his old self—made me wish I could look into his heart.

At the time, I thought our relationship was starting to progress. But now?

Maybe I was the only one who felt like we'd grown a bit closer. That thought saddened me a little.

I'm sure Prince Eric is just preoccupied with changing the kingdom right now.

He had already taken his gaze off me and was talking with Johann about the ramifications of the reform. I could have stayed and listened, but I had work to attend to.

"Your Highness, I'd better get going..."

"Ah, right. You have saintly duties? I'll come with you," Eric said.

It seemed he was still observing me to see if I was worthy of sainthood.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"And thank you for humoring me. Leia, if I'm being honest, I no longer feel it's necessary to observe you."

"Huh?"

"But I'm just not ready to let you out of my sight yet... So I do hope you'll indulge your prince's selfish whims."

The prince ambushed me with this revelation that I already had his trust and respect. He was as clear as mud to me; I had no idea what he was thinking.

"Leia?"

"Understood, Your Highness. We will depart immediately."

"Thanks. I'm grateful for everything you do."

His words were casual yet kind. We had grown closer—I was sure of it. I just needed to believe in myself and do my job.

With a smile, the prince opened the door and gestured for me to go ahead. I didn't realize until now that he always held the door for me.

With a little bow, I walked through the door to get ready to depart.

Chapter 1: The Ice Mage

“LIA, HAVE YOU HEARD of something called the Eye Scream?”

I had finished my saintly duties for the day and retired to Prince Eric’s study to be his bodyguard when he asked me about *ice cream* out of nowhere.

That’s new. Prince Eric has never taken an interest in that sort of thing before.

Eric was ultra-diligent, in constant pursuit of his own sense of justice. I never thought the day would come where he would utter the words “ice cream.”

“It’s the name of a dessert that’s quite popular in the royal capital right now. It’s cold like ice but sweet. People rave about its texture in particular.”

“An ice-cold sweet, you say? I just assumed it was the name of some sort of black-market weapon.”

“What a terrifying imagination you have, Your Highness. If people were gabbing about such a weapon outside a shop with a long line, wouldn’t you want to deal with *that* before the revocation of the dukes’ special rights?”

I never thought Eric’s ultra-diligence and detachment from reality would make him suspect ice cream, of all things.

While he had eaten at restaurants of the common people before, his brain was preoccupied with thoughts of preserving Elshaid’s peace and preventing his own assassination—it was tragic, really.

Lingsha did say ice cream was very good.

“Fair point. Well, would you like to go have some of this eye scream, then?”

“Er—I h-hope I didn’t say anything out of turn, Your Highness.”

“Not at all, but I saw it in your eyes. Your performance with Berklein blew me away, but aside from that, you have a terrible poker face.”

Oops. I let my true emotions show there.

I was embarrassed that the prince had seen me with a gluttonous look on my face. But when Lingsha had told me, “It melts in your mouth just like snow, oh yes,” I didn’t think anybody could have resisted the temptation.

Up until now, my mind had been focused on trying to stop Berklein’s conspiracy. I didn’t have the mental bandwidth to pay any heed to a certain shop in the capital that attracted long lines of eager customers.

I’m ashamed I let my feelings show, but it’s useless denying it now.

“Quite right, Your Highness, I do indeed want to try the ice cream. Are you sure it’s all right if you and I go together?” I asked, laying my true feelings on the line.

The prince nodded, “Of course. It’s a pity it’s not a secret weapon, but it’s good for a prince to acquaint himself with the fancies of the peasantry now and then.”

It was a very Prince Eric sort of answer.

Yet it was still surprising that he invited me on an outing. We had gone out together in the past—to spy on Jill to find out what she was up to and to get the materials we would need to lure Berklein into our trap—but this was different.

As this question lingered in my mind, Eric wrapped up his work early and escorted me into a carriage.

“By the way, this dessert that’s cold as ice—how do they make it?” Eric asked as the carriage jostled us.

I was sure this was the question on the tip of everyone’s tongue. No one had ever heard of a frozen dessert before.

“The artisan who invented the treat can use ice magic.”

“Ooh, that’s impressive. So they use their magic to make their desserts?”

“From what I’ve heard, they have a ring that boosts their ice powers. Ever

since acquiring that ring, they've gained the ability to unleash powerful bursts of ice magic and manipulate it at will."

"Interesting. I didn't know such a magic artifact existed."

I could use magic myself—to put up barriers, heal people, and all other sorts of things—but even I was surprised when I learned what that artisan was capable of. I'd heard most of this from Lingsha, and it made me quite curious about how that magic worked. Eric and I were still talking about it when we arrived at the ice cream shop.

Wow, look at the size of that line! I suppose Prince Eric could use his position to help us skip it...

"Well, this sure is popular. We'd better secure our place in line."

"Yes, Your Highness."

That was just like Prince Eric. He hated bending the rules, so he never used his privileges for his own benefit. I doubted it ever even crossed his mind to do so.

"He really is straight and true..."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"Er, no, Your Highness."

We got in the back of the line. Standing beside him like this had come to feel very familiar to me. We were in for a long wait, but I never felt bored in the company of the prince. We simply waited in line and felt summer's heat upon us as we looked forward to the icy treat.

After only a few minutes, we were already halfway through the line, despite its length. That led me to believe that this ice cream could be quickly served. It was an especially hot day, but everyone waiting wore eager smiles on their faces.

Let me add that we were dressed inconspicuously, especially the crown prince, so nobody would recognize us. The nobility were known to patronize this shop, but a visit from a prince—and a prince who was, until yesterday, the

target of assassins—might end up causing a fuss for the shop.

Luckily, since nobody could fathom the infamously stern prince eating ice cream, all he needed to do was change his clothes to become completely unrecognizable.

“Leia, look. I see the customers are taking their purchases outside of the shop.”

Eric pointed at a customer who was walking away with a container of ice cream in hand. Upon closer observation, there was a small window beside the shop entrance where several patrons with tickets stood.

“Yes, Miss Lin told me you can take the ice cream away with you. According to her, there’s tiny crystals of ice inside that keep the ice cream cool so you can take it with you someplace else.”

“Hmm. Interesting. I suppose that’s another use of the ice magic. What a great business model. That way, even the patrons who can’t visit the store can still enjoy the product.”

Eric was quite impressed by the ice cream shop’s business acumen.

He’s enjoying himself more than I thought he would.

The prince stroked his chin as he watched the shop operate. Now that the intense barrage of assassins was over, I hoped that there would be more days like this in his future. They needn’t be special days, just days where Eric could live in peace.

But disarray was not far into the kingdom’s future. As soon as the king announced that the most powerful noblemen were getting their special rights revoked, Eric’s days would be peaceful no longer.

“One thing still puzzles me.”

“Um, is everything all right, Your Highness?”

While I was falling into an anxiety spiral over the coming political revolution, Eric regarded me with a grave look. Did he sense something was amiss about

this shop? Was there an assassin lurking in the shadows?

“It’s about Lingsha. If she could have brought the treat back to the palace for me, why didn’t she?”

“Ohh, so *that’s* all. And yes, Miss Lin did consider it, but the little crystals of ice only last half a day. She had other matters to attend to on the day she bought it, so she was unable to bring you back a sample, I’m afraid.”

“Aha, now that makes sense. I’m sorry I doubted her. Huh. So it only lasts half a day...”

If you asked me, magic ice rocks that lasted half a day were already an impressive feat. I could use temperature magic myself, but the effects did not hold for several hours. That must mean the artisan who made the ice cream had to be incredibly skilled at manipulating the cold.

Now I really want to know what this artisan is like. I don’t even know their gender.

There were no such people present at my saint exams. One had to be incredibly skilled in magic to become a saint, but that didn’t mean every skilled female mage was trying to become one. In other words, it was equally likely that the ice cream maker was a woman.

“It’s almost our turn,” Prince Eric remarked.

“Yes, and I’m afraid I’m going to have a difficult time settling on a flavor.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, they do have an abundance of flavors to choose from. I suppose that’s why some people buy more than one.”

As Eric’s eyes danced over the variety of ice cream, he looked like a typical young man. Johann had confided in me that as a little boy, the prince had burdened himself with the responsibility of ruling the kingdom and had little room in his life for fun. I found that admirable for a prince. At the very least, I knew he would never abuse his powers for his own personal gain. Here he was, trying to be a good prince and changing his kingdom for the better.

I was sure that when he became king, his subjects would be happy. Not a bone in my body doubted it.

But...would there be any room for Eric's happiness? I was starting to realize that if Eric sacrificed his own happiness for his subjects, it might not be enough for me to just watch over him and say nothing.

"Leia... Hellooo? Can you hear me?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Your Highness. I just drifted off."

"That isn't like you. Has the heat gotten to you?"

"Maybe it has, yes."

I really hadn't been myself today. It wasn't like me to get lost in my thoughts and miss what the prince said to me.

There was no point to my worrying over the emotional well-being of the prince in the first place. I was his bodyguard, nothing more.

"Then I hope the ice cream brings much needed relief from the heat. Let's go inside."

"Yes, Your Highness. I'm so sorry for making you worry."

When we first met, I didn't realize how sincere the kindness of the prince was, but now I'd gotten so used to it that I sometimes forgot.

In these fleeting moments of tranquility, I renewed my faith that someday this would be the norm for him. And that I would stay by his side watching over him until it was.

"Hello there! Step right this way."

A smiling waitress led us to our seats. My heart fluttered with excitement—I was finally going to taste ice cream, the frozen treat that was taking the royal capital by storm.

I used to dislike sweets, but thanks to the delicious array of desserts Lingsha

found, my aversion had been whittled away. Thanks to her, I was sure to enjoy myself today.

“Well, it looks like you’re right, Leia. They do have a wide variety of flavors. It’s difficult to choose.”

“Their most popular flavor is vanilla, followed by chocolate. They also have seasonal flavors like peach, pear, and grape. Oh my goodness, they even have cactus.”

I heard the shop boasted a variety of flavors, but the selection was more than I could’ve ever bargained for.

Which one should I try? Even more importantly, which flavor will Eric choose? I thought as I watched the prince scrutinize the menu. At that moment, I realized I didn’t know much about Prince Eric—his favorite foods, music, hobbies, and more were still a mystery. I had known him all this time without even asking about these basic personal preferences. So I was especially curious to discover which flavor he would go with.

“Hmm... There are too many flavors. I can’t decide. Leia, just choose something for me.”

“No, that simply won’t do!”

“Uh, what?” Eric’s eyes peered up at me over his menu, wide with surprise.

Oh shoot! I was so startled, I gave the most bizarre response possible.

I withered under the Prince’s bewildering stare.

But I couldn’t help it, this was my perfect chance to learn something new about him. What flavor of ice cream would the steadfast prince choose? I was invested!

Okay... I know what to say!

“Your Highness, is it prudent to give up in the face of a decision like this? I’d wager you’ll face much more trying decisions in the future.”

“Er... But it’s just dessert.”

Yeah, it was a dumb idea from the start. I thought all he needed was a push, but I suppose it wasn’t meant to be...

“Then again, you do raise a valid point...” Eric said. “All right, I’ll order vanilla.”

Just when I was about to give up on learning something about the prince, he actually accepted my strange advice.

What a relief. Now I know something new about the prince.

“It *is* the most popular flavor,” he added. “According to the precepts of logic, it should thus be the most delectable one.”

I should’ve known. That was the kind of man he was. Majority rule was one of the fairest means of making a decision. Of course, Eric wasn’t so foolish that he would discard the concerns of the minority, but it was in keeping with his character to follow the majority for a decision like this.

For now, I decided to ignore whether or not that was a good thing...

It’s still a small victory. I learned something new about the prince.

“I love fruit, so I’ll go with the grape.”

“All right.” He gestured for the server. “Pardon me. We’re ready to order.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

Eric made our order. All the staff here were well trained, friendly, and polite. It seemed this shop owed its popularity to more than just its unique product.

“Now, I’d like my ice cream served in a container I brought. Can you test it for poison for me?”

“P-poison?” the server and I stammered in unison.

That was my fault. I shouldn’t have let the prince place the order.

Of course! Prince Eric is used to having all his food tested for poison.

Testing his food for poison should’ve been my duty. Johann had done just that

when we were at a restaurant in the past. What a *fine* bodyguard I was to not consider that. Now I had to think of a way of keeping the server from figuring things out.

Maybe I'll just have to tell him he's the crown prince. Unless...

"Very well, sir. When I bring your ice cream, I'll taste it at the table first."

"Good. Thank you."

"What?!"

That was probably the most surprising twist of the day. The server actually agreed to Eric's ridiculous request to taste the ice cream for poison.

Their extreme dedication to their patrons is almost awe-inspiring...

Anxiety threatened to boil over within me these past few weeks, so when the prince cracked a bright smile, it healed me to the core. My heart flooded with joy, I sat with him until our ice cream arrived.

"Here you go, Miss. Grape ice cream. And this is your vanilla ice cream, sir."

White icy vapor danced in the air around us. My ice cream was a translucent white shot through with glittering purple, like amethysts in snow. The sweet, icy confection artistically arranged on my plate held a mystique the likes of which I'd never encountered before.

"And now I'll test yours for poison, sir."

"Thanks, and sorry to be such a bother."

After the taste-testing, Eric looked down at his slightly misshapen mound of ice cream and gave a satisfied smile.

Well, I suppose this is to be expected: A prince cares more that his food is safe than how pretty it looks. Anyway, I finally get to eat ice cream! I'd better dig in before it melts.

We each took a spoonful.

“Oh... It’s delicious!” I cried. “It’s so velvety and melts as soon as it touches my tongue. Even though it’s cold, it doesn’t feel like ice—how interesting!”

“Yes, it’s very good. This shop does wonderful work. This is a flavor that will make many people very happy.”

My body, which was previously screaming from the summer sun, forgot all about the heat instantly after just one bite of the ice cream. It was like magic; that was how alluring the dessert was. It soothed a weary soul in a way my magic never could. I was thoroughly impressed.

“Say, Leia... I think I’m having very shameless thoughts right now.”

“Me too, Your Highness...”

I was dying of curiosity. I just had to know how the vanilla tasted—and the prince felt the same way about the grape. His eyes were glued to my ice cream.

We had only one recourse: sharing.

Hm? Whoa, hold your horses! If we share ice creams, that means I'll have to put my spoon in His Highness's mouth...

I felt my body temperature rise. My imagination filled me with shame.

“Won’t you give me a spoonful of your grape ice cream?” he asked. “Of course, you can have a bite of my vanilla as well.”

Me, eat his vanilla ice cream? Does that mean the prince will feed me?

I was eating cold ice cream, yet my body was burning up. I never dreamed this would happen. My heart raced, sending the blood rushing through my veins.

What should I do? I can't turn down the kind offer of a prince... Okay.

I took a deep breath, scooped a spoonful of my ice cream, and held it out to the prince.

“Here’s my plate. Can I borrow your plate for a minute?”

“Hweh?!”

Amid my panic attack, the prince casually held out his plate of ice cream to me as he reached for mine.

“Mm? Weren’t we each going to share a bite of ice cream?” he asked.

“R-right, yes, of course! We’ll share...”

Totally not the way I pictured it!

For some reason, I felt terribly disappointed. I didn’t know why, but I felt like a rug had been swiped out from under me.

Well, no matter... Ooh! It’s a lot tastier than I imagined.

The vanilla ice cream was refreshing enough to yank me out of my pit of despair. It was a perfect balance of sweet, floral vanilla and rich, creamy milk. It was just as exquisite as the grape.

I’d assumed the vanilla would be too sweet, but I was wrong. No wonder it’s the best seller here.

We enjoyed our ice creams to the very last drop with smiles pasted on our faces.

“AHHH!!!” We heard an earsplitting shriek from the table behind us.

“Huh?!”

And just like that, our fleeting moment of bliss came to an end.

“S-somebody’s fainted!”

“What in the world is happening here?!”

“He collapsed in agony the minute he took a bite of ice cream—I saw it!”

Amid the clamor, the shop’s patrons craned their necks to stare at a man who had collapsed at his table. I had no idea what had happened, but I knew I probably needed to act swiftly to save him.

“Pardon me...” I quickly examined the man. “Oh dear...I think it’s poison. If

untreated, his throat will swell, his temperature will drop, and he'll stop breathing..."

From the look of his lips, I knew he had been poisoned. I needed to counter the poison before I could do anything else...

Funny how learning Anti-Poison to stop Jill would come in handy at a time like this.

"O Light Spirit, exorcise evil shadows!"

I laid a hand on his convulsing chest and activated my Anti-Poison spell. Silvery light enveloped him, and his complexion soon improved.

Oh, good...

Eric, who was beside me the whole time, said, "Good work, Leia. I think he'll be all right now."

"Yes, Your Highness. He'll need to spend the remainder of the day resting, but I doubt he suffered any lasting harm."

If I'd waited a moment longer, he might have died, so we were lucky that I was able to respond so quickly.

"I am surprised, though. Why was *this* man poisoned?"

"Prince Eric, do you know him?"

Eric seemed to recognize the victim. I had thought he looked like a nobleman, but I had no idea who he was.

"He's Baron Almer, the father of your sister's friend, Carol Almer. Haven't you met him?"

"Oh, so he's Baron Almer... I'm sorry, but I've never met Jill's friends."

According to Berklein's confession, Baron Almer was the one who had provided Jill and Berklein a place to meet in secret. He was a diehard Berklein supporter—he had done everything to serve the man up until his arrest.

In other words, he had aided in the attempts on Prince Eric's life.

“Hack-hack! Oh-oh-oh...!”

The young lady who was in a daze beside the baron moaning in pain suddenly cried out, “Father! Are you all right?! Oh, thank goodness!”

So she must be his daughter Carol. Jill’s friend...

“Yes, I somehow pulled through. Thanks to this lady here, er...”

“Leia Westoria, sir.”

Both father and daughter’s faces clouded over at the sound of my name.

Was it rude of me to introduce myself?

After all, I was the one who helped Eric put their family friend in the dungeon. As ardent Berklein supporters, I wouldn’t be surprised if the entire house hated me for it.

“Leia Westoria! The one who abused not only Jill but Lord Jade as well!” Carol cried, glaring at me. It sounded like she believed the lie that I abused Jill.

So they really did hate me. And since she thought I abused her friend on top of everything else, Carol hated me even more.

“Leave her be. She just saved your father’s life—don’t ruin it by getting yourself thrown in the dungeon.”

“Un-unhand me at once!”

“Carol, stop it! Do you know who this man is?! He’s Crown Prince Eric!”

“P-Prince Eric?!”

Eric grabbed Carol’s arm, holding her still. And Baron Almer, given his position, recognized his prince upon sight.

Shocked by the realization that the crown prince was personally restraining her, Carol began to quiver.

“The crown prince is at an ice cream parlor?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Wait, did you say Prince Eric? What’s he doing here?”

Uh-oh, everyone’s started to gossip about Prince Eric. Maybe we should leave. The gendarmes should arrive soon anyway.

I didn’t know why Baron Almer was poisoned, but it wasn’t our job to question him. Eric wasn’t a victim in this either, so it was probably best we left as soon as possible.

“So, Baron Almer, what brings you to this ice cream parlor?” the prince asked.

“Prince Eric? We don’t need to question him—let the police handle it.”

“Leia. I know what you’re trying to say, but I have a vested interest in the person who tried to poison him. I have a feeling I ought to know who did it.”

He has a vested interest? Is Prince Eric trying to say he believes the poisoner and Berklein’s puppet master are somehow connected?

I couldn’t follow his logic, but I knew he wouldn’t be swayed. If I wanted to settle the matter before the commotion grew out of control, I needed to help Eric do whatever it was he wanted to do.

“Baron Almer, can you answer my question?”

“Y-yes, Your Highness. I got summoned to the palace today for questioning with my daughter. We stopped here on our way home. She heard rave reviews about the ice cream and wanted to try it.”

Aha. So they were brought to the palace for questioning to confirm the findings of the investigation.

After Berklein’s arrest, his house was dismantled—and a truth was uncovered. The Berklein manor was in a territory far away from the royal capital, but there were Berklein loyalists in the royal capital who had been aiding him.

These loyalists did everything from providing secret meeting places for Berklein’s use, like Baron Almer did, to giving him financial backing. In exchange for their help, Berklein used his special rights as a duke to enrich his cronies.

Because of that, his loyalists were brought in for questioning as the nature of their relationship meant they might also have helped him hire the assassins. But since the members of the Almer house had been released without a hitch, that had to mean they were deemed to have no connection to the crimes.

After listening to Baron Almer's explanation, Eric thoughtfully folded his arms. "I knew Berklein had many supporters, but I heard they aren't a united front. It's possible that Berklein attempted to silence Baron Almer before he could reveal anything inconvenient."

Prince Eric suspected there was internal discord in Berklein's camp. It was certainly true that Berklein's arrest had fostered apprehension among his supporters. If you were found guilty of aiding in a plot to assassinate a royal, you would lose more than your lands—you could lose your life. If Baron Almer had some information that was inconvenient to Berklein's cronies, it was only natural that they would try to eliminate him.

But why would they try to kill him in an ice cream parlor, of all places? I feel like they would've gone for a less conspicuous place to assassinate him.

This attempted poisoning posed many unanswered questions. Eric wanted to find the culprit himself, but I wasn't sure how he was going to do that.

"Prince Eric, the gendarmes have given us permission to begin cross-examinations."

"Good work, Johann. Well, let's go hear what he has to say."

A while later, the gendarmes came running to us along with Johann, whom Eric had summoned. Everyone working or eating at the ice cream parlor was questioned by the police while the rest of us returned to the palace.

Their primary suspect at the moment was the owner of the ice cream parlor, an ice magic user. Eric wanted to hear firsthand what the man had to say, so he had asked the police permission to conduct his own questioning.

Baron Almer was in pain the moment he took his first bite of ice cream, so it makes sense that they'd question the person who made the ice cream first... But is the case really that open-and-shut?

It would've been easy for the shop owner to put poison in the baron's ice cream, but he wouldn't have tried to murder someone in his own shop. It was far too risky. Not only would he be the number one suspect, it would tarnish his store's reputation. I failed to see why he would make such a choice despite these drawbacks.

"Leia, I'm sure you have the same skepticism I have. That's precisely why I wanted to speak directly with the shop owner."

"Yes, you're right, it would be fastest to hear his side of the story directly."

It was futile trying to imagine a motive I didn't understand, so I joined Eric in questioning the owner of the ice cream parlor.

"Wow, I certainly never expected the crown prince himself to grace my shop with his presence."

"I don't see what's so strange about it—your shop is highly praised. It's popular not only among the peasantry but the nobility as well."

The ice cream parlor owner was a man with a pale face and long dark hair. I heard he was only eighteen years old, just like me.

He gazed at us with vacant eyes. He looked lifeless—so lifeless that, I hated to say it, he was not cut out for the service industry.

"Highly praised, you say... Well, not after today, I'd wager. Who wants to come to a shop with poison-flavored ice cream? Especially since I, the shop owner, am the prime suspect!"

With a self-deprecating smirk, the shop owner lamented the end of his business. He seemed to believe it would be impossible to open shop again after being suspected of a major crime.

He seems to have given up on proving his innocence. Most people in his position would plead their case, but he's showing no such inclination.

Why was that? Had he given up *because* he did it? Or did he have little faith in the investigative abilities of the police? Either way, he believed he wouldn't be able to recover from this.

"If we clear your name, you'll have no problems reopening," Eric said, his voice resolute.

"Crown Prince, with all due respect, there's no coming back from a reputation falling into the gutter."

"You think so? Well, I don't. You are the only person in this world who can make that delicious ice cream."

Neither Eric nor I knew much about running a business, so the shop owner could very well have been right. Even if we cleared his name, it could be difficult for his reputation to recover.

But his ice cream really was delicious. One of a kind, even. So I felt inclined to believe Eric's claim that he would have no problems reopening.

Still, that's only if he's innocent. If he did poison the ice cream, losing his business would be the least of his worries—he would likely be sentenced to death.

The fact was, he was the prime suspect right now.

I personally doubted he was the assassin, but I couldn't prove it. I wondered what Eric thought about the situation.

"I am honored by your words, Your Highness, but my ice cream really isn't that grand. Anybody who can use ice magic can make it."

"Hmmm... Is that true, Leia?"

He was clearly being modest. For a start, few people could even use magic, so anybody with even a modicum of magical talent was highly valued, even if they were a peasant. And even if they were gifted with magic, not just anybody

could use that magic to make a confection. Finally...

"I've seen with my own eyes just how advanced one's ice magic would need to be to create something like ice cream, Your Highness. At the very least, it's beyond my abilities."

The soft texture, the cooling containers that let customers carry the ice cream home—not only was he a great chef, but he surely possessed great magic to accomplish those feats.

"There you have it," Eric said. "You've heard of Leia Westoria, I presume? Even she, a saint, says nobody else comes close to your talent."

"She is merely being modest."

"No, *you* are," Eric argued.

Was he downplaying his own abilities? Being modest as the prince said? Or was it something else?

I had the impression that this shop owner didn't want to acknowledge his own arcane talent.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say, Your Highness. Does my magic have something to do with this crime?"

"Yes, I'm certain it does."

The shop owner gasped.

He was a powerful mage, but I didn't see how that had anything to do with this crime. Yet Eric's sea blue eyes saw through everything. The shop owner's eyes widened with unease.

"Johann, tell me about his father."

"The suspect's name is Nash Hoffman. His father, Gates Hoffman, has published several academic papers at the Royal Academy as a premiere magic scholar."

So he was Gates Hoffman's son. Gates Hoffman was considered among the

top three mages in Elshaid. I heard that he had passed away about half a year ago, but his legacy was so monumental that news of his passing had been hushed.

Now I see—the son of a great magic scholar having a talent for magic is nothing out of the ordinary.

Nash Hoffman was the owner of the ice cream parlor. He had been so modest about his own magic abilities because he didn't want to live in his father's shadow. I wasn't quite sure why, but I knew there was more to it than that.

"I don't see what my father has to do with any of this."

Prince Eric exhaled through his teeth. "Nash Hoffman, you'd be wise not to underestimate the investigative abilities of my subordinates. Your father's area of study was *Death Poison*—taboo magic. He wrote a document detailing it, and you sold that to Berklein, didn't you? Through Baron Almer, that is."

After a moment, Nash sighed, threw up his hands in defeat, and said, "You're good. Hard to believe you've unearthed that much already."

I was also surprised that Johann was capable of getting that far into the investigation in such a brief window of time. He probably already deduced some of the puzzle from his investigation of Berklein, but it was still quite a feat.

Even so, this linked Nash to Baron Almer and Berklein. He now had a very clear motive to kill Baron Almer, since he was privy to that inconvenient truth.

"That's partly how you funded this ice cream parlor, isn't it?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Duke Berklein—wait, he isn't a duke anymore, is he? *Berklein* told me that he wanted the document to prevent the spell from leaking out and to protect Elshaid from evil magic. I was deceived."



Now Nash was claiming that Berklein had deceived him. If that were true, it would be cruel to blame him.

But what is this sense of wrongness I'm feeling? I think he's still hiding something from us.

"I see. Then you tried to kill Baron Almer to cover up the fact that you sold the taboo magic documents to Berklein? Or was it something else?"

"So you *do* suspect me, Your Highness?"

"No, I haven't drawn any conclusions yet. I stopped making snap judgments a while ago; I've seen the harm it can cause."

Eric glanced at me sideways and nodded. He was recalling what had happened between us.

He's right. No matter how suspicious Nash seems, it's wrong to accuse him without any proof. It's possible that one of Berklein's cronies or somebody else was behind the conspiracy.

Eric didn't make snap judgments anymore because he felt remorseful for what happened between us. I already knew his feelings, but I still felt proud to see him follow through on them.

"Then, do you think I'm innocent, Your Highness?"

"I haven't made up my mind. I'm sorry, but I don't trust easily. Besides, you're still hiding something, aren't you? You're either protecting somebody else or hiding information that would hurt your case—I'd appreciate it if you told us everything."

"I...don't know what you're talking about."

We both believed that Nash was still not being entirely forthright. It was inconceivable that he would try to cover for somebody else while he was suspected of attempted murder, so it was more likely that he was hiding some fact that would inconvenience him. However, since Eric wasn't entirely certain that this was the case, he drew no conclusions.

“According to the police report, you smoke cigars, don’t you?”

“I have enjoyed a cigar on occasion, yes.”

“I heard that you were trying to light a cigar right before your arrest and happened to incinerate your ledger—is this true?”

“What can I say, I was nervous. Someone nearly got murdered in my shop.”

He burned his account books? The timing was just too perfect. He had to have been trying to cover something up. Perhaps he was trying to hide that Berklein gave him money.

“The documents on taboo magic weren’t enough to pay for your ice cream shop—Baron Almer’s testimony confirmed that.”

Nash fell silent.

“Your father’s obsession with his research left him in severe debt—he must have left you a paltry inheritance, if any. Johann, look into the purchase of this shop. We might learn something.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Prince Eric seemed to believe we’d dig up the truth by looking into the shop’s purchase.

What a horrible thing to happen when the prince and I finally got to go on a nice outing.

I was a little disappointed, but when I saw how seriously Eric was taking this case, I felt compelled to aid him in the investigation.

Several days passed, and we still had no answers.

Nash hadn’t broken his silence either. There had to have been a reason why the details of his purchase of the ice cream parlor would hurt him if revealed.

Prince Eric believes this attempted murder is somehow connected with the

mastermind behind his own assassination attempts. At the very least, we do know it's connected with Berklein.

As I walked to Eric's study, I ruminated on the case. The prince had always been the target of attempted murders—too many to count—but all those assassination attempts were always thwarted, so this case of a successful attempt was uncharted territory for us.

Our main suspect, Nash, was an ultra-powerful mage. We still didn't know for sure that he was guilty, and he was not cooperating with our investigation. Although he denied his guilt, he refused to talk, and we didn't even know why.

“Hello, Miss Leia, are you going to go see my brother?”

“Oh, hello there, Prince Dale. I apologize again for disturbing you at work the other day.”

Prince Dale's greeting in the hallway brought me back to the present. He was Eric's younger brother and the second prince of Elshaid. His friendly personality made him popular with his subjects—even the upper classes revered him. Except for Duke Gilbert, they all openly backed him for the throne instead of Eric.

“Oh, it's all right, the matter I was attending to was rather quick and easy. I determined your errand had priority, so you have no need to worry,” Dale reassured me with a smile.

A while ago, he had surrendered over some documents I needed. He had been investigating something on Eric's behalf by order of His Majesty the King.

“Is my brother well?”

“Yes, I've never heard of him being ill since I started living here.”

“Glad to hear it. He tends to work too hard, so I would appreciate it if you kept an eye on him.”

Dale was very mindful of his brother's well-being. I often had the impression that Eric pushed himself too far.

Protecting Prince Eric was my job. I didn't know if he would heed any of my advice, but I figured that if he was hurting himself, I would speak up.

"Understood, Your Highness. If I ever sense Prince Eric overdoing it, I will give him a gentle nudge to stop."

"Leia, you've changed a little. Has my brother opened up to you?"

"Uh, what? Did I say something strange, Your Highness?"

All I did was answer normally, yet Dale seemed to think I was different and that it was due to Eric opening up to me. *He might be right.*

Still, it was Eric who had changed, not me. So why was Dale saying such things?

"Oh, of course not. I was only saying that your kindness soothed the pain in my brother's heart."

"Oh..."

"I heard you two went out yesterday. He was never the sort of person to go on an outing to relax, so I was relieved to hear it."

Well, an attempted murder happened during our "relaxing outing," so it would be odd to call it that. But Dale's compassion for his brother was clear. I had suspected him of aspiring for the throne in the past, but that was likely a baseless fear. Still, I thought it was a bit of an overreaction to be relieved simply by hearing the prince and I had gone on an outing.

"Please, Your Highness, don't put too much faith in me. I *wish* I could relieve all the stress he carries just by going on an outing with him."

"Don't be so modest. In fact, I envy my brother. I wish you and I could sit down and have a nice dinner together."

"Oh, I am honored, Your Highness."

Dale wants to go out to dinner with me? The statement was so unexpected, I had no idea how to respond. What did he mean, exactly? Could he have his

suspicions about Eric that he wanted to look into? Or was he just being polite?

Almost certainly, he's just being polite... Prince Dale is a very kind man. I'm sure he's just saying that to flatter me.

Either way, I decided not to read too much into it.

"If you don't mind, Leia, would you have dinner with me tomorrow night? There's a new restaurant I would love to visit with you."

"Ehm...tomorrow, Your Highness?"

I was in shock. After I just assured myself he wasn't serious, he outright invited me to dinner tomorrow.

I was embarrassed by my awkward answer. As I cautiously peered back up at Dale, I detected a hint of guilt in his smile.

"Sorry, you're right, tomorrow is a bit soon. I didn't mean to offend—I can ask again some other day."

"Oh, no, you didn't offend me, Your Highness! I would be honored to accompany you to dinner."

"Great! I can't wait to spend some time with you, Leia!"

His offer accepted, Dale's eyes widened with a surprise that gradually melted into joy. But, to be honest, I felt uncomfortable that he was so eager to have dinner with someone like me.

I don't think I've ever seen Prince Dale smile like that before... This might actually be his true smile.

"Well, I'll have a servant tell you later where and when to meet me tomorrow."

"Understood, Your Highness. I'm deeply honored."

And so, I walked the rest of the way to Eric's study with a dinner date with Dale at the back of my mind.

“Hmm...”

When I entered Eric’s study, I found him with his brows knit in thought as he studied a document. I was about to tell him about Dale, but I didn’t want to disturb his concentration.

Prince Eric has been like this for the past few days. Ever since Johann dug up some information on the case, the prince has been constantly poring over every bit of it with that uneasy look on his face.

It wouldn’t be much longer before His Majesty announced the revocation of the dukes’ special rights. I was sure Eric wanted to solve the mystery before then. Not only would it be more difficult to act once the kingdom fell into discord, but he would have a heap of other problems to deal with as well.

“Leia...sorry I’ve not been very easy to be around lately.”

“It’s all right, Your Highness. I understand.”

“Oh, good. So...any new thoughts on this case?”

Eric wanted my insight. To be frank, I didn’t know much, but that wouldn’t do for an answer. So I tried to find the right words for what I was thinking.

“This might be obvious, but I don’t think anybody with a shop that popular would try to kill someone in it. That’s what nags at me the most.”

As Eric said earlier, poisoning someone like that could only had negative repercussions for Nash. He knew suspicion would fall on him first. More importantly, there were less obvious ways of poisoning somebody.

“Agreed... That’s the point I keep returning to as well. That shop was thriving. And it cost him quite a bit of money to open it. He must have had a lot of passion for his craft.”

“Yes, I feel the same way. His staff were all very well trained and the parlor was clean and inviting.”

“And that’s why it doesn’t add up, right? It doesn’t make sense that he burned his ledger the day of the poisoning. If he had nothing to hide, then why

would he do something so clearly suspicious?"

I agreed that Nash wasn't a likely culprit. However, I couldn't deny his behavior was suspicious. Eric's question seemed to be the key: Why did he burn the ledger? And although we'd already connected the dots to him selling Berklein the taboo magic document, he maintained his silence—it didn't make sense.

Just then, Johann burst into the study.

"Prince Eric! We've discovered the source of the ice cream parlor funding!"

The prince and I both gasped in surprise. So, he found out where Nash's funding came from! That was Johann for you—he was on the ball.

But he looked a bit panicked.

"Well done...is what I'd like to say, but from the look on your face, I doubt it's good news."

"No, Your Highness. It's, well... Regarding that ice cream parlor...Prince Dale contributed quite a bit of money to fund it."

"Hmm... So Dale has his hands in it. I certainly didn't see that coming..."

Dale was one of the ice cream parlor's backers? He should've mentioned it when I spoke with him a moment ago. He knew we went out, but maybe he didn't know we went to the ice cream parlor.

Could it be... No, was Prince Dale really pulling the strings behind Nash to some nefarious end?

I shook my head firmly, expelling the audacious, harebrained notion from my mind. After all, I had made up my mind that Dale was Eric's ally just the other day.

But...what if he only *acted* like Eric's ally under the king's orders? That possibility made the gears of suspicion turn without mercy.

I didn't know what lay behind that smile of his, overflowing with compassion.

But I could feel something, like a feeling that couldn't be put into words...or a belief he didn't want others to know about.

"Prince Dale has been investigating Jade's relationships on order of His Majesty the King. He might have already known about Baron Almer and Nash Hoffman."

"Yes, we can't ignore that possibility."

"Damn it all, why did it have to be *Dale*... This makes our task difficult. Nobody's soul is more impenetrable than his."

Dale was Eric's sole brother. But despite that, I'd never once seen them being friendly with each other. Whenever they crossed paths, Dale would always be the one to greet Eric first, but Eric was undeniably remote.

A while ago, Eric told me he could never hate his little brother—and he was surely telling the truth then. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that those two men were far too distant to be blood relatives.

Then again, my sister and I have grown so far apart that I'm not one to talk.

Jill came to the front of my mind then. The little sister who had come to think of herself as the tragic heroine of her story, casting me as the villain.

Before I knew it, she'd tried to kill me. Eric told me not to agonize over it since Berklein had brainwashed her, but it still had a firm grip on my heart. Having a family member try to kill you...that wasn't something you could easily get past.

I wished that this bad feeling I had about Dale was a mistake; I didn't want Eric to have to experience the same pain I had.

"Prince Eric, Prince Dale is our ally—we know this to be true. There is no need to despair," Johann consoled Eric. He probably noticed he was imagining the worst-case scenario.

Johann was right. It was foolish for us to despair over outlandish, baseless fantasies. However, looking at matters from Eric's point of view, I knew that was easier said than done.

"I want to have faith in Dale, believe me. It's just...Dale was friendly with Berklein. What if he was only pretending to be allies with His Majesty and myself when, in reality—no, no, what am I even saying? If *that* isn't unjust speculation, I don't know what is."

Somehow, Eric managed to ward off the negative thoughts in his head. *He must want to believe in his brother.* He hated himself for having doubts.

I could sympathize with how conflicted he was, being constantly beset by enemies left him untrusting of others. It was unbearable. There was conflict when we first met because of his wariness.

I just have to say something. There must be something I can do to help him... Oh, I know!

Hoping to clear away the clouds darkening Eric's heart, I said, "Prince Eric... would you like me to carry out a covert investigation of Prince Dale?"

"You, investigate him? That's sudden—what exactly are you proposing?"

The answer was clear: I had to try my hardest to clear the doubts in Eric's heart, so I explained my little plan to him.

"You see, Prince Dale actually invited me out to dinner earlier."

"What? He asked you out? Wait a minute, since when were you and he that close?"

Eric was a lot more surprised than I thought he would be. Was Dale inviting me out to dinner really that odd? Sure, we hadn't spoken much before, and even I was startled when he asked me to go, but I assumed he was simply being polite.

I was even more shocked that Eric, always cool and levelheaded, would react with such a start at the news that it derailed our conversation.

"I wouldn't exactly call us close. We were just chatting and that led to him inviting me to dinner. He said he knew a great restaurant he wanted me to try..."

“Just chatting, were you? So does that mean Dale asks every woman he ever just chats with to dinner? How many dinners can he eat in a day?”

“Of course, he doesn’t need to ask a woman to dinner every time they have a chat—isn’t that a bit absurd? Prince Eric, what’s wrong? You’re acting strange.”

“I’m acting strange? I’m most certainly not—well, yes, I suppose you’re right that it’s illogical to suggest he needs to dine with every woman he chats with. Sorry, please continue.”

Eric’s outburst was so bizarre, but he seemed to have calmed down a little. Johann looked like he was trying not to laugh.

I know Prince Eric... He ought to realize that Prince Dale asking me out to dinner is the perfect opportunity to suss out his intentions. So why is he so upset?

I needed to finish explaining the plan to him. Although I thought he had calmed down, there was still an angry glint in his eye as I continued. “Anyway, uh, going to dinner with Prince Dale would be the perfect opportunity to figure out his motives.”

“So that’s your reasoning... Not that I didn’t already understand that. Still, you and Dale...” Eric nodded and then folded his arms, deep in thought.

Is it really worth mulling over? He’s muttering under his breath, but at least he understands me.

Eric brooded over the plan for a few moments longer, then said with resignation in his voice, “I guess it’s unavoidable... All right, I’ll let you handle this. But promise you won’t do anything reckless. You are my bodyguard—I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Understood, Your Highness. I promise not to do anything reckless.”

“Good.”

Though awkward at times, Eric was always so considerate with me. He probably looked upset because he didn’t want to have a hand in putting me in

any danger.

Still, he agreed to my plan—that showed his trust in me. And that was fuel for my soul.

Just sit tight, Your Highness. I promise I won't let you down.

I wanted to help him. It felt like this had been my dearest wish for ages now.

Now, how will I get information out of Dale? I didn't know quite yet, but I knew I had to somehow get something useful out of him.

“Oh, and Leia? One more thing.” Eric’s tone was serious.

“Yes?”

What could it be? Does he have some other orders for me?

“Just so you know...I also know of plenty of good restaurants.”

“Oh. Do you?”

“Yeah. So, you know...um...”

“Well, I’d love for you to tell me about them. I want to know your favorite restaurants, Your Highness.”

I was a little surprised by the abrupt change of subject, but I was pleased by his suggestion.

I didn't know Prince Eric was a foodie!

He didn’t give me the impression that he was that passionate about food when we got ice cream.

“Really? Very well, I’ll share them with you in the near future!”

“Thank you, Your Highness. Looking forward to it.”

The prince smiled proudly. He was probably so happy because he finally found somebody to share his love of restaurants with besides Lord Philip.

Now that I had a reward to look forward to, I would be all the more inspired to do a good job tomorrow. Naturally, I balled my hand into a fist and pumped

it.

"I'm very pleased to have a chance to enjoy dinner with you like this, Miss Leia."

It was the next day, and we were seated before a veritable feast in a restaurant of the royal capital. Dale beamed sincerely at me.

A part of me hates to believe Prince Dale's kindness is a facade... I just can't see him as a bad person.

If you added up all the times we'd ever exchanged words, I doubted that it would total more than an hour. We first spoke at a party, if I recalled correctly. It was just small talk, but I remember we had discussed my engagement to Lord Philip. However, when I next ran into him at the palace, it was a bit awkward: He offered his congratulations, not knowing my engagement had already been broken...

Nonetheless, every time we spoke, Dale seemed to enjoy my company. I never once felt uncomfortable speaking with him.

"The chef here spent three years training in the Ren Empire. Though he wasn't there for long, he served the imperial family."

"Well, that is quite impressive! I heard the Ren Empire has many talented chefs. To make a name for yourself there surely is no normal feat."

The Ren Empire was Lingsha's homeland. I heard it was a terribly tumultuous place, but its cuisine was hailed as the best on the continent. And, while I can't necessarily say it's proof of their reputation, Lingsha had a knack for finding all the best restaurants in Elshaid, and she was a professional-tier chef in her own right. She had a saying from her homeland: "Food is medicine." It meant that a healthy body began with a healthy diet. In other words, the Ren Empire took its food very seriously.

"I can vouch for the food here. The chef adjusted the flavors of the Ren

Empire to suit an Elshaid palate—the result is *perfection*.”

“Well, I can’t wait to try it.”

And so, our dinner began. Dale and I were alone in a private room as the staff brought us the chef’s specialties one by one.

“It’s so delicious...! I had no idea such flavors existed in the world.”

Dale chuckled. “Glad you like it. I must confess, I was a little worried it might not be to your taste.”

The food Dale had recommended was so good that it made me forget the real reason I was here. The prince looked pleased to see the smile on my face.

Okay, then...how do I broach the subject? If I don’t say something soon, dinner will be over, and I will have made no progress whatsoever.

“I imagine it’s difficult being a saint *and* my brother’s bodyguard, but I hear you’re managing both tasks quite well.”

“Yes, thank you. Prince Eric has been very considerate toward me.”

“I see. Still...if you ever find yourself in trouble, don’t hesitate to come to me. If it’s something sensitive that you can’t tell my brother, I don’t mind serving as a go-between.”

At that moment, I realized something: Dale wasn’t here just for small talk. He wanted to know what was going on in my life. There had to be some sort of ulterior motive to his questions.

“Nothing’s troubling me so far. If anything, I’m grateful to live somewhere as comfortable as the palace.”

“Is palace life really that comfortable? Do forgive me, but I’ve lived there all my life, so I don’t quite understand what you mean.”

“Oh, it’s a wonderful living environment, Your Highness. The furniture and beds are first-rate, and it’s quiet and peaceful.”

Life at my parents’ house was a living hell. My little sister, Jill, and my

stepmother, Catherine, made sure of that. Their verbal abuse was a daily occurrence. In comparison, the palace was heaven. I was treated so well here, it almost intimidated me.

“I see. Well, I’m very pleased to hear you have a good life at the palace. Sorry to pry, I just couldn’t help but worry.”

“I appreciate your concern. So, may I ask a question of my own, Prince Dale?”

Since that topic had come to its natural conclusion, I decided to get down to business. My time was limited. It would be better to take a direct approach, no beating around the bush.

If I hit a nerve, his complexion would change, even if he otherwise masked his feelings. I simply had to keep a keen eye on him.

“What about? Your voice sounds so serious.”

“Well, it’s about the ice cream parlor Prince Eric and I visited the other day—”

I took the plunge and mentioned the ice cream parlor right from the start.

Now... What’s his reaction...er—he’s smiling?

His reaction was the opposite of my expectations. Dale kept the smile on his face and said, “Ah yes, I know that ice cream parlor well. Actually, I was its primary financial backer.”

“Huh?”

“I suppose I should have mentioned that yesterday, but my mind was occupied trying to come up with a way to ask you out to dinner.”

Dale’s casual confession that he was the ice cream parlor’s main backer took the wind right out of my sails. In other words, he had no particularly damning reason for concealing it from me yesterday.

This isn’t what I expected, but it’s still welcome news. His openness with this information demonstrates that he feels no guilt about it. But wait a minute...

Something still wasn’t quite right. For a brief moment, a weight had lifted

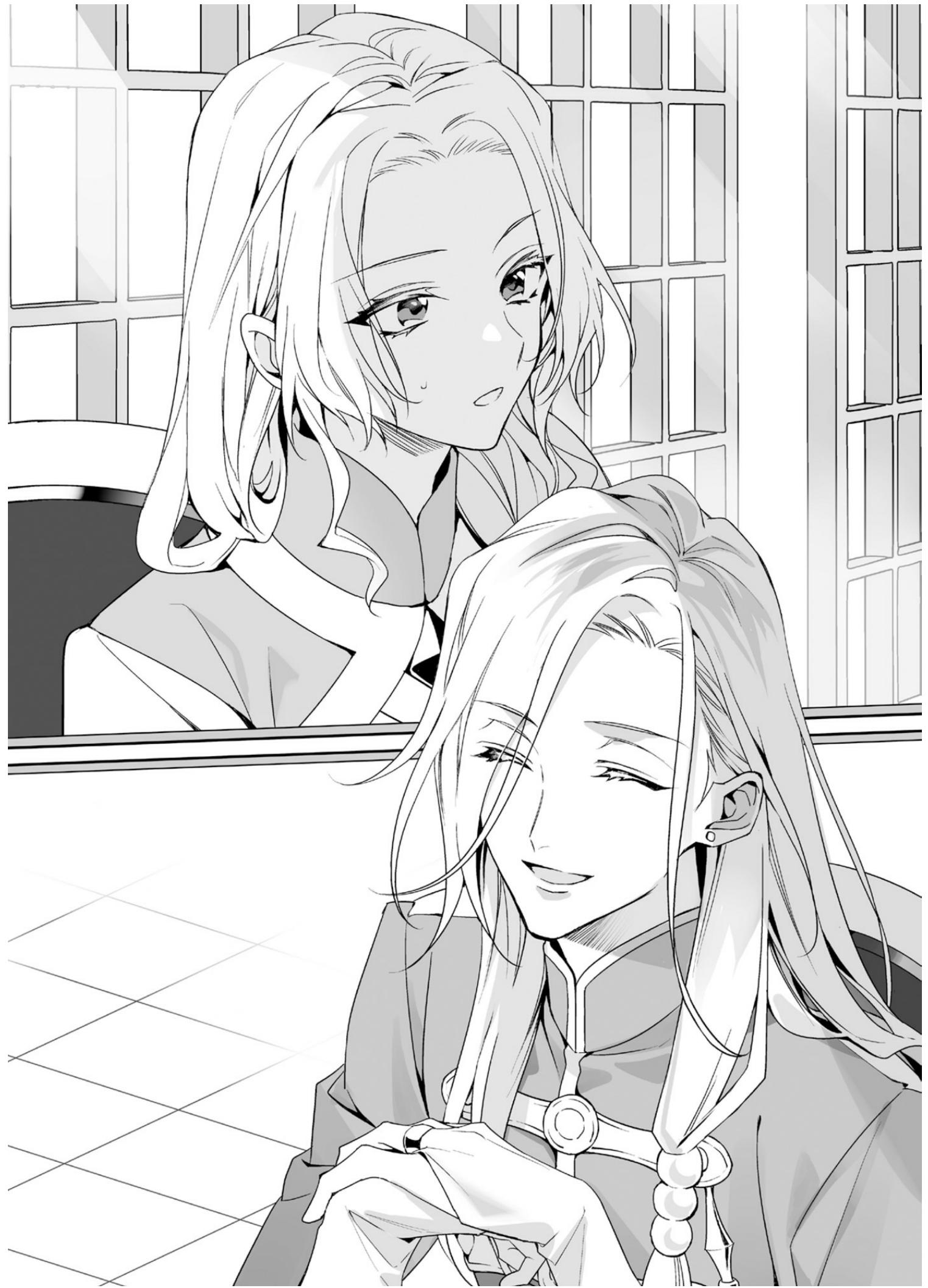
from my shoulders, and my suspicions that Dale was plotting something were cleared away. But another suspicion quickly took its place.

Why did he pay for the ice cream parlor in the first place? I don't think it's typical for a prince to fund the shop of a commoner.

It also struck me as odd that he had funded the shop in secret. I hated myself for feeling so suspicious about it, but it really did strike me as odd.

"Let me guess—you think it's odd that I provided funding for an ice cream parlor?"

"Oh—er, yes. S-sorry, Your Highness, was I making a strange face just now?"



“Oh, don’t be silly, Miss Leia. You always have a beautiful face.”

The way Dale could say lines like that without batting an eye was one major difference between him and Eric. Dale was popular because he was polite with everyone and always put his conversation partner on a pedestal. Eric’s devotion to justice was one of a kind, but Dale was one of kind in his own right.

But it’s more than that... Prince Dale noticed the subtle discomfort in my face and anticipated my question before I could ask it. I was right, I have to stay on my toes around him.

It was like he could read my mind. Perhaps he even suspected that I wanted to discover his true motives for Eric.

“Thank you, Your Highness... So, um, was there any special reason why you funded the ice cream parlor?”

“It wasn’t a special reason, per se. I don’t have a sweet tooth or anything like that, but when presented with the opportunity to try ice cream, I found it to be so exquisite that I wanted everyone in Elshaid to try it.”

Dale bashfully cracked a smile and looked down as he explained why he bankrolled the ice cream parlor. If it weren’t for my suspicions, I would have been quite charmed by his story.

What did he mean when he said he was presented with the opportunity to try ice cream? Something tells me that getting a royal aristocrat to sample your product is no easy feat...

Nash Hoffman was a commoner. His connection with former duke Berklein aside, it would have been quite difficult to give a sample of his ice cream to a prince like Dale.

“How did you and Mr. Nash become acquainted?”

“Duke Algren introduced us.”

“Duke Algren, Your Highness?”

I wasn't expecting him to name-drop a duke besides Berklein. Algren was one of the three remaining dukes in Elshaid after Berklein was stripped of his title.

The dukes were all supporters of Dale, so it wasn't surprising that the two would be friends. Yet, it was a bit surprising that Dale's connection to Algren would come up here. Their relationship I could understand, but I didn't see how any of that connected to Nash's ice cream shop.

"Duke Algren likes to help people with talent. The chef of this restaurant got to study abroad in the Ren Empire because of the Duke's funding."

I didn't know that. This was the first I'd ever heard about Algren's philanthropic work.

"He still proactively seeks out talent from abroad and helps them immigrate to Elshaid. He wants to enrich this kingdom with talented people—it's like his credo."

So he was not only sending Elshaid's people abroad but importing talent as well. I wasn't sure why, but I felt a nagging sense that something was amiss, even though this was all commendable activity.

I started to wonder if he had ulterior motives in bringing talented people to Elshaid—a notion that I just couldn't seem to shake. Naturally, I was unwilling to suspect Algren of foul play without any evidence, but Dale's story gave me a visceral feeling that something was wrong.

"I'm afraid I never dreamed Nash would become a suspect in an attempted murder," Dale said. "He seemed so kind and mild-mannered, not at all the sort of man capable of such a thing."

Dale knew about the attempted murder at the ice cream parlor, though that was to be expected. *Should I press the matter further?* Even if we assumed Dale wasn't involved, we couldn't say with any confidence that Algren was also uninvolved.

“I feel the same way. Prince Dale...if I may, I’d like to know a little more about Mr. Nash. What kind of person is—”

Just as I was about to ask Dale my pressing question, a waiter interrupted us. “Prince Dale, so sorry to disturb you during dinner, but there’s a guest here who insists he pay his respects.”

Of all the luck. There goes my best opportunity.

I secretly wished Dale would decline the conversation, but knowing him, that was a futile wish.

“Someone wishes to see me? May I ask who?”

“Duke Merhide.”

I almost choked on my food. Along with Dukes Gilbert and Algren, Duke Merhide was among the three most powerful nobles in Elshaid, and he was here at this very restaurant. There were only so many more surprises I could take.

“Oh dear, I’m afraid I’m in the middle of a lovely dinner with Miss Leia here...”

Dale stole a glance at me. There was genuine disappointment in his eyes. He was certainly enjoying his time with me—I didn’t sense any insincerity in his expression—but it was hard for me to take his disappointment at face value when I still couldn’t get a complete read on him.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss Leia, but may he join us?”

“Of course, Your Highness. Duke Merhide wishes to see you—don’t let me get in the way.”

I was in no position to refuse. Partly because I didn’t want Merhide to lose face, but also because refusing an invitation from him would cause trouble for both Eric and Dale.

Still, Duke Merhide... I had never spoken with him, so I only knew him by his reputation.

I don't want to speak out of turn...

If Duke Merhide was the mastermind we were looking for, my actions now could potentially undermine Eric's goal. I decided to keep my mouth shut to avoid such an eventuality.

"Prince Dale! So sorry to bother you at dinner—I thought it might be out of line, but then I said to myself, Merhide, you have sworn your loyalty to him! How could you *not* pay your respects!"

This man with an impressive beard and a booming voice was Duke Merhide—one of the most powerful noblemen of Elshaid. House Merhide had a long history of militarism. They earned their ducal title through many feats of glory in battle during the Great Continental War.

And as one might expect, Merhide was built like a tank and had intelligent eyes. He was more boisterous than refined. In a quiet restaurant like this, he stood out like a sore thumb.

"Thank you for your consideration. Please, have a seat."

The duke arrived like a tempest, but Dale, unfazed, offered him a seat at our table. It was little gestures like this that made him popular with all the nobles, including this one.

"Well, thank you! I've actually just ordered and haven't eaten yet, you see! Oh my! Everything on the table looks quite good!"

With a grin, Merhide plopped down beside us, just in time for his food to arrive, and he licked his chops.

I guess he already asked the waiter to bring his food to our table.

Though I was a bit appalled at his boorish behavior, I didn't let it show. I couldn't imagine anything more foolish than sealing my fate with a disapproving frown.

"Damn, I've forgotten to introduce myself to the little lady here! What's

bugging you? Got fired from your job babysitting that loathsome prince?"

Duke Merhide's introduction was peppered with snide comments. I was astounded at how shameless he was by openly disrespecting his own crown prince.

I had to tread carefully. I doubted he would make a scene in front of Dale, but any action I took here had the potential to tarnish Eric's reputation.

"Don't worry, my lord, Prince Eric has many bodyguards more able than I. But thank you for your concern, all the same."

"Bah! Concern, my ass! You *knew* I was belittling you, you dishonest wench! As far as I'm concerned, Prince Eric—"

"Duke Merhide, your dinner is getting cold. The chef graciously cooked it to perfection—you must eat before it loses its flavor."

Both Merhide and I were taken aback by that. I had never heard Dale sound so severe before. His voice was level, but the atmosphere in our dining room turned to ice for a moment—that was just how intimidating his words were.

So intimidating that Merhide found it difficult to respond. "Pardon my carelessness, Your Highness! You're absolutely right—I should fill my belly first!"

After a few silent seconds passed, Merhide vigorously shook his head and started shoveling food into his mouth.

I didn't know anybody could chew so loudly... I never want to eat dinner with him again.

His table manners were beyond hope. It was monstrous behavior for a duke, but nobody was brave enough to rebuke him.

After he'd devoured most of his meal, Merhide asked, "So, Your Highness! Why are you dining with this little *wench* of all people?"

He was far too blunt for this to be a clandestine investigation, so he probably asked purely out of curiosity. Either way, I knew I had best keep my mouth shut.

“No reason in particular. We were just having a chat about the recently opened ice cream parlor, among other topics.”

“Ah yes, I heard about that! Is it true that it was founded by a minion of the former Duke Berklein?”

Apparently, even Duke Merhide knew about the connection between Berklein and the ice cream parlor.

“I don’t know if Nash is one of Berklein’s *minions* per se, but I learned yesterday that he was the one who sold Berklein the Death Poison document.”

“There you have it! He’s a minion! Berklein is a sniveling weasel—never liked the man! He’s barely old enough to be called a man, yet he spoke like he thought he was my better!”

Apparently, Merhide disliked Berklein. That was easy to understand; they were polar opposites.

“I don’t know about this Death Poison business, but I wish he’d carried out his plan! Then he would have taken the crown prince down with him and you would’ve had the crown, Prince Dale!”

“Duke Merhide!” I shouted. “I cannot let what you just said go unchallenged! You are being needlessly disrespectful to Prince Eric!”

“I’m *what*?! Know your place, *wench*! The daughter of a mere count has no right to speak to a duke such as I in that manner! *You* are the disrespectful one!”

His outrageous slander of Eric made me lose my temper, but I didn’t regret it. If I stayed silent, I would’ve betrayed my loyalty to Eric. So I held my ground and returned Duke Merhide’s resentful glare.

“Do you have any idea what the idiot crown prince is trying to do?! He’s going to revoke our rights! The special rights that we dukes are entitled to! That fool doesn’t seem to understand how much our ancestors helped build this kingdom! And I’ve got a bone to pick with Gilbert too! His house is under the

same threat as mine, yet that weasel won't put up a stink!"

I wasn't surprised that Merhide resented Eric. And once the king announced he would revoke their rights, he would aim that resentment right at the king.

"Meanwhile, *you*, Prince Dale, are fantastic! You understand well just who it is that *really* holds this kingdom together! That is why House Merhide swears its loyalty to you!"

It looked like nothing I could say would reach him. As far as he was concerned, Prince Eric was a villain who was trying to strip him of his inalienable rights. It was a premise he would never yield. He exalted Prince Dale in excess because he would be more accommodating toward the rights of dukes.

He's so transparently artless it's almost refreshing.

Whether Merhide liked it or not, Eric *was* the crown prince. It would've been prudent of Merhide to support him, even if in appearance only, but he didn't even try to disguise his contempt for Prince Eric as he hurled insults at me, his bodyguard. He simply didn't care what Eric thought of him.

"Duke Merhide, I think you've said enough. You've made your feelings *quite* clear. But you're interrupting my lovely dinner with Miss Leia."

"Hrngh?! Well, how disrespectful! Wench of a count's daughter! Think long and hard about to whom you should attach yourself! Prince Dale was gracious to ask you to dinner! Switch sides—the faster the better! Gah hah hah hah!"

After Dale reprimanded him, Merhide finally left the table.

I would never betray Eric. I had made a promise. I was going to help make his dream world come true.

"I'm so sorry, our dinner was ruined..."

"Oh no, Prince Dale, I know you must maintain appearances."

"I appreciate your understanding. You really are a kind soul, Miss Leia."

I was not at all angry with the prince. Merhide was one of the most powerful

people in Elshaid, and Dale had to be diplomatic. He wasn't the sort of man you could be rude to, no matter how much his behavior called for it.

He left before I could get any answers. It doesn't seem like Prince Dale was involved in the poisoning either... In the end, I couldn't get any useful news to give Prince Eric.

I was most disappointed that I hadn't gathered any new clues for our case. After all that serious planning, all I had to show for it was a delicious dinner in my belly.

"Miss Leia...may I bring the conversation back on topic?"

"Um, the c-conversation, Your Highness?"

I sipped my wine as Dale continued.

"About Nash, I mean. He seems to be keeping a secret."

I nearly spat out my wine. "Y-yes, Your Highness. You're certainly well informed..."

"Well, I do have my own intel network," he said with his trademark beatific smile.

Intel on Nash was heavily classified. To be able to access it, Dale's intelligence network must've stretched farther than I could imagine.

Merhide seemed to be under the impression that he could have his way if Dale became king, but I had a feeling the prince wouldn't give in so easily.

"Forgive me, Miss Leia. I haven't been completely honest with you. I didn't want to say anything while Duke Merhide was here..."

"You've been...dishonest, Your Highness?"

What could it be?

"I've known for a while now that Nash sold Berklein the document on Death Poison. I heard it from his own lips..."

"What?!"

“Right after Berklein was stripped of his title, Nash reached out to me. He was worried he would trouble me, a person to whom he owed a great debt.”

So Nash did have a reason to keep quiet. He didn’t want to get Prince Dale in trouble.

“I told him he should just keep doing business as usual and not worry about it. He then told me he would tell nobody that he and I were connected in any way. He’s probably still trying to keep that promise, even now.”

It could have easily been called an act of loyalty to Dale. Being connected to Nash—a suspect in a major crime—would cause him nothing but trouble. Keeping his silence even when he was treated like a criminal was surely no easy task.

“Please, Your Highness, I must ask—why didn’t you offer a lifeline to Mr. Nash? If you told him he didn’t need to keep quiet about you, that would have improved his standing a little.”

What didn’t make sense to me was why he was confessing this secret to me now. If he thought it was safe for his involvement with the ice cream parlor to be known, he wouldn’t have withheld that information until today.

“It was because of the Death Poison spell.”

“Death Poison? What about it?”

“Nash is a very powerful mage. He has internalized all of his father’s research as well, so he can also cast the Death Poison spell.”

Nash was able to channel ice magic with a delicate touch. Even I had to admit his magic aptitude was exquisite. In theory, it was entirely possible that he could use Death Poison at the same level as Jill.

“I haven’t spent much time with him, but I noticed that he was extremely sensitive. If his relationship with me were to be revealed, even if I was the one to do so, he might try to atone for it by ending his own life with that very spell.”

“I see... So I assume this should be kept secret?”

"If possible, yes. And if you do have to tell my brother, please tell him to exercise discretion."

Dale surely wanted to protect Nash to go to such lengths. I sensed a similar sort of conviction from him that I felt in Eric.

But will his convictions make him Prince Eric's ally or enemy? That remains to be seen.

If it made him Eric's enemy, I could imagine no foe more terrifying. His poker face was immaculate, his guard impenetrable, and his grasp of human psychology was brilliant. If his skills were used as a weapon against Eric, I couldn't even imagine how big a threat he would be.

Regardless, I needed to have faith that Eric would determine whether his brother was friend or foe. My job was simply to relay the information back to him as I heard it.

"Prince Dale, may I ask just one more question? Why did you tell me about this?"

"Well... Because Nash is going to be executed if I don't intervene. I trust him. And I know somebody else did it."

I was speechless.

"I think my brother's instincts are telling him the same. But if he were to find out about my relationship with Nash, he would question Nash about it, and Nash might choose death. So I wanted to be proactive."

So that was why he asked me out to dinner yesterday. Many of my suspicions had been cleared, but I didn't feel a sense of accomplishment for some reason.

"I enjoyed our conversation today, Miss Leia. May I ask you to dinner again sometime?"

"Of course you may. The delicious food alone was enough to make this evening a delight for me."

"Well, I'm very glad to hear that. I'll invite you out again sometime."

As Dale smiled serenely at me, I couldn't help but wonder what was behind that smile. Was he pleased that he was able to have a chat with me as he planned or was it something else?

Either way, we definitely made some progress. I wondered how Eric would react when I gave him the news. As I finished my dinner date with Dale, my mind couldn't help but dwell on that.

"Good work, Leia...and thanks for compiling it into a written report."

The next day, I reported to Eric on what had transpired the day before. I told him about Nash and Dale's connection, and even about Merhide.

"Duke Merhide seems to thoroughly despise you, Prince Eric."

"Well, I don't blame him. From his perspective, I'm a villain trying to take away his rights. But let him be. It helps that he's easy to read."

As far as Eric was concerned, Merhide wasn't even a threat. His crassness made me chafe, but Eric seemed to consider that useful.

"I am actually most interested in Duke Algrene now. I believe he must have had some special reason for introducing Nash to my brother."

"Yes, that also struck me as odd," I agreed. "Though I neglected to ask Prince Dale further about him. Sorry I wasn't much help, Your Highness."

"Oh, no, that information alone is more than enough. You stuck your neck out just considering asking about him—you've been a great help."

Eric set my report down on his desk, stood up, and started to get ready to go out. I wondered where he was going. It was unusual for him to go out this time of day unless he was accompanying me on my saint work.

"So what are your impressions, considering this information?" he asked me.

"My...impressions, Your Highness? Well, I think the culprit is someone else. After hearing about Nash through Prince Dale, I became more convinced..."

“Quite right. He was not the architect behind this attempted murder. That’s why I’m about to go apprehend the true culprit.”

“Oh, that’s great! I guess I’ll—wait, you know who the real culprit is?!”

Before I could finish my sentence, I processed what Eric had said: the true culprit.

He continued getting ready. From the look of it, he knew everything, including where to find the culprit right now.

“Thanks to your report, Leia, I now know for certain who the culprit is. Lingsha, you should come too. Johann, I have a special assignment for you.”

“You’ve got it!” Lingsha chirped.

“At your command, Highness!”

Eric gave his commands to the pair, who were stationed outside the door of his study, and left. Since he chose to bring Lingsha along, that meant there was a possibility they were in for a raucous fight.

I suppose he’s going to catch the criminal by any means necessary...

And with that, we got in a carriage to catch the culprit.

“Prince Eric...is this the place? Sorry, but...is the criminal really *here*?”

“Ooh yes, I know this place! It’s the parlor for ice cream!”

Our carriage stopped right in front of the ice cream parlor. But as its owner, Nash, was still in our custody, it was unlikely anybody was in the shop right now.

No, wait... I sense a presence. Is somebody inside?

How was that possible? With the owner gone and the shop shuttered, there shouldn’t have been anyone here. Nash’s advanced skill in ice magic made him the only one able to make ice cream, so I couldn’t understand why anyone would need to be here.

“Hmm. It’s locked,” Eric frowned.

“Ooh, jimmying doors open is Lingsha’s specialty! I’m even better at *blasting* ‘em open!”

“Easy, Miss Lin,” I said. “Your Highness, does anybody else besides Mr. Nash have a key to this place?”

Eric shook the door to check if it was locked—it was. Perhaps there was some other way we could enter, but all the windows were shuttered, and I didn’t see any other way in.

“Yes, Leia, it seems we are thinking exactly the same thing. The person who possesses the spare key went into the ice cream parlor the moment I sent the guard who was watching him away.” He knocked on the door and raised his voice. “Open up! We know you’re in there.”

In no time, the door opened before us. I recognized the man holding it.

“Well, it’s the crown prince! Didn’t expect to see you here. Is something the matter, Your Highness?”



It was one of the waiters from the ice cream parlor—the very waiter who had indulged Eric's fussy request to taste test Eric's ice cream for poison.

"What are *you* doing here?" Eric countered. "You waltzed into this place while its owner was gone as if you owned it."

He was right, even though this man worked here, it was very odd for him to be here by himself.

"Well, I was just trying to improve the ventilation in here. We want to be able to reopen the moment Mr. Nash is released, you see."

"Ohh, the ventilation. Fascinating. I just assumed you came here to destroy evidence—perhaps even burn the shop down, just in case."

"What?!"

"Destroy evidence..." The moment the prince uttered those words, the waiter's face drained of color. Which meant...he was the culprit?! At least that was what Eric seemed to be implying.

"Ha ha ha! What are you suggesting, Your Highness? Nash is the killer, isn't he? Why would I need to destroy any evidence?"

"You *just* said that you expected the shop to reopen soon, and now you claim your boss is guilty. Aren't we being a bit inconsistent with our story?"

"Ack!"

The waiter had dug himself quite a hole in no time.

Yep, this guy's the criminal all right. But why did he do it?

"Let me ask again: Why did you come here? My spy reported that you've been loitering around this shop every day since the attempted murder."

"B-because I forgot something here! And I was afraid that if I told you, you'd think I was trying to tamper with the crime scene, so I lied!"

"Hmm. That's so contrived it's embarrassing. But I'll play along. What is this item you forgot?"

“W-well, it’s my...my knife! Yes! I forgot my knife!” the waiter’s voice quivered. He probably hoped that he could talk himself out of this mess, but Eric wouldn’t let that happen. “Nash is the criminal, not me!”

“Playing dumb when you’ve been caught red-handed—that’s a bold move. But I already know Nash didn’t do it. If he wanted to kill the baron, the baron would be dead.”

The waiter was speechless.

That’s right. Nash could cast Death Poison. He didn’t need to procure poison—he could just kill Baron Almer with magic.

Yet, not only was the murder attempt unsuccessful, he was arrested as a suspect. It was entirely ridiculous. Naturally, when Eric received my report on Nash, he realized that Nash wasn’t guilty.

“Reflecting on it, you’ve been acting strangely all along. When I asked you to test my ice cream for poison, you did so with a smile, not even questioning my identity.”

He was right. That could’ve been interpreted as good customer service, but most waiters would have been resistant to the idea.

“Well, I did think you were a strange customer, but I didn’t want to offend you. The customer is always right—that’s the golden rule of service.”

That being said, it was illogical to accuse him of the crime based on that alone. Eric surely understood that, and that’s why he was provoking the waiter.

“According to eyewitness accounts, the only other person who touched the ice cream besides Nash was you. In other words, only two people could have poisoned it: him or you.”

“Well, then Nash did it! That’s why he didn’t use Death Poison, so that I would become a suspect!” The waiter said, his voice shaky and desperate.

Anybody would get flustered and scared when accused of attempted murder, but his excuses didn’t add up. That confirmed he was the culprit.

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you know Mr. Nate could cast Death Poison?"

"Uh, w-well, I..."

"Not many people know about that. Who *are* you?"

It wasn't common knowledge—even we didn't know until Dale told me.

The waiter's face turned even whiter. He trembled as his head slumped.

Why don't you just give up? It's getting harder and harder to make excuses.

"B-but I! Oh, damn it!"

The waiter suddenly tried to run, but it was pointless. Neither the prince nor I even needed to pursue him.

"You're not getting away from me, oh no!"

"Ooof! Ow! Ouch! You're breaking my arm!"

Lingsha leapt onto the fleeing man's back and got him in an armlock. He fell to the ground and let out an agonized yelp. Her viselike grip caused him immense pain.

"Looks like he fell straight into your trap as predicted, Your Highness." Just then, Johann showed up with Nash in tow.

"Prince Eric, I heard I'm being acquitted," Nash said, taking in the scene.

"What's going on? What is he doing here?"

Apparently, this was Johann's special assignment: bringing Nash to the scene.

"Nash Hoffman, this man is the true criminal. He poisoned a man in your shop and framed you for it. Isn't that right?"

"H-he's the real culprit?! But why, why would he do such a thing?!"

Nash was shocked to hear his own waiter was the wrongdoer. Based on the evidence, the waiter was the only possibility besides Nash, but he still didn't know why the waiter did it. He couldn't help but be shocked.

“Please stop! It hurts! Owwww!”

“I detest inhumane methods, so I never torture anyone. However, we’re short on time. If you don’t spit out the truth right now, I can see to it the pain in your arm increases tenfold. What’s your move?”

“Ow, ow, owww!” The waiter howled in anguish as tears rolled down his cheeks.

I knew that Eric would never let the man actually be tortured, but it was true that time was in short supply.

“For your sake, you had better cooperate with us. Fortunately, Baron Almer survived. If you confess to your crime, I can give you a lighter sentence.”

“Urgh! F-fine... I was behind everything. I confess. I confess, okay?!”

We finally got a confession. Now Nash was exonerated, and Dale wouldn’t lose face.

“Good. Lingsha, release him.”

“Phew...ahh...” The waiter cradled his arm and wiped the sweat off his brow.

Lingsha was a master of her craft. She could inflict so much pain without causing any actual harm.

“Now, tell us everything. Why did you conspire to murder Baron Almer in this ice cream parlor? I know you must have had a motive.”

“I was...an orphan. I was adopted into House Berklein as a butler-in-training.” The waiter, resigned to his fate, quietly began his confession. He apparently used to work for Berklein. “Lord Jade was my savior. I still can’t believe he was arrested. He was so kind...so passionate about his ideals... I couldn’t believe he would plot to kill you, Prince Eric. Not when you had such spirit to change this kingdom for the better.”

Prince Eric stood quietly and listened.

“Lord Jade was set up. Someone came to me, declaring to be a confidant of

his, and told me the whole truth. That's when I found out that Nash and Baron Almer sold out Lord Jade to save their own hides."

Um... What's the meaning of this?

Did this waiter honestly believe that those two men betrayed Berklein and set him up? And that's why he was stripped of his title? And why did that so-called "confidant" of Berklein's spin such a tall tale? What did they hope to gain?

"If Lord Jade were to be saved, Nash and Baron Almer would both need to be dealt with. That's what Duke Berklein's confidant said, so I assumed this was the only way."

"Huh. So you were waiting for Baron Almer to visit the shop so you could spring into action?"

"Yes... Baron Almer and Nash's father go way back. Duke Berklein's confidant said he was sure to come here."

The more we learned about the plot, the more unease I felt. This man was manipulated into committing a serious crime. Indirectly. Unintentionally. What good would the death of Baron Almer and Nash's arrest have accomplished? Berklein's sentence would not have been lifted.

In other words, this waiter would have spilled blood in vain.

"Johann. Lingsha. Take him away. I'll conduct a full investigation later."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"You've got it!"

After learning the waiter's motive, Eric put him in Lingsha's and Johann's care. He stroked his chin, deep in thought...and he was probably thinking the same thing I was.

"Prince Eric, I cannot thank you enough. You cleared my name, even though I was so rude to you. I don't know how I can ever repay you..."

After the waiter was taken away, Nash bowed deeply to Eric in remorse. We knew he had his reasons, but we couldn't deny that he had been uncooperative in helping us solve the case. Eric's dedication to sincerity and the truth surely hit him square in the heart.

"I didn't do it for you; I wanted to help Dale. He cares for you a great deal."

"Is that so? Prince Dale would care for a lowly commoner like me?"

"Anyway, your name has been cleared. It won't be easy to get your customers back, but I wish you luck."

"Yes, Your Highness! Please do come again! I will give you the best ice cream that was ever made!"

Nash bowed deeply again...and I saw a smile on his face for the first time.

Prince Eric's and Prince Dale's kindness reached him. I'm so glad he didn't take the blame for the crime.

And thus, we solved the case of the ice cream parlor poisoning.

"So...what was that murder plot all for anyway?"

As the carriage jostled us, I mulled over what had happened the past few days. Somebody had manipulated a waiter into attempting murder. What was their goal? Until we found that out, this case wouldn't truly be closed.

"Maybe our mastermind wanted to instill terror. Either that, or they wanted to distract me from something else..."

"A diversion, then?"

"Yes, a diversion. And we very well may have danced to the puppet master's strings, just like they wanted."

If that really was true, then this was a truly aggravating resolution.

For crying out loud, how deep do the roots of conspiracy reach in this kingdom? Why would anybody go to such lengths? What are they trying to achieve?

“Your Highness, who do you think orchestrated it all? That is, I understand you can’t reach an answer right away, but I wonder about your opinion.”

“Well, there are many suspicious people around. I can’t make any guesses until I do a little more digging.”

I felt despondent. We worked so hard. I even got Dale to help us solve the case...

But it was still worth something that we solved the case so quickly. If we hadn’t solved the case before the king announced the revocation of ducal rights, we wouldn’t have been able to solve it at all. And if that had happened, that would have made our mastermind all the happier.

“By the way, did you enjoy your dinner with Dale?”

“Er, my dinner with Prince Dale? Yes, well...the food was delicious. I was a little nervous, but I did enjoy myself.”

Eric’s eyes narrowed, and he muttered irritably, “Hmmm... I see, I see. So you and Dale had a good time together...”

What’s going on here? Is he angry with me for neglecting my duties and having a nice dinner instead?

“Well, let me ask you this then—did you enjoy going to the ice cream parlor with me?”

“Your Highness? Um...yes. Very much. It’s unfortunate that it had to end with such a terrible incident.”

Now the prince was asking about *our* outing.

I don’t get it. What is on his mind? Don’t tell me he’s jealous that I went out to dinner with Prince Dale? No, Prince Eric would never...

“All right, then. Let’s go out again sometime. Please promise me. I enjoy spending time with you.”

Eric turned his gaze downward and awkwardly tried to extract a promise, but

his eyes looked more serene than I had ever seen before. The prince had a good time with me, eating ice cream. He was so happy about it he couldn't help but let it show.

"Of course, Your Highness, I would love to. I had just as much fun as you did, perhaps even more. So yes, I'd love to go out again sometime."

"Oh, good. I'm glad to hear it."

I needed to work hard to ensure we could spend another moment like that together. It didn't matter who was behind the conspiracy and what they were trying to do—no matter what, I would protect everyone I cared for with my life.

-Jill's Perspective-

EVERYONE DESERVED TO HAVE a happily ever after. I knew this because I read it in a book once.

I wanted to be just as happy as everybody else. I had lived my life up until now in pursuit of that humble dream. And yet, just when I thought a bright future with Lord Jade was within my grasp, I found myself suddenly in this cold, dark cage.

This was just too cruel.

I worked hard, just like I was told to.

I poisoned my sister's wine glass, just like I was told to.

Lord Jade, you lied to me. I certainly wasn't living happily ever after.

Instead, I dwelled in this cold cell, sustaining myself only on stale bread and a little water—I was in deep peril.

The guards were no comfort. They would just threaten me and tell me, "Crying won't work on us!" They kept asking me the same questions over and over and over. I was starting to lose my mind.

Lord Jade told me that Leia being a saint was a threat to Elshaid—all I did was try to exterminate her like a pest.

I did nothing wrong.

I did everything for my kingdom.

Wasn't it cruel to punish me like this? I was certain all of this happened because God hated me.

Oh, Mother, Father, why won't you rescue me?

I was eternally cold and hungry. I was filthy and ached all over.

And I felt so, so wretched...

“Jill Westoria, I presume? I’d like to have a little chat with you.”

“I-it’s you?!”

“I believe this is our first time speaking. My name is Dale Elshaid.”

As I sat there in the icy darkness of my cell, afflicted with profound grief, Elshaid’s younger prince, Prince Dale, graced me with his presence. His smiling face was gently illuminated by the light of a lantern. He looked kind—like an angel.

Oh my... Has my prince come to rescue me? Oh dear. My hair is tangled, my dress is dirty. Oh, whatever shall I do...

“Miss Jill, I hear you still deny your crime. You tried to end the life of your own sister, Miss Leia. Don’t you feel any remorse at all?”

“Remorse, Your Highness? But why? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I see... Just as the reports say, your parents spoiled you rotten. They let you get away with anything, so you don’t even understand the severity of your crime. Poor Miss Leia... She must have been in a constant state of turmoil.”

Prince Dale scrutinized my face as he jumped to conclusions.

I was not at all spoiled. *I do wish you wouldn't say such rude things, Your Highness.*

I hadn't caused my sister any strife either. *She* was the one who abused *me*.

Prince Dale knew nothing. How could he say such cruel things?

"I hear you claim you tried to kill your sister for the good of Elshaid. Is this correct?"

"Exactly, Your Highness. My sister, Leia, will only bring harm to this great kingdom. As the next saint in line, and as her sister, I felt it was my duty to eliminate her."

Prince Dale asked me the same question everyone else did, so I gave him the same answer. Time and time again, no matter how hard I tried to explain, I was ignored and painted as a villain. I cried bitter tears each and every time, but I lifted my chin and bravely answered all the same...

"You did this...for Elshaid?"

"Yes. I vowed to do whatever it takes to help Elshaid. That is the way of a saint. Lord Jade told me so."

"What an admirable goal. Most people don't have the resolve to do anything for their kingdom."

"Ee hee hee."

Oh, I have resolve.

I had enough resolve to kill anyone if it would save Elshaid. Even my own family. Even my beloved big sister.

That was why Lord Jade told me that I was his ideal woman.

So here I was, ready to become the next saint.

"Let me ask you this, then: Are you willing to die for your kingdom?"

"Uh, did I hear you right?"

"You see, Miss Leia put her life on the line to help preserve the peace in Elshaid. I was merely curious to see if you had the same noble spirit as her."

"My sister would die for Elshaid?"

I didn't understand what Prince Dale was talking about.

How exactly had my sister, Leia, ever put her life on the line?

I was sure it was all an act. She only did it because it made her look good.

As I feared, my sister was devious beyond compare. If she did something good, it was only so that she could maintain her reputation. Mother was right about her.

"Waah! Prince Dale, you're just like the others. You keep putting my sister on a pedestal to torment me. You're soooo cruel. Uwah!"

"Even now...to think you still cry like you're an innocent. It's worse than I thought. You blame all your problems on your sister and never try to repent. We have a word for people like you: shameless."

Prince Dale's smile flipped, and his face contorted into a scowl as he heaped abuse upon me.

Why did I have to endure such baseless slander?

"Why do you hate your sister so much? Think carefully. She has never harmed you even once, has she?"

I hate my sister? But I don't.

My sister abused me. At some point, she started to always get a smug look on her face whenever I tried to talk to her. No matter what I said, she made that dreadful face at me. And she would take every opportunity to rub her sainthood in my face. I could barely endure that torture. I understood that she had a superiority complex, but that was no excuse for her to be so cruel to me.

"But my sister, Leia, goaded me even though I did nothing to deserve it."

"She...goaded you? That doesn't sound like her at all."

“Oh, you’re so wrong! Even though she cheated her way through the saint exams, she never misses an opportunity to flaunt her sainthood! I’ve always dreamed that I would be a saint! And yet she stole it from me!”

Prince Dale, are you blind? Why do you always take my sister’s side?

She always made excuses that she was too busy for me because of her saintly duties. She always scowled at me whenever I tried to speak with her. And to add insult to injury, she had the audacity to live in the palace!

Here I was in a dungeon, and she hadn’t even tried to rescue me. She was the worst sister ever.

“Miss Leia cheated to become a saint? What sort of evidence do you have to support that rubbish story?”

“It is not rubbish! My mother told me so!”

“Your mother... Ah hah. Now it makes sense.”

On that fateful day, when I took the final written and practical exams, I stayed up all night to prepare, but it was in vain: I scored lower than my sister and failed.

Leia didn’t stay up all night. She didn’t work hard. Wasn’t there something odd about that?

And when I was upset after failing the exam, my mother told me the truth: Leia had cheated.

I begged mother to contest the results immediately, but she said we had no proof, so it was better if we waited for Leia to get herself in trouble and lose her job.

“Let me ask you this, Miss Jill: Have you ever witnessed your sister cheating with your own eyes?”

“Umm, no. But my mother said—”

“If your mother truly saw Leia doing something wrong, why did she not stop

her then and there? Did she explain that to you?"

"Buh?!"

He was right. If mother had stopped her then and there, I would've been chosen as the new saint.

So, why didn't she stop her?

Could it be that mother was on Leia's side all along? N-no, that couldn't be.

But she hasn't visited me once since I came here... She's done nothing to help me.

"A word of advice—you should think long and hard about your twisted relationship with your parents."

"Prince Dale? Please, stop saying such nonsensical things."

"Until you understand that what I say makes sense, I'll repeat it as many times as necessary. You have all the time in the world."

Then Prince Dale left the dungeon.

After all that, I had no idea why he came down here. I was left feeling sad.

As I sat there, alone in the dingy half-light, I felt truly wretched.

Chapter 2: The Revocation of Rights Is Announced

“THE DAY HAS FINALLY ARRIVED, Your Highness...”

“Yes... His Majesty announced the reform. One month from now, all the special rights given to the dukes will be nullified.”

On this day, His Majesty the King announced the revocation of rights. It was news that shook the entire kingdom.

It was also Prince Eric’s most earnest wish.

The special rights enjoyed by the dukes had become a hotbed for corruption. With them revoked, the prince would get one step closer to achieving his ideal world.

“Leia, Johann, Lingsha—things are bound to become quite hectic, but I hope you’ll stick with me.”

“Your Highness, we are your friends,” I insisted. “We will stick with you whether you order us to or not.”

“I agree with Lady Leia,” Johann said. “I will follow you to death whether you bid it or not.”

“And your Lingsha is always ready to blast away anybody who gets in your way!”

No matter how hectic or how bleak things got, we wouldn’t let Eric go through this alone. I made my decision to stay by his side. Even if he tried to get rid of me, I would follow him to the ends of the earth. He promised me a front row seat to the attainment of Elshaid’s bright future, and I was going to hold him to that promise.

“Thank you all. I feel like I could move mountains because of you,” Eric said, his smile untroubled.

I'd expected a much more tense atmosphere today, but once we ripped off the bandage, it was surprisingly calm.

"Your Highness, Duke Gilbert seeks an audience with you. Shall I allow him in?"

As we sat there having a relaxed conversation, we received word that Duke Gilbert, Lord Philip's father and one of the Great Four, had arrived. He probably couldn't remain idle when he heard the news that his rights were going to be revoked. Still, he wasted no time in coming here...

Gilbert is the only duke who sides with Prince Eric... I wonder why he came here to see him?

"Sure, let him through. Lingsha, get us some tea."

"Gotcha."

Of course, Eric permitted Gilbert to enter as he had no reason to send him away. I understood that he wanted to determine whether the duke would be a friend or a foe moving forward.

"Duke Gilbert, so good to see you. Sit down, have a cup of tea."

The prince had the duke sit on the sofa and offered him the tea Lingsha had made. Gilbert had an uncomfortable frown on his face.

As he was my former fiancé's father, we had spoken many times. He was incredibly strict—even Philip feared him. That was probably why Eric had some degree of trust in him.

"My apologies, but I cannot stay long. Let's just get right to it."

"Sorry to hear that, but if that's what you want, I'll comply. Tell me what's on your mind."

Gilbert was in such a hurry he couldn't even pause to take a sip of tea. The air sparked with tension.

"His Majesty announced that our special rights are to be revoked."

“That’s right. Is there an issue?”

“For heaven’s sake, Prince Eric, couldn’t you ask your father to rescind his proclamation?”

So he was here about the revocation of rights. *Of course he was.*

It gave me a new appreciation for just how radical this act was, radical enough that Duke Gilbert would demand Eric help undo it. Unlike the other dukes, he was on friendly terms with Eric, yet even he raised his objections to the prince. The other dukes had to have been even more incensed.

But Duke Gilbert should already know what Prince Eric’s answer is going to be.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. You know I’ve been asking him to revoke those rights all this time, don’t you?”

Case in point: The revocation of rights was Eric’s most earnest wish.

Though he had expressed discontent that he was not able to carry the reform out himself, that was no reason to want to delay his father doing it.

“Of course I know, Your Highness. And I’ve been your friend because I wanted to help you create your ideal Elshaid. But with all due respect, you can’t simply rush these things. Don’t you agree?”

Gilbert seemed not opposed to the revocation of rights itself so much as the timeline of their revocation.

“One month is not nearly enough time. I’m telling you, you need a multi-year plan if you want to do this right. Suddenly revoking all those rights is like a slap in the face. There *will* be civil unrest.”

Now I understood. He was going to help Eric enact the reforms, but he felt things were moving way too quickly. Indeed, it would be some time before Eric became king. If Gilbert was working under the assumption that the reforms wouldn’t take place until then, the sudden announcement must have confounded him.

“Duke Gilbert, I appreciate your cooperation all this time. However, this is one

matter on which I simply cannot yield. Not even if you ask me.”

“Can’t you be nudged even a little?”

“No, I cannot. My father was very brave to draw a line in the sand with this reform—you know I can’t undermine him.”

The king had made the tough decision for a revolution because Eric’s hard work had inspired him. There was absolutely no way Eric would try to stop him.

I do feel sorry for Duke Gilbert, but he’ll just have to give up.

It must have taken a lot of courage to confront Eric. He stood silent, his head drooped.

After a moment of silence, Gilbert looked up and said, “The kingdom is going to fall into chaos, you know...”

The kingdom would be thrown into disarray—that was inevitable. The remaining two dukes would oppose the reform much more fiercely than Gilbert. Instead of the prince, they would target the king himself.

“His Majesty and I are both prepared for such an eventuality.”

Gilbert sighed. His voice tired, he said “You never change, do you? I’ve had this bad feeling ever since Berklein lost his title. Well...good luck in battle, Your Highness.”

With the look of defeat in his eyes, Gilbert sighed and left the room. Eric had probably prepared himself mentally for this moment for years. He didn’t consider surrender an option.

Even if the kingdom falls into chaos, I will do everything in my power to protect him.

Without my realizing it, Eric’s dream had become my own. It linked to my conviction as a saint that this was the best way to move Elshaid in the right direction.

“I heard what Duke Gilbert said, but I believe that in the end, he will still help

me.”

“You sure have a lot of faith in him.”

“He was the only duke who never abused his special rights—not even once. He only delivered that warning to me out of worry. I understand that.”

Eric spoke highly of Gilbert. He seemed to believe the duke was an honorable man.

On this day, the Kingdom of Elshaid began a profound transformation.

The next morning, I headed out to perform my saintly duties. Eric accompanied me, as he always did by then.

“To be honest, I no longer feel I need to observe you.”

“But I’m just not ready to let you out of my sight yet... I do hope you’ll indulge your prince’s selfish whims.”

He already trusted me completely as a saint, but His Highness still wanted to observe me at work. For some reason, that made me happy. At first, every day with him was stressful, but before long, having him by my side came to feel normal.

Still, the day will come when all of this will end. I wonder what the prince’s parting words will be?

I didn’t do my best simply because I desired anything in return but because I took pride in my duties as a saint. I would spend the rest of my days as a saint serving my kingdom to the fullest.

Nonetheless, it felt so good when the prince praised me. Knowing that I had done my best as a saint and that I had helped him gave me more confidence than I could ever express in words.

“Is it me, or have you gotten faster at putting up barriers?”

“I hone my methods a little each time I do it, Your Highness. I’ve been

experimenting to optimize how I allocate my magic energy.”

He was very observant. He wasn’t cavalier about accompanying me—he observed intently with each passing second. That was why he could notice the subtleties of my craft.

“Watching you work so hard inspires me to do the same. You give me strength.”

“Does that mean you perceive me as a rival, Your Highness?”

At least my presence seemed to invigorate Eric.

“My rival... Yes, maybe you are. Though it’s more appropriate to say that I respect you.”

“Your Highness?”

“Leia, I have to tell you, I—”

“Hellooo! Prince Eric! Leia!” A familiar voice interrupted the prince.

It was Gilbert’s eldest son, Philip. He had been my fiancé until recently, and then he became Jill’s fiancé as soon as he broke our engagement.

We held a party in his honor to lure Berklein into a trap, and this was our first time seeing him since.

What curious timing. What could he want?

Something was fishy. I couldn’t imagine what could possibly bring Philip here. Eric seemed just as baffled as I was. He raised an eyebrow as he watched Philip approach.

“Huff, huff... Prince Eric! Leia!” he called out once more.

Philip’s shoulders rose and fell as he took deep, ragged breaths. Upon closer inspection, he was clad in plate armor. He also had several guards in tow, probably because of what Eric had told him the other day.

“Philip, why are you here?” Eric sounded irate somehow.

Once before, Philip had approached us in a similar fashion in order to propose to me again, and Eric had given him a tongue-lashing. After that, the prince said he had lost a friend, and I felt a distance between them at the party.

“Your Highness, please, don’t grimace. You see, my father ordered me to do this...”

Aha. Now I see what’s going on.

Eric had failed to convince Gilbert yesterday, so he had moved on to the next phase.

“Did you come here to ask me to stop the king? Gee, Duke Gilbert is more stubborn than I thought.”

Eric also figured out what was going on. Gilbert was using Eric’s friend, Philip, to try to influence him.

I feel sorry for Lord Philip; he’s in over his head.

The prince was a stubborn man, not easily swayed. He always walked the path of righteousness. If the king had ordered him to do something unjust, he would disobey. Convincing this prince to change his mind was a task far beyond Philip’s means.

“It would be a huge help if you would stop the king, yes.”

“*What are you even saying?*”

“You and I go way back, Your Highness. I know that you would sooner die than ask your father to take back the revocation of rights. I know that nothing I can say will change your mind.”

Philip was apparently well acquainted with his own shortcomings. Because he and Eric were old friends, he likely understood the prince’s personality better than I did.

“Then why are you here? Surely you didn’t come all this way just to say that. You came out here, knowing my mind. I can tell this is urgent.”

There must have been some reason why he had hurried out here where monsters could kill him. Eric had deduced that the reason must be important. Indeed, he could have avoided danger by waiting for our return to the palace later in the day.

“You won’t need your guards for a while. Dismiss them,” Eric said.

Philip sent his guards away. Then he turned back to us and, with a grave look in his eye, he hissed, “His Majesty’s life is in danger.”

Eric and I exchanged glances. In a way, we weren’t surprised. We knew that this would happen. But we were surprised to hear the news from Philip.

“Who told you that?” Eric responded with the obvious question. Assassinating a king was a bombshell of a plot. There was no way he would hear this news without demanding to know its source.

“Actually, my father had been invited to join the assassination plot. We believe that one of the other two dukes is behind it...”

They were moving faster than we expected. To think, they were already trying to bring Gilbert into their plot to prevent the revocation of rights...

Maybe this was what Gilbert had meant when he warned us that the kingdom would fall into chaos.

He wouldn’t have told us then and there that he was invited to join an assassination plot. That would have pointed the finger of suspicion at him.

Philip’s confession had taken a lot of courage. He didn’t go so far to say that *he* was involved in a plot to assassinate his king, but now he had made it entirely possible that if things went south, he could become a suspect in a matter he wasn’t even involved with.

“Thank you for telling me. We were already aware of the possibility, but I appreciate the confirmation.” Eric gave a slight grin.

“Your Highness...”

He had braved danger and come all this way just to deliver this important

intel to his prince. I was sure Eric realized then that he hadn't lost his friend after all.

"But you really should leave now. Even with your guards protecting you, you could get hurt."

"No, there's still one more thing I have left to do. Please, give me a moment." Philip paused and turned to look at me. I wasn't expecting him to have anything to say to me. "Leia...please, let me apologize again. I was selfish and I hurt you. I've done a lot of thinking and I realized just how selfish I've been. Please forgive me!"

Then Philip bowed deeply to me. His apology seemed genuine. His voice shook, and I could tell he was holding back tears.

"Lord Philip, please, look at me. Listen, I'm over it. I appreciate the apology, but I have nothing to say."

"So...you forgive me?"

"Yes, I forgive you. Everyone makes mistakes. What's most important is to realize where you went wrong and how you will atone for it."

Nobody is perfect. But if we repent, we can grow into better versions of ourselves. I had seen it happen up close and personal, so I was prepared to forgive Philip.

"Oh... Oh, thank you! Thank you, Leia! I will never forget your kindness."

He will never make the same mistake again. I knew it in my heart as I watched him bow with tears streaming down his cheeks.

After Philip walked away, Eric said, "If tragedy hadn't struck, you would have married that guy."

If tragedy hadn't struck—if Jill hadn't spread lies that I was abusing her—I would have joined House Gilbert as Philip's wife by now. Both houses had already set a date and the wedding preparations were well underway. I

remembered how excited I had been to join House Gilbert.

“Yes, I suppose I would have,” I answered curtly. I didn’t know why Eric brought this up, but his eyes looked lonely as he watched the carriage fly past like a gust of wind.

“Did you...love him?”

“Er, Lord Philip, you mean?”

“Yes. The man you planned to marry.”

His question completely blindsided me. From the sound of his voice, I knew he was serious.

I could always tell him the truth...

“I didn’t dislike him, but if you’re asking me if I felt romantic love for him, I don’t think I did.”

It was an arranged marriage into one of the most powerful families in the kingdom. My feelings were beside the point; my family was not going to turn down the offer. I think that was why I found it so easy to get over him when he broke off our engagement. If I had any special feelings for Philip, I would have cried and begged him to take me back. But I did nothing of the sort, and I could easily understand why he found Jill so much more appealing.

“Is that so? Sorry I asked you a strange question. I just assumed people only got engaged if they loved each other.”

“Oh, no, Your Highness, you needn’t apologize. Naturally, it’s ideal if both parties love each other when getting married. But, as I’m sure you’re aware as a prince, noble families prioritize social prestige through familial alliances. Many marriages are arranged, and the people directly involved in them don’t have a say.”

Eric was surprisingly uninformed in this regard.

I just assumed that as the crown prince, he would marry someone of the best social standing and put romance second.

Given how surprised Dale had been when I told him life at the palace was wonderful, it seemed that royalty lived in a whole different world from the rest of us.

“I see... Well, I want to marry someone I love. Though I suppose it’s not good for the crown to think only of love...”

“Yes, you’re the crown prince. You have a duty to choose a wife who will be worthy of becoming a queen.”

“Indeed. But luckily...I don’t think I’ll have to worry about that.”

“Huh?”

Wait a minute... Is he already in love with someone? Is that why he’s asking me for marriage advice?

I supposed that made sense. Nobody else around him had any experience in that matter...

My heart won’t stop pounding... Why does it hurt so much?

My mind was conjuring images of what Eric’s future wife might look like, and it filled my body with a sensation I’d never felt before.

I never even considered the possibility of Eric getting married. But that was a strange thing to think since, as the future king, he would need to produce an heir.

“Leia, what’s wrong? Do you feel ill? You look unwell.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing. Don’t worry, I—ah?!”

“Hmmm... You don’t seem to have a fever.”

Eric’s cool hand pressed against my forehead. He seemed to think I’d caught a cold.

I certainly didn’t *feel* cold. In fact, I was only getting hotter. With his sincere eyes gazing into mine, I didn’t have the confidence to keep my heart from racing out of my chest.

"If you're tired, please tell me. You're important to me. I don't want to lose you."

"Prince Eric..."

His kindness hurt. I couldn't even look at him.

Someday, the prince could belong to someone else.

But...let me hold onto this moment. I want to cherish the memory of having Prince Eric all to myself...

His Majesty's life was in danger. Two days had passed since Philip delivered the news. Luckily, nothing happened during those two days, but the air at the palace was thick with tension.

"I anticipated that His Majesty's life would be in danger, but hearing so from Philip means it's more serious than I originally thought."

Eric examined some documents, musing over the danger the king was in. As you might have guessed, we were worried that the forces that disliked the revocation of rights would instigate rebellion ever since we heard the news.

Eric folded his arms across his chest and looked at me. "Leia, what do you think I should do to keep the king safe?"

He wanted my advice. I wished I could say something helpful, but sadly, I couldn't think of anything.

"His Majesty has good bodyguards around him, correct?"

As I was still new to the palace, I hadn't quite grasped the finer details of its security. I knew the king had bodyguards, but I didn't even know what sort of people they were.

"Of course he does. He has more bodyguards than Dale and I combined."

"Yes, I suppose he would."

"Johann's father is a master of the Olbrun school of fencing, and he was the

captain of His Majesty's royal guard up until a little while ago. He is the strongest swordsman I've ever met."

The prince's swordplay was first rate; I knew firsthand from watching him battle monsters and assassins. As his senior training partner, Johann was even more skilled than him. If the skill of Johann's father surpassed both of theirs, then His Majesty's royal guard was surely full of fierce fighters.

"Then we have nothing to worry about, right? His Majesty has his own bodyguards, and if they are even more powerful than us, his life won't be claimed so easily."

Not to brag, but Eric's bodyguards were great. It took more than bandits-for-hire to get in our way. So, if His Majesty's guards were at least on our level, we could rest easy.

"You're quite right, Leia... His Majesty's bodyguards have their honor to defend as well. They would probably laugh if they heard I was worried."

"Yes, I understand why they would feel that way. If somebody told me I was insufficient as your bodyguard, I would feel insulted."

Almost everyone who served at the palace took pride in their work. If their talents were called into question, they would become disgruntled and resentful.

"Yes, quite right. Setting aside Olbrun's time as Captain of the Guard, their current captain is Alfred Leonard. Convincing him that he needs more men might not be an easy task."

That clarified things. If Johann's father, someone we were connected to, was still in charge of the royal guard, he would have probably accepted our offer to help. But the current captain of the guard was a person named Alfred. I wondered what sort of person he was.

"Is he really that difficult to deal with, Your Highness?"

"Difficult... I'm not sure that's the word. In terms of stubbornness, I have a worthy rival. Alfred is the son and heir of a viscount and master of the Leonard

school of swordcraft.”

“Leonard school...”

“It’s a style of fencing historically popular among the nobility. He isn’t too pleased that I chose to learn the Olbrun style instead.”

Apparently, they had a deep history. The Olbrun school had many pupils, but most of them were peasants. Meanwhile, the Leonard school served the nobility. I could see how that alone would put the two men at odds.

“Just how skilled with the sword is this Alfred fellow?” I asked.

“He’s quite skilled, I assure you. His form is so graceful that people call it an art.”

He was His Majesty’s Captain of the Royal Guard. Of course he wasn’t weak. What a foolish question I’d asked.

But for all Eric’s praise, he sounded a little concerned about Alfred’s abilities.

Part of it must be worries over whether or not his dream will come to fruition. But his father’s life is in danger—of course he’s ill at ease.

Eric was a kind man, and I knew that he always chose the path that he deemed most righteous.

“Your Highness, despite what you say, you *are* worried about His Majesty, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am worried,” Eric admitted after a brief pause. “I’m worried that if I don’t act now, I’ll regret it later.”

There was only one thing to do: make His Majesty even more secure.

“Your Highness, this may be out of line, but shall I be His Majesty’s bodyguard for a while? I know I can help.”

I gave voice to my plan to become the king’s temporary bodyguard. I knew it could be done, as long as the prince put in a good word. I would miss him while I was gone, but I wanted to ease his worries as much as I could.

After a few seconds of thought, Eric answered, "No, I'll assign that role to Johann."

"Do you think I'm not up to the task?"

Of course, I saw how Johann would be the safer bet, but my feelings were a bit hurt that he wouldn't entrust me with the job.

"You have your own saintly duties to attend to. Do you expect His Majesty to accompany you?"

"Oh!"

I'd completely forgotten that crucial detail. I could only do both of my jobs because the prince accompanied me as I did my saintly duties. Eric was right, if I became the king's bodyguard, I would no longer be able to perform those sacred tasks.

"Besides...I want to keep you by my side, Leia."

"Huh?"

"It's n-nothing, f-forget it," he stammered, looking away.

I had a feeling he just said something very important and I'd missed it...

To secure the safety of his father, the king, Eric assigned Johann, his most trusted companion, to be his personal guard. For that purpose, he requested to speak with Alfred, the captain of the royal guard. He also requested that Johann be present so the three could talk.

As soon as Alfred arrived, he looked quite surly.

He must be upset. Prince Eric's suggestion probably made him feel like His Highness found fault with him.

He took pride in his work as the king's bodyguard. It was entirely reasonable that Eric's lack of faith would offend him. Getting Alfred to understand our side would be like pulling teeth.

"Your Highness, I'd rather you not assign new personnel to my roster without my permission. Temps are unnecessary. We are the honorable Knights of Elshaid's royal guard. Johann's rustic, brute force swordplay would not be a benefit to us."

The very first words that came out of Sir Alfred's mouth were a scathing condemnation of Johann. The nerve of him, calling the Olbrun school rustic! He knew how highly Eric valued Johann, yet he belittled him anyway. I sensed a personal vendetta at play.

"Sir Alfred, won't you at least consider Prince Eric's intentions?" Johann added politely. "This is no time for us to be led by our egos. His Majesty is in unprecedeted danger. Wouldn't you agree that in this moment that there's no such thing as too much security?"

"Bah! I don't care that the crown prince himself requested it! We have our pride! A pride that comes from years of service under His Majesty! We cannot toss that pride aside to let the likes of you join our ranks!"

Alfred was as obstinate (if not more so) as we'd anticipated. This man with a dark complexion was well trained, and he didn't hesitate to show just how good a fighter he was.

"Now, now, Sir Alfred, let's not be so harsh. You accepted the former captain of the guard without discrimination despite his humble background, did you not?"

"Prince Eric, deputies in the royal guard are at my discretion alone, by order of His Majesty himself," Alfred said. "I don't have to take anyone's advice, not even yours. It's my policy to not allow proles in my ranks. The matter is closed."

Sir Alfred believed he had the power to hire and fire was solely his. Nothing Eric could say would convince him to let Johann join his ranks. And it seemed that Johann's status as a commoner was what Alfred objected to the most.

"Well, I think good fighters should be our bodyguards, regardless of their class," Eric said calmly. "And Johann is a great fighter. You have my word."

“What good is your word, Your Highness? I seem to recall you also chose the Olbrun school. You had the audacity to ignore the Leonard school and learn the swordplay of a farmer. The humiliation was too much to bear.”

So that was the root of Sir Alfred’s resentment. Eric choosing Olbrun over Leonard had deeply wounded Sir Alfred’s ego.

“The Olbrun style suited me better. It also made me into a good fighter, so I’m eternally grateful to Master Olbrun and his son and my fellow training partner, Johann.”

“Yes, but thanks to acting on your whims, the Leonard school is now disparaged as second-rate. I believe that the Leonard school is the most powerful. Peasants and their schools are a detriment to the art.”

Now we were in trouble. Alfred was just as stubborn as Eric. I wanted to explain our case to him somehow, but no ideas were coming to mind.

“You really seem to look down on the Olbrun school,” Eric said. “But surely you know just how skilled the former captain of the guard was?”

“The former captain of the guard...was skilled? Can’t say—I don’t remember. He must have been rather insignificant. He only used rustic swordplay, after all. I wonder why he was entrusted with the honor of captain of the guard in the first place.”

“Shall I help jog your memory?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Murderous intent crackled through the air. What in the world was Eric doing? He should have known better. We wouldn’t make any progress if he wasn’t diplomatic.

“Your Highness, how do you propose to help me remember how skilled the former captain was? I hope you aren’t proposing that you and I duel.”

“That’s exactly what I’m proposing. If I best you in a contest of strength using rustic swordplay, as you mockingly put it, then you’ll have no choice but to

acknowledge the Olbrun school's merit, won't you? Besides, I've been wanting a little exercise. It's been a while."

Both Alfred and I were shocked. Eric was indeed strong, but this was the captain of the royal guard! If they dueled, Eric could get hurt—seriously hurt.

"Prince Eric...this isn't a joke."

"Ha ha! If I were joking, I would have said something funnier. We fight fair and square—no holds barred. You'd better put this impudent prince in his place."

"As you wish. You'll be sorry you said that."

Before I knew what was happening, Eric and Alfred agreed to a duel. The original plan was to get Johann on His Majesty's royal guard, so how did it come to this? My mind swam with confusion as we all headed to the training ground where the palace soldiers practiced.

As soon as we arrived at the training ground, Eric chose a practice sword of suitable size and gave it a swing before settling into a forward-leaning, midlevel stance. It was apparently the fundamental form of the Olbrun style that Johann's family created generations ago.

"I have heard that you are rather good with a sword, Your Highness. However, you have never faced a fighter forged in battle. As your rustic style relies purely on brute strength, it is already clear how this fight will go."

Alfred chose a practice sword the same size as Eric's and took a higher stance. As the eldest son of a viscount, he was a master of the Leonard school of swordplay. He had climbed his way up to the position of captain of the guard through the crucible of battle. It was his radiant history that likely made him dismiss a commoner like Johann. Maybe that was why Eric felt the need to defend the honor of the Olbrun school and show Alfred just how powerful it really was.

"All right then, Your Highness. Come at me any way you wish. If you fear

injury, I advise that you yield early.”

Alfred would not be punished if he hurt Eric during this duel. Eric had proposed the duel, and he had used the words “no holds barred.” Alfred would not reject an offer like that. From the time I spent with Eric, I knew he meant it.

How Alfred looked was also concerning. Though he belittled the Olbrun style for relying on brute force, he was awfully muscular.

If Prince Eric takes an attack head-on, even that wooden practice sword will cause some serious damage.

If it were me, I could rely on my magic to fight with ranged attacks, but how would Eric deal with the difference in their physiques?

“What’s wrong, Your Highness? Don’t tell me you’re scared!”

“Don’t blink. Unless that’s what the Leonard style teaches you to do?”

“What?!”

Alfred did not look like he was particularly cocky, but when he blinked, Eric swooped in and ruthlessly thrust his sword up toward Alfred’s jaw.

However, Alfred wasn’t the captain of the royal guard for nothing. An ordinary fighter would have been finished by that move alone—but not him. At the last possible moment, he parried Eric’s sword with his own.

From there, their swords clashed in a series of escalating blows. Eric seemed to be at a disadvantage. As I’d feared, Alfred was a bit stronger than he was.

Prince Eric is much faster, but it’s not enough to make up for the shortness of his reach and the disadvantage in strength.

The way things were going, I had a sense of dread that Eric would lose. I hated how the match was settled before it had hardly begun.

“Hmph! The Olbrun style is not a threat at all. Indeed! I’ll admit, you surprised me with that first attack! However, I will not give you another opening!”

“Please, don’t misunderstand. I’m about to perform an Olbrun technique.

Vacant Rain!"

"Urgh?!"

With a shout, Eric swiftly aimed at an angle with intense focus. From where I was standing, I could see it, but since Alfred was facing the attack directly, I imagined it felt like an invisible sword had assaulted him.

Alfred had belittled the Olbrun school as a rustic style that relied on brute strength, lacking speed and finesse. But if that were so, Eric could not have pulled off such a move. It would take years of muscle-training and repetition of the fundamentals to master. That was probably why, at a glance, he had written the style off as plain and overly reliant on muscle.

It made me wonder how much training Eric had to endure to be able to master a move like that.

"Huff, huff... S-so that's...huff...Olbrun style..."

"Good job, Alfred. You dodged it."

"Huff...huff... Well, if I wasn't capable of simple evasion...huff...huff...I would've died on the battlefield long ago."

Alfred caught his breath and resumed his high stance. The invisible sword strike must have wounded his confidence but not his spirit.

"I am Sir Alfred! My spirit is unbeatable!"

Alfred swung his sword hard from a distance barely a sword's length away. Due to his herculean strength, the swing produced a squall of wind. Eric braced himself against it, but lost his footing and fell to his knees.

"You're mine!" Alfred charged at him, seizing his chance at victory.

His former smugness was gone. This was no longer a fight to put an impertinent prince in his place—it was his last chance to defeat a powerful enemy, and he pursued it in earnest.

"Olbrun technique, Hatching Cicada..."

“Oof?!”

Alfred’s sword slashed through empty space. Eric was now back-to-back with his opponent as he thrust his wooden sword at Alfred’s neck.

Eric had only pretended to stumble. He then judged the speed of Alfred’s charging attack and sneaked behind him the moment it was unleashed. I couldn’t quite tell if I had seen everything that transpired correctly, but I was fairly certain that’s what happened.

“And Johann is even better than I am,” Eric said. “His arms are much thicker and stronger than mine. When I unleashed my Vacant Rain technique on you earlier, the fight was already mine.”

“I suppose you’re saying...a bodyguard should never be weaker than the man he’s protecting.”

“Exactly. Glad you’re quick on the uptake.”

Alfred had fallen to his knees and was staring vacantly. It seemed that he finally understood just how powerful the Olbrun school was.

“I was being narrow-minded. I was obsessed with the notion that if I were to surpass my predecessor, I had to surpass the Olbrun style...and I lost sight of what was most important.”

“I recognize just how seriously you take your career. And I may have bested you today, but that doesn’t prove the Olbrun school is superior.”

“You’re too kind, Your Highness. I was entirely in the wrong. If the offer still stands, I would be honored to add your closest confidant, Sir Johann, to my team.”

And with that, Alfred begged Johann’s forgiveness, Johann accepted his offer to join the royal guard, and together, they agreed to protect His Majesty the King as allies. At first, I thought things had gotten needlessly complicated, but in the end, everything worked out nicely.

“Sir Johann Olbrun, my order would be honored to have you join us.”

“Sir Alfred, I am honored. In the name of the Olbrun style, I shall protect His Majesty with my life.”

While they had butted heads at first, they were both loyal men who trained as hard as possible to protect their king and their kingdom. It was Johann’s skill that had won Alfred over.

Now that this matter was resolved, I began to worry about the two dukes besides Gilbert. I wondered what their next move would be.

“Splendid! That was truly magnificently done, Prince Eric.”

A tall man walked toward us, clapping.

“Duke Algrene...”

Duke Algrene, one of the most powerful nobles in Elshaid.

He was one of the potential schemers behind the plot to kill His Majesty the King. With a monocle on his eye, a tall top hat on his head, and a bow at his waist, he looked nothing short of a perfect gentleman.

But there was no mistaking it—we needed to be wary of him.

His appearance on the scene revived my premonition of danger.

“Thank you kindly for giving me your time, Your Highness. I came to see you and was told you were at the training grounds. As the atmosphere was rather fraught just now, I thought it best to wait and observe.”



Since Duke Algren was there to see him, Prince Eric took us all back to his study. As the duke sipped his tea, he explained to us the circumstances that had brought him to the training grounds.

Just like Duke Merhide, I've hardly ever spoken with him. I know nothing about him either, aside from what Prince Dale told me about him wishing to foster talent.

Algren was the one who introduced Dale to the ice cream parlor and helped the restaurant chef study in the Ren Empire. I only recently learned both of those facts.

I didn't know what sort of person he was, but when I heard those stories about him, I had a bad feeling I couldn't quite place. I knew it was unfair of me to suspect him without any evidence, but seeing him now, I sensed a shadowy, sinister aura about him.

"What a splendid king His Majesty is. Revoking the special rights of one's highest nobles is a valiant form of revolution, in my book. Naturally, I'm all for it. I believe as much power should go to His Majesty as possible."

No way did he really believe that. Somebody in Algren's position suddenly supporting the measure wholeheartedly was beyond fishy. After all, it was Eric's wish that this revocation of rights was to be carried out, and that was the very reason Algren had distanced himself from Eric and awarded his fealty to Dale.

Yet here he was, suddenly expressing his full support. It was suspicious, no matter how I looked at it.

He must have some reason behind publicly supporting the measure. He's plotting something.

I was starting to resent this new cynical side of myself. Suspecting everyone was one of the unfortunate drawbacks of my profession.

"And you came all this way just to tell me that?" Eric asked.

"No, Your Highness. In fact, I have yet to broach the most important subject

that I must discuss with you.”

“Aha. Important, you say...” Eric didn’t even attempt to hide his wariness. His eyes gleamed sharply as he regarded the duke.

But Algrenе returned his gaze without flinching, gave an audacious grin, and said, “Now, I may support the revocation of rights, but it’s highly likely the other dukes are not in agreement. Especially Merhide. He might respond with violence.”

Now I get it. He’s hoping to paint himself as Prince Eric’s sole supporter.

He brazenly disparaged the other dukes with a smile on his face. If he was the mastermind behind everything, I doubted it would be easy to catch him red-handed.

“You see, I love to support Elshaidians who show promise. To that end, I’ve formed a mercenary company of individuals with a talent for the martial arts.”

“Oh? That’s a noble achievement. Is it somehow related to what you came to tell me?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I came here with a proposition: Add my mercenary company to His Majesty’s royal guard.”

So that’s his game. Get on Prince Eric’s good side and plant his own goons in His Majesty’s royal guard.

This was an offer that was difficult to refuse. Algrenе offered his army as a sign of loyalty. Doubting his intentions would be an insult. Mishandling of this situation ran the risk of tarnishing Eric’s reputation.

“Duke Algrenе, I’m deeply honored by the offer, but—”

“Your Highness! As a duke and head of house, I have pledged my loyalty to the crown for many years! I am just so worried about His Majesty’s safety that I...I...oh-oh!”

Duke Algrenе burst into tears as he swore his loyalty to the crown.

Now he's playing the crying card. He's made the offer almost impossible to refuse now.

This whole situation gave me a strong sense of déjà vu—because of Jill. Jill would always cry to sway others. Playing for sympathy was her signature move.

But this is Prince Eric he's up against. Not even Jill's tears worked on him.

Eric slowly sipped his tea and watched Algrenе continue to sob. Then he said, “Duke Algrenе, I’m afraid your tears are quite suspect. We have no need for your mercenary company, so could you please take your leave?”

Eric rejected the duke’s offer. Of course he did. Even if it was difficult to turn down Algrenе, there was no way he could put something as suspect as a bunch of mercenaries anywhere near the king.

Algrenе sighed. “Prince Eric...you’ve disappointed me. Your paranoid nature will hinder your ability to rule as king, in my humble opinion.”

“That may be so but I’m more concerned with the king’s safety than I am with losing your favor. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I was foolish enough to put my father in the care of somebody I couldn’t trust.”

Eric and Algrenе glared at each other. The latter’s tears had already dried and his eyes were cold.

“Guess I was right. A more tolerant and flexible man like Prince Dale is the one who truly deserves the crown.”

“Duke Algrenе, don’t you think that’s an inappropriate thing to say to Prince Eric?”

I just couldn’t bite my tongue any longer. Eric rejected his proposal, so I could see why he was spiteful, but the way he spoke to Eric was rude beyond words.

“You must be Saint Leia... Your little sister, Jill Westoria, was tricked by Berklein into committing a major crime. Doesn’t that make it inappropriate for you to serve as a prince’s bodyguard?”

“What?!”

“A prince unfit for the crown and a bodyguard with a criminal sister—I’m sorry, but I believe I am much more suited to protecting His Majesty than either of you.”

Duke Algren rose to his feet, a smug look of superiority on his face. I didn’t think he had any particular reason to rile Eric up, but must’ve had some reason for showing such a high degree of disrespect.

“Johann, Alfred, and their men are more than capable of protecting His Majesty,” Eric snapped. “I’ll be frank, Duke Algren, I have no proof that you are not conspiring to harm the king.”

Eric firmly showed Algren that he didn’t trust him. And he had every right to, after what the duke had said to him. Still, was the duke’s true face? He looked down on me with utter disgust.

“I figured you would say that, Your Highness. You will come to regret your lack of faith.”

“And why is that?”

“I came here of my own accord and tried to help you save face. Now I will offer my mercenary company to Prince Dale.”

With that, the duke took his leave.

I knew Dale had no desire for his mercenary company either, but when I saw how brazen the duke was, I couldn’t shake the feeling in my heart that danger was brewing.

“Eric, Johann’s back,” Lingsha announced.

Johann had been in a meeting with Alfred to iron out the details of his temporary transfer. When he returned to Eric’s study, Lingsha started to get the tea ready for him.

“Good work, Johann. Have a seat,” Eric said.

“Since you wish to speak with me again, I assume Duke Algren said something concerning?”

“Yes...you could say that.”

Prince Eric proceeded to fill Johann in on what had happened with Duke Algren. Johann’s face grew graver and graver as he listened.

“So Duke Algren was simply insulting us—nothing else!” Johann raged after Eric concluded the story.

I didn’t blame him. This was completely different from Eric sending Johann over to His Majesty’s royal guard. However, what made things difficult was Algren’s assertion that he had made the offer out of loyalty. That made it difficult to reproach.

And yet, Eric had flatly rejected him, and in turn thoroughly disgraced Algren. Then again, it looked like that was all part of the duke’s plan...

“You don’t need to worry, Johann. Just focus on your own work.”

Eric trusted Johann. No matter how many mercenaries Algren had in his militia, the prince’s faith in him could not be shaken.

“Understood, Your Highness! Your loyal retainer, Johann Olbrun, promises to work with Sir Alfred to keep His Majesty fully protected!” Johann declared, pounding his chest with his fist.

I knew everything would be okay. Alfred was a skilled fighter, and Johann had years of experience protecting Eric. They would never falter, no matter what trickery the mastermind employed to stop the reform.

However, there was one more thing. One more issue that worried me.

“Duke Algren said that he was going to present the same offer to Prince Dale,” I said. “And I’m not sure what he will decide...”

I was a bit anxious that Dale would accept the duke’s offer. He and the duke were rather friendly. Ever since I heard that it was Algren who had introduced the ice cream parlor to Dale, I’d had nagging thoughts about their connection.

“I doubt Dale would swallow that man’s rubbish,” Prince Eric scoffed.

“I agree. But Prince Dale has his position to consider. I don’t think he can callously reject a kind offer from a longtime friend.”

Eric was right, the offer was absurd. But unlike Eric, Dale was friendly with the dukes. I didn’t know how Algren would broach the subject with Dale, but we had to consider the worst-case scenario just in case.

“Don’t worry, Eric, I’ll punch Dale in the face. That’ll stop him!” Lingsha interjected.

If there was one thing we needed to avoid at all costs, it was that. Her punishment would be more severe than house arrest this time.

“Miss Lin, that is just too barbarous.”

“But, Johann, in the Ren Empire we have a saying: A beaten dog never barks, yes!”

“But Prince Dale isn’t a dog. And don’t you *ever* repeat that saying in public again.”

Johann sighed while Lingsha cackled. In an odd way, they had eased the tension in the room.

Eric looked at the bantering pair and said, “That won’t be necessary, Lingsha. We won’t need to go so far as to punch Dale.”

Of course, it was wrong to literally punch Dale, but I could tell there was a hidden meaning in his words.

“Even if Dale accepts the duke’s offer, the king won’t. He has a vested interest in protecting himself—he wouldn’t entrust his safety to a group he doesn’t trust or even know.”

Eric had a good point. The king, being the subject of this matter, had the final say. No matter how hard either of his sons pleaded, if the king drew a line, nobody could cross it.

I'm ashamed I lost sight of this most crucial detail in all of this.

Eric's sound logic got me nodding firmly in agreement. Now I realized my worries were in vain. Algren's proposal was doomed to fail from the very start.

But the next day, we received some shocking news: Duke Algren's mercenary company had been integrated into His Majesty's security detail. This meant that Dale and His Majesty had both accepted Algren's proposal.

Eric seemed just as shocked to hear the news as we were. It was some time before the stunned look left his eyes.

-Eric's Perspective-

DAY AFTER DAY, I was asked the same questions. Everyone continued to put the blame on me.

They asked me why I tried to kill my sweet sister, Leia. They asked me about my connection to the person trying to harm Prince Eric. And they asked me about my relationship with Lord Jade.

I answered all their questions truthfully, and yet nobody ever understood me.

I heard that when Mother and Father were brought in for questioning, they said they wanted nothing more to do with me and left in a hurry. Mother always said that she loved me, so how could this be true?

Why wouldn't they rescue me?

Why did I have to receive such unjust treatment?

My cell was dark and small and cold. I couldn't bear to spend even a single day in a place like this.

Dear God, do you really detest me so? Why is Fate always so needlessly cruel to me?

“How are you feeling? I was hoping you were about ready to be honest and face your crimes.”

My mother, my father, my sister... None of them ever visited me. Only Prince Dale came to visit me every single day.

At first, I wondered if perhaps he was in love with me.

But he said such dreadful things to me every day. He kept telling me how gravely I had sinned. No matter how hard I denied it, he kept scolding me. As Prince Dale and I talked, I started to believe that I truly was a wicked person. That was why I never wished to see him.

However, he could possibly free me from this dreadful place. That belief was what kept me listening to his lectures. I was stricken with grief, but I swallowed my tears and listened every day to what Prince Dale had to tell me.

“I don’t know what my crimes are. As I’ve told you many times, Your Highness, I was merely following Lord Jade’s orders because I believed he would make Elshaid a better place.”

“And as I’ve told *you* many times, Jade deceived you. He betrayed you. He’s an evil man who tried to kill the crown prince, my brother.”

Prince Dale was speaking ill of Lord Jade again. When he told me Lord Jade was evil and that he had used me, for a moment, I almost started to believe him.

But it couldn’t be true. Lord Jade was so dashing, and he cared so much for me. Kind and gentle Lord Jade, a villain? I couldn’t imagine a more terrifying notion.

“You tried to kill Miss Leia. Do you still believe that act was justified?”

“Lord Jade told me it must be done, and I trust my beloved Jade.”

“But you just told me you did it for Elshaid...”

"It's the same thing. Lord Jade promised me he would make Elshaid a better place."

Prince Dale kept asking me the same nitpicky questions. Why, this was no better than torture. Why did I have to endure such cruel interrogations?

"Do you really hate Miss Leia that much?"

"Of course I don't hate my sweet sister!"

"Then, do you love her?"

"I...used to love her. I was so proud to be her sister."

Now Prince Dale began to ask me how I felt about my sister; it was one baffling question after another.

I had never *hated* my sister. She wanted to keep her distance from me, for one reason or another, but the feeling wasn't mutual. Okay, I'll admit, if she weren't around, I would've become a saint, but that wasn't enough to make me hate her.

"You *used* to love her? But not anymore?"

I did love Leia. Was that really such an odd thing to say?

"My sister can do anything. But she looks down on me, and even worse, she cheated her way into sainthood."

Mother told me that Leia had cheated. She was so talented, yet she needed to cheat to become a saint. That was what made me think less of her. I used to believe in her. But not only did she flaunt her victory, she cheated to obtain it. There was no way I could love her after she did that.

"Let me ask you this, then: What if your mother was lying to you?"

"If my mother...lied? Well...I still couldn't love her."

Even if Leia's cheating was a lie, my feelings will not change.

Why was Prince Dale even asking me about this?

Mother would never lie to me, so it was a pointless hypothetical anyway.

“Why would you still not love your sister? Wouldn’t you lose your reason to think less of her?”

“Yes, but Leia loathes me.”

That’s right. My sweet sister detests me.

I had always felt this to be true. Whenever she saw me, her face soured. Whenever I tried to talk to her, she looked bored. I always felt it would be difficult to love a sister who treated me like that.

“I see. Wow... You and I might be alike in that way.”

Sadness crept into Prince Dale’s eyes. He got up and left.

Just why in the world did Prince Dale come to visit me every day?

Chapter 3: Two Dukes, One Incident

NEWS OF DUKE ALGRENE'S mercenary company joining His Majesty's royal guard shook us. The higher nobles who weren't happy about the revocation of rights probably wanted the king dead, so why would the king go out of his way to let the mercenaries of Duke Algren—one of those higher nobles—into his circle?

Neither Eric nor I could make sense of it. All we could do was stand there in a daze.

"The tea's ready."

"Thanks, Lingsha," Eric said. He took a sip of tea and craned his neck. "I just... don't understand His Majesty's reasoning. It's like he's hoping to be assassinated."

I didn't think I'd ever seen the prince this perplexed. He was a very logical thinker, which made it even harder for him to follow His Majesty's reasoning.

"Perhaps this is his way of showing he trusts Duke Algren?" I suggested.

Just because we found the dukes suspicious didn't mean everyone else did. From the king's perspective, Algren was a vassal with a long history of loyalty. Perhaps His Majesty placed exceptional trust in him.

Eric nodded. "True, the only person whom Duke Merhide and Duke Algren actually hate is me. Their relationships with Dale and my father have always been friendly."

Eric had spent the past several years exposing the corruption of government officials connected with the dukes. He even made public statements that he would revoke their special rights as soon as he became king. As a result, the dukes saw him as a threat, and they had tried to assassinate him multiple times.

If His Majesty has a good relationship with Duke Algren, it's entirely possible that he doesn't feel he's a danger to his life.

"But now that the king has announced the reform, the good relationships he's forged won't necessarily keep him safe from an assassin's blade. In fact, his good relationships will make it worse—the dukes will feel he betrayed them."

Okay, so it was reasonable of me to think along those lines.

Even if His Majesty attempted to maintain harmony with the dukes, taking away their special rights would inevitably lead to resistance.

I was optimistic about the situation at first, but Eric was right. Welcoming Algren's mercenary company was just too high a risk.

"I'm sure His Majesty considered the possibility," I said.

"Indeed. In which case, my father took in Duke Algren's militia knowing the risk. But still, that doesn't make his reasoning any clearer."

We were back to square one. The king must've had a reason to accept the mercenary company into his ranks in spite of the danger. But what was it?

It's no use. I haven't the faintest idea.

I cursed my own lack of imagination. I wanted to give the prince some intelligent ideas to help him think through the problem, but I was coming up blank.

"In the Ren Empire, we have a proverb: You can't catch a tiger without entering its den."

I knew that proverb. It meant in order to achieve spectacular results, you needed to take spectacular risks. Perhaps Lingsha was telling us that the king accepted Algren's mercenary company for that reason.

"Lingsha, that thought had crossed my mind, but the king jumped far too deep into the tiger's den for that to make sense."

"Huh... Y'think so?"

“Even if he planned to make himself bait to lure the mastermind out of hiding, placing potential assassins right next to you is the definition of madness.”

Eric believed the king would never put himself in such extreme danger, but I felt that Lingsha’s story made sense. Eric had done something quite similar recently. He had devised and carried out a scheme to catch a mastermind by letting the assassins come at him when he was most vulnerable. So it was quite reasonable that his father the king could utilize a similar stratagem.

“In any case, Johann will need to keep constant surveillance on this mercenary company—”

“Prince Eric, Duke Merhide seeks an audience with you.”

Eric was interrupted when Merhide’s arrival was announced from the other side of the door to his study.

A visit from Duke Merhide, of all the luck.

Perhaps it had something to do with Algrenе’s soldiers joining the royal guard...

“Duke Merhide, you say? We can’t refuse. Let him in.”

With a sour look on his face, Eric resigned himself to speaking with Merhide. I hadn’t seen the duke since my dinner with Dale. At the time, he struck me as an uncouth man who wouldn’t stop insulting Eric—I wondered if he would tone any of that down when meeting the prince face-to-face.

He might say some nasty things about me again, just like he did in front of Prince Dale...

This fear lingered in my mind as Duke Merhide entered the study.

Duke Merhide sat opposite Prince Eric. There was gloom to his eyes, and nothing in his expression hinted that he was about to bury the hatchet and get friendly with Eric. Rather, to put it bluntly, he looked furious. And even without saying it outright, the source of this outrage was clear: Duke Algrenе.

"That utter fraud! Trying to paint me as the villain! Your Highness! I consider this a grave insult to the honor of House Merhide!"

Merhide was roaring so loudly that his voice was audible outside the study. He had to feel quite humiliated. After gulping down his tea in one go, he stood up and let Eric have it.

"So, Duke Algren cast you as the villain..." Eric looked Merhide up and down, then he said curtly, "Well, aren't you?"

Eric was as good at picking a fight as Merhide. The latter's face grew redder by the second.

This is going to get ugly. I know Prince Eric doesn't trust Duke Merhide, but he's being way too direct with him.

No good would come from provoking him.

Merhide's lips quivered, unable to form words. Finally, he glowered at Eric and said, "My house has served the crown for generations. I'll have you know, we've put our lives on the line and served with utmost loyalty! We have never once considered acting with dishonor toward His Majesty! Do you mean to say you doubt our fealty, Your Highness?!"

He was yelling so close that I longed to cover my ears. As with the first time I met him, he seemed like a man thoroughly incapable of subterfuge. Especially not when he yelled every thought in his head straight at your face. In a way, his honesty was rather refreshing.

"Well, I don't appreciate the revocation of rights reform, nor do I like the fact that you are crown prince, Eric! But I would never try to disguise that! That is why I have the courtesy to come here in the open, to tell you what I think to your face!"

I wasn't sure that was worth praise, but he made it sound like it was. Merhide didn't hide his true feelings and had freely complained about Eric even to me. If Dale hadn't stepped in to smooth things over, it surely would have escalated

just as it was now.

“Duke Merhide, please don’t shout. Can’t we relax and speak like gentlemen?”

“You think I can *relax* at a time like this?! Plotting assassinations is more Algrenе’s cup of tea than mine! That mercenary company of his is bloody suspicious if you ask me! It offends me even more than you do, Prince Eric.”

On that, we could agree. He was just as suspicious of Algrenе’s mercenary company as we were.

Indeed, Algrenе was a bigger thorn in Merhide’s side than the prince. On paper, Algrenе’s move was meant to signal that he would protect the king from any rebellions over the revocation of rights. Duke Gilbert also supported the reform, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Merhide felt that Algrenе was isolating him.

With a labored sigh, Eric said, “Did you just come here to gripe at and insult me? If so, I must ask you to leave. I’m a busy man, you know.”

I also didn’t understand the duke’s intentions in coming here. I could understand his need to complain, but it didn’t seem like there was much else he wanted to say. Merhide needed to calm himself quickly and tell us why he was here.

Merhide gave a devilish grin. “Would you like to join forces with me, Prince Eric?”

“Join forces? With you? I don’t follow. Could you elaborate?”

Merhide was proposing an alliance—but to what end?

“I will catch Algrenе red-handed. If I succeed, exempt House Merhide from the revocation of rights. What do you say? Not a bad deal, eh?” He spoke in a self-satisfied manner.

Clearly, he thought his plan was brilliant.

This is hopeless. No use even talking to this guy.

I was honestly underwhelmed. When he suggested they join forces, I was hoping for something more feasible. Did Merhide honestly think Eric would go for such a crazy idea?

“Duke Merhide, I think you’re negotiating with the wrong person,” Eric said, his voice level. “His Majesty is the one trying to carry out the reform. You should negotiate with him, not me.”

Eric could have simply rejected him and sent him off, but his attempt to explain his reasoning was the least he could do to soften the blow.

“But His Majesty chose Algren over me! I cannot abide by that!”

I expected Merhide to bluster, but he sounded surprisingly objective.

Still, he ought to know that Prince Eric would never go along with such an outlandish proposal.

Merhide knew what kind of man Eric was. I hated to say it, but the man was much too optimistic.

“I don’t know the nature of your relationship with His Majesty, but you’re putting me in a bad position if you want me to intervene.”

“Your Highness! Just think about it! It sickens me to say this, but you are the future king! And if you are the future king, surely you can do something to help me!”

That was uncalled for—Merhide was completely out of line. He needed to learn a thing or two about humility before trying to negotiate. If that was his style, nobody would agree to form an alliance with him, let alone Eric.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. If that was all you wanted to say, then please leave.”

“You what?!”

Eric was quite blunt. From the look of shock on Merhide’s face, I assumed that he hadn’t expected rejection. He picked his jaw up off the floor and stared

daggers at Eric. Then his face turned red again.

“Damn you! Prince Eric, you’ll rue the day you turned down an alliance with me!” Spittle flew as he punctuated his words with his fist slamming down on the table.

This man and Eric were like oil and water; of course they couldn’t mix.

“If you said that line in the Ren Empire, you’d be unlucky, oh yes. Keep an eye open when you sleep, okay?”

“Harrumph!” Merhide scoffed at Lingsha’s wisdom of the Ren Empire.

But what a twist: Not only did Merhide and Algrené both oppose Eric, but they were also at each other’s throats. Would this work in our favor or against us? That was the question...

Regardless, our biggest concern right now was Algrené’s mercenary company, not Merhide. I thought that His Majesty would be safe with Johann by his side, but I still couldn’t shake the ominous feeling I had.

I hated most of all that the only thing I could do to help was to pray for the future.

First there was the news of Algrené’s mercenary company joining the king’s guard, then Merhide’s hurricane of a visit. Between the dizzyingly fast developments and the swirling shadows of conspiracy looming over us, my brain was about to explode.

But there was still something I needed to do.

No matter how turbulent the political climate of Elshaid got, I still needed to keep the monsters out and save the faithful who needed my help. That was a saint’s duty. So, in the morning, I readied myself for another day of doing the Lord’s work.

“Prince Eric, aren’t you rather busy today? Miss Lin is more than capable; shouldn’t you stay behind at the palace?” I said.

Eric was under no obligation to accompany me. If we wanted to keep Algrenе in check, keeping Eric at the palace was optimal.

“No, the king won’t be any safer if I stay here. I’m letting Johann and Alfred handle it.”

Eric decided to accompany me as he always did. I did think the king ought to be safe as long as Johann was among his bodyguards, but I still had the feeling that Algrenе had a trick or two up his sleeve. There was no guarantee some unforeseen circumstance wouldn’t arise.

Although, if Prince Eric says everything will be fine, warning him any further is unnecessary.

Eric said everything was taken care of, so I decided to trust him. With a renewed perspective, I finished getting ready and headed to the palace gate with Eric.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Prince Eric. And Miss Leia. Going out? *Fine* weather for an outing, if I don’t say so myself.” Duke Algrenе wore an angelic smile.

We ran into him at the palace gate. Behind him stood a bunch of men holding a variety of weapons. They were probably his aforementioned mercenary company. They certainly did look strong. The rumors that he scoured foreign lands for the most talented warriors appeared to be true.

“Let me introduce you to the Algrenе Mercenary Company. They are true warriors who’ve honed their talents and sculpted their muscles. I believe you’ll find little difference between them and the palace knights.”

Algrenе could not hide the smugness in his eyes as he showed off his mercenaries. But even if they were skilled, the most important quality in a palace bodyguard was loyalty. Although strength and skill were factors when Eric hired his own bodyguards, loyalty came first. Even with Lingsha, a former imperial princess of another empire, she was chosen as a bodyguard not only

for her strength but for her steadfastness.

Perhaps this was rude to say, but this group of soldiers looked more like an unruly mob than an army—definitely not the sort of people we could trust to keep His Majesty safe.

“They do indeed look strong—they have strong arms, at least. Though I can’t say I agree that they’re equal to the palace guards...”

“Oh dear, I was being terribly modest. They are *better* than the palace guards. After all, they were recruited from all over the continent. They’re on a whole other level, my boy.”

It was an insult to the palace knights and bodyguards. Eric’s expression grew very serious. First Merhide, now Algren—why were the highest nobles allowed to disrespect Eric like this? Perhaps special privileges made people too confident.

“A whole other level, you say? Sorry, but without a reputation, your boasts about their capabilities ring hollow to me.”

“Oh, they’ll build a reputation soon enough. Prince Eric, your father is safe in our hands. I promise we will deliver results.”

He had to have a reason for his conceited attitude. Unless assassins targeted the person you defended every day like they did when I started as a bodyguard, they couldn’t build a track record for success so easily.

I just can’t shake this feeling. I know he’s still hiding something. I can see it in his eyes.

I didn’t know what thoughts lurked behind his smile, but my instincts were sounding alarm bells for the hundredth time. Since Eric survived even harsher malice than I had faced, I was sure his intuition was telling him the same thing.

Eric breathed out slowly and said, “Well, I’ve left His Majesty in Johann’s care, so I’ve got nothing to worry about. Besides, he has Captain Alfred as well. He’s highly skilled.”

Eric reaffirmed his faith in Johann. Johann was indeed highly skilled; his swordsmanship was even better than Eric's. I couldn't imagine anyone better suited to be a bodyguard than him. I agreed that, with Johann and Alfred working together, there was nothing to fear.

Duke Algren chortled noisily, "Hah hah hah! You're a funny man, Your Highness, you have nothing to worry about because of *Johann*? Do you truly mean that?"

"I beg your pardon?" Eric growled.

I didn't see what was so funny. There was nothing at all strange about Eric trusting Johann.

"If Johann is so trustworthy, then why did you feel the need to train yourself so hard?"

Eric looked astonished.

It was true that Eric had trained hard. And it was also true that he had done so to be able to protect himself. But to insinuate that he did so because he didn't trust his bodyguards? That was just too much...

"When Sir Alfred wouldn't accept Johann into his ranks, why did you challenge him to a duel? If you truly trusted Johann's abilities, it would have made more sense to have him fight on your behalf."

He had it all wrong. Eric stepped in to fight so there wouldn't be any bad blood between Johann and Alfred afterward. If Johann had dueled Alfred and won, he may have proved himself worthy, but it could've led to a rivalry.

Alfred had his own men to command. If Johann had humiliated their commander, his authority could be called into question. Eric had taken all of that into consideration when he volunteered to play the bad guy. He had done all of it for Johann's sake.

"Duke Algren, please retract that claim."

"Miss Leia, I have said nothing wrong. I merely stated the facts."

"The facts, you say? And what part of Prince Eric not trusting Johann is true?"

It was too much. Even I was fuming and couldn't hold my tongue any longer.

But Algren's cool smile didn't waver. "If he truly had any faith in Johann's abilities, it'd only be natural to infer that the prince has no need to flaunt his own strength, don't you agree? After all, he continues to observe you when you perform your saintly duties because he still doesn't trust you."

"That's not true! Prince Eric is just—"

"Prince Eric has a bodyguard he can't trust, and His Majesty has a captain of the guard who lost a duel to a prince. Vassals of that caliber would make anybody feel uneasy. Well, then, if you'll excuse me, I must pay my respects to His Majesty."

After hurling insult after insult, Algren retreated into the palace before we could retaliate.

Prince Eric... Why won't you fight back? Doesn't it eat you alive?

Eric just stood there, clenching his fists in a shocked stupor. I wanted him to argue back. I wanted him to insist that he trusted Johann.

Keeping silent was not like him. I couldn't help but think that.

The silence was suffocating. If I'd known things would end up like this, I would've preferred that he stayed behind at the palace.

The prince pressed his lips together in a tight line for the entire carriage ride out and while I erected my barriers.

He would usually at least engage in some small talk. What Duke Algren said earlier must've really gotten to him.

The world was full of surprises. Eric was always confident in his actions. Of course, he didn't always succeed, but he never sulked. When he'd realized he had misjudged me, he owned up to his mistake and tried to make amends by

appointing me his bodyguard and observing my worth as a saint with his own eyes.

At his core, Eric was an idealist...and I respected him deeply for that.

“Prince Eric...”

“Hmm? Leia, what’s wrong? Are you feeling down?”

He gave me the courtesy of a response, but he still looked dour.

“Your Highness, I understand how you feel. About what Duke Algren said, and about Johann. It was dispiriting.”

“Oh, so that’s what’s bothering you.”

At Algren’s name, I detected a sharp edge in Eric’s voice. He sounded distant and cold; he probably didn’t want to talk about it.

I should be sensitive...

I cautiously continued, “When considering your environment, I don’t think it’s at all strange that you’d want to take precaution on top of precaution. I know that you’re training yourself to fight doesn’t mean that you don’t trust Johann.”

How many other people in Elshaid have experienced as many assassination attempts as Prince Eric? He never let it show, but it was easy to imagine how that sort of thing could take a psychological toll on someone.

And it didn’t matter how much he trusted Johann—the future of Elshaid was on his shoulders. He had a duty to carry out his responsibilities, and he knew that. He couldn’t afford to let a conniving villain get to him, so he took every precaution and trained himself into a champion fighter.

“Leia... I’m sorry I worried you. It’s all right, I haven’t let Duke Algren’s words get to me.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes.”

Eric smiled as he spoke, but his smile was strained, like it could break at any moment. But I was just as stubborn as he was. I knew he didn't want me to talk about it, yet there I was, insisting we talk.

"Still, leave me be. I appreciate that you want to help, but this is my problem. I have to be the one to find the answer."

This time, it was a clear rejection. Eric wanted to resolve the matter on his own. It was just like him.

It seemed that Algren's words touched a nerve. Eric was probably second-guessing himself, wondering if he really didn't trust Johann enough.

"Please, don't talk like that. I know, I'm not an expert on your relationship with Johann, but you shouldn't keep these things to yourself. You'll feel much better if you let it out."

I felt it was dangerous for Eric to bottle all those feelings up. The king's life was in danger; that he chose to send his most trusted vassal to protect him had to mean something.

The fact that Eric now doubted the measure he had taken—a measure that he had considered the most optimal for protecting his father—was proof that he had lost confidence in his sense of judgment. If that uncertainty spread to Alfred, then to His Majesty's royal guard, it could affect morale everywhere.

Which was why it was imperative that Eric recovered quickly. I knew I was being a busybody, but I simply had to help him.

"I know what you're thinking, Leia. If I'm depressed, that will bring morale down. Isn't that what you're trying to say?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"As I told you earlier, I truly appreciate you. But I'll be fine. I let myself feel down for a little while, but I've already bounced back. So please, don't say another word on this matter."

You aren't at all okay. But those words caught in my throat. I knew that

nothing I said would work.

Looking back, I always had the sense that Prince Eric would break someday. And I'm scared that my fear may soon come to pass.

Eric always walked on the straight and narrow path, pursuing his own sense of justice. That was why I believed that someday the threads he'd wound so tightly would snap. It's why I decided to devote my life to supporting him.

"I'm sorry, but can we end this conversation? You must be tired from work. Let's just head back to the palace and rest."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

I followed Eric back into the carriage.

Eric didn't say another word to me during the carriage ride; instead, he silently gazed out the window.

But I have faith. I know Prince Eric won't let this get him down. I have faith that he is strong.

He just needed a little more time. I knew that Eric would dust himself off and keep going. I just had to have faith in him and be patient. We would finish that conversation then.

"Make haste! Raise the alert level at once!"

"Don't delay!"

"What's going on?! For goodness' sake!"

When we returned to the palace, there was commotion at the gate. Several soldiers were milling about with stern looks on their faces.

There must have been an incident... And from the sound of things, it's serious.

From my experience as Eric's bodyguard, it was easy for me to determine what had happened: An assassin had infiltrated the palace. I had seen many times how the alarm was raised during each previous incident.

Setting aside the fact that the raised security precautions didn't seem to keep more assassins from showing up, it'd been a while since an alarm was raised because no one sought Eric's life any longer.

They probably just detected an intruder. But they weren't after Eric's life...

"Was it an assassin after the king?" I asked nervously.

"It's highly probable. We need to find Johann, fast."

A gleam returned to Eric's previously dull and listless eyes. I nodded in reply, relieved at the sight. Without another word, we ran into the palace.

"Well, hello there, Prince Eric. Glad you finally made it. We've been waiting for you."

"Duke Algren..."

His Majesty's royal guard was in the hallway outside the audience chamber. I had hoped that the intruder wouldn't make it this far in. Algren looked at us with a conceited smile on his face. Johann and Alfred were biting their lips and hanging their heads nearby.

What in the world happened here? From the general atmosphere, it seems like they caught the intruder, but something's off...

As I narrowed my eyes in doubt over this scene, Algren raised his arms and said, "My army apprehended an assassin meant for His Majesty. I didn't dream they would earn their stripes on the very first day. It seems we have their daily routine to thank."

So I was right: There was an intruder in the palace. And Algren's soldiers caught them.

It was a happy ending, so why was the atmosphere so morose?

"I see. You wanted to brag about how they earned their stripes. Well, you don't need to be so eager, I'm not so small that I can't give credit where credit

is—”

“That’s incorrect, Your Highness.”

“What?”

“I’m saying, your presumption about me was incorrect. That wasn’t why I was waiting for you to return. This is.”

Making sure not to lose his conceited grin, Algrenе told Eric that he had a different reason for wanting him to return quickly. His smile twisted wickedly with the smug confidence of a winner—it was remarkable in its grotesquery.

If Duke Algrenе wasn’t eager for Prince Eric to return so he could brag about his army’s exploits, then... Oh no, what’s that look on Johann’s face?!

It was times like this that I cursed my reliable intuition. A part of me prayed that I was wrong.

“Your Highness, where do you think our ruffian entered? It was from the area Johann was guarding.”

“What?”

“If Johann had only been doing his job properly, the ruffian wouldn’t have been able to make it this far. Dispatching my mercenary company was the right move. If I hadn’t stepped in, there’s no telling what would have happened to His Majesty.”

That can’t be! I almost yelled out.

When Johann was Eric’s bodyguard, he never once let an intruder enter where he was posted. It was impossible to believe that he would make such a careless mistake like this right after his transfer.

“Sir Johann, is this true?”

“Lady Leia...I am so ashamed. Everything Duke Algrenе said is true. I... I... I let an intruder through and I should have seen them coming!” Johann cut himself off, his face contorted into a mask of self-loathing.

So it was true. Eric and I both held our breath.

Algren pointed his finger at Alfred. "Sir Alfred, you are also partially to blame. You assigned an inexperienced bodyguard to this crucial post. Wasn't that careless of you?"

Alfred paused before saying, "No words can excuse my behavior. As you say, my lord, I am partially to blame."

He admitted to his own guilt. Algren puffed out his chest, making it clear that he was now in charge.

At the worst possible moment, Dale ran into the scene. "I heard there was an intruder! Is His Majesty safe?"

"Prince Dale!"

I remembered then that Algren had asked Dale to put in a good word about his mercenary company joining the royal guard. What's more, they had a long history of cooperation and mutual friendship. In other words, Dale had been the one to advise His Majesty to let Algren's mercenary company join the royal guard.

"Prince Dale! What excellent timing. My mercenary company, which you so graciously helped assign to the royal guard, has just earned their stripes."

"Well, that is fantastic news. So, they caught the intruder?"

"Yes. A brave Algren soldier did it."

Dale smiled when he heard Algren's news. Of course he was happy. The group he had vouched for had produced good results.

"What great news. I'll go tell His Majesty that your mercenary company was successful."

"I appreciate it. And I vow that House Algren shall do everything in our power to serve the crown moving forward."

"We greatly appreciate it."

Algrenе bowed reverently to Dale, the exact opposite of his behavior toward Eric. If an outsider saw this, they wouldn't be able to determine which of them was the crown prince and heir. Algrenе shamelessly revealed where his loyalties lay.

"Before you go, Your Highness, I have more news. While my mercenary company had its victory, Johann, who also recently joined His Majesty's guard, made a grave mistake."

"A mistake... *Johann* made a mistake?"

"Yes, I had a hard time believing it myself, but he let the intruder in. My soldiers found the intruder at the last minute before any harm could be done, but his negligence in the line of duty cannot be ignored."

Algrenе stole a glance at Johann and Eric as he delivered the news to Dale. It was snitching in a way—why did he feel the need to do it here and now?

"I see. Well, that is very disappointing news." Dale nodded quietly with an uncharacteristically serious frown.

"Your Highness, Johann's blunder could have put His Majesty in mortal peril. And we can't say that, as his supervisor, Sir Alfred was entirely blameless."

Prince Dale held his silence.

"If they aren't punished, that will bring dishonor to the royal guard."

I couldn't believe my ears. Algrenе was doing more than bragging about his army's victory, he was trying to get Johann and Alfred in trouble. It was probably a power move, trying to strengthen his influence over the royal guard's operations.

I knew there was something fishy about him from the first time we met. I tried to be cautious around him, and now look at what happened...

After a pause, Dale spoke in a slow, quiet voice. "That won't be necessary. I cannot bring myself to punish Johann or Alfred."

"But, Your Highness..."

Thank goodness. Prince Dale put his foot down.

Dale, always peaceful, would never do anything that could cause lingering resentment. Algrenе looked upset, like he'd just missed the target with his arrow.

"I needn't punish Johann personally, as I'm sure my brother will give him a harsh scolding later," Dale walked right up to Eric and said, "Rest at ease, my brother is a just and righteous person. He will give his subordinate a suitable punishment."

"D-Dale...you can't—" Eric sputtered, looking at Dale in shock.

How can he make such a crazy suggestion?! Now he's basically forced Prince Eric to punish Johann.

Johann and Eric were best friends. And Dale had laughed in their faces by forcing Eric to make a cruel choice. I had never seen Dale so heartless before.

"J-Johann Olbrun..." Eric's voice shook. "You are suspended, effective immediately. Think long and hard about what you've done."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Johann answered solemnly.

"Alfred, you serve directly under His Majesty. Go to him for your punishment."

"Right away, my lord." Alfred closed his eyes, resigning himself to his fate.

Their pride as soldiers likely prevented either of them from trying to fight against the ruling. As for me, I couldn't even begin to approve of what had just happened, but if I spoke up, that would undermine their steely resolve, so I kept quiet.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" barked Algrenе. "That's our Prince Dale. He makes a sound argument, not letting his brother intimidate him. Prince Eric, how lucky you are to have such a good little brother. Ah hah hah hah!"

I knew exactly what he was doing: He was declaring victory over Eric. It was

his way of getting revenge on the prince for belittling him.

I've faced all sorts of malice in my life: my stepmother, Catherine, my little sister, Jill, and the former duke Berklein. But he's a different flavor...and I get the feeling he's a formidable foe too.

As Algrenе threw back his head with laughter, I quietly clenched my fists.

Johann bowed and said, "Prince Eric...I'm so sorry. I wasn't—"

"Johann, it's all my fault," Eric interrupted, despondent. "Sorry, but I need you to lay low for a while."

I have to do something. I can't let Eric lose to Algrenе. I can't let it end this way.

"Now, Prince Eric, I hope you'll have a nice day. Ha ha ha!"

But what exactly can we do to fight back against this man? And Prince Dale... why did you say such a thing to Prince Eric...

As I watched Algrenе leave, his mercenary company in tow, I racked my brain for something to say to Eric. If it turned out Dale was our enemy too, keeping the king safe would be no easy task.

Prince Eric, please don't let this break you. You are the only one who can get us out of this predicament.

Eric's best friend and most trusted soldier had made a horrible mistake. Eric surely felt a great deal of torment when he was tasked with Johann's punishment.

Back at his study, I sat, agonizing over how I might heal the wounds in his heart.

Duke Algrenе is a terrifying man. I doubt anybody has inflicted as much psychological harm on Prince Eric as him.

I surmised that the recent intrusion was a setup executed by Algrenе. It was

just far too convenient that someone would be able to break in due to Johann's error mere hours after Algren's mercenary company had been integrated into the royal guard.

But I had no proof, so I had to keep my mouth shut.

If I focused only on the known facts, Algren had cleaned up after Johann's mistake, so coming after him right now would put me at a horrible disadvantage. Even if this was just a huge plot by Algren, my lack of proof meant I had to do things properly.

Eric was well aware of all of this. He had punished Johann, though it broke his heart, for that very reason.

"Eric sure is working extra hard today, yes, yes."

Several hours had elapsed since we returned to his study, and Eric still stoically tended to his documents. He pored over them with fervor, as if he was trying to distract himself from horrible thoughts.

"Let's give him some space for a while, Miss Lin. Prince Eric is emotionally exhausted."

"If he's exhausted, then working's the *last* thing he should do. Eric, come take a break."

Lingsha ignored my warning and urged Eric to stop working. She was right, but I knew that Eric would never obediently comply and rest if somebody asked him to.

"Lingsha, sorry, but I can't rest. I have too much work."

"Huh..." Lingsha paused thoughtfully, then said, "Y'know, I heard you suspended Johann. That was cruel—he works so hard for you."

Eric let out a muffled grunt. "Well, that's the rules. I can't make an exception for my subordinates—that would go against my moral code."

When Lingsha rebuked Eric for suspending Johann, he quickly pushed back. That was a jab he couldn't let slide.

“Rules? You let some silly rule force you into punishing Johann?”

“That’s right. I can’t break the rules. If I do, it would be a rejection of the man I’ve spent my whole life being.”

Lingsha stood her ground. I had never seen her so adamantly oppose Eric’s behavior before. At first, I thought she was just being her usual self, but she was particularly angry that he had suspended Johann.

“Okay then, if Leia did the same thing, would you suspend her too?”

“What do I have to do with this?!” I was so startled that she brought me into it, I actually yelled.

But it didn’t matter whether it was Johann or me, Eric would punish any of us equally without mercy, and I knew it.

If it really did come to that, I know I would feel a little hurt...

Being punished by Eric would depress me, but I knew what kind of man he was. I knew his convictions. So I would never voice my objections to it.

But the prince didn’t respond.

What’s wrong with Prince Eric? He’s being awfully quiet.

Why wouldn’t he answer? That wasn’t like him. I know the Eric I met a few months ago would have answered immediately.

“Oh dear, haha...” Eric laughed listlessly and ran a hand through his hair. “A little while ago, that question would have been easy for me to answer.”

I never imagined he would react like that. Was this a change for the better? Or the worse?

“Prince Eric, I am happy to comply with any ruling of yours, as long as you’re adhering to your moral compass. Please, don’t falter. Walk on the path that is yours.”

“Leia?” His eyes widened as he looked at me. This was another expression I had never seen on him before.

I had already steeled myself. I would put my life on the line to bring Eric's ideal world to life.

"I'm sure Sir Johann feels the same way, Your Highness. I know he has no objections to you punishing him in accordance with the rules. Please, don't lose sight of yourself."

"Are you sure Johann feels the same way?"

"I am. He won't break just because you scolded him once. He will do everything in his power to see that you walk the path you chose."

My fealty to Eric couldn't compare to the weight of years behind Johann's. He'd served Eric since they were both little boys, as his friend and as his vassal, not to mention as a surrogate older brother. After everything they had been through, Johann's faith in him would not falter now.

I wish Prince Eric would realize that I feel the same way as Johann...

Eric's mental health had taken a hit. That was especially important for him to know that we trusted him and always had his back.

"I... I used to have faith in my own moral compass. But, Leia...when we first met, I was wrong about you."

"Your Highness, that was just—"

"So at some point, I started having doubts about my own sense of judgment. I thought I had chosen the right path, but now I'm starting to question if I made the right choice."

Meeting me was one of the events that had led Eric to question himself. I knew that he was self-conscious about it, but I didn't realize it was this bad. Of course, he had a greater sense of responsibility than the average person, but I wished that he would get over it.

"Your Highness, *nobody* is a perfect judge. Anybody who thinks he has perfect judgment is deluding himself."

"Leia, you—"

“Making mistakes doesn’t make you a bad person. Failing to learn and grow from them does. You have done more than enough repenting. What you need most right now is courage, the courage to keep going without the fear of failure.”

I’d had enough of Eric wallowing over past mistakes. It was pointless dwelling on the past; he needed to keep his eyes on the path ahead. He learned and grew from the mistake, so it was time to have faith in himself and move forward. I understood why he was scared, but this was something only the prince could handle. We couldn’t afford to have him get stuck.

“Leia... I know what you’re trying to tell me. I can’t give up. I must keep going. I know you’re right. It’s just... I don’t have faith in my own sense of right and wrong. And that doubt is shackling me in place.”

“You can never be truly sure if you’re doing the right thing, so you’re right to struggle with your decisions, Your Highness. But you have people in your life who will always believe in you.”

Since he walked a righteous path and expected the same from others, the pain of losing his resolve had to be unbearable. But he had a strong foundation to stand on that would keep him from falling apart, and I wanted him to know that.

“We all believe in you, Your Highness. No matter what happens, our faith will never waver. So please, have faith in yourself and walk your path.”

“You all believe in me?”

“That’s right. If you ever stray off the righteous path, we will tell you. We will stop you. Please, have faith in us.”

Eric was not alone. He had people who believed in him. And if he ever came close to making a mistake, we would step in. I wanted him to trust in us, and I wanted him to show that trust not in words but in actions. That was my earnest wish.

“Oh... So it’s okay if I make mistakes.”

“Yes, exactly,” I chuckled. “Otherwise, why would you even need us?”

I didn’t expect Eric to be perfectly righteous all the time; I simply shared the same ideals as him, and I wished with all my heart to help him. If Eric were infallible, there would be no point in us serving him. So I wanted him to grant himself permission to rely on us.

“Ha ha ha...you’re pretty amazing. You’ve seen what a purist I am about my own ideals, and you still want to stick around? I’m selfish, you know.”

“Maybe so, but I want you to keep that promise you made the other day. You will keep it, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course.”

The clarity in his gaze was as bright as it was on the day we first met. His confidence had returned, and he now knew that he was not in this alone.

My prince was back.

Something trivial like Algrené’s provocations wouldn’t get to him now. Deep down, Eric had a strong spirit.

“I trust Johann,” he said. “And I refuse to believe that he’d carelessly let an intruder slip past him.”

“I agree, Your Highness,” I said. “Sir Johann would never make a mistake like that.”

In voicing his faith in Johann, Eric signaled that he knew there had to be something more to Johann’s mistake.

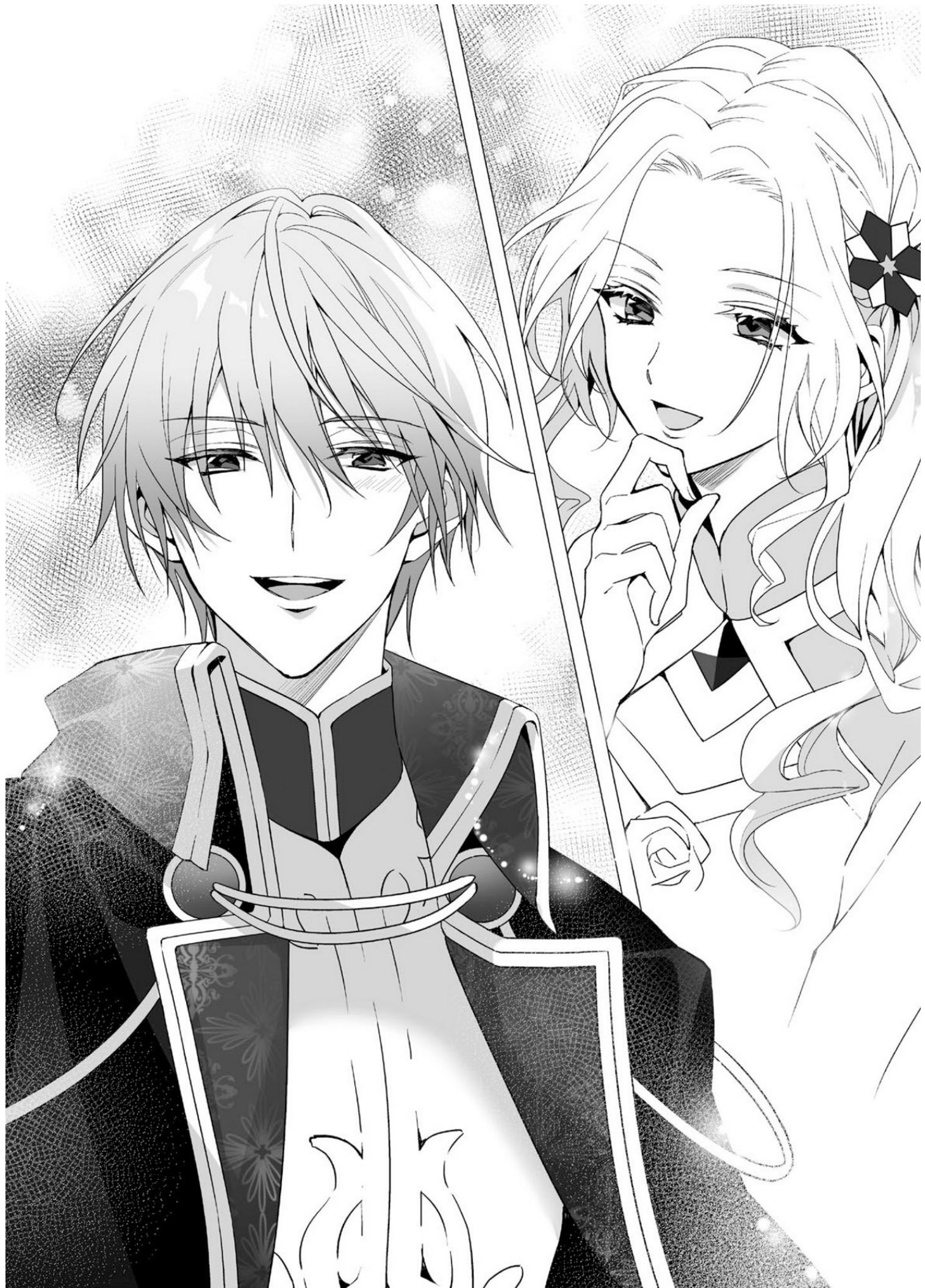
“And since Johann trusted me and accepted his punishment, I must repay his righteous loyalty—that is my sense of righteous justice that I must cultivate.”

Eric valued righteousness above all else. Righteousness was the compass that guided people on the paths they must walk.

It was like a creed, perhaps, like the Aejis Faith was to me. The drive to be a saint that would not bring shame to my God. Eric and I shared very similar paths in life.

"All right, our first order of business is to investigate the cause of the break-in," Eric said. "I'm sure something doesn't add up."

"Agreed," I said.



"That's the spirit, Eric! I can't let poor Johann be suspended in vain—oh, no! In the Ren Empire, we hate things happening in vain. If a servant works in vain, gouge out his master's eyes and sell them—that's how the proverb goes, oh yes!"

What a terrifying proverb.

It didn't look like Eric would need to worry about Lingsha gouging out his eyes anytime soon. Looking back, she kept her thoughts to herself during the exchange, even though she was the one who raised a fuss over Eric's behavior in the first place.

Did Miss Lin do that on purpose? To light a fire in his belly?

She knew all along exactly what Eric needed to do; that's why she had pointed out the injustice of Johann's suspension. If Eric had continued to spiral into depression, it would've been unfair to poor Johann who had believed in him.

Surviving all the chaos and trauma in her life had given Lingsha profound emotional intelligence. I watched as she beamed radiantly and poured us more tea, and the sight made me feel grateful all over again. Eric had yet another powerful ally in her.

"All right, let's get straight into the investigation. We might find something right away. Leia, Lingsha, come with me!"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"Oh, yes!"

Our hearts were focused on the same goal: making sure Johann wasn't suspended in vain.

We were back in action.

The next day, Eric pored over the reports on the palace intrusion. "The intruder entered through the rear entrance of the palace. That's where Johann

was stationed.”

“You’ve already lost me there,” I said. “I can’t believe Sir Johann would have let someone in right where he was stationed.”

“But the intruder himself corroborated the evidence.”

The most obvious explanation was that the intruder lied—and that they were working with Algrenе’s mercenary company to frame Johann.

But the intruder was arrested and imprisoned. Since he tried to kill the king, he would be executed. Who in the world would participate in a plot that they knew would get them killed?

Alfred’s men ran an investigation on the intruder as per Algrenе’s request, but they’d found nothing particularly odd about him. The report said he would not confess who had hired him, no matter what they did. In other words, there was no evidence of a deal made before the deed.

Since Algrenе himself was the one who requested the investigation, I was sure that he was confident the investigation would come up empty...

Anyway, I just need to focus on keeping Prince Eric safe as his bodyguard, I thought to myself as I watched him pore diligently over the documents.

“Isn’t there anything I can do to help?” I finally blurted out after watching over him for what felt like hours.

I didn’t know how he’d managed it, but Eric hadn’t left his desk once all day. There were piles of papers in front of him, so many piles.

Night was drawing near and it was time to call it a day, but Eric showed no signs of stopping. I needed to step in and ask if he needed help if I wanted to keep the toll on his health to a minimum.

“No, I’m all right...is what I’d like to say, but we’re out of time. If I were to ask for help, I can see nobody more suitable than you. Will you help me?”

“Yes! I’d love to!”

Eric accepted my offer with a smile. It felt so good to be needed, and I felt so proud that he trusted me.

This will lessen the negative effects on him. If he doesn’t get a little rest soon, he’ll collapse from exhaustion.

I stood tall beside Eric. *Okay, Leia! Time to pull an all-nighter.*

“These reports contain the testimonies of everyone who was in the palace at the time the intruder came in. I’ve already read them over, but I want a second pair of eyes on it. Check the testimonies for inconsistencies and let me know if you find anything.”

“The testimonies of everybody in the palace...”

When there was an attempt on the king’s life, the investigation was much more thorough. Investigation reports on the attempts on Prince Eric’s life were thick as well, but not this dense.

Okay, Leia, just read the documents.

We passed the rest of the night in silence. Well after midnight, Eric and I were still silently staring at the documents.

Now I’m really getting sleepy.

Earlier that morning, I had gone out to fulfill my saintly duties by myself for once since I received word that my barriers had been destroyed. I informed Lingsha that I would go out alone in case it became an issue, but Eric was so busy that I didn’t want to distract him, so I left without telling him.

All those consecutive days of using magic had taken their toll. I felt heavy, like I was more drained than I thought.

Ack! Oh, that was a close call. I almost nodded off. How pathetic would it be if I insisted that I help him, but instead I fell asleep on the job?

I pinched my knee under the table so Eric wouldn’t notice I was halfway to

dreamland.

That should do it... Okay. I'm awake now. So, the next document...

“What?!”

The next thing I knew, I saw light peeking through a gap in the curtains. Apparently, I had fallen asleep after all.

“Good morning. If you’re tired, you should go back to your room and sleep for a little bit. Sorry...this is my fault. Lingsha told me you went out early yesterday morning to erect barriers.”

“Um, Prince Eric, but...I wasn’t...”

I felt disoriented hearing his voice. How had this happened? I had never made a mistake like this before. I never imagined that I would fall asleep on the job...

To make matters worse, Prince Eric saw me sleeping.

Just the thought of him seeing me drool made my cheeks burn crimson.

I feel hot. Hotter than usual. Must be this darn blanket. As hot as I was, a blanket was the last thing I needed...

“Wait—blanket?”

I made a face when I noticed a blanket was draped over me. I had fallen asleep on the sofa.

“It may be summer, but the nights are still chilly. I didn’t want you catching cold...” Eric looked away before continuing, “Just so you know, I didn’t touch you when you were sleeping.”

“Th-thanks. I appreciate that...”

I knew Eric wouldn’t do a thing like that, but the very idea of doing so must have made him feel embarrassed. His cheeks were a little flushed.

I feel like...I’m wrapped in a blanket of Prince Eric’s kindness.

Seeing the look on his face made my heart soar. It was these little moments of kindness that drew me closer to him without me realizing it.

“The inconsistencies in testimony you noted contained several things I’d missed,” Eric announced happily, list in hand. “We just might be able to crack this case now. Thank you. You did amazing work.”

Oh, thank goodness. I felt like falling asleep on the job was a huge mistake, but I was glad I was able to help.

“Lingsha, get Leia some tea. Let’s wake up first, then we’ll go over our plan of action moving forward.”

“You’ve got it, Eric!” Lingsha came in from her post outside the study door and got started making tea. It looked like Eric wanted to start working right away.

I need to snap myself out of it.

“Leia, a sweet drink in the morning is good for the brain.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took a cup of freshly brewed tea from Lingsha.

“I think we should question the assassin once more. This time, I’ll do the questioning.”

“Sir Alfred’s men did the questioning last time. You don’t trust them?”

“It might come across that way, I know. But these documents contained the inconsistencies you spotted as well as a number of inexplicable details. If I speak directly with the assassin, I might be able to find the connection we’re looking for.”

Eric wanted to handle the interrogation himself. He waited for Lingsha and I to finish our tea, then explained his plan.

If the assassin had targeted him, that would be one thing, but in this case, the prince would act outside his jurisdiction. One wrong move and people might

think he suspected Alfred; however, it was a risk he was willing to take to get to the truth.

“Lingsha, I’m sorry, but I’m taking Leia with me to the dungeon. Can you hold down the fort?”

“You’ve got it. Good luck!”

Lingsha agreed to guard his study, and so we departed for the dungeon to interrogate the assassin.

“What do you mean, we can’t talk to the assassin? I don’t like playing this card, but I am the crown prince, you know. What authority do you have to prevent me from questioning him?”

When Eric handed the dungeon warden the document requesting permission to interrogate the detainee, he was rejected.

The prince was right, this was against protocol. Unless His Majesty himself forbade it, Eric should have been allowed to question a condemned man.

“Prince Eric, you don’t suppose His Majesty said—”

“No, that’s even *more* outlandish. He has no reason to stop me from questioning the man who tried to kill him.”

We were both confused. We didn’t expect to run into a roadblock so soon.

“Dungeon Warden, please, I demand an explanation.”

“Eep?!”

Eric marched up to the warden without restraint and cornered him against the wall. He was so imposing the warden looked like he was about to cry, but with a shaking hand, he showed Eric a document.

Its contents were shocking.

“Um, the thing is, Your Highness, the assassin has already been executed. I don’t think even a crown prince such as yourself would gain anything from

questioning a corpse..."

The prince and I exchanged silent glances, stunned by the news.

An intruder who was arrested only two days ago had already been executed? What kind of crazy world allowed something like this to happen?

This person tried to kill the king. And it was highly probable that somebody was pulling the strings behind the scenes. He should have only been sentenced after a thorough investigation, so why was the sentence carried out so soon?

"Warden, what in the world is going on here?" Eric pressed him, his eyes sharp as daggers. "Don't you think it's mad that we executed somebody so quickly?"

"Huh?! Er, well—when you say it like that, yes, that would be rather mad." The warden finally realized how unusual the situation was.

"When you say it like that," he said? Come on, you shouldn't need it spelled out. Wow... Looks like we'll have to break a few more bones before we get to the bottom of this.

When I took on this case, I felt a faint sense of defeat over the thoroughness of Algren. He was constantly two or three steps ahead of us. I could practically hear his smug laughter, and it was quite unsettling.

"Would be mad? We're not dealing in hypotheticals here—it has already happened. Warden, how did this come to be? Start at the very beginning."

"Uh, well, you see, Your Highness, the intruder's name was on this morning's execution list, so I complied."

The intruder, who was caught only two days ago, was on the list of condemned men? *I see.* This dungeon warden was just following orders. So the person we needed to track down was the one who put his name on the list.

"The person who approved this list..." Eric paused for a breath, "is Dale."

"Prince Dale? But...it couldn't be..."

I wasn't expecting Dale to come up yet again, but I couldn't deny that I had sensed a new sort of frostiness from him during the past two days.

It's now highly probable that Prince Dale is an active participant in Duke Algren's conspiracy...

"Hmm... Yes... Prince Dale oversees that list, that's correct. He's always very good to us down here, and he does a perfect job. I never even considered he could've made a mistake."

The warden seemed to regard Dale very highly. The prince was extremely respected in high society, but even people like this dungeon warden, people who only knew him through work, felt the same.

"Are you and Dale friends?" Eric asked.

"You flatter me! No, it's preposterous to think I am friends with him. A lowly jailer such as I could never be friends with a noble gentleman like him."

Prince Eric phrased that question in the wrong way. An ordinary person would've found it difficult to answer a question like, "Are you friends with a prince?" lightly. We needed to rephrase the question.

"Warden, do you speak with Prince Dale often? When we spoke of him earlier, it seemed like the two of you were somewhat acquainted."

"Y-yes... I suppose we are. Especially now that he comes down here every day."

Eric and I exchanged shocked glances.

Prince Dale comes here every day? To this dungeon?

We were at a loss for words. It was just so out of the blue.

"Soooo, here's the visitation log. See? It's been about ten days now. He stops in every day. And he's always so polite when he greets me."

The warden handed us the visitation log. It showed that Dale had indeed been coming to the dungeon every day to visit someone.

This...can't be. Why? For what purpose?

It was just one surprise after another since we set foot in the dungeon, but the biggest surprise of all was...

"Dale has been visiting Jill Westoria?" Eric asked.

"Why is Prince Dale visiting her?"

Jill. Dale was visiting my little sister, Jill.

We still had our hands full with the execution list fiasco, and now Jill?

What in the world has been going on without my knowledge?

-Dale's Perspective-

SOME TIME EARLIER

ONE DAY, a woman caught my eye.

She was at the saint exams, and she had distinctive, long golden hair. She was beautiful and refined, and as I watched her earnestly tackle each exam, she took my breath away. I remembered it as if it were only yesterday.

That woman, Leia Westoria, with her outstanding magical abilities and exemplary moral character, passed the saint exams with top marks that day.

It was the first time I had ever felt this way about a woman. I supposed you would call my feelings romantic.

But there was no point in acknowledging these feelings. As a prince, I was in no position to act on them.

"Prince Dale, isn't it about time you settled down? I'm sure any woman would be happy to have you."

"Oh no, my older brother hasn't even found a fiancée yet. I must wait my turn."

My brother was struggling with the noble mission of reforming the kingdom.

It seemed that romance was the furthest thing from his mind. It wouldn't be fair for me to leave him in the dust and get married first.

"Come on, you don't need to hold back on account of Prince Eric. Isn't there a lady in your heart?"

"A lady in my heart? Ha ha ha... Oh dear, I'm afraid not."

I have no idea how often I'd dodged that question, whether the person asking was somebody else or myself. It was ridiculous, because there *was* a woman who stole my heart.

But I gave up on her from the very start. She was unattainable.

I can't exactly say I have no regrets... Still, the timing was just all wrong.

The first time I spoke with her was at a party. She was looking for someone when I approached her.

"I'll have to go pay my respects to your fiancé Philip sometime," I told her with a smile.

That night, I cursed my inability to make quick decisions. If only I hadn't convinced myself to hold back on account of my brother. If only I'd spoken to her sooner...

I obsessively ran through various scenarios in my head, hating myself more and more with each passing day.

But I chose this path in life. Leia and I were never meant to be.

That thought helped me get over it somehow. That is, until she entered my life again—this time as my brother's bodyguard.

She has feelings for my brother. And he for her. There's only one thing I can do...

"Prince Dale, you've come to visit me again?"

After several days of this, Jill came to expect my visits. Life in a dungeon had

to be a harsh change of pace for a count's daughter. Most people in her position would have been racked with guilt, but she showed no signs that she believed that she had done anything wrong. She just kept bawling her eyes out over her supposed mistreatment.

Her pathological self-regard had thrown me for a loop. After the horrible things she did, she didn't seem to understand the error of her ways. Getting someone like this to own up to her crimes would be like pulling teeth. After only a few minutes of conversation, that much was clear.

"Miss Jill, do you know why Miss Leia hates you?"

"Why my sweet sister...hates me? No, I don't know."

But the more we talked, the more I understood Jill's psyche. At her core lay an inferiority complex toward her sister, Leia, and then her mother, Catherine, had twisted it until her persona had been reshaped into that of a tragic heroine. That was my theory.

Jill would not own up to her crimes until her twisted sense of self was corrected. That was my diagnosis.

"Is Miss Leia the sort of person who would hate without reason?"

"Oh, no. My sister was always very kind. She doesn't hate anybody else. She only hates me."

"If she hates only you, does that mean you did something to make her feel this way? Don't you agree that it's your fault she hates you?"

"Wha?! M-my fault? B-but that can't beeee... You're just too cruuuuell... Uwaah!"

Jill started bawling. I was used to it by now. She had a habit of turning on the waterworks when she didn't get her way, so I'd seen her cry many times. I suspected that she had grown used to somebody coming to her defense whenever she did that.

Crying righted every wrong. Since she had come to believe that as gospel, she

had lost the ability to find any fault in herself.

But here she was, in a dungeon. Nobody would come to her defense here. She was gradually starting to learn that crying was futile.

“Cry all you want, but it won’t change reality. Haven’t you come to understand that by now? If crying could bring about meaningful change, then maybe my brother and I would have had much easier lives.”

“Abloo, a bloo hoo hoo...” she blubbered.

Several minutes later, Jill’s head drooped, exhausted from crying.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Nothing’s changed...just as you said, Prince Dale. Nobody came to my rescue. Why?”

Crying changed nothing. It was a simple truth, and Jill finally understood it. But she still hadn’t taken the next step and understood what she had done wrong. It could be difficult to get her to realize it, but it was not impossible, given enough time.

“If you find out why Miss Leia hates you, you’ll find the answer to that question.”

“If I find out...why my sister hates me?”

Jill’s jaw hung open, as if in a daze. From the look of her, she still didn’t completely grasp what I meant.

I still had plenty of time. If I could get her to own up to her own sins, then I could repair the broken relationship she had with her sister.

If Leia finds out I’ve been meddling, she might resent me for it, though...

The warden asked, “Prince Dale, is your visit over so soon?”

“Warden, thanks for all the good work you do. I will come by again tomorrow, same time. Also, here’s the execution list.”

“Understood, Your Highness. I will arrange the executions right away.”

I handed the dungeon warden the list. I had lost count of how many days in a row I’d walked down this same hallway.

My brother or Leia might start to notice I’ve been coming down here. What will they think? I can imagine a few scenarios...but I have my own duty to fulfill. I can’t stop now.

I would walk on the path I believed in. Steadfast, one step at a time...

Final Chapter: An Unyielding Saint and a Righteous Crown Prince

“WE NEED TO FIND OUT why the intruder that Algrenе’s soldiers caught was executed so hastily,” Eric said.

“Agreed. Do you think we should start with Prince Dale?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. It looks as though he may be involved somehow.”

Dale not only oversaw the execution list, but he was also the one who recommended that His Majesty add Algrenе’s mercenaries to the royal guard. These two facts pointed to an obvious conclusion: Dale’s help had intentionally hastened the execution.

“Everything we learn adds to the theory that the intruder wanted to get caught trying to attack the king.”

“Indeed—it’s only natural to assume he was silenced before he could confess anything. It doesn’t take a cynic like me to see that.”

Every questionable action only made Dale appear more suspicious. But we had a problem: The intruder who could’ve verified all this was dead.

It’s not going to be easy to find proof, is it...

To make matters worse, if there was an assassin among Algrenе’s soldiers who meant to harm the king, he was in imminent danger. We needed to act as quickly as possible to ensure his safety.

Who was friend and who was foe? And what was His Majesty thinking?

It’s just one mystery after another, which makes it even more important that we keep a cool head.

We didn’t have time to leisurely talk through the case, but that was exactly why we needed to tread extra carefully. We needed to think hard so we didn’t

make the wrong choices.

Eric frowned. "If Algren and Dale are working together...then there's even the possibility that the foundation of Elshaid will crumble."

"Just the thought of them working together rubs me the wrong way..."

Dale was acting suspiciously, that was a fact. He was connected to Algren's mercenary company and the execution list, so his involvement in the plot was all entirely plausible.

But if Dale was Eric's enemy, that would leave a few other matters unexplained.

"Prince Dale was running an investigation to help catch Berklein," I argued. "Why would he do that if he were your enemy?"

"Yes, I knew about that. But we should still assume the worst when deciding how to proceed."

I knew Eric was right. We were in a situation where everything was suspect, so there was no harm in imagining the worst-case scenario.

But he had to feel drained from working under the assumption that his own brother joined forces with Algren and meant to harm him and their father. It reminded me of what Jill tried to do to me.

Then it's perfectly clear what we need to do right now.

If we let paranoia erode our thoughts, a decision we would make in the heat of the moment could prove to be a fatal mistake. *If we suspect Dale, then we might as well embrace that.*

"Why don't you just confront Prince Dale, then? If it's come to this, we should just get it out in the open."

"Confront Dale? You mean, I should tell him I suspect him?"

"Yes. After everything he's done, I'm sure Prince Dale can imagine that you would suspect him. I don't think it would be at all unusual for you to talk to him

directly about it.”

Dale was not shortsighted. It would be easy for him to imagine how his actions could make Eric suspicious. He probably already had an answer planned for when Eric would bring it up. Our best course of action was to just ask Dale directly—that would quell the unease we felt in our guts.

“Yes, I see. And even if he does give some flimsy excuse when I question him, that could prove to be a crucial clue in solving this. Yes, this might be the best way to clear things up.”

“Exactly, Your Highness. It will be much easier for us to act decisively.”

“All right. I’ll talk to Dale.”

“Good!”

That settled, Eric and I set off to see Dale.

This will bring us closer to the truth. I have faith.

“Well, hello there, Brother. And Miss Leia too. I anticipated that you would come see me right about now.”

We’d arrived in Dale’s study. He was smiling as usual, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He knew we were there to confront him, and that was exactly why Eric needed to question him.

You know, this is my first time in Prince Dale’s study.

It looked much more ornate and fashionable than Eric’s did. It held a menagerie of antiques, had a comfortable sofa, and the print on the curtains tied the room together. Dale likely cared about appearances because he often had visitors. Eric, on the other hand, showed no interest in interior design. The only thing lacking was the tea; Lingsha’s tea was much better.

“Thanks for getting us tea when we dropped in unannounced.”

“No need to thank me, I had a feeling you were coming. Besides, being

prepared to serve tea is basic hospitality.”

Dale set out the silver teacups that would react to poison, and just to be sure, had someone test the tea for poison before serving us. Like Eric, he was a prince, so he was quite thorough in these matters.

“Ah, then we can cut to the chase,” Eric said. “You know why I’m here, I take it?”

“Of course. This is regarding the intruder, correct? I have final say on the execution list, and you thought something was amiss when you found out the intruder was executed this morning. Am I wrong?” Dale’s voice was calm, and he didn’t skip a beat in answering Eric’s question.

It was almost as if the answer was rehearsed. He brought up the intruder immediately, showing no interest in avoiding the subject. I couldn’t imagine how he would plead his case, but he at least seemed unperturbed by discussing it.

“Exactly. I had planned to interrogate the intruder to try and discover who was behind the plot against the king. But as he was executed, I couldn’t do so. If you have an explanation, I would love to hear it.”

“I have no explanation.”

“You... What do you mean?”

He couldn’t explain? Did that mean he authorized a wrongful execution? No, there was something unusual about his answer.

Eric looked just as confused by Dale’s answer as I was.

“The premature execution was my mistake. Please forgive me, Brother. You’re right, we should have gotten more information out of him before the execution. I deeply regret my rash decision.”

He just apologized without making excuses. All we could do was stare in shock.

He admitted he made a mistake, so we can’t press him further. It’s a simple

but effective way of ending the conversation.

Dale was Eric's brother, after all. It wasn't easy to get the upper hand with him. He was a master of human psychology, and he rarely showed any weakness.

"You say it was a mistake? Dale, I know you. You're not that careless. Wasn't there some reason behind your actions?"

"You overestimate me, Brother. I *was* careless. Father was... The king was nearly killed. I couldn't bear the thought of the would-be assassin continuing to draw breath. It was a lapse in judgment. When I thought about how our father was almost murdered, I couldn't help myself."

Dale claimed to hold a grudge against the assassin. I could sympathize. Anybody would hold a grudge against someone who tried to kill a family member. Some could even want the killer eliminated.

But it just doesn't sound like something Prince Dale would say.

Gentle Dale wouldn't impulsively kill someone. Even if his temperate personality was a guise, that would have been even more reason for him to uphold it.

I refused to believe that it was a moment of weakness. There had to be some reason.

"I see. So you resented the king's assassin so much that you rushed his execution. I suppose you didn't feel the same resentment against all those assassins who came after me?"

"Brother, you're being unfair. Of course, I was angry then as well, but I was just in a particularly bad place this time."

Eric was as much Dale's family as the king was, and Eric survived countless assassination attempts. I agreed that Eric was being unfair in pointing that out, but at the same time, I could understand why he would highlight Dale's hypocrisy.

“You were in a bad place... Okay, I’ll take your word for it.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Were you hoping I would?”

I looked at Eric. His eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at Dale. The air in the room grew very tense. Eric was unyielding—misdirection had no effect on him.

“I would never lie to you, Brother. Please, trust in me.”

“I’m just surprised you can make such an excuse without batting an eye after what’s happened.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Brother. I destroyed the one link that could lead to the mastermind behind this plot. It’s only natural for you to blame me.”

Eric was at a loss for words. Dale’s tone was still placid. Surely, Dale knew that Eric wouldn’t believe him that easily. The way he returned Eric’s gaze made him seem sincere, but sincerity wasn’t enough to win Eric’s trust. He wasn’t that naive.

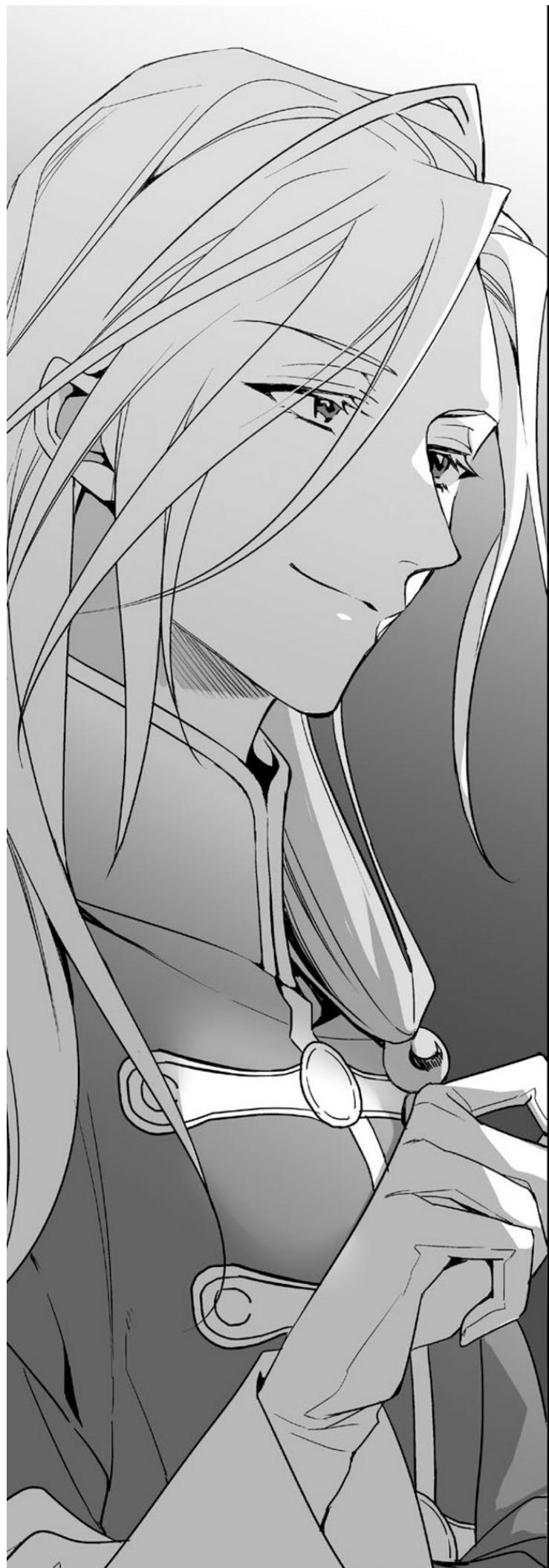
“I should have taken the time to question the intruder, and if any contradictions were found, launch a full investigation. My failure to do so is a reflection of my lack of virtue. I deeply regret the severity of my actions.”

Eric remained silent.

“If you wish to punish me, then I will humbly accept it.”

“I see...”

Eric listened to Dale’s testimony to the end then fell into silent contemplation.



I hoped that we would discover something here, that we could figure out whether or not Dale was Eric's ally, but I still couldn't get a read on him. During my time as a saint, I had acquired all sorts of abilities most people didn't possess, but in matters like this, I was no better than the average person.

The act of trusting someone came with its own risks. Sometimes you had no choice but to go with your gut and trust somebody because you wanted to, even if you couldn't see what was truly in their heart. Whether Eric chose to trust Dale here all depended on what he was able to discern from the conversation thus far. Would he renew his faith in his brother or not?

"Leia, I've run out of questions to ask Dale. Let's leave."

"A-all right, Your Highness."

After what felt like hours in silent thought—but was probably only a minute or two—Eric finally suggested we depart. I wondered what this meant. What sort of judgment had Eric made about Dale?

Regardless, I obediently rose from my seat and bowed to Dale. "Well, Prince Dale, I must be on my way."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help. I'm sure you had your own questions to ask. Perhaps we could meet some other time."

He was right. I had kept quiet since it was unrelated to our current task, but I had my own burning question for Dale: Why was he visiting Jill every day?

To be honest, I understood that even less than how he handled the execution. Dale knew that I had something on my mind; perhaps that was why he added that little remark when we were taking our leave.

Was coming here a mistake?

I knew it was too late to ask that question now, but I couldn't help but doubt my own suggestion.

No, Leia. It's better than knowing nothing at all. It was surely worthwhile.

With these thoughts lingering in my mind, I followed Eric out of Dale's study.

Eric was silent the entire walk back to his study. He was probably considering whether to believe Dale. Dale wanted Eric to believe him, but it was a mystery what Eric would decide.

Prince Dale is even harder to read than I originally thought.

I remembered liking him when we first met; I thought he was simply a good person. Though I had only spoken to him a number of times since I moved to the palace, he was always kind to me. It hurt to see him act so suspiciously that I questioned my own feelings.

We were almost at Eric's study. What would he say to me first? That he believed in Dale? Or the dreaded alternative?

Lingsha greeted us from her post as we entered Eric's study. "Eric, Leia! You're back! Did ya go punch out some bad guys?"

"No, we actually went to speak with Prince Dale," I said. It was only natural that she didn't know, since all we'd told her was that we were going to go question the intruder.

"So ya punched out Dale! Ohh, yes!"

"That would cause a major incident, Miss Lin," I said. "We had a peaceful conversation."

"Ohhh? So that's why Eric looks so blue. Try this pastry. So good!"

Eric was lost in thought ever since we set foot in his study. I knew it would take a while for him to open up. I had seen that troubled look on his face so often that I could tell if it meant he had compiled his thoughts or was still mulling something over.

Noticing this, Lingsha offered the newest popular pastry from the capital to

me, instead of the prince.

“Ooh, it really is scrumptious.”

“Right? I’m gonna get Johann some next time, oh yes.”

“I think he’d like that. He must feel rather glum being under house arrest.”

We passed the time with conversation. Now that there were no longer assassins constantly after Prince Eric, this was how much of my time as a bodyguard was whiled away these days: I would chat with Johann or Lingsha while Eric worked. As a result, I was starting to feel less and less like I needed to be there, but there was still a possibility Prince Eric would be in danger until the reform went into effect.

There I sat, keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings as I chatted with Lingsha.

“No matter how you look at it, Dale must be lying. That’s the only conclusion I can draw.”

About two hours after we returned to the study, Eric finally broke his silence—and he had arrived at the conclusion that Dale was lying.

I wonder what made him conclude that Prince Dale had lied? Did we notice the same thing?

One thing Dale had said made me feel something was amiss. It was something in the conversation that just didn’t make any sense to me.

“Okay then, can I blast away Dale?”

“No. You don’t need to ‘blast’ Dale into the sky,” Eric said.

The hidden meaning in Eric’s statement was that Prince Dale had lied, but he wasn’t our enemy.

But what about Prince Dale’s lie?

“When he said he hastened the execution by mistake—he was lying, right?” I

asked.

“Yes. No matter what the excuse, Dale would never kill a man by mistake. He has common sense. It’s his common sense I trust, more than anything.”

Eric was right, but I felt that there was more to it than that. I also knew that Dale was a levelheaded person. So when he gave us the sort of excuse that we couldn’t dig any deeper into, it made it seem like he was signaling that it was a lie.

As the lie was so obvious, that was the only conclusion I could draw.

“Prince Dale wanted us to know he was lying. Is that your thinking, Your Highness?”

“Indeed. You’re right, Leia. He could have come up with a number of more believable lies. If he really wanted to plead his innocence, he would have chosen a better explanation. But he didn’t do that. It is therefore logical to conclude that he did so intentionally.”

Eric and I were on the same page. Dale had lied, but he wanted us to notice. The question now was why?

That was probably the very question Eric had spent the past two hours mulling over. If we could figure out the reason, we would know Dale’s true motive.

“What are your thoughts, Your Highness? Do you have any ideas on what Prince Dale is trying to accomplish?”

I touched on the crux of the topic. After all this speculation, I just wanted to learn the whole truth. What was Dale hiding, and what was he hoping to achieve?

I felt like the answer was right under my nose, but I waited for Eric to speak.

“Dale is closer to the Great Four than me,” Eric answered. “He has ties with them.”

“Yes, I have heard that he is close with Duke Merhide and Duke Algren, so I

assume it's true."

"He was also quite close with Berklein."

"Yes. And Berklein despised you, so it was only natural of him to become friendly with Prince Dale."

Dale's relationships were common knowledge. He had many friends among the aristocracy, and he was quite popular. But in reality, it was difficult to be friends with *everyone*, even if you tried.

Dale's congenial personality came naturally to him. It set him apart from Eric, and it was a quality that made him born to lead.

"I have a theory. What if Dale suspected Duke Algren before I did?"

"Huh? But Prince Dale agreed to add his mercenary company to the royal guard, didn't he?"

"Indeed. That's why my theory is that Dale is pretending to be Duke Algren's ally until he slipped up."

Now I see. That explained it.

Lingsha had said, "You can't catch a tiger without entering its den." Had Dale gotten close to Duke Algren, aware of the danger?

If that's true, then that means we have an even bigger mystery on our hands.

If Eric's theory about Dale was true, that made his behavior all the more inexplicable. He would never do something like that.

"But Prince Dale still hastened the execution. If he was just biding his time until Duke Algren made a mistake, why would he go out of his way to destroy that possibility?"

If only we could've questioned the intruder, we would have found a connection to Duke Algren. It was the only way we had of proving that Algren was behind it all. Yet Dale blocked that path of investigation. And then he lied to us in a startlingly obvious way.

Huh. I really don't get it. What exactly are his actions pointing to?

"You're quite right in saying so, but Dale told us a transparent lie. In other words, I believe he was sending us a coded message. Dale must have had a good reason to kill that intruder."

"But what reason could he possibly have?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to think hard about what it might be."

It was a precarious, vague deduction, but Eric's eyes brimmed with confidence. It looked like he had worked through something very important during the past two hours.

"Are you certain then, Your Highness? That Prince Dale is our ally?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it now. Besides, he said, 'Please, trust in me.' I haven't been much of a big brother to him in the past, but that's exactly why I want to believe in my little brother now."

When I saw the slight smile on Eric's face, my breath caught in my throat. His countenance reminded me of his gentle nature.

"Prince Eric, I think you've changed a little."

"If I've changed, I have you to thank, Leia."

"Me? But I haven't done anything."

"Nonsense. You changed my outlook on life, the way I see the world. I'm eternally grateful..."

Eric's eyes smoldered as he thanked me. But I couldn't agree. He did the work himself to become more mature. Even if meeting me had sparked that change, it was he who had put in the work.

"I humbly accept your thanks. But, Your Highness, I think you—"

"Stop right there. Don't be modest. Please. I want to cherish my feelings for you."

He pressed a finger to my lips, asking my silence. My heart practically leaped

from my chest, but I obeyed.

Eric began the investigation under the assumption that he could trust Dale, so I had to respect his judgment and do my best to aid him.

“But now that we’re pursuing this theory, it makes the records of Dale visiting your sister, Jill, of the utmost concern.”

The topic I had been dreading finally came up. I clenched my fists. The question had been swimming around in my head ever since I learned this.

I was dying with curiosity. Why would Dale meet with Jill? What was their connection? I couldn’t think of one. Yet, Dale had visited her every day.

What was the meaning of it? That was the most difficult thing to figure out.

It was hard to believe they had a hidden connection. If Jill had ever spoken with Dale in the past, she definitely would have told me about it. Her past behavior told me as much. She had kept quiet about her secret trysts with Berklein, of course, but at her core, Jill was an open book.

When it came to boy talk, she was unstoppable. She would repeat the story ten times until I begged her to stop. That’s the kind of girl she was.

And that’s why I was pretty darn certain that she and Dale had had no prior contact.

“Guess we gotta question Leia’s sister next, oh yes.”

“That’s exactly what I was going to say, Lingsha,” Eric said. “Funny, I thought you’d suggest we blast her away.”

“Eric, you meanie! You’re making it sound like blasting people away is all I ever talk about!”

Honestly, I was also a little surprised.

But it was undeniable. We had hit a wall, and questioning Jill directly would be the fastest way of breaking through. I doubted Dale would do anything

without reason, so I had to face the music and visit my sister.

“I’ll speak with Jill,” I said.

I decided I would be the one to get her story. I had only visited her once since she’d been thrown in jail. She cried the whole time, so it wasn’t much of a conversation.

If I went to visit her now, it might be no different. But if I didn’t talk to her, I would be throwing away a chance of finding the missing piece to the puzzle. I wasn’t getting my hopes up, but I would be patient this time and really try to talk to her.

“Thanks, that will really help me out. If I went to see her, she’d probably blab a bunch of nonsense. I’ll send word to the dungeon warden. Can you go visit her alone?”

“Yes, that’s the idea. I’m not sure whether or not I can get Jill to talk, but I will do my best.”

And so it was decided that I would go to the dungeon to visit Jill. I had put up a strong front for Eric, but the truth was, my anxiety was killing me.

Would I be able to even talk to Jill? We’d never had proper conversations before, and now she was in a dungeon, bedraggled and depressed.

But that’s still no excuse to give up. I’ll make you talk if it’s the last thing I do, Jill.

As images of her melodramatic tears haunted my mind, I pressed on.

“Oh, why, good afternoon, Saint Leia. What brings you here? Did you forget something?”

The dungeon warden looked surprised to see me, which was understandable, since I had been there only a short while ago.

“No, I haven’t forgotten anything. I’m here to visit someone being held here:

Jill Westoria. Um...here's a letter from Prince Eric."

"I see, I see. A letter from His Highness. Very well. Wait just a moment, I'll get everything ready."

After reading the letter, the warden approved my visit.

I was more nervous than I thought I'd be. How should I even start the conversation?

"Step right this way, my lady. You have thirty minutes."

"Thank you very much, sir."

Once everything was ready for my visit, I descended into the dungeon. It was summertime, yet the air down here was chilly and damp.

I remember thinking last time how moldy it was down here. Just spending a fair amount of time in this place would really take a toll on the mind and body.

I walked for about a minute as these thoughts raced through my mind. Then I stopped. She had grown thinner, and her hair was wild and unkempt, but she was still my little sister, clear as day. Her girlish beauty had not faded.

"Hello again, Jill."

"S-sister?"

Her eyes widened and she froze at the sight of me. Then she quickly came to her senses, approached me, and bowed deeply.

"I'm so sorry... Please find it in your heart to forgive me, Leia."

"Huh?!"

For a moment, I doubted my ears. And my eyes as well. Jill—my little sister, Jill Westoria—the girl who had never once apologized to me, was groveling.

Is... Is she really Jill? Wait, of course she's Jill. I know my own sister.

For a moment, I thought she wasn't really my sister, but I knew she couldn't be a fake, so that only made her behavior all the more shocking. I couldn't

believe that Jill would ever apologize to me.

“Leia, all this time, I thought that I was the victim. But after speaking with Prince Dale, I realized that my behavior had made you really sad.”

The words poured out of Jill in a torrent. I should have been happy to hear her say that, but a part of me still couldn’t believe it was happening. And I hated that part of myself, but the change was so sudden and so drastic, it wasn’t so easy for me to accept.

Had she been brainwashed?

No, there was no point in thinking like that. My sister, Jill, was giving me a heartfelt, remorseful apology. I needed to be a good older sister and accept it.

“But...my dear sister, I have just one question I wish to ask you. I’m pleased that you came to visit me, but would you mind answering my question first?”

“A question? Of course. I don’t mind.”

Jill had a question for me, and I still doubted her sincerity. We didn’t have much time, but I agreed to hear her out. It seemed that letting her lead the conversation would be best right now.

“Mother said that you cheated in the saint exams. Is that true? I realize I’m asking an impertinent question. But I want to hear the answer from your lips.”

I had never seen that look in her eyes before. Her clear, blue eyes were filled with determination. Like she had resigned herself to something.

I was shocked to learn that Catherine had told her that. Had Jill believed her lie and thought all this time that I had cheated to become a saint?

When I passed the saint exam, Jill had cried and said, “You’re so wicked, Sister!”

Thinking back, there was a hint of contempt in her gaze that day. Ever since, she told anybody who’d listen that I bragged about being a saint.

Catherine...you really did a number on Jill...

Of course, Jill had always been a nuisance, but it was possible that Catherine was the root cause of that too, whispering lies into Jill's ear behind the scenes.

I looked Jill in the eye and said, "I didn't cheat. I swear it, in God's name."

It was a ridiculous question to me, but to Jill, it wasn't. She asked it knowing that my answer would change her entire outlook. It was a brave request for the truth—it meant that Jill finally doubted her mother's words for the first time. I couldn't take her bravery lightly.

So I answered her question in earnest.

"I always... The truth is, I always thought something was off... I mean...you were always...always so much more...more than me. Waaaah!"

At last, Jill burst into tears. She had felt conflicted for a while now, that much was clear. That Jill would repent was shocking enough already, but she had even matured enough to doubt her mother's words. Destroying her former worldview must have been a terrifying undertaking for her.

"Is that all you wanted to ask me? Jill, tell me, did my answer satisfy you?"

"I understand now. I think...I may have made you very upset, Sister. And it was because I was miserable. Because you were always better than me at everything..."

"Stop that, it's okay. I doubt I was a perfect sister either. And you're right, I was very upset, but I don't want to dwell on the past."

It was clear now that Jill's inferiority complex had played a hand in her behavior. We had such a long, messy history that, while I could accept her apology, it was impossible to forget the girl she used to be.

Honestly, I didn't want to remember. That might make me awfully shallow for a saint, but the pain she put me through all those years had left deep scars.

"I understand completely," Jill said. "I did so many horrible things to you, Sister. I know you will never love me again."

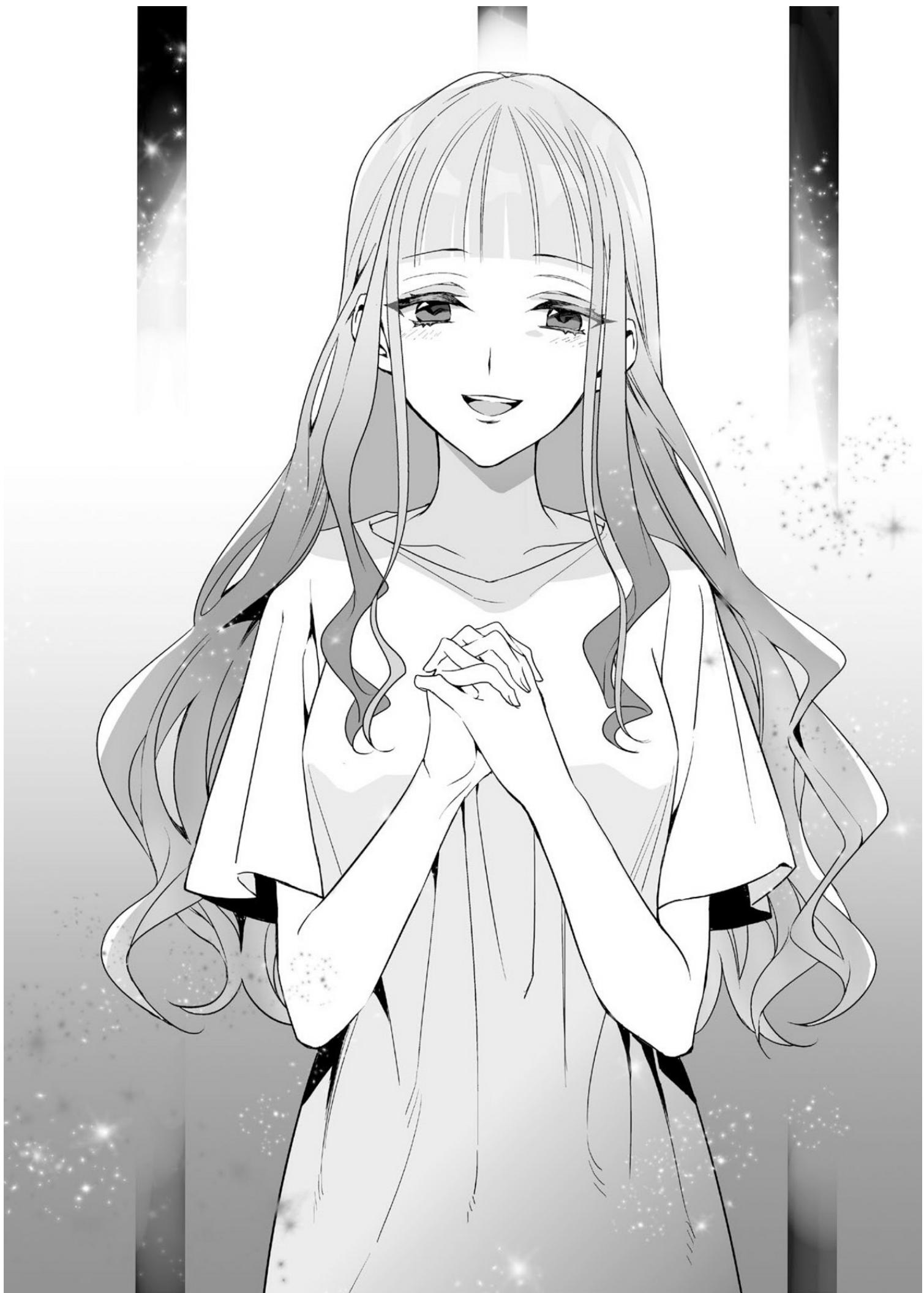
"I'm sorry. I feel ashamed to call myself a saint. I wish I could say with

confidence that I can come to love you, but the chasm between us just grew too deep and too wide.”

Truthfully, I didn’t want to say that. Jill had finally repented, and I wanted to forgive her. But I just couldn’t. Every time I saw Jill’s face, a barrage of awful flashbacks flooded my mind.

“But I’m still happy, Sister,” Jill said, smiling in relief. “I got to have a good talk with you, after all this time. I feel like I’m actually hearing you for the first time.”

I didn’t know if Jill was really going to change. I didn’t know if she would atone for her sins and grow as a person. But I really hoped that she would, and I wanted to believe in her. That was the most I could muster at the time.



Okay. We don't have much time left. I need to get to why I really came here.

"Listen, Jill...I came here today to ask you a question. Has Prince Dale asked you any questions?"

"Oh, no. We just talk."

"I see. Well, what does this talk entail, exactly? Could you give me a general idea of what you can remember?"

Jill's answer did not surprise me. I had my doubts that Dale would reveal anything central to the mystery to her, but Dale might have predicted that Eric or I would come talk to Jill to try to get a clue. And there was the possibility that he had embedded this hint somewhere into their "talks." Hence my asking Jill to relay what Dale had told her.

"We talked about you and about Mother, about why I felt so sad, and about Lord Jade... That's all."

I see. So they talked mostly about matters relevant to her.

I wonder what sort of things she told Prince Dale...

Since I had no idea what their conversations were like, I was curious to know what he'd told her to cause her to repent.

But that's not the most pressing matter right now.

"Jade Berklein... What sorts of things did you both say about him?"

"You want to talk about...Lord Jade? Well, he was Prince Dale's friend. Prince Dale said they often dined together with Duke Algren."

Jill proceeded to tell me about Dale's friendly relationship with Algren and Berklein. I knew about that already. I also knew that Algren was quite friendly with House Berklein as well.

"Prince Dale also told me that he and Lord Jade both helped back an ice cream parlor."

"Oh, neat..."

That might be the link between Dale funding the ice cream shop and its owner selling Berklein the Death Poison papers. Perhaps it was during this exchange that Berklein found out the ice cream shop owner needed cash and that was what had prompted him to offer to buy the documents.

But I couldn't exactly say this was news to me. It was something we could have found out easily with a bit of digging of our own. Still, the fact that they had talked about Berklein at all tugged at my thoughts. Maybe Dale wanted to deliver a coded message about his connection with Berklein.

"Anyway, this isn't something I spoke about with Prince Dale, but..."

"Hmm?"

"I'm sure you know how everyone in Carol's family worships Lord Jade, right? Well, I think they worship Prince Dale just as much. Lord Jade and Carol's family both spoke of how Prince Dale would make the ideal king."

Jill's friend Carol was a member of the Almer family, Berklein's most ardent supporters. And now I learned that the Almers also worshipped Prince Dale.

What did all of this mean? I had a feeling I might need to speak with Berklein to find out. While I'd never had a proper conversation with him before, I had the feeling that was just what I had to do.

When Eric wrote me the pass to give to the dungeon warden, he gave permission for me to visit anyone in the dungeon. Perhaps he had foreseen something like this arising. He was always very thorough...

I spent the rest of my thirty minutes talking with Jill, getting as much information as possible out of her. When it was time to say goodbye, I promised I would visit her again, then returned to the dungeon warden and had him arrange for me to visit Berklein.

"Well, what a pleasant surprise. I never dreamed a saint would grace me with her presence."

The man in the dark cell snapped his book closed and greeted me. *Jade Berklein.*

He approached me, a thin smile on his face. Books were highly prized gifts in the dungeon, and though Berklein had lost his title, he still had a long list of ardent supporters—it was likely the books were from them.

“Jade Berklein, I’ve come here to ask you some questions.”

“An interrogation, eh? I like to think I answered everything honestly during the investigation. If you’ve only come here to interrogate me, I’d rather you go through the proper channels instead of using a dungeon visit as an excuse.”

“This isn’t an interrogation. I’ve come to ask you questions out of personal interest.”

Since this was unofficial and I wanted to get it done as quickly as possible, I wasn’t in any position to go through the official channels to question Berklein. Eric would conduct a proper interrogation anyway, so I didn’t think it was necessary to go through all the hassle.

“Personal interest, eh? So, what kind of questions do you have to ask a man who tried to kill you? I already gave my motive and I’ve accepted my death sentence. What more could you possibly want to ask?”

Lest we forget, he tried to kill me. I got in the way of his attempts to kill Eric, so he used Jill to try to get rid of me. Since Berklein’s plan had failed, he was now incarcerated.

“Tell me about Prince Dale. Tell me everything you know.”

“Prince Dale? Ah, so that’s your angle. That little devil Algren is finally on the move, then.”

“Wow, you’re quite sharp. Do you know what Duke Algren is planning?”

The day we lured Berklein into a trap, he retched in front of everyone at the party and confessed to his crimes. At the time, I thought he was a fool. But maybe I misjudged him.

Jade Berklein wasn't just charismatic, he was brilliant. He lured devoted supporters to him in an attempt to become a major power. He very well might have slain Prince Eric if he hadn't grossly misunderstood Jill's nature.

In the short conversation we'd had thus far, I was already starting to amend my opinion of the man.

"Algren was trying to kill Prince Eric just like I was—no mistaking that. There was no telling when he was going to step in and thwart me, so I always kept an eye on him."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I could add that Algren buttered up Prince Dale a lot. They dined together too many times to count. That's why when you said you wanted to talk about Prince Dale, I figured Algren had set the wheels in motion."

That was a reasonable deduction for him to make. And he was right. Berklein was a cunning man.

"So, did Algren use Prince Dale to start something?" he asked.

"Yes. He integrated his mercenary company into the royal guard. He did so right after the king announced he would be revoking the dukes' special rights..."

Berklein raised an eyebrow. "Ooh, that's a bold reform. By mercenary company, I assume you mean the elite soldiers he's collected from across the continent?"

Prince Eric had been striving to achieve these reforms and they were the very reason he was targeted by the dukes, so Berklein must've been surprised to hear it was the king who finally enacted it.

"Algren probably sought out military talent from outside Elshaid in order to recruit assassins. I'm sure you know I wasn't the only one who sent assassins after Prince Eric, right?"

"What?! Ah... Now I see."

Duke Algren sent promising chefs to the Ren Empire to study, funded a

hopeful ice cream parlor, and gave aid to anybody with talent—that was just the kind of thing he did.

But now it was clear that it was all a cover to smuggle assassins into Elshaid.

If Berklein's inferences are correct, then it's very likely his so-called mercenary company is a band of assassins.

This was something I had theorized, but Berklein's useful piece of intel had narrowed down our investigation quite a bit. I wasn't about to take everything Berklein said at face value, but I did think it was worth further investigation.

"So are we finished talking about Dale now? I hardly know the man anyway. At first, my plan was to use him as a puppet to run Elshaid after I got rid of Eric."

"At first'? So your plan changed at some point?"

"That man... He never revealed his true nature. Whenever Algrenе or I talked to him, he always acted like he sympathized with us, but he always kept a distance. In a way, I started to think he was more of a sly fox than Eric."

It sounded like Berklein regarded Dale very highly. At the very least, he thought it would be difficult to take control of Elshaid, even if Eric were out of the picture.

"However, when it came to my own supporters, I brainwashed them into worshipping Dale rather than Eric."

"You brainwashed them? That's right, I heard that the Almer family worshipped not only you but Prince Dale as well. That they wanted him to be king."

"Well, yes, I thought it could be a way to get Eric stripped of his title. That's why I manipulated all my followers into worshipping Dale and wanting him to be king."

I would be lying if I said it didn't anger me to hear Berklein outline his plan to cross Eric, but he might give me the clues we needed to crack the case. I decided then and there that I had to tell Prince Eric about all of this.

“Anything else you want to ask me?”

“No, thank you, that’s enough. More than enough, really. To be honest, I’m a little surprised by your willingness to cooperate.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just couldn’t stand by and let the likes of Algrenе upstage me. The idea of letting that righteous fool rule the kingdom sounds a thousand times more appealing than that.”

I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not, but it sounded like Berklein hated Algrenе more than Eric. Everything he said seemed to add up and there was no point in my doubting him, so I decided to take him at his word.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Too bad about what I did to Jill Westoria.”

“What?”

“The biggest obstacle to breaking her was getting rid of her sense of guilt over killing you.” He chuckled and added, “That’s why my plot to kill you failed. Even now, it still haunts me.”

Why is he bringing this up now, of all times...

Maybe he was trying to tell me that Jill never wanted to kill me.

I tucked Berklein’s words away into the back of my mind and left the dungeon to deliver the news to Prince Eric.

“Thank you for doing this, Leia,” said Eric after I returned to his study and reported on what I’d learned. “Wow, so you spoke with Berklein as well as Jill Westoria.”

The information I’d gathered hadn’t exactly cracked the case, but I hoped that if we sorted through what we knew from the premise that Dale could be trusted, we might find something.

In other words, I hoped that Eric’s shrewdness could find something. I

believed that unlike me, Eric could see angles I couldn't imagine and make connections I couldn't see from the given information.

It was a belief not based on anything, but I believed it all the same.

"Leia, is your sister doing well?" Lingsha asked.

"She's...really run down, as you'd imagine. I could hardly call her 'well.'"

"Oh, she'll be okay. When you're locked in the dungeon in the Ren Empire, each of your fingers gets a name, and you have tournaments to find out which one is the strongest, oh yes!"

Hm? Why would Lingsha ever set foot in a dungeon?

I was scared to find out, so I decided not to ask.

She was probably just trying to say that Jill's experience was normal. And normal was an apt word. She was much easier to talk to now than she was back at home. You might even say her mental health had greatly improved.

"Leia, your Lingsha knows just how much it hurts to fight with sisters, oh yes. I'm sure you can't forgive her for trying to kill you. But you're still alive, yes? So even if you can't be friends, you can still start over."

"Miss Lin..."

Lingsha was the twelfth imperial princess of the Ren Empire. According to Eric, her siblings had ruthlessly warred with each other. And while a part of me was grateful for Lingsha's extensive experience with war, sometimes my heart breaks knowing the deep sadness she carried with her. So when Lingsha told me that we had a chance to start over, her words carried a lot of weight.

"Okay... I think I know what our next move should be," Eric suddenly said, interrupting our conversation.

I hope my intel gave him the hint he needed.

"Sounds like you've got a good plan, Your Highness."

"Weeell...I'm not quite sure it's a *good* plan, per se. It involves more deceit on

our part."

It sounded like Prince Eric had another ruse up his sleeve. And this time, Duke Algren would be the target. Eric didn't look that excited about it.

"By deceit, do you mean the sort of trap we set for Berklein?"

"Yes, exactly."

We had set the stage at Philip's engagement party. There, we had lured Berklein into our trap and gotten him to confess his crimes on the spot. Our operation succeeded because we used a ruse to lull him into a false sense of security and created the ideal scenario for a confession.

"Um, I'm almost afraid to ask this, Your Highness, but not much time has passed since our ploy at Lord Philip's engagement party. Are you sure this will go well?"

So much had happened since then that I was surprised to realize only a month had passed since Berklein's arrest. Duke Algren surely knew about our little trap at the engagement party, so it was hard to believe we would be able to fool him so easily.

"You're right. Algren witnessed Jade's downfall, so he's sure to have his guard up."

"You're going to lure him into a trap all the same?"

"That's the plan, yes. And I of course know that luring a cautious man into a trap will be no easy task. What's more, this is Duke Algren we're talking about. Our plans must be immaculate."

He sounded confident that he could trick Algren, despite Algren's heightened alertness.

Well, when he's this committed to an idea, I can't refuse him.

Eric thought we had a real chance of victory, and it was my job to support him wholeheartedly.

“Understood. I’m entirely in your hands, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Leia. You’re my rock.”

“And your Lingsha is on standby to blast everyone away, oh yes.”

“Good, Lingsha. I look forward to your brutal display.”

As a unit, we hyped ourselves for our battle against Duke Algren.

Eric says he looks forward to Lingsha’s brutal display. That must mean...

“Leia, Lingsha, let’s move. Leia, we will have an audience with His Majesty. Lingsha, I’m going to write a letter and I need you to deliver it for me.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“You’ve got it, Eric!”

Eric drafted his letter, and we prepared for the final showdown with the mastermind who had raised hell in the palace.

“I heard your matter is urgent—what is it? Coming to see me at this hour, I assume it’s quite serious.”

Prince Eric and I were prostrated before the king. There was a reason why we hadn’t spoken with him once all this time—the king was a busy man. Revoking the special rights of the dukes meant all sorts of systems already in place needed to be changed, such as the government officials they had appointed. The king had his hands full with new laws and other reforms that needed to go into effect. The work of the princes paled in comparison, so Eric had taken extra care not to waste His Majesty’s time.

“I’m terribly sorry to take your valuable time, Your Majesty, but we’ve come here today with a proposal to expel the evil that targets your life, if you’d be so gracious as to listen.”

“I see...”

His Majesty’s eyebrows raised when Eric informed him that we would have a

showdown with the mastermind. He had probably intuited how far along our plan was from the way Eric spoke.

I felt the air grow laden with portent. We would soon reach the end of a long road. I had become Prince Eric's bodyguard, then we backed Berklein into a corner, got his title revoked, and then there was the attempted murder at the ice cream parlor. As soon as we'd solved that mystery, the king announced the revocation of rights, and Duke Algren's mercenary company was added to the king's royal guard. We still did not know Dale's true intentions. But Eric determined that the real battle was about to begin. He had devised an elaborate scheme to trap the elusive Algren—and we would need His Majesty's help in carrying out the plan.

"I wish to make a donation to the shop Dale financed, to help it reopen."

"A reopening, you say?" the king asked. "I...don't quite follow. What do you intend?"

I couldn't follow his logic either. I assumed Eric meant the ice cream parlor—but why did he want it to reopen?

"They sell something called 'ice cream' at that shop. I think it could be the next greatest thing in the royal capital, so I would love it if you could attend its reopening. If the king graced the ice cream parlor with his presence, we would signal to our subjects that, with the revocation of rights, we will have a society where the common man can be a star."

A society where anybody could be a star. That was the world Eric dreamed of. It was a beautiful idea, but his true goal was more than a PR stunt.

His true goal is to lure Duke Algren into a trap.

I immediately picked up on what Eric was plotting. He had asked the king to do something outlandish.

"Hmm. Well, if I went to an ice cream parlor, somebody would try to kill me."

Exactly. If His Majesty left the safety of the palace and went into a

commoner's shop, he was practically begging to be attacked. If Algren was our mastermind, he wouldn't let this opportunity go to waste.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I want you to be the bait to lure Duke Algren—the mastermind behind all that has happened—into a trap."

With a clear voice, Eric confirmed the king's fears. He had asked the king to do something reckless in the name of justice. Most kings would harshly rebuke him for that.

But Eric was sincere. His clear, blue eyes pleaded with the king to overrule the impossible.

"So you want to use me as a lure... I assume you think that you have a chance of success? Algren is no fool—he'll catch on to the fact I'm bait. If you need proof of that, look no further than, what did he call it, his mercenary company? They're a dubious sort, but even Alfred couldn't find fault in any of them."

His Majesty was indeed aware that Algren was plotting something, and he had allowed his mercenary company into his ranks in the hope of exposing them. But it was in vain. It resulted in Johann's suspension and made Algren even more cautious.

I had voiced a similar concern to Eric earlier: Even if Algren did manage to fall for our obvious trap, it was doubtful things would go as we planned.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Eric said, his eyes brimming with confidence. "Leave everything to me. You have my word. I will see to it that Duke Algren and his ilk fall squarely into our trap."

He isn't the sort of man who would make such a declaration without a firm foundation. It sounds like Prince Eric still has a trick up his sleeve.

Working as Eric's bodyguard and watching him all this time was the very reason why I trusted him now.

It will be all right... We will win. I know it.

"Very well," the king said. "The fate of Elshaid is in your hands, Eric. I've made

my decision. Use my life however you wish."

And the king put his faith in Eric as well.

His Majesty had stood by and watched his son fight such fierce battles all those years. And now, he had recognized Eric's spirit and promised to help him.

We got straight to work. When the day came to expose Duke Algren's treachery, we would be ready.

-Algren's Perspective-

I T'S HERE. It's finally here. Oh, how I've been waiting for this opportunity to come.

For years...*years*, I've waited.

How many assassins did I send after that princeling brat when he spouted that drivel about revoking our rights? Thankfully, since that upstart Berklein was nice enough to meddle and make a fool of himself, I had more time to prepare.

I knew better. I knew that I would need more than mere military might to kill that impudent crown prince for good. The only issue was, I was one of the most powerful nobles in this kingdom. I couldn't act behind the scenes without drawing attention to myself.

So I focused on philanthropy. I met with all sorts of people from other nations under the guise of finding and helping talented people. In part, that led to the formation of my company of assassins. When the time was right, they would eliminate the crown prince. A brilliant plan if I said so myself.

I estimated it would take at least ten years before the crown prince ascended to the throne. The king was in good health: As long as nothing happened to him, he still had plenty of life to live.

In the meantime, I decided to survey the continent, seeking out the strongest fighters in foreign lands. Naturally, I was never so foolish as to let my cover slip.

I spent generously, financing the most promising people in the cultural arts—chefs, artists, actors, and so on. And slowly, so as not to draw suspicion, I expanded my philanthropic efforts to warriors and martial artists. In doing this, I noticed Jade Berklein was hiring assassins from neighboring lands and smuggling them into Elshaid, but I kept my mouth shut. I would let him swim. If he succeeded, good. If he didn't, I could always use the information to blackmail him.

Too bad the poor fool had to go get himself arrested before I could extort him. It's pathetic, really.

Ever since that damn king betrayed me, my beautiful plan turned to shambles. I never imagined that His Majesty was idiotic enough to revoke ducal rights before the crown prince could. But he did, so I amended my plan: kill the king *and* the crown prince. Then I would make the remaining prince my puppet and hold this kingdom in the palm of my hand.

As luck would have it, an opportunity to make this happen fell in my lap.

His Majesty the King was to visit the ice cream parlor. Earlier, I had orchestrated an incident there as a distraction to traffic a large band of assassins into the royal capital, and now, to my amazement, the parlor would reopen for business.

It was quite easy to sway that waiter. All I had to do was remind him of his loyalty to Berklein. He danced like a puppet for me.

Since the gendarmes were distracted by the attempted murder, it was easy to smuggle my mercenary company—my band of assassins—into Elshaid. I flawlessly executed my artful master plan from the shadows.

That silly crown prince can't hold a candle to me.

The king's visit to the ice cream parlor was surely a trap laid by the crown prince. He imperiled the king in order to lure me out of hiding. He had to assume that Duke Algren's mercenary company would take the opportunity to besiege him.

Oh, Crown Prince Eric, you sweet, stupid child. Did you honestly believe I would fall for such a transparent ruse?

I will not have the same disgraceful end as Berklein.

Really, I pitied him for thinking I was idiotic enough to fall for such an obvious ploy, but I would be kind enough to teach him a lesson.

I wouldn't mobilize my mercenary company. Instead, I would order the assassins I'd gathered in secret to attack him. And I would utilize another diversion! A diversion on top of a diversion!

First, my mercenaries would capture my assassins. I'd make them heroes when everyone was most paranoid, earn them even more trust, and lower the king's guard. The real attack would occur during the ride back to the palace. My mercenary company would set the assassins free and they would slay the king. Then they'd use the ensuing pandemonium to kill Eric as well.

"Ha ha ha ha! Unlike Berklein, I won't be fooled by a simple deception! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!"

Berklein's youth was his downfall. I was glad he was gone. He was but an obstacle to making that whelp Dale my puppet.

I would make them all regret ever underestimating me.

As you watch your father die, I hope you'll feel remorse for mocking the great houses of the Elshaidian aristocracy.

"Eric...pay close attention. Behold the moment I gain supremacy over this kingdom! At last, my long-held grudge shall be settled! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

We, the great houses of the nobility, made Elshaid what it was today. Ignoring us was a grave sin. A sin that couldn't be forgiven, not even for the royalty.

This was a holy war for the good of the Kingdom of Elshaid. Much blood would be shed—a sacrifice for the glory of the kingdom.

Your Majesty, Eric, as an act of clemency, I shall give you both a majestic

burial befitting your rank.

Today marked the dawn of a new era. Answering the invitation, I made my way to this so-called ice cream parlor.

Security was tight at the event. Royal bodyguards cloistered around His Majesty—Alfred was closest.

Alfred... Damn him. I managed to get Eric's lackey Johann—that piece of goldfish crap—suspended, but Alfred was the king's pet and heir to a viscount. Perhaps that was why he went unpunished after the breakin and was allowed to continue serving the king.

Well, there was nothing to be done about that now. It was not unexpected.

His Majesty's faith in my mercenary company was perhaps lacking. The younger prince's entreaties probably made him agree to it with reluctance.

“Duke Algren, have some ice cream, my lord?”

I took a bowl of ice cream from the waitress. I was in no mood to eat such a trifle, but refusing it would draw unwanted attention.

Ice cream, eh? Since I had been helping talented people as a cover for my true business, I happened to already know about it, and it was fortunate that I did.

I remembered well when I invited Dale and Berklein to dinner. Dale innocently took interest in the ice cream while Berklein took interest in the shop owner's father, a scholar of the arcane. When I found out Berklein had used that connection to buy a forbidden tome of magic, I had to laugh. I now had not one but *two* ways to extort him.

Yet, his plot to kill with Death Poison failed utterly. That kid just didn't have what it took.

“Greetings, Duke Algren. So sorry about the other day. I shouldn't have spoken ill of your mercenary company.”

“Ah, Prince Eric. It’s quite all right. I know you only said what you did out of loyalty. The kind sentiment is more than enough. I look forward to our continued cooperation in keeping His Majesty safe.”

Oh, Eric. Lying to my face, are we?

Did this twerp think I was oblivious?

Jade Berklein may have been tricked into foolish self-sabotage, but I saw that happen, you know. You had to believe I was an unparalleled fool to try the same trick on me.

“You certainly do have stellar subordinates,” Eric said. “I know he made a terrible error the other day, but my bodyguard Johann Olbrun is quite a sword master. No suspicious intruders had ever sneaked past him before.”

“Ahh. In a distant land, they have a saying: Pride goeth before the fall. Perhaps this Johann had a bad day.”

Johann was tricked due to his staggering incompetence. He was a sorry excuse for a man to fall for such an obvious diversion.

And before I could even recommend the swift execution of the perpetrator, Dale disposed of that loose thread for me. Surprisingly enough, I half wanted Dale to bite the dust every bit as much as Eric and the king. Once they were out of the way, I’d have to contend with Dale on the throne.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Eric replied. “I hope Johann does something to fix his tarnished reputation.”

“Ha ha ha! Yes, I hope so too.”

This was taking too long. The attack was supposed to have happened by now, and my soldiers were supposed to capture my assassins. I did not appreciate that they were late. I’d have to dock their pay later.

Wait, I was going to kill them all anyway, their payment was irrelevant.

“Something wrong?”

“Eh? Why do you ask, Your Highness?”

“Oh, you keep looking at the time. Do you have an appointment elsewhere?”

“Er, n-no, Your Highness.”

Blast! Can’t a guy look at a clock without you yapping?!

This irritated me to no end. He had apprehended far too many of my precious subordinates—I lost track of the number of times he’d made a fool of me.

This time, however, my plan would succeed. Phase One was almost upon us. When my soldiers captured my band of assassins—

“Prince Eric! We’ve rounded up a motley bunch of suspicious characters!”

“Ah, good work.”

“Huh?! But how?!”

Th-that’s Johann Olbrun!! And he’s captured my band of assassins.

I had put fifty of them on the job—fifty! He didn’t even know where they were going to attack. How could he have possibly caught them?

Could it be...my mercenary company was too slow? Well, now the ambush was a wash.

No, not so fast. They don’t know that those are my assassins. Which means the plan can still get back on track!

“Something wrong, Duke Algren? You look awfully perturbed.”

“Er, what?! Oh, wh-why, I’m just impressed by Sir Johann! He’s wasting no time in rebuilding his reputation. Though I must say I am surprised to see you back. I didn’t know you were reinstated.”

It was acceptable for me to look shaken over these events. I didn’t know that Johann was reinstated. And in any case, it was only natural that I would be surprised by people getting arrested.

“I see. Well, Johann, go ahead and take those men to—”

“Er, wait! Your Highness!”

“Hm? Is something the matter, Duke Algren?”

That little bastard was trying to take the reins. *What, you think you’re running the show, Eric Elshaid?*

Then again, maybe I should admit defeat. If Eric’s men take away my assassins, I might need to postpone the assassination.

If I slipped up and said too much, they would suspect me.

“He did something commendable from the very moment he was reinstated,” I said. “Perhaps men like Sir Johann are indeed most worthy to serve His Majesty? Please, let my mercenary company take these bandits, in service of the king.”

It sounded a bit forced, but I couldn’t do anything about that. Johann was likely riding high after his prompt display of heroism, and Eric wouldn’t want to burden his precious bodyguard with the humble task of taking ruffians away; he would rather Johann stand beside His Majesty and get all the glory.

The only issue was if they trusted me or not. Eric had been extremely suspicious of me and my mercenaries. He had set this entire gala up to lure me into a trap, there was no mistaking that. But now that my decoy assassins were caught, it was possible that he had become less wary.

Eric had a reputation for not trusting others easily, but how would that play out now? If he didn’t take the suggestion I just gave, then as much as it would pain me to do so, I would have to abort this mission.

I was a deeply cautious man. I knew when it was time to quit. I still had plenty of time. Suffering a temporary setback here was just part of the process.

“Hmm, fair point, Duke Algren. I suppose I will let your mercenary company take these thugs.”

“Yes, Your Highness! They’re in good hands!”

There! There it is! The chance of a lifetime has fallen into my lap!

Ha ha ha... Oh, Eric, you fool. You'd never guess that I hired fifty men just to cause a diversion, would you?

It was a shame they were so pathetic that Johann's men could catch them, but the Algren mercenary company was the real deal. They were the elites, gifted with intelligence and combat skill. I didn't even want to think about how much of my fortune was spent on amassing such an elite force.

The only reason I hadn't yet ordered them into action was because I couldn't risk the slightest chance of a mishap. Otherwise, they would have taken the king's head long ago.

And now that he has been lulled into a false sense of security, the aforementioned king's head shall be mine.

I'd won! I was the victor, Eric Elshaid! Idealists like you should crawl among the vermin where you belonged.

"Prince Eric, Duke Algren, this is their latest product," Saint Leia said. "I would love to hear your opinions on it, so I've brought you both a sample."

"Hmm, interesting," Eric said. "I'll give it a try."

"Thank you, my lady," I replied.

Saint Leia—that witch was on my watchlist. After all, she had cast devious spells to fool Berklein.

But I would be an amateur if I let my wariness of her show. I was exceedingly calm. I would never let my emotions show.

"Well, this certainly is delicious," I said. "I wasn't expecting a melon flavor. It is a truly refined taste, isn't it, Your Highness?"

I smiled, but not because the ice cream was good. I was smiling because everything was going according to my design. I was wary of Leia Westoria's tactics, but letting it wash over me calmly was the right move. Johann's heroics were an unexpected hiccup, but my poker face was just that impeccable. I would fool them all, and bring my plan closer and closer to fruition.

“Are you all right, Duke Algren?”

“What do you mean, Your Highness?”

“We haven’t tested this ice cream for poison. Do you think it’s safe? Do you feel at all ill?”

“Wh-what are you saying?”

Did this bastard just imply that he poisoned the ice cream? I remembered how Berklein writhed around on the floor after sipping some wine. Was he trying to use the same gambit on me? Using this saint as his agent...

“Leia can cast Death Poison now, just like her sister, Jill. Duke Algren, I’ve changed my policy. I now punish anyone I suspect so that I may achieve my ideal world. You’ll have to die now.”

“What?”

“Unless you confess to me. Confess all your crimes.”

“C-confess?!”

That’s bloody child’s play. It’s pathetic! Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic, pathetic, pathetic, pathetic, pathetic, pathetic! Pathetic beyond words!

At first, I was surprised to hear that he still didn’t trust me, but this was his move after I let my guard down? Was this childish tactic really his idea of a battle of wits?

I’m truly disappointed in you, my boy. To think you were this pathetic.

“Ha...ha! Hah! Hah! Hah! Are you joking, Your Highness? I can’t think of anything I need to confess.”

“What?”

“Besides, I know you, Prince Eric. You’re not the sort of person who would punish somebody just because you suspect him of wrongdoing. I’ve committed no crimes, yet I can’t hide my disappointment that you would bluff to try to reproach me.”

I was ninety percent—no, a hundred percent certain that this was a bluff. Eric Elshaid was a just man. A firebrand perversely obsessed with fairness. If he would bend his own rules to condemn me, that would be a rejection of his very ideology. A rejection of his long history of championing the revocation of rights as his primary cause. It frustrated me that he would panic and try the same cheap trick on me that he used on Berklein.

Did you honestly think I wouldn't see through your little game? Don't underestimate me, you damn amateur!

"Prince Eric, let's put an end to your little charade. I am innocent. I have nothing to confess."

"Doubling down, are we?"

A new voice interrupted, "Duke Algren is right, Brother. Please stop this, you're embarrassing yourself."

"Dale..."

At last, somebody came to my defense. Dale Elshaid, the younger prince of the kingdom. This man was on my watchlist too, of course. I sneaked government officials loyal to me into his inner circle and had them report back to me about everything Dale thought and did.

I discovered from their reports that Prince Dale was truly useful to me. A true fence-sitter who hated conflict and was agreeable with everyone. Once I got the vermin out of the way and put him on the throne, this man would be a perfect puppet for me to control from behind the scenes.

With him, it would be possible to make House Algren more powerful than Merhide and Gilbert's houses combined.

To that end, I needed him alive.

Killing him as well as his brother and father was indeed another way to seize power, but that would result in a civil war and a kingdom in the throes of chaos. I only needed him to have just as much ambition as myself.

“Don’t interfere, Dale,” Eric said. “Duke Algren has taken poison. He will die very soon.”

“The duke will not confess, Brother. And besides, he did not take poison, you did.”

“What?! Urgh!”

Wh-what is the meaning of this?

Dale said something under his breath, and Eric’s face suddenly contorted into a mask of pain as he collapsed to the floor.

Did Dale Poison Eric? Eric, who is always cautious?

“I know you had it tested for poison—I’m terribly sorry, but I had the ice cream artisan use ice magic to freeze the poison so that it would melt later.”

“Nnngh... D-Dale...you traitor!”

“I’m going to eliminate everyone standing in my way, here and now. Farewell, my dear brother.”

Wh-what in the world was happening? Leia and the king had both collapsed too!

Did Dale orchestrate all of this? It couldn’t be... Did he lay in wait all this time? Hiding until the last moment when he would bare his fangs?

“Duke Algren, I’m terribly sorry, but it appears I’ve achieved your goal before you.”

“What do you mean?”

Dale chuckled. “Thanks to your transparently suspicious behavior, I could maneuver with ease. After all, you sent your own mercenary company into the royal guard to assassinate His Majesty. That got my wretched brother to focus his energy entirely on you.”

He knew everything.

Yet he feigned cluelessness, all while plotting the assassinations of his brother

and father.

“Everyone trusted me. This makes all those years of stupid, innocent smiling worth it.”

“Well played, Prince Dale. Now you will be king.”

“I am humbled and honored that you would choose my ice cream to strike the winning blow,” the shopkeeper said.

Just then, a crowd of people entered the parlor.

Who the hell are these guys? What the hell is going on here?

Baron Almer came in, and he congratulated Dale on becoming king. I recalled that he was one of Berklein’s minions.

“Thank you so much for avenging Lord Jade!”

“Leia Westoria! Eric Elshaid! How dare you! How dare you humiliate our Lord Jade!”

This was a mob of Jade Berklein’s allies.

Now I see. He used the resentment of this angry mob after their leader was imprisoned in order to carry out the assassination.

I remembered that Berklein had tried to turn Dale into his puppet, just like me. Berklein could easily brainwash his supporters into worshipping Dale. And since Eric and His Majesty both believed that Dale was their ally, their guards were completely down.

It was perfect. Credit where credit was due. It was a flawless plot.

“Prince Dale, I underestimated you. You truly are most worthy to be king.”

“Thank you very much. But you’re not bothered? Your own plot was foiled.”

“Ha ha ha! I don’t care about my plots to kill the former king and Eric anymore. When you ascend the throne, Prince Dale, I vow to back you wholeheartedly.”

I had only one option now: to pledge my loyalty.

It didn't matter that my own plots had failed; my joy in serving such a great king outweighed any bitterness I might have felt.

All the vermin in my way were eliminated. Originally, I merely wanted for the dukes to retain their special rights, and it was best that I forget any other aspirations I might have had. I needed to maintain my own power; that was enough for me.

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Algren."

"Bwuh?!"

I had never seen him smile like that before.

Dale Elshaid—what the hell are you saying? How much of it is sincere? I never exactly hid my ambitions to rule this kingdom as a puppet master—

"We got everything on record, Duke Algren. You openly confessed that you tried to assassinate me."

"You know, playing dead is harder than it looks."

"Yes, I hope I don't have to play a role like this ever again."

The king, Eric, and Leia rose from the dead.

Damn it all! They tricked me!

At that moment, I realized that the trap I fell for was completely unlike the one I envisioned.

They were all in on it. That's impossible! When did that worm Dale team up with Eric?

I don't get it. When did it happen? Where did I go wrong...

-Leia's Perspective-

DUKE ALGRENE WAS INDEED a careful man. Just like Eric had said, tricking him required that he think he'd already won. That's why Prince Dale helped us with our assassination charade. It was a strategy that took full advantage of his impeccable poker face.

We had to go all in. I was worried that our feigned deaths wouldn't be convincing, of course, but I was most worried because this strategy would fail if we didn't fully trust Dale.

In the end, everything worked out exactly as Eric had planned. Algren confided to his own crimes, and he was now being carted off to the dungeon.

"So, you had two assassination plots: one for His Majesty and one for me. Is that correct, Duke Algren? It sounds like a rather amusing conspiracy—can't you tell us more?"

"Ngrrugh...! Mm-mmrrrggg. Your Majesty! Please forgive me!"

Duke Algren fell to his knees and groveled before Eric, who did not deign to answer his question. He had fallen from his pedestal of supreme arrogance and now pressed his head to the ground, desperately, tearfully apologizing and begging for mercy from His Majesty.

"I have always—that is, my house has always, always, through all the generations, and even longer than that—done everything in our power to bring wealth and prosperity to the kingdom of Elshaid! I don't need any special rights! I swear my eternal loyalty to the royal family of Elshaid, until I draw my final breath!"

It's too late to beg for forgiveness. Duke Algren should know that. What is his game here?

His desperation was obvious. It was true, the Algren family had worked very hard for Elshaid. But the same could've been said of Berklein, the house that had fallen just before. What's more, Algren had plotted to murder the king—a much heavier crime.

"You're embarrassing yourself, Duke Algren. Your crimes are grave enough that you should lose everything. You know that death is your only way to atone for them."

After a long pause, the duke said, "Prince Eric! If that's how it must be, then please, listen to what I have to say!"

"What? Spit it out."

There was a sinister gleam in the groveling duke's eyes as Eric stepped toward him. It looked like we were about to be treated to a helping of sour grapes.

"I'll see you in Hell!!"

Algren pulled a lustrous, purple knife from his sleeve and darted at Eric's opening like a feral beast. He had one last, desperate card stashed up his sleeve.

"O Chains of Light, bind the evil one!"

"Hm?! Nggh!"

Chains of pure light flew from my right hand and bound Algren in place. For someone like me, who spent her days fighting monsters that moved at lightning speed, he was far too slow.

"Hmm, this knife looks like it's had poison applied. Damn, what a stupid thing to try. Don't you know I have the best bodyguards in the world?"

"Leia Westoria!" he roared, his eyes full of hate for me.

Eric, undeterred despite nearly dying, looked at me and smiled.

He knew I was going to save him, but I'm still flattered. I didn't know earning the trust of someone could make me feel so happy. It's something I've never felt before.

Unlike when we first met, he completely trusted me with his life now. The feeling of his steadfast faith set my heart ablaze.

"Duke Algren, I advise you to surrender. You've lost. As His Highness's

bodyguard and as a saint, I cannot overlook this outburst of violence.”

“Oh, shut up! Shut up, you bitch! The crown betrayed me first! I am true nobility; I will smash the iron hammer of justice into the corrupt crown prince —”

“No, *you* shut up, Duke Algren!”

“Guh?! Dale, Your Highness...”

Even bound in chains, Algren hurled obscenities and insults with wild abandon, but Dale rebuked him sharply. It was terrifying; I had never seen him look more intimidating.

“You dukes abused the special rights we gave you—as a member of the royal family, my brother couldn’t turn a blind eye! He chose a path of hardship from a very young age so he could realize his ideals. He deserves your respect! I cannot stand by and let a bastard like you disparage him!”

“Prince Dale, is that how you’ve always felt?”

It was the first time we had heard Dale say those words. Maybe that was what was in his heart all along.

Dale had lived his whole life watching his brother from a distance. He was angry, and he couldn’t stand by and let Duke Algren use his brother as a whipping post after everything he had been through.

Dale turned to Eric and knelt. “Eric, please forgive me for how rude I’ve been to you. I felt so powerless and so insignificant, skulking in the shadows and trying to find out who was trying to kill you.”

All this time, he had worked tirelessly for Eric’s sake. Even when he was suspected to be an enemy, he kept trying to help from the shadows.

I’ve never known anybody so full of compassion...

I imagined the harsh path Dale must have walked, and I was in awe.

“Dale...please, don’t kneel. I... I really am a big fool. It took me this long to see

how strong and reliable my brother is.”

“Eric...”

“Thank you. I will never forget what you did for me. I want to take the time to repay you, but that will have to wait until this matter is settled.”

Eric extended his hand. Dale gripped it and rose to his feet.

That day, both princes discovered that they had a wonderful brother that they could trust with their lives. It was the treasure of a lifetime.

After this matter is settled... That's right. It's not over yet.

It was obvious that Algren's mercenary company was a mob of assassins hired to kill the king, but it was also highly likely that the duke had also sent the band of assassins Johann had just captured.

I sensed several people outside that seemed to fall into that category, and Eric had started to order Johann, Lingsha, and others to beef up security.

“Th-this is bad, you know?! Duke Algren...this isn't what you promised us!”

“Prince Eric, I sense several presences outside this building, trying to leave.”

A despairing cry pierced the air, probably from a watchman stationed outside looking for the assassins. Now, quite a few people were trying to flee. It was understandable. With Algren arrested, no one would pay them. All that awaited them in Elshaid was a death sentence.

“I'm going to help catch the assassins,” Eric said. “And don't you object. I want to see this through to the very end.”

I sighed and said, “I have no objections, Your Highness. Please, do everything you must. I'll keep you safe.”

He never, never hesitated to put his own life in danger...

A part of me was exasperated, but another part of me was proud of him—that was the real Prince Eric. As his bodyguard, and as a saint who loved Elshaid, it was my sworn duty to protect him.

Eric gave a little laugh. “Well, that’s a relief to hear. I trust you more than anyone... All right, heroes! I’m calling on everyone loyal to Elshaid’s royal family! Let’s show them that a band of warriors from other lands are no match for us!”

“Yeah!!!”

Prince Eric raised his sword and let loose an inspiring battle cry, and the royal guards and Johann followed suit.

In the end, it took them less than an hour to capture all of Algrene’s soldiers. Duke Algrene’s ambitions had come to an end.

Epilogue

DUKE ALGRENE WAS CHARGED with attempted high treason and put under arrest. His mercenary company, which was arrested soon after, had already been thrown into the dungeon. His soldiers were indeed skilled fighters, but perhaps due to low morale, not many of them even bothered to fight back.

There were still several men among them who, confident in their own might, put up quite a struggle, but they were all knocked out. *Lingsha blasting them all away played a big part in this.*

“If anybody wants to be blasted even further, come at me! Ohh, yes!”

When they saw Lingsha bare her teeth in a big grin and cackle in their faces, quite a few of them surrendered on the spot. In the end, Duke Algren’s mercenary company was a hired mob, nothing more. They weren’t loyal enough to help their master.

“Still, I’m shocked that Duke Algren fell for our trick—I thought he was so careful.”

I imagined that he had a contingency plan to call off the attack if things turned south. Since he knew we didn’t trust him, he was always watchful, always waiting for his opportunity. Simply put, he was conservative in his actions.

When we told him the ice cream was poisoned, he was the epitome of calm. He surely didn’t think he would slip up so easily.

“And that’s why we made use of Berklein’s supporters,” Eric said. “If Berklein’s supporters—who hated our guts—acted like we were dead, even distrustful Algren would have to believe them. They had no reason to help us. Though they did have reason to help Dale.”

When Berklein told me about his supporters, Eric decided to incorporate them into our little subterfuge. Hearing the testimonies of Jill and Berklein had confirmed to us that Dale was indeed our ally.

Honestly, I was surprised when Eric suggested that Jill be the one to deliver the details of our plan to Dale.

He had said, “Don’t worry, Leia. Your sister will deliver the message to Dale. I’m sure of it.”

Trusting Eric’s confident expression, I went along with it, but that was my biggest concern with our plan.

“Leave it to me, Sister. I’m not sure I can even begin to make amends for the pain I’ve caused you, but I will deliver the message right away.” Jill’s eyes sparkled as she spoke.

We were so indirect with our communication for good reason. Eric had determined that there was a spy among Dale’s ranks. Naturally, Eric could just ask to speak with Dale privately, but that would practically signal to our enemy that Eric and Dale were now allies. It was crucial to our plan that the brothers’ relationship remain ambiguous. We would be in dire straits if Duke Algrenе were to discover the truth.

“I didn’t think that many people would show up...”

“Everyone aside from Baron Almer was an extra cast by Johann. We couldn’t deprogram so many people so quickly.”

Johann had done a lot of work for us behind the scenes while he was suspended. When he heard of the plan, he deduced that Algrenе would once again stage another fake attack and have his mercenary company arrest them.

Since that very plan had been used against him once already, Johann was hyper-vigilant. He discovered all the areas where Algrenе’s assassins might hide, and he visited them all in advance and rounded up the assassins before they could act. Eric was overjoyed and said that Johann’s efforts were outstanding.

“And that first intruder who came for the king wasn’t actually executed after all, was he?” I asked.

"That's right, and I fell hard for that deception. The dungeon warden took the blame for that, but I'm not going to prosecute him."

We were shocked to learn that Dale had only pretended to execute that intruder. Instead, he placed the intruder under house arrest and pursued a private investigation himself.

That intruder's family was taken hostage. In exchange for their lives, he was ordered to get caught by the mercenary company and go to the dungeon. The cruel lows to which Algren would stoop were beyond words.

Due to those circumstances, the intruder was exonerated. He was only another victim of Algren's selfish conspiracy.

The dungeon warden hadn't executed the intruder but a different condemned man. This was also by Dale's request; another secret kept from Eric. Visiting Jill every day had made him quite close with the warden. He told us later how it was fortunate that they were able to become friends.

I recalled his words, *"I just couldn't stand the fact that your heart was broken from the strain of your relationship with your sister, Leia. I am well aware that I crossed a line and meddled. But I knew the pain of having a difficult relationship with one's sibling..."*

Dale wrote the whole thing off as him meddling. He said there was no other reason...but I wondered. I doubted anybody would go so far just for the sake of meddling, but he wouldn't tell me anything more. Perhaps he didn't want to tell me the real reason.

It's just, what I felt in Dale was a deep love. Whether it was compassion or some different feeling, I didn't have the courage to ask. I got the sense he didn't want that part of him to be acknowledged.

Of course, I was very grateful to Dale. Thanks to him, Jill was spared a death sentence as well. Eric told me that it was mostly due to the fact that she was deemed to be a victim of Berklein's brainwashing, but her sentence was also lessened because of how cooperative she had been with the investigation after

her arrest.

From that conversation, it became clear to me that Dale had been supporting Eric from the shadows all along. He had a reason to become friendly with the aristocrats who hated Eric. He had befriended the Great Four and made them believe he was their ally so he would be aware at the earliest possible moment when their plans to harm Eric would go into motion. He also kept his distance from Eric because he was waiting for the dukes to let down their guards and show their true colors. He had chosen this path at a very young age, to live his life in service as Elshaid's second prince and as the crown prince's younger brother.

Just like Prince Eric, Prince Dale's chosen path was overgrown with thorns. He could never reveal his true intentions to the brother he loved, and devoted himself to a life in the shadows. That's no small feat.

He never strayed from that path, even when he was suspected of being his brother's enemy. Even though he did it for his own flesh and blood, I wouldn't describe it as anything less than incredible.

"Now I have a debt to Dale I can never repay," Eric said.

"I know you can repay it someday," I responded. "If you make Elshaid a better place, Prince Dale's efforts will all have been worth it."

"Yes, you're right, Leia. Thanks."

He smiled at me with a smile exactly like the one Dale had in the moment when he revealed everything to Algren. A smile that signaled relief that he would no longer have to hide his true feelings from his brother.

Now that Eric knew Dale's true feelings, his heart surely felt a bit lighter too. It showed in the brightness of his smile.

"But I'm sure Dale is in love with..."

"Prince Eric?"

"Er, it's nothing. Dale...wasn't the only one who saved me. Leia, you woke me

up inside. In truth, the biggest debt I owe is to you. Without you, I know my spirit would have been broken."

Eric was terribly depressed when he had no choice but to suspend Johann. And it's true, I did give him some helpful words then. But I knew something Eric didn't: Eric had pulled himself up by his own strength.

That's why I didn't need his gratitude. I just wanted him to fulfill his destiny.

"You are too kind, Your Highness. But I speak for myself, and perhaps for Prince Dale as well, when I say that seeing you live a life pursuing the justice you love so much is more than enough thanks."

After a moment of hesitation, Eric said, "That's right, you always give me a push when I need it. But that's why I appreciate your encouraging words more than anything."

The prince needed me. That fact alone was an honor more than I deserved. He probably spoke so highly of me because he knew that I would soon have to leave the palace.

Unfortunately, my time as his bodyguard was never meant to last forever. His Majesty told me so directly.

Algrene and Berklein, those that threatened Eric's life, had both been caught. The rights reform was about to go into effect. Once that happened, Eric would almost certainly no longer need such strong protection.

In other words, there was no longer a reason for me, a saint, to be his bodyguard.

When I first came here, I felt nothing but confusion. But now that I'm leaving, I'm sad.

If I could have had my way, I would stay. I loved it here, where His Highness, Lingsha, and Johann were. I loved that I could be myself here.

Your Highness, I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I've lied to you.

I lied when I said that seeing you live a life pursuing the justice you love so

much was more than enough for me. What I really wanted was...

“Oh, Your Highness, about to go out with Lady Leia?”

“Have a good time, Eric, Leia!”

Several days after Duke Algren’s arrest, Eric and I were headed for the palace gate when Johann called out to us. Lingsha was with him.

My job as a bodyguard was to end the day the revocation of rights went into effect. Until then, Eric accompanied me on my saintly duties just as usual. At first, when he told me that it was so he could observe me, I was a nervous wreck. But now, oddly enough, I felt stronger when he was with me.

“Duke Algren has finally begun his confession. We’re getting rather close now, aren’t we?” Johann said.

“Indeed. The revocation of rights is at our doorstep.”

Algren had kept his silence for a while, but once he was stripped of his title, he resigned himself to his fate and began his official confession. Now we could put all our focus into the revocation of rights.

Having said that, two of the Big Four had already been stripped of their titles. The only two dukes who remained were Lord Philip’s father, Duke Gilbert, and Duke Merhide. As a result, the effects of the reform would be much smaller than originally expected, but it would still change the laws for the first time since Elshaid’s founding.

It was no exaggeration to say the wheels of history were turning.

“So, Eric, is your dream gonna come true now?”

“No, Lingsha. My dream is just beginning.”

“Your Highness, I am more than capable of handling monsters of that caliber on my own.”

While I erected barriers as part of my saintly duties, Eric was destroying a fair number of monsters beside me. If an outsider saw us, they wouldn't know which of us was the bodyguard. No matter how many times I told him not to, Eric still protected me.

"I've been a bit out of shape recently. If I don't move my body, I'll put on weight. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd rather you be fat than hurt."

"Oh, I'll be fine. I won't get hurt, and even if I do, I have a saint here to heal me."

With a swing of his sword, blood gushed out of another monster as it died. He had annihilated so many in the blink of an eye. I was always impressed by the carefree nature of his swordplay.

Wiping the blood off his sword, Eric took on a formal tone and said, "Leia, I have three things to tell you today."

"Really, Your Highness?"

What could it be? If he had something to tell me, why didn't he just do it back at his study?

"The first thing I have to tell you is what is to become of Jill Westoria. We are going to send her to a convent, as per her wishes. She should be able to leave the dungeon after a while."

"Is that so? Well, that's wonderful news. Thank you for your clemency."

"It's Dale you should thank. He reawakened the fragments of good she still had in her soul."

Truth be told, I never wanted Jill to be punished. But there was no telling what would have happened to her if the prince hadn't intervened. Even if she was spared an execution, she might have spent decades rotting in that dungeon.

"She said she wanted to find herself while serving God and to start over."

“I’m surprised to hear how gentle she’s become. It’s like she’s a whole different person.”

It felt like a miracle; I had given up hope that Jill would apologize. I wouldn’t put all the blame on Catherine’s lies, but I felt that Jill’s mother had sinned the most.

“Now, the second thing I want to tell you: From this case, I have judged you to be a perfect saint, Leia. Starting tomorrow, you will no longer be under my observation.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve known for quite some time now that you are a gifted saint. I just thought I should tell you that before you resigned as my bodyguard.”

Now all my reasons for being near Prince Eric were gone. I was going to miss him. It was the unbridled truth. All of my life’s most joyful moments were with him.

“And lastly, the third thing I want to tell you—”

“Yes?”

The last thing. He told me about Jill’s fate and that I had earned his respect as a saint, what could he possibly have left to tell me?

Eric turned to face me directly. He closed his eyes for a moment, then he looked straight into mine. It might have been my imagination, but he looked nervous.

“Leia Westoria, will you marry me?”

“Uhh? What?!”

I was astounded. It was the last thing I ever expected him to say.

My heart was beating so fast that it felt like it was going to burst. Just the feel of his gaze on me made my blood burn so hot that I felt like I would melt.

What should I do? I’m making the most dreadful expression right now, I just

know it.

I couldn't decide how to answer him. Yet my lips moved on their own.

"Yes...I'd love to marry you."

"Thank you... Actually, I was a little scared that you'd turn me down."

Before I realized where I was, I had just said yes to Eric's proposal. But I had no reason to say no.

Does this mean I'm Eric's fiancée now? My heart is pounding—but in a good way. My veins are pumping pure joy!

It was no exaggeration to say our first meeting was a disaster. Eric jumped to the conclusion that I was a terrible saint. He came at me, and I thought he was terribly ill-mannered. I couldn't deny that fact.

But the more I got to know this man, the more I realized just how purehearted and devoted he was. My forgiveness wasn't enough for him. He took responsibility for his actions and made amends by watching me hard at work as a saint. He respected me more than anyone ever had.

"This time, I want you to be the judge of whether or not I'm worthy of kingship. I want your approval, Leia, more than anyone else."

"And I will watch over you always, if you'll let me stay by your side."

Our feelings for each other now known, Prince Eric threw his arms around me. I could feel his love through the embrace. I knew then that no matter what came our way, I would never leave Eric's side.

I had no fear, no matter what obstacles lay in our path. As I quietly took in my prince's warmth, my mind danced with visions of the path we would walk together in the future.



Side Story 1: After the Suspension

ARGH... WHAT A HORRIFIC BLUNDER. That I should be so easily forgiven for letting a ruffian sneak into the palace.

Prince Eric had dueled Sir Alfred to get me a place in His Majesty's royal guard, and now I'd gone and destroyed his reputation. This might be the first time in my life that I felt so terribly guilty. I had pride in the fact that I was Prince Eric's right-hand man, and with that pride came the confidence that I would never betray his expectations. I had managed to protect him with my life thus far, no matter what challenges came my way, and I fully intended to do the same and put my life on the line to protect His Majesty.

"And now I'm suspended..."

Barely after I began my new post, I made a critical error. I failed to catch an intruder before Duke Algren's mercenary company. It was inexcusable—a fatal mistake.

Prince Eric, I couldn't bring myself to look you in the eye. You trusted me, yet I betrayed that trust in front of so many people. I am consumed with regret. I can't face you. Perhaps I should resign.

But Prince Eric and I had exchanged a vow when we were young: "Johann, promise me we'll always be together."

I swore to be his right-hand man, believing that the day would come when this kingdom would change for the better by his power.

"If I resign now, I'll break that promise, won't I, Your Highness..."

It was humiliating, disgracing myself so, but if I let that break me, I would only betray Prince Eric's trust a second time. Therefore, there was only one thing I could do: wait for the opportunity to restore my honor and do something truly

useful for His Highness.

“Perhaps I should exercise. I mustn’t let my muscles atrophy. You never know when danger will strike.”

I could always train, even in my home. I would make my already large body even larger.

I started with squats. Then pushups and crunches—I tripled my usual regimen. I did it all in service of His Highness’s dream...

Your Highness, I won’t break so easily. I am ready and waiting to carry out your next command.

“Johann, it stinks in here. Make sure you ventilate, yes?”

“Agh, Lady Lingsha. Do forgive me.”

Since I had nothing else to do during my suspension, I spent the whole day exercising. And Lingsha had just entered my home, pinching her nose and scowling. Apparently, working up a sweat was making me rather pungent. Perhaps it was a bad idea to close the windows to build up my tolerance to the summer heat.

“You’d better beg for forgiveness, oh yes. I heard you’re supposed to sit still and do nothing when you’re under house arrest. Johann, have you sat still?”

“Er, well I...I’m so ashamed.”

As I felt the weight of Lingsha’s scolding, I quickly opened a window.

Ahh, the fresh air felt nice.

Lingsha was once put under house arrest as well. If I remembered correctly, it was because she got too violent in the pursuit of defeating assassins that were after His Highness. I recall scolding her then—I had told her she must sit still and reflect during her confinement.

And now look at me. I didn’t blame Lady Lingsha for being cross.

“By the way, what brings you here?” I asked her. “I hope the prince isn’t in danger?!”

“Nooo. Eric’s fine, oh yes. Hey, Johann, don’t change clothes in front of a lady. It’s improper.”

“S-sorry. Ah, good, so His Highness is safe...”

I decided to change clothes because I was concerned about the smell, but that only made Lingsha yell at me again. I’ve only ever thought of her as my coworker, but she was originally a princess of the Ren Empire.

What a careless way for me to act. I must be more mindful.

“Eric says he has a job for you. Your suspension ends today.”

“What?! Is that true?! Lady Lingsha!”

It’s finally here! My big opportunity to clear my name and regain my honor! No, wait, this day isn’t just for me. Prince Eric’s honor is riding on this as well.

After all this time, at last, my house arrest was lifted, and His Highness had a task for me. We were unmistakably close to the end of this battle—there was a ninety percent chance our enemy was Duke Algren.

“Yup! Eric said it was something only Johann could do, oh yes! This letter’s from him!”

“A letter from His Highness...”

The contents of the letter that Lady Lingsha handed to me were exactly what I’d expected: We were about to have our final confrontation with Duke Algren. In other words, we were going to lure him into a trap. His Highness wanted me to capture some assassins we were certain Duke Algren was going to send. Prince Eric deduced that Duke Algren had additional assassins separate from his mercenary company.

We were of the same mind on that matter.

If you assumed the premise that Duke Algren had hired the intruder that

caused my house arrest, it was almost certain that he had other minions lying in wait. If Duke Algrenе really wanted to take His Majesty's life, his plot had to be quite thorough. He would probably station assassins at the ready near the ice cream parlor.

"He told me to help you, Johann, so I will, oh yes. I'll blast 'em all away!"

"Indeed. Your aid is much appreciated!"

I spread out a map to find possible locations for the assassins.

The ice cream parlor was located in a flourishing restaurant district in the royal capital. There were many places where assassins could hide; this task was going to be more difficult than I imagined.

"Hee hee hee—oh, but the harder the job, the more my arms tingle."

"Johann, you sure look excited."

At last, I could serve my prince. Just the thought of it made my heart dance.

You're in good hands, Your Highness. Your Johann Olbrun will not let you down this time.

Side Story 2: A Day of Just Rewards

WHEN SHE BECAME my older brother's bodyguard, I cursed Fate. But no matter how bitter I felt, the hands of time could not move backward. As I watched the pair fall for each other so naturally, I decided to watch over Eric and Leia from a distance.

I had my chance. If only I had approached her just after the saint exams, I might have had a different future. But that wish was no longer in my reach.

Though I couldn't be with my first love, I wanted her to be happy. Barely had I resigned myself to my fate when tragedy struck.

Jade Berklein brainwashed Jill Westoria into nearly poisoning Leia, her sister. Brainwashing aside, Leia's own flesh and blood had tried to kill her. I couldn't imagine how much that had broken her heart.

No matter what sort of twisted words that monster Berklein had used to seduce her, how could Jill have possibly gotten it into her head to kill her sister? I couldn't understand it one bit. But even though her sister had tried to kill her, Leia didn't want Jill to receive a harsh sentence. Leia's wishes would probably be honored, and her sister's life would be spared.

But was that really for the best?

Jill still refused to own up to her crimes. She kept insisting everything was Leia's fault. The least Jill could do was acknowledge how she had hurt Leia and give her a heartfelt apology—that's what I believed.

My relationship with my brother wasn't one that could be called normal. Since the decision to keep my distance from him was made by me alone, I was in no place to complain, but it still saddened me to see the gulf between us grow wider.

I guessed that the gulf between Leia and Jill was wider still. It was a thought that haunted me.

That's why I decided to meet with Jill, to get her to confront her sins. I was meddling, and maybe Leia did not want that at all, but it was the least I could do for the woman I loved.

Time passed, and everything was resolved. My brother saw through Duke Algren's plot, and he and Leia captured all his assassins and sent them to the dungeon. Leia thanked me for sparing Jill from a death sentence and for helping to mend their relationship.

I was so proud that she had a bright future together with my brother. Yet, even though the future I had hoped for had manifested, the dull pain that lingered in my heart tormented me.

"Prince Dale, you're off to an early start today, I see."

"Likewise, Miss Leia. Out for an early day of saintly work?"

Since I had woken up oddly early that morning, I was out walking in the palace garden when I crossed paths with Leia. I had already heard the news, news I had mentally prepared myself for since the day I decided to watch over her from afar.

"Yes. I need to go erect my barriers a bit farther away from my usual spot today."

"And my brother will accompany you, I presume?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Eric told me he no longer had a reason to observe me..."

When I heard her refer to my brother without any titles or honorifics, an odd twinge of pain shot through my heart. I was so close to her right now, yet she felt so remote, as though no matter how far I reached out, I could never touch her.

"I see... Well, congratulations on your engagement. Sorry I took so long to say

so.”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry too—we were going to make a formal announcement, but things got delayed.”

That’s right. She and my brother were engaged. I knew it was a happy occasion. And I was happy for them, deep down. But I wasn’t a big enough person to fully accept the news. I put on a smile anyway. I was used to doing that, but I couldn’t remember a day where I struggled harder.

“Take good care of my brother for me.”

“I will. I promise I’ll make sure he doesn’t do anything too reckless.”

This was for the best. I needed to shut my feelings away before anybody noticed them.

I didn’t feel like keeping the smile on my face and extending our conversation, so I politely said goodbye to her and headed back into the garden.

“Um—wait! Prince Dale!”

“Miss Leia?”

I had turned my back and only taken a few steps when she ran up to me and stopped before my eyes. There before me stood the determined face I had fallen in love with so long ago.

“Prince Dale...I really appreciate how kind you’ve been. Especially with Jill. I know you worked on her in a way that wouldn’t upset me. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Oh, I didn’t do much.”

“No, Your Highness, I will never forget your kindness as long as I live. I will always, *always* be in your debt.”

This took my breath away.

Your words make everything worth it, Miss Leia.

I would always have a place in the heart of the woman I loved. I wasn’t

expecting anything in return, but it was the greatest honor I could imagine. The pain in the bottom of my heart faded. I couldn't let myself become rooted in place—Elshaid was about to change dramatically.

The kingdom my brother and Leia loved was every bit as precious to me.

"I don't deserve your thanks. By the way, may I have dinner with you and my brother soon? I'd love to celebrate with you."

"Your Highness... Yes, I would love that! I'm sure Eric will too!"

Her sweet smile revealed a divinity in her befitting her sainthood.

Thank you. I'm so grateful my first love was you, Leia. I wish you all the happiness.

Afterword

First of all, thank you for buying Volume 2. I am overjoyed that this series has made its way into the hands of readers again. This time, I progressed the relationship of Leia and Eric while also putting the spotlight on Dale.

When I saw Haduki Futaba-sama's design of Dale in the illustrations of Volume 1, I thought to myself, "No way can I leave this guy in the background," so I wound up changing the story completely from the version I was writing for *Shousetsuka ni Narou* and made it a tale of unrequited romance and brotherly love.

As a result, I had Dale sneaking around in the shadows, which made this a really fun story to write, and I'm very satisfied with it.

Will Eric and Leia get married without a hitch? That is going to be the focus of the next book. It is my dearest hope that you all read it, so I humbly appreciate your continuing support.

Lastly, I must thank my editor, who gave me all sorts of encouraging words regarding the writing of Volume 2, I must thank Futaba-sama, who continued to draw illustrations even more beautiful and charming than Volume 1, and I offer my sincerest thanks to everyone involved in this book.

Well, let me wrap up this volume by saying I look forward to the day we meet again!

—Fuyutsuki Koki



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