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*The
Strongest
Knight is
Actually a
Cross-Dressing
Noblewoman?!*

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The Strongest Knight is Actually a Cross-Dressing Noblewoman?!

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The Strongest Knight is Actually a Cross-Dressing Noblewoman?!

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Prologue: The Solar Fire Knight and the Lunar Ice Knight

REGENBOGEN Kingdom.

A sword dance to celebrate the new year and the start of the social season was being held in a coliseum near the royal palace.

The performers—two of the kingdom’s most recognizable knights, military academy students both. Though still officer trainees, they were referred to as knights in accordance with tradition.

The one with short, fiery red hair was Felzen von Vulkan, better known as the Solar Fire Knight. Glistening bronze skin; exotic, finely chiseled facial features; eyes that blazed red like the sun; a muscular physique fitted over a roughly six-foot-two body... It was little wonder why he was considered a model warrior.

The one with long, blue hair in a ponytail, on the other hand, was Bernstein von Eisberk—the Lunar Ice Knight. Skin pale like the moon, a face like that of a beautiful ice sculpture, deep sea blue eyes that shimmered softly. His build was slim but not so slim as to cast doubt on his martial prowess. Androgynous though he was, his impeccable mannerisms and overall demeanor made him a knight more than worthy of the title.

In the heart of the coliseum, clad in ceremonial dress, the two put on a most elegant sword dance.

Their swords gave off a bright glow. Felzen’s was wreathed in flame while Bernstein’s was sheathed in ice.

The sharp whistle of steel slicing through the air, glimpses of limbs flashing underneath fluttering cloaks. Their gazes locked, breaths in sync, the two’s swords met.

The fire blade struck the ice blade. Dislodged chunks of ice turned to dust as they crumbled to the ground. The ice blade swung right back. Steam rose from the fire blade then quickly dispersed.

The stunning bladework, the excellent exchange of magic utterly captivated the audience.

“Frohes Neues Jahr!”

The two wished all assembled a joyful new year in an ancient ritual prayer. The audience responded in kind, their cheers echoing throughout the stadium.

The opponents spun their swords, facing one another, before simultaneously sheathing them. Interestingly enough, both the flames and the ice gradually vanished from the point down as the blades plunged into their respective scabbards.

The stands erupted, many spectators waving red and blue folding fans. Daughters of nobility had brought them to signal support for their knight of choice. There were also those who sported purple fans, conveying an equal preference for both.

“Virile as ever, my beloved Solar Fire Knight!”

“My, what a most elegant performance from the Lunar Ice Knight.”

“It’s when you put the two together that they really shine.”

“I suppose so...”

“The Fire Knight’s vigor brings out the Ice Knight’s grace.”

“While the Ice Knight’s more ethereal nature highlights the Fire Knight’s ferociousness!”

Their sighs filled the coliseum.

What none of them knew, however, was that Bernstein von Eisberk, otherwise known as the Lunar Ice Knight, was actually the *daughter* of a marquess—actually a woman.

Chapter 1: The Daughter in Disguise

IN a coliseum in Neue Milchstrasse—Regenbogen’s royal capital—our blades danced in commemoration of the beginning year and social season.

“Frohes Neues Jahr!” we shouted to the crowd, concluding the ceremony with the traditional blessing.

My ponytail bounced from side to side as I gently shook my head. I glanced over at my sword dance partner and childhood friend Felzen as he ruffled his fiery red hair.

This is what gets the ladies cheering.

I felt a sigh welling up, as was also tradition. Noticing my expression, Felzen tossed a smile my way. We stepped together, shoulder to shoulder, to face the stands, congratulating each other while the stadium roared with applause.



I’M Bernstein von Eisberk, a seventeen-year-old second year at the military academy. I also serve as a knight to the kingdom—those who enroll at the academy, after first finishing military prep school, are referred to as knights in Regenbogen. In prep school, boys ages thirteen to fifteen train to become soldiers. At sixteen, graduates who seek to rank up to officer attend the military academy, a boarding school, as officer trainees. The title of *knight* is meant to represent and encourage the aspiration to become more than a trainee.

I come from a noble family with a long history of involvement in military affairs. That said, Father, though a marquess, currently serves as personal staff under the marshal and has no official position in the royal court. In other words, while our standing is high, our authority is nonexistent.

In contrast, Felzen, a childhood friend of mine and fellow knight, is nobility among nobility: son to the marshal and just under six foot two with gleaming bronze skin and a well put-together face. Brazen, yet surprisingly pleasant to be

around. The ladies simply adore him.

Our fathers, both marquesses, endearingly nicknamed “the kingdom’s finest,” were close friends, so Felzen and I grew up not unlike family. We’ve studied, trained, and goofed off together for as long as I can remember.



WE had just finished our performance.

Felzen and I returned to the changing room. We lined up in front of a mirror, our reflections’ eyes meeting.

A smile crept its way up my face. “Fan favorite as usual, I see.”

“You say that as if a good chunk of them weren’t cheering *you* on.” Felzen smirked. “They even changed the color of their fans, in case you didn’t notice.”

“They did?”

“Red and blue, like the colors of our hair.”

The red and blue fans were rather hard to miss, come to think of it.

“And the purple ones?” I asked.

“What color do red and blue make?”

“Lively bunch, aren’t they?”

We chuckled.

“I’mma hit the showers first.”

I watched Felzen enter the shower stall per our normal routine, then undid my ponytail and splashed water over my sweaty face. Reflected in the mirror were my deep blue hair and frosty eyes.

“Done,” Felzen said to my back, finishing his shower in a few quick minutes.

“Thanks as always.”

Felzen snorted at my response.

There was, of course, more than one shower. The reason I didn’t use the others regardless of that fact was so Felzen could stand guard while I bathed.

I ducked into the stall and turned the faucet. A stream of warm water ran across my body. Despite identical training regimes, my muscles never became quite as big as Felzen's. Waterdrops trickled down my lacking yet distinctly unmanlike chest.

Yes, I, Bernstein von Eisberk, an all-boys military academy student, was a woman who cross-dressed as a man to conceal my true identity.

My father and head of the family, Zilber von Eisberk, was both a marquess and a margrave. My mother's name was Iris. I had two siblings: Elfenbein, my older brother by seven years, and Lilia, my older sister by two years.

The remote region of Eisberk, north of the royal capital, was our territory. A range of mountains bordered the province to the north; west was the sea; east was a Vulkan enclave within our land, tiny though it was; and south, separated from our land by a small forest and large river, was the royal capital.

One of the reasons my disguise worked as well as it did was my uncanny resemblance to my father. We both had straight, midnight-blue hair and eyes. His characteristic appearance even got him nicknamed "the Icy Advisor." Yet my brother had light blue, gossamer hair and Mother's paler eyes. *Lucky*.

Perhaps it was what I deserved for riding horseback in culottes (they're easier to maneuver in) with my hair in a ponytail (which gets in the way otherwise). Why else would I be confused for the opposite sex? My boyish face probably didn't help matters, though.

Neither did me matching the average male's height at five foot seven, nor did my square shoulders or meager chest that appeared no different from a man's when flattened with a binder. The fact that I needed the right wardrobe to properly resemble a woman irked me to no end.

The second crucial reason was that my sex was legally listed as male, which was my father's doing and not mine.

House Eisberk was historically predominantly male. The few women that did crop up were feeble to the point that living to maturity was the exception. Everyone had been wildly excited when Mother gave birth to Lilia—the first girl in a hundred-odd years. She too, however, suffered an extremely weak constitution.

I was born two years later on the brink of death. No one thought I'd make it long. That's when Father, either out of resignation or as a last resort, gave me a boy's name and had me baptized as one. I was officially documented as male as a result.

And because of that or maybe something else entirely, I made a miraculous recovery.

Thank you, Father. Because of you I get to live yet another wonderful, disease-free day!

Our household had little experience with raising girls; concepts such as political marriage might as well not have existed. As such, I was brought up rather liberally.

Eisberk had long been renowned for its fine horses, and our tradition of husbandry carried on to this day. Father was often called the "shut-in marquess" for spending most of any given year preoccupied with our demesne, or so my brother once told me. Everyone in the family was something of a free soul, perhaps a carryover from our pastoral roots.

While I was taught basic etiquette and manners, I never actually had to act noble in Eisberk. It didn't make much sense to, seeing as we were the only gentry in the territory. And the commonfolk, also descendants of nomadic tribes, were meritocratic by and large: if you couldn't ride a horse, you would be treated as a child, lord's daughter or not.

It's a tough world out there.

Growing up surrounded by horses, I naturally learned how to ride one. I honed my swordsmanship alongside my brother, who was striving toward knighthood. I also shared my love of flowers and sweets with my sister and enjoyed playing dress-up.

I wasn't told to act a certain way because I was this or that. The servants addressed me by name and not some formal title. That was probably a big contributor to why I didn't really recognize gender.

I was me and no one else. I did what I wanted; I got what I wanted. Perhaps not all too surprising considering I was the daughter of a marquess. Or maybe it

was youngest-child privilege at work. Either way, I romped around in my underwear outside and favored pretty dresses inside. I thought that was the norm, although I've since become convinced that my family simply had no idea how to raise a girl.

Setting that aside as an unfortunate inevitability (was it?), I became a knight because I inadvertently got into military prep school.

In prep school, boys learned the basics of being a soldier. Yes, only boys were allowed entry. By extension, only boys could attend the military academy and only boys could be knights.

As for why I had gotten into a supposedly all-boys school, it basically came down to placing highly in a junior sword fighting tournament that Felzen invited me to. It was during the tournament that I had a life-changing encounter with Second Prince Sternchen von Milchstrasse.

I fought the disguised prince and, regrettably enough, lost. My fighting prowess seemed to have caught his eye, however. That, coupled with the fact that he and Felzen were childhood friends, led to my invitation to the royal palace. We became fast friends, eventually referring to one another as Bern and Stern.

At some point we began talking about how fun it'd be if we could go to military prep school together, as we were all the same age. When I passed the entrance exams, my first thought was that the prince's authority could even get me, a girl, through, but no, I had been admitted as a boy. I was, after all, officially male—a rather disappointing realization.

It was around then that I learned Stern still thought I was a guy. I hadn't intended to hide being a girl or anything; he'd just never asked me my gender, so I'd figured he already knew.

There was also the fact that no one tried stopping me. Not Father, nor Mother, nor even my brother. On the contrary, they celebrated my acceptance.

Father told me he'd have my back no matter what. My brother had been standing close behind, tapping his chest with a smile.

Something's off about this picture, right?

Mother had grabbed me by the hand and assured me that I was free to live my life however I liked.

Thirteen-year-old me was, of course, over the moon. I liked swords, bows, and horse-riding. I admired my brother and father's work. If there was a path to female knighthood, I would walk it.

Above all, I wanted to spend more time with Stern and Felzen.

And that was that.

No one besides the people of Eisberk and Felzen's family knew that I was a woman, not even the king or the other princes. Why? Because girls weren't allowed into the military academy. Girls couldn't be knights. If my true gender was found out, I'd no doubt be expelled.

That would ideally all change by the time I graduated, but unfortunately, my family didn't have the power to enact such an important reform themselves. They were, however, considering founding an all-female cavalry unit within Eisberk. In fact, they'd recently begun training potential candidates to that very end.

In any case, I wanted to be a knight but didn't wish to throw away my womanhood entirely (not that I particularly cared about it). Nor had my family ever instructed me to live as a man.

I liked dresses, I liked flowers, I liked pretty-looking things. Embroidery and other handicrafts weren't really my cup of tea, but I did have a sweet tooth. I also enjoyed horseback riding, swords, playing outside, and gorging on meat. That was how I lived my life.

I didn't know much about love, but I wasn't especially into girls. I wasn't so sure about guys either.



FELZEN began fanning my back as I vigorously dried my hair with a towel. "You lack self-awareness even for a washing board. Don't forget, you're still more or less a woman."

"More or less? I am a woman!"

“The women I know carry more cake.”

“Well, sorry for being flat!”

“There’re guys into that kinda thing, you know. Wouldn’t want them catching you buck naked, now would we?”

“I trust you’ll make quick work of them. I’m only this vulnerable around you, Felzen.”

He froze for a moment, his cheeks turning pink, then chuckled. “Your adoring fans would lose it if they found out. Sir Ice Knight’s main appeal is his ‘coolness’, after all.”

“You know full well I never intended to deceive anyone. What they call a ‘fiery temper’ I call being a brat, Sir Fire Knight,” I shot back, only to be ignored.

“Still can’t believe your father had you baptized as a boy. Even your level of tomboy couldn’t have gotten you into the military academy, had he not.”

“You can say that again. Even I didn’t think I’d be a knight one day.”

“Yet here you are, a knight of idol status among high society,” sniggered Felzen.

It’s not like I ever wished for any of this.

I shrugged. “I’ll retreat back to Eisberk when the time comes.”

“What? Got a fiancé waiting back home for you?”

“As if! I’ll probably end up leading the female cavalry unit. That or raising horses.” Our family provided horses to the royal palace.

Felzen laughed. “How...*you*.”

“Half of this is your fault, in case you need a reminder!”

“Huh? What do I have to do with anything?!”

I shot Felzen an angry glare. He threw his hands up in defeat.

It was then that the door suddenly flew open. Felzen quickly jumped to his feet. I scrambled to put my shirt on as I took cover behind his large back.

“Stern!” Felzen exclaimed.



It was none other than Second Prince Sternchen von Milchstrasse—the Radiant Light Knight.

“Brilliant performance, both of you!” he said, briskly waltzing inside.

I hastily buttoned up my top and gathered my hair in a ponytail.

“Have you heard of knocking?” Felzen blurted out.

Stern smiled, seemingly confused by Felzen’s words. “Why would I?” He tilted his head in a rather obnoxious manner. “I don’t see anyone else in here?”

A devil in angel’s clothing...

Stern had lustrous, golden hair and glowing amber eyes. He didn’t just look beautiful; he sounded beautiful as well. A true prince charming if there ever was one.

Personality-wise, he was somewhat airheaded—carefree and harmless yet surprisingly unprincelike given how overbearing he could be at times. Only a few select individuals knew that side of him, and being one of them made me incredibly happy.

“I could watch you two dance for hours on end.”

“Thanks.” Words of praise coming from someone as strong as Stern meant a lot to me.

“Also, did you notice how the stands were painted red and blue?” he asked, grinning. “Fan favorites as usual. My sister’s was purple, by the way.”

My soul left my body. “Princess Marlena...”

“And Lilia’s was blue.”

“E-Et tu, Lilia?” I felt a headache setting in.

“You’ll be attending today’s soiree, yes?” He grinned. “Can’t wait.”

I pouted. “I’m sure you can’t.”

“Why, it’s only natural for me, a prince, to get all the ladies.” He snorted.

This is why I can’t stand you attractive people. “You being a prince has nothing to with it!”

His eyes widened at my offhand remark.

Have you no self-awareness? You're the worst.

Although he was a childhood friend of mine, Stern didn't know I was a woman. If he had, he never could have let a relationship like ours slide. The revelation of my gender would only needlessly burden him, so a secret it would remain.

How did it come to this? I'd never intended to deceive anyone, nor did I have the desire or will to live as a man.

I let out a faint sigh.

Nothing seems to go my way.

Chapter 2: The New Year's Ball

THE sword dance was followed by a ball. Held by the royal family, it marked the start of the social season. Its first half also functioned as a coming-out party where newly adult nobles made their debut in high society. The debutantes, clad in white, were the picture of innocence.

The biggest ball of the year. I sighed at the thought of the long, tortuous hours ahead of me. Social gatherings were my bane. I couldn't risk standing out, nor did I want to.

I observed the debutantes twirl as I escorted my lovely sister. I wore a tailcoat instead of my usual uniform. My sister's platinum blonde hair cascaded over her light pink gown, outshone only by a smile that would give any princess a run for her money.

What else is there to say besides she's gorgeous, a true Madonna even.

Men in the vicinity were captivated, their eyes glued to her. She was the main character and I merely a supporting one.

Protecting her from said men was my duty, or so my overprotective brother and father had told me. The occasion was, however, a ball—a place to schmooze and, to a degree, scout out potential matches.

Attending the event in male clothes felt...off. Then again, it wasn't like I had anyone in mind, nor was I in a position to even think about romantic matters. The real shame was that the outfit made grabbing from the wide selection of desserts on display much more ostentatious than it would've been otherwise. I'd have been lying if I said that all the flashy dresses didn't make me feel ever so slightly jealous.

This feeling of "I don't belong here, when can I go home?" is perfectly normal, right? Right? I thought as I positioned myself near a wall. I *really* didn't want to stand out, in case that wasn't abundantly clear.

The music stopped, and the ring of people dancing in the center of the hall

parted, Princess Marlana emerging from within. Princess Marlana was, of course, Stern's little sister and the kingdom's only princess.

Can you please not come straight toward us? I'm trying to blend in!

"You look beautiful, Lilia," she said to my sister, all smiles.

Lilia curtsied, gracefully lifting her skirts. "Thank you for having me."

"Your dancing was gorgeous, Bern."

"I appreciate the kind words, Princess Marlana," my public persona replied.

"I brought a purple fan, you know!" she cheerily proclaimed.

I suppressed a wry smile. Princess Marlana was a trend-savvy fifteen-year-old, inquisitive and peppy for a princess. Each of her astonishingly many facial expressions was simply adorable. "Purple, you say?"

"Yes! Purple represents my heartfelt wish for you two to be happy together!"

"I-I see." *What is she going on about?*

"I went with a blue one myself," said Lilia, smiling softly.

"Blue?"

"Bern's happiness is my primary concern, after all."

Is it just me, or did she do the Eisberk's signature frosty smile right there? Probably just me. I hope.

"What are you pretty ladies doing over there?" resounded a voice from across the hall.

I turned toward it only to see the one and only Solar Fire Knight grinning at us.

I'm trying to blend in!

I looked away, sighing.

"A bit cruel to be hogging them all to yourself, don't you think, Bern?"

"I do, actually. Good thing you're here to right this injustice."

"That I am, and what better way to start than with a dance. What say you, Lady Lilia?" requested Felzen politely, as befitting a gentleman.

Lilia took his hand, smiling gently. “I’d be more than delighted.”

And just like that, they wended their way into the now-colorful dance circle. Felzen’s fiery red hair stood out amid the crowd, the contrast with his dark tailcoat making it gleam even brighter. Felzen’s brawn highlighted Lilia’s delicacy. The two complemented each other so nicely, I couldn’t help but smile.

He’d be the perfect husband for Lilia if he weren’t quite so cavalier.

“Aren’t you going to invite anyone?” Princess Marlena asked, her light brown eyes brimming with curiosity.

I didn’t feel like getting to know any debutante in particular, so I’d avoided taking the initiative. I acted indifferent toward other women to not get their hopes up—a big reason I was considered “cold,” but what else could I do?

Even so, I didn’t want to cause anyone to lose face. Girls were, well, cute, and I felt compelled to be nice to them.

“I was just about to, but my nerves got the better of me, apologies. Care for a dance, Princess?” I said, offering her my hand.

Princess Marlena’s eyes widened, her cheeks blushing pink. “I-I didn’t mean it like that...”

“I understand completely, though I still ask that you grant me the honor.”

“The honor’s all mine,” she said, placing her hand in mine.

After a lap around the ballroom with Princess Marlena, I returned to my spot beside the wall. Lilia, on the other hand, had nobles lining up to invite her for a dance the moment she and Felzen finished.

That’s my sister for you.

I watched them swarm Lilia, mentally noting their names and heritage to ascertain whether they were worthy of her company.

Stern approached me just as I brought a flute of champagne to my dehydrated lips.

What part of “I don’t want to stand out” do you not understand?!

“Another fine showing. How was Marlena?”

“Simply phenomenal. She managed to maintain a high level of composure rare for a debutante all throughout. Truly a performance befitting one of her rank,” I answered in a stereotypically debonair fashion, cuing a satisfied smile on Stern’s face.

“Felzen’s dancing with yet another lady, I see,” he commented.

“They don’t call him the hot-blooded knight for nothing,” I said, grinning wryly. Felzen’s relationships never really lasted. Any fiery ardor in his heart died out just as fast as it ignited.

“Rumor has it that you, the cool, independent knight, have finally found ‘the one.’”

“Did Princess Marlena tell you that?”

Stern smiled, refusing to speak further. His amber eyes lit up with a strange glow.

How underhanded for someone as angel-like as you! His gaze locked with mine as I struggled to respond. *Not fair.*

“No, I haven’t. I’m just...bad with women.” I couldn’t see them in a romantic light, but I didn’t want to hurt their feelings by rejecting their advances either.

“You and me both.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m also bad with women. Their psychotic stares tire me,” he said, glancing around. Numerous noblewomen were peering in our direction, their attention almost feverish in intensity. Being subjected to that, day in and day out, definitely didn’t seem like a pleasant experience.

“Sucks to be you, I guess,” I remarked.

“How cold.”

“It’s part of your job description, is it not?”

“And yours.”

“Eisberk has never been known for its sociability, nor am I the eldest child.”

“I’m not the crown prince either.”

“A prince nonetheless.”

“How mean.”

“You’re always welcome back here if you get tired,” I suggested, waving to the wall beside me.

“Not fair...”

“What is?”

“Lucky Marlana. I wanted to dance with you too.”

“Come on now.”

“Felzen got to!”

“It was a ceremonial sword dance,” I said dryly.

“Who cares about the details. I just want to dance with you.” He glared at me sulkily, and there was something lovable about his petulance. “Why do *you* get custom fans? So not fair!”

I sighed in resignation. “A fan colored for a prince would be improper.”

“Just imagine our colors mixing together to form green.”

“I’d rather not.” I couldn’t help but wonder if he understood the implication.

He pouted. “How very cold of you.”

“I don’t mind rehearsing a sword dance with you if you forget the fans.”

“What fans?”

“That’s the spirit. Good luck with your remaining princely duties.”

Stern leveled another quick glare at me before nabbing my champagne flute and promptly downing its contents.

“Hey!”

“Uh-uh-uh, you’re breaking character!” He winked, melding back into the crowd.

What a child, I thought, my shoulders sagging.

Once again, Felzen, a lady on each arm, started heading my way. I gave him

an angry stare. *Shoo, playboy, shoo! I don't need any more eyes on me!*

My telepathic signals appeared to have gotten through to him. Felzen parted with his companions, then snatched a handful of sweets and two flutes of pink champagne from a tray before continuing toward me.

"Here," he said, handing me the glass, "got you a new one."

These small gestures of his unnerved me. Just as I felt a craving set in, he had conveniently arrived bearing confectionary.

"You were watching?"

Felzen shrugged. "Bad time?"

"Could be worse. Find 'the one' yet?" Court gossip speculated that Felzen hopped from woman to woman in a quest to find the perfect partner.

"Does it bother you?"

"Oh, I'd just prefer you settle down before someone stabs you. I'd keep my hands off Lilia if I were you though."

"Complex, much?"

"Yes, and?"

I raised the champagne flute to my lips. The cold, bubbly, rosy liquid looked exquisite. I breathed a sigh of relief. Felzen had a knack for getting me exactly what I wanted when I wanted it.

"What was Prince Charming whining on about earlier?" Felzen grinned.

"Something about not getting a fan in his colors."

"You mean yellow? That's improper."

"He insisted on green."

"Green? What about orange?!"

I couldn't stifle my smile at the indignation in his voice. "Right, aren't you two closer?"

Felzen furrowed his brow. A running joke between us was that Felzen couldn't settle on anyone because he and Stern got along a little too well. I, for one,

found their relationship quite wholesome.

“What are you trying to say?” He snaked his arm around my shoulder, smirking. “You know I only have eyes for you, Bern.”

“You’re free to search for the one all you like,” I said, swatting his arm away. “But frivolity is only going to make you lose all credibility.”

“How cold of you,” he said, a sardonic smile on his face.

I found his reaction rather tone-deaf. *If you weren’t so insincere, I’d gladly recommend you to Lilia, but alas.*

The chandeliers twinkled behind Felzen’s towering frame. Jaunty tunes and boisterous laughter swirled through the air. The extravagant New Year’s Ball was swiftly coming to a close.



I returned to the dormitory after seeing Lilia off to our family’s town house. Felzen was already there, lazing around in loungewear.

“Aren’t you going to hang with one of your lady friends?” I asked.

“I get tired too sometimes.”

“Fair enough.”

I was beat too. I untied my hair, tossed off my jacket, and threw myself onto the sofa.

Felzen and I had been roommates since military prep school. I could reside in the dorms free of worry because I knew he always had my back. It was only in his presence that I could truly be myself.

“Whew, am I beat,” I remarked.

Felzen laughed. “All that standing around must have really done you in, Miss Wallflower.”

“Joke all you want. Doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like being asked to dance, nor would it do anyone any good to get too close. Blending in isn’t as easy as you think it is.” Attempting to become one with the wall while some of the biggest names in the kingdom approached back-to-back was anything but

easy.

“Uh-huh. Did anyone happen to catch your eye?”

“No, thankfully. Not like I could go out with her even if I wanted. Or take responsibility for any weird rumors that might or might not surface.”

“‘Her,’ huh.”

“Yes? Why would I ever hit on men in a tailcoat?” I laughed, removing my tie and undoing a couple of my shirt buttons. Felzen handed me a cup of warm milk, which he’d likely heated with his magic. “Thanks.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I took a sip, the not-too-overpowering sweetness of honey spreading through my mouth. *You playboys are something else.* “It’s delicious.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Felzen, sitting on the back of the sofa. “So, uhh, yeah. If you’re ever in need of advice, you can always just ask me.”

“Advice?”

“Like what to do if some lady asks you out or if you develop feelings for some dude.”

I snorted. “As if.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re at that kind of age.”

“Maybe, it’s just that I’m a little indifferent when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing?”

“I’m not interested in screwing another woman,” I said flatly.

“L-Language!” he squawked.

“Nor do I feel like screwing a man—”

“What did I just say?!”

“—and I don’t get why other women go crazy over you or Stern either.”

Felzen made an odd face. “Stern’s hot, what do you mean?”

“So are you,” I pointed out. *As if you needed me to tell you that.*

Felzen fell silent, his cheeks reddening.

I eyed him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m going to bed,” he announced.

“Nighty-night then.”

Felzen slunk over to our bunk bed. He slid into the bottom bunk and pulled the curtain shut behind him.



FELZEN and I met when we were five.

I was, of course, horseback riding that day. I could see more of the world while mounted, and its vastness never failed to excite me. Eisberk horses ran as fast as the wind; I could go anywhere I liked, even if it was a ways off.

The noisy rattling of a coach resounded from the forest road to the south. A brougham was making its way along the track from the direction of the royal capital. *Visitors*, I thought.

I rode up beside the carriage, a familiar family crest catching my eye. I saw someone waving from behind the curtains. I waved back, then immediately rushed home.

I needed to inform Father.

I quickly returned the horse to the stables before charging into the house. “Father! Uncle Vulkan’s coach is here!”

“They’re here already?”

“They’ve just made it through the forest.”

“So we still have some time. Go get dressed,” he said softly.

I nodded and barreled back to my room, prompting the old housekeeper to knit her brow at my unladylike conduct, an all-too-frequent occurrence.

“Is my favorite dress ready, Gran-Gran?”

“The light green one, yes? I’ll have it ready at once.” She smiled warmly. “A lacy bow to go with it, perhaps?”

“Yes, please! Tie it extra cute!”

I shrugged off my riding breeches and boots and tugged on my favorite frock. Gran-Gran untangled my hair, combing it gently. She braided the sides into a half updo, tying a light green bow above one of the decorative knots. I spun in front of the mirror to admire myself. *Looks good!*

I hurried to my brother’s room, rapped on the door, and quickly zoomed away again before he could open it. That was all the warning he needed.

I knocked on my sister’s door, letting myself inside. “Vulkan will be arriving soon, Lilia.”

“It’s about to get lively, I can feel it.” Her smile was like a flower in full bloom.

I pulled two chairs over to the window so Lilia, who was somewhat frail, could watch from inside. The extra was for Mother, who I knew would be coming to Lilia’s room shortly. “Talk to you later!”

Unable to contain my excitement, I dashed out into the garden. Obli, the sheepdog, ran up beside me. I couldn’t help but laugh at the noble little escort.

Two shadows fell over me as I was stroking his bushy, light brown fur. Father and Brother had appeared.

“Who’s this pretty lady?” teased Elfenbein, chuckling.

A military prep student, he spent most of his days in the royal capital, staying at our family’s town house. He had returned to Eisberk just the day before on autumn break.

“I liked your previous attire too,” Father said, chuckling much the same.

“I like both!” I liked dressing adorably *and* running around in breathable clothing.

“You look good in both.” Father grinned, placing a hand on my head. “Look who it is.”

The brougham pulled up right next to us. The coachman opened the door and Marquess Vulkan emerged from within. Tanned skin, burly chest, a faint scar from a sword cut on his left jaw—he was a field marshal who very much looked the part. A few stray grays peppered his red hair.

“Uncle Vulkan!”

“Bern, long time no see. Elfen, though, I remember seeing you in the capital.” He shifted his gaze to Lilia’s window. “She grows more beautiful every time I see her,” he added, waving.

Vulkan was an old friend of Father’s. It was an annual tradition of his to journey to Eisberk each autumn following the close of the social season. He’d stay till winter, hunting with my father and inspecting the Vulkan enclave. We didn’t get too many visitors from the royal capital, and I always looked forward to his kooky stories.

“Look who I brought,” he said as a seemingly younger bronze-skinned, fiery red-haired version of himself materialized from behind him.

“Wow, lucky! You’re going to get pretty pink hair too when you grow up!” I realized, delighted.

Everyone fell silent.

I looked around, unsure if I had said something I shouldn’t have. Vulkan was frozen in place, his face turning red. Father looked away, his shoulders shaking. Brother stared at me in awe.

Yes, yes you did!

The boy ducked his head, and his shoulders started to tremble. *Did I make him mad?*

I scrambled to explain myself: “I didn’t mean it like that! Just, Uncle Vulkan’s hair looks pink and so cute with all those gray hairs mixed in. I want pink hair too, but I know I’ll never have it...” I didn’t dislike blue hair, but pink hair was so pretty that I wouldn’t even have minded becoming an old lady to get it.

The boy burst out laughing. “I’ve never heard anyone use the word ‘cute’ when describing Father before!”

The rest of the assembly followed suit, guffawing heartily.

Was it really that funny?

“All right, you two,” Uncle Vulkan said, “go ahead, introduce yourselves.”

The boy performed a gentleman’s bow. “I’m Felzen von Vulkan. Five years of age,” he said formally.

“I’m Bernstein von Eisberk, same age as you.” I pinched the sides of my dress, curtsying.

“Bernstein?” Felzen’s large eyes grew yet larger. “*You’re* Bernstein?”

“Yes.”

“The one from earlier?”

“The one you saw outside your coach? Yes.”

“You’re not...a boy?”

I giggled. “You wouldn’t be the first to confuse me for one.”

Felzen blinked repeatedly. He bit his lip, dropping his gaze, his fists clenched tight.

I worried that I might’ve angered him.

“Could one...learn how to ride a horse, instantly?”

“You never know till you try.”

“And try I will!” he exclaimed. “Father, my mind is set!”

A satisfied smile appeared on Uncle Vulkan’s face. “Teach the boy, would you, Bern?”

I nodded vigorously.



BEING the same age, we became fast playmates.

I taught the city boy the joys of the outdoors, and he, in turn, schooled me in boardgames and the sword. I adopted Felzen’s casual manner of speech, and at some point he began calling me Bern.

By the time he was to return to the royal capital, Felzen could already go on long rides all by himself.

“When will you come visit?” he asked on the day of his departure.

“Hard to say, Father rarely ever travels outside of Eisberk.”

“Guess I’ll have to come to you then.”

“Guess so. I’ll be sure to stop by your place if I’m ever in the royal capital, though.”

“Promise?”

“Promise!”

And so we parted ways.

That was how I met and became friends with Felzen.

Chapter 3: The Solar Fire Knight Felzen von Vulkan

THE night grew darker.

The bunk above me creaked. It was Bern, tossing and turning in her bed.

They called me the Solar Fire Knight but I wasn't all that hot, truth be told, just some spineless coward who didn't have the guts to profess his feelings to the one he loved.

I quietly sighed. Above me slept the woman of my dreams, her mere presence causing my tiny heart to tremble.

We'd met at just five years old. I never imagined a person like her existed in the world. The emotions I felt wash over me were as vivid as they'd been back then.

She was my first love.



AT the end of the social season, which lasted all the way from January to September, Father would travel to Eisberk to hunt.

Father took socializing very seriously. He dragged me to all sorts of events, and it wore on me. Adult-only functions were tolerable enough, but gatherings that involved kids less so. Father, however, thought I'd feel more comfortable around other children, so he purposefully took me to events sure to have children in attendance whenever possible.

Father's fiery red hair and bronze skin were intimidating to most. Other kids were similarly intimidated by me, because I'd inherited said features. Whenever I did try to get along with them, they simply refused to leave the safety of their parents' shadows. The adults would chat with another while each kid found ways to entertain themselves and not interact with each other. Every single time.

"There's a kid your age in Eisberk," Father said. "I'm sure you two will find

something to do together.”

I shuddered, wondering how I’d avoid dying of boredom. It didn’t help that Eisberk was rural either.

Why does Father go there every year? It sounds so boring, was what I thought at the time.



I hopped into the brougham, a bleak journey ahead of me.

The closer we drew to Eisberk, the fewer people we saw, but the road was wide and well maintained. We crossed a large stone bridge. Then we passed through a forest, which was rumored to be infested with monsters. Finally, we were greeted by a vast, grassy field. Clouds skipped across the limitless sky, the autumn sun blinding.

Father informed me that the four-legged fuzzballs dotting the pastures were called sheep. Cows grazed peacefully amid the grass. Unbranded horses roamed in flocks. As I gazed out the window, breath held, a black horse cantered up beside our coach. Straddling it was a blue-haired boy.

He looks about my age, and yet he’s already riding!

Father grinned, ready to see me eat my words about our visit being a boring trip. “That’s Bernstein von Eisberk, one of Eisberk’s kids,” he said, waving. The boy waved back before turning his horse around.

Must be returning to his mansion, I thought.

Father had told me there’d be someone around my age, but he hadn’t mentioned that the kid could ride horses. I felt the corners of my lips raise in anticipation.

Upon our arrival, I was shocked to realize that Bernstein von Eisberk was, in fact, a girl.

Her light green dress was simple albeit charming. A bow adorned her soft blue hair. I never would’ve guessed she was anything more than a prim and proper young lady had I not seen her in her previous attire.

Then she described Father, who was feared by both young and old alike, as

“cute”. I was floored.

I enjoyed my time at Eisberk. Us kids spent a lot of it together, as Father was out hunting more often than not.

Bern, Elfenbein, and the stable hand taught me how to ride. Even as the others raced ahead, Bern would match my slow pace across the grasslands. I could see more from horseback. It was like a whole new world had just opened up before me.

Bern and I spied on the shepherd together, explored the forest together, played with local kids together. All of it felt fresh, exciting, and a little scary. I had never experienced anything like our adventures back in the royal capital.

Elfenbein agreed to a practice duel with me. He’d enrolled in military prep school earlier that year, and his skill with the blade was remarkable. Bern sulked considerably afterward, apparently bitter because she’d noticed that Elfenbein had gone harder on me than her.

Peeved, Bern asked me to teach her the sword, and so I did. She was tough and unlike any girl I knew. I was able to be myself around her; I didn’t have to put on a fake smile or carefully choose my words for fear of scaring her off.

In the evenings, we’d all enjoy rounds of cards, boardgames, and whatever else I’d brought from the capital. Lilia always absolutely demolished everyone in chess.

I fell asleep to the twinkling of stars and woke up to birdsong. I finally understood why Father made the trek to Eisberk year in and year out. Our family territory was known for its steel production and hot springs, abounding in nature yet pulsing with industry, or so Father often told me.

Father just wants a calm, quiet place to relax, I thought.



ONE morning after breakfast, Bern and I headed out to a nearby lake, Obli the collie accompanying us. Paring knives and half-finished wooden boomerangs hanging off our waists, we sprinted off in our least expensive clothes to meet up with Wolfe, a playmate who’d been teaching us how to whittle boomerangs. Wolfe was our little gang’s unofficial leader and three years older than us.

Water lapped gently at the shore. Eisberk's autumns passed quickly, and dying leaves floated on the lake's surface, forming a brocade. I plopped down on the ground and began shaving strips of wood from the boomerang with my knife, Wolfe anxiously observing my shoddy technique. Frustrating as it was to admit, it seemed using a toy and making one were two entirely different beasts.

I was getting there though, with only a few final adjustments left to go.

We threw, then shaved. Threw, then shaved, over and over. The other kids were just as serious about their work as I. After achieving our desired flight trajectories, we polished our boomerangs and applied finishing touches.

Looks good. I should polish it a little more and apply oil, but that can wait.

Boomerangs started flying through the air once more, and even Obli joined in on the fun, chasing after the projectiles.

Suddenly, a *kerplunk* echoed through the air, followed by a series of ripples spreading across the lake.

"Awww," the children exclaimed.

I'd thrown my boomerang with too much force, and it had landed in the lake, far out of reach.

A wave of sadness washed over me as I watched it float somberly on the water. It was the first thing I had ever made with my own two hands. I felt disappointed and resentful, and I wanted to retrieve it no matter the cost. Had one of my servants been present, I would've ordered them to fetch it at once.

I was not, however, in the royal capital.

I sensed the children's concern. They knew I wanted to go after it.

"We've been told not to go in the water because it's cold..." mumbled Wolfe awkwardly.

"It's deep, you'd have to swim there," a girl added.

If only it were summer, they probably would've swum out to get it for me. I bit down on my lip. *It's fine. So long as they understand my frustration, it's fine.* I didn't want to abandon the boomerang, but the fun would be over the moment I started complaining like the spoiled noble child I was.

“It’s cold, you say? Leave it to me!” Bern reached her hand into the water. “Just don’t tell anyone. Okay?”

“*Okay!*” the kids chorused, smiles appearing on their faces.

Bern held her hand out over the lake, and ice began to quietly creep across its surface.

My eyes widened. *Magic!*

Although many in our kingdom possessed magical power, few, and primarily nobles, were capable of actually wielding it. I, too, could use fire magic but had never seen Bern use her ability. Noble children were prohibited from performing acts of magic without adult supervision in addition to all sorts of other restrictions. I was no exception.

The kids’ eyes sparkled with anticipation as they watched a bridge of ice extend toward the boomerang. Once it reached its target, Bern sprinted across, refusing to give up my careful labor as wasted effort. She was rushing in to retrieve the feelings of pride and accomplishment that I, in my good boy act, had been about to leave behind.

Obli was barking incessantly, and a faint crackling noise put me on edge. “Bern! Get back here! That’s enough!” I shouted as Bern grabbed the frost-coated boomerang.

She turned, holding it glittering overhead.

A wall of water swelled up on either side of her path back to shore.

“Bern!” Wolfe yelled.

I ran toward her, the ice splintering underneath my every step. I tugged her toward me as the mass of water set itself upon the bridge.

“It’s the Lord of the Lake!” a petrified voice called out.

I quickly pulled out my dagger and imbued it with flames, wildly flailing at the encroaching deluge.

The bridge shattered with a loud cracking sound, and Bern tumbled into the water. I locked my arms around her midriff to pull her back up but was dragged in as well. To say that it was freezing would have been putting it mildly.

Bern had lost consciousness. My clothes were waterlogged and cumbersome, and Bern's body was a deadweight, her arms hanging limp. I had never held anything so heavy in my life. We were drowning. We were being swallowed whole.

I-I can't let Bern die!

I conjured an image in my head, one I never had before. Usually, I visualized my magic as sharp and daggerlike, but that wouldn't do under the circumstances.

I have to get this right!

I imagined an aura of heat surrounding me. *Fire is weak to water, but I should be able to at least warm it a little.*

Although I felt the lake's cold sting relent somewhat, I could see the Lord of the Lake stretching his watery hand toward us. *We're doomed!*

Or so I thought until his hand stopped abruptly, halting upon touching the warm water cocooning us.

He stared at us with black eyes, then gestured as if in farewell. A gentle surge of water rolled toward us, buoying us toward the shore.

Is he sending us off? I looked back in disbelief only to see the Lord of the Lake still waving at us.

The dying, red autumn leaves my only guide, I kicked upward, towing Bern in my arms. After much effort, I eventually crested the surface. The other kids, wading waist-deep in the cold water, helped drag us back onto dry land.

"Go Obli, go!" Wolfe yelled as I passed out.



NEXT thing I knew, I was in a bed in a warm room. Father looked at me, the tension in his face easing.

"Where's Bern?" I asked.

"She's sleeping," he replied curtly.

Several questions fought for my attention: What had happened after I passed

out? Had anyone gotten hurt? My whirling thoughts dissipated, however, when I noticed Father's expression.

I grasped the blanket, averting my gaze. "I apologize," I said, my tone contrite. "What I did was careless."

It really had been, especially for a noble. My life was more important than the other kids', no matter how much I liked to think of us as equals. One of Vulkan's children dying in Eisberk surrounded by commoners could have dire consequences, even if it were just an accident.

Father rested his hand on my head. "Everyone's safe and sound."

"They are?"

"Yes. Yes, they are," he affirmed. A tear rolled down my cheek. "Good," he said, and not a word more.

I'd thought he'd be angrier, and the fact that he wasn't made it hurt that much more.



SOMETIME later, I was informed that Bern had woken. I scrambled to her room as fast as I could. Her father was there at her bedside, as one would expect. Bern was sitting up, chewing her lip, her face pink.

"What timing. Have a seat, Felzen." Eisberk's frequent smile was nowhere to be seen. His eyes were deadly serious.

"Felzen had nothing—"

"Quiet. You have not been given permission to speak yet," he said, his voice cold.

Bern's entire body stiffened, as did mine. Even my father wasn't so intense. The contrast between the Eisberk before me and his usual, kind self was chilling. At that moment, I came to understand just how scary Eisberk could be.

"You too, Felzen." Eisberk smiled, looking pointedly at a nearby chair. His smile was soft but frigid. I timidly complied. "Obli alerted us to your predicament. No one was hurt." The tension in Bern's body eased. "The children claimed they were to blame."

“What? That’s—”

“Absurd? I can tell, Bern. I can tell what happened just by looking at you, but they didn’t say anything. They didn’t say anything about what you did. Instead, they apologized for not looking after you, hanging their heads and soaking wet from the waist down.”

Bern started bawling. It was the first time I had ever seen her cry. She didn’t cry when she took a hit in our sparring sessions, nor had she when she’d been bitten by an angry sheep or stung by a bee, yet tears were streaking down her face all the same.

The kids had kept their word, taking Bern’s half-joking remark to heart.

How? They were up against adults—and not just any adults, but nobles, lords. My chest felt so heavy I could barely breathe. My nose stung like I had just inhaled water. I felt more in pain than I had sinking to the bottom of the lake.

Eisberk smiled again, his gaze no longer quite as frosty. He gently rubbed my cheeks. “I see I’ve brought you to tears as well.”

It was only then that I realized I was crying. “I’m sorry,” I choked out.

“I’m glad you came out unharmed.”

“I-I’m so, so sorry...”

“Never forget what happened today.”

“I won’t.”

Needless to say, the incident left a permanent impression on me.

Eisberk stood up from his seat.

Bern wept, staring up at the ceiling. I crawled into her bed, putting my arm around her shoulder.

Bern tried rubbing her eyes, and I tucked her head under my chin. I hadn’t had the foresight to bring a handkerchief with me but thought I could at least let her use the collar of my soft pajamas.

Bern wrapped her arms around me and clutched my shirt, shivering. I realized then just how small she really was.

I wanted to protect you, and I failed. I was the one who caused you all this pain. I began wailing. My throat clenched, my eyes felt like they were going to melt.

We cried and cried until sleep overcame us.



I pried my heavy eyelids open. I slipped out of bed, the evening sun permeating the room. Bern was still under the blanket, sleeping.

I noticed a dark shadow and followed it to its source where a platinum blonde sat in a chair. Her hair reflected the sunset as if painted red. She looked like something straight out of a fairy tale.

It was none other than Lilia. *How long has she been here?*

“I see you’re awake.” I nodded. “You must be thirsty. Here, I brought you some lemon water,” she said, pouring it into a glass. Floating in the water was a slice of lemon and some mint leaves.

I took a sip. It tasted a little salty.

Kind of like tears.

“Thank you, Felzen.”

Her words caught me completely off guard. I shook my head. “A-All of this was my fault to begin with. A-Apologies,” I stammered, bowing as deeply as I could bend.

I should’ve given up on the boomerang. All I had to do was ask Father, and he would’ve bought me one. If only I hadn’t gotten so attached.

“All because of some lousy boomerang,” I muttered like a curse under my breath.

All because I’m a lousy brat.

“Lousy?” Lilia pushed the boomerang into my hands. The layer of ice had melted, leaving it dry and light. “It’s beautiful. I’m sure it’ll fly far.”

The way it sliced through the autumn sky *was* beautiful, so beautiful that it had caused the whole mess. I’d hurt Bern; I’d forced my playmates to lie.

I gripped it tightly. *Why I oughta—*

Lilia placed her hand over mine. “Bern hung onto it. It’s clearly dear to her, so don’t call it lousy, not in front of her.”

I gaped at Lilia, speechless. It almost sounded like she was referring to me, not the boomerang. My chest felt like it was about to burst.

“Thank you for saving her,” she said. “Thank you.” Her face seemed troubled. “I care only for Bern’s happiness. What Father says is irrelevant. How a noble ought to think is of no interest to me. Selfish, right? Your image of me must be crumbling right now,” she mumbled in a low voice.

I shook my head. “But I—”

“What took place before doesn’t matter. You saved Bern from drowning, and that does.”

She was saying that I—my magic—was good for more than just violence. A warm sensation spread through me. It was a gentle kind of warm, nothing like a scorching-hot flame.

I opened my hand, running it over the boomerang. *Lilia must have dried it off*, I thought.

“I hope you’ll continue looking out for Bern. If you haven’t given up on us already, that is.”

It was as though a deity had given me a divine charge. *I’ll never give up on Bern*. She’d rescued the emotions I had almost left behind, and I would do the same and more for her. “Of course!” I replied.

Lilia’s smile was like a flower in full bloom. Light from the window glanced off her hair. The windowsill’s thin shadow grazed my shoulder, and I felt like a knight being sworn in. “Thank you. I’ll leave the lemon water here. Give Bern some once she’s up.”

“And you?”

“I’ll be heading back to my room before I overstay my welcome,” she said, kissing Bern on the forehead. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she whispered quietly before exiting the room.

I scooped up a handful of Bern's straight, blue hair. Its softness, the way it sifted through my fingers was so different from mine that my heart started to race.

"Stupid Lilia," Bern muttered, her voice muffled by the blanket. I couldn't hold back a giggle.



THE day we were to leave Eisberk, I met up with Wolfe as he was tending to the sheepdog.

"Why did you keep quiet?" I asked, gathering up my courage.

Wolfe seemed confused by my question. "It's what friends do," he replied matter-of-factly.

My entire world lit up at that moment. *I'm one of them.* The all-too-late realization made me exceedingly happy.

"That they do," I said.

Wolfe laughed. "Till next time, if there is one."

"There will be."

And so we parted ways, the boomerang dangling from my waist.

The journey home was the opposite of the trek to Eisberk. The wide, well-maintained road to the royal capital made me feel nothing but scorn for my life there. I reluctantly gazed out at the scenery as it slowly passed by.

"How was it? Eisberk," Father asked, his voice lively.

"It was fun," I answered honestly.

I'm fine now. I might still struggle around other children, but I have friends now, people who understand me. I'll be fine, I'm sure of it.

"Take me with next year too."

"Jumping straight to next year, I see," he said with a bemused smile.

"The earlier the better."

"You can get there in half a day on a fast horse, you know." He narrowed his

eyes thoughtfully. “I think it’s about time I bought you an Eisberk horse, a sorrel one,” he proposed, almost as excited as I was.

“So the horse and I both have cute matching pink hair when we get old?”

He burst out laughing. “That’s my boy.”

I wondered if the bay that had borne me on its gentle back during my wobbly riding lessons was still available.

I can’t wait to grow up, I thought as we passed underneath the beautiful autumn foliage.



BERN, even just standing there against the wall, drew eyes whether she wanted to or not. She was tall for a woman and narrow-shouldered for a man, the tailcoat accentuating her thin waist. Her lustrous blue hair was bunched up into a ponytail secured by a silver barrette. She gazed at the dance floor blankly, her eyes like the frozen night sky, blinking slowly, quietly.

Her androgynous beauty stunned the ladies—and some older gentlemen too—and she seemed entirely unaware of the fact. Her admirers all lauded her cool demeanor, the impassive expression she sported in public gatherings, the composure with which she handled herself around some of the prettiest of women.

Her real self, however, was different.

I felt a sting in my chest at seeing Stern waltz up to Bern, at her troubled smile.

I’d been jealous of Stern since the day he first summoned Bern to court, and I’d liked her for as long as I could remember. I hid the fact that she was a girl from him because I suspected that he would require her presence in the capital far more often if he knew. Because a childish part of me feared that he’d take her away from me. Pathetic, yes, but I couldn’t help but feel there was something between the two, given that Bern had endearingly nicknamed Stern ‘angel’ the day I introduced them, much to his delight.

I felt something black well up inside me. Even as I watched them, I was jealous

of how he looked at Bern the wrong way, how he stood just a little too close, how his touches felt a tad too intimate for a friend. I was jealous of how he drank out of her glass, stealing an indirect kiss from right underneath her nose.

I'd protected her for so long.

Don't you dare touch her all willy-nilly.

I went over to her with a fresh champagne flute, bringing the sweets she avoided while in boy mode. *I'll pamper her like no one else can.*

Satisfaction coursed through me at her delighted smile. I knew more than just her cool façade.



BERN returned to our dorm room after me.

She unclipped the silver barrette, her flycatcher-blue hair scattering. I felt the room instantly brighten. She never undid her ponytail in boy mode, not even for Stern.

Bern stripped off her jacket and tie, tossing her white vest aside. The stripes running down her dress pants emphasized the length of her legs. The woman inside revealed herself for just a brief moment, and my heart thudded in my chest. A sinful urge thrilled through me.

I had to resist. Once I touched her like that, there would be no going back.

The Eisberks had allowed Bern to attend military prep school on two conditions. One, I was to defend Bern's innocence. Two, the Vulkans were to feign ignorance and cut all contact with the Eisberks should Bern's true gender be revealed. If either stipulation were broken, we'd never get to see each other again.

I had to be her fortress at the all-male academy. I was the only one who could provide her a worry-free space to be herself. My hot-blooded Solar Fire Knight persona was just an act to put Bern's mind at ease, to ensure she didn't think I was lusting for her.

Because I had already found "the one" long, long ago.

I wanted to know everything about her. I was the only one who could know.

I asked her if there was anyone she liked, disguising the question as some light banter. I'd heard a rumor earlier that day that the dispassionate Lunar Ice Knight had found someone. Bern denied it. She appeared uninterested in romantic matters, which was a relief.

Her white shirt and suspenders made her meager chest stand out. Her collarbone peeked out through the undone buttons. *How does Bern not realize how tempting and suggestive of a sight this is?*

I wanted to wrap the blue hair stuck to her neck around my fingers. I wanted to touch her, touch her in all the places a friend wouldn't.

I prepared some hot milk in an attempt to distract myself, cool my head, and handed it off to Bern. She drank it with a childlike expression of contentment. I sat down on the back of the sofa, settling as close as reasonable for a friend.

My heart leaped when Bern called me hot like it was the most obvious thing in the world. She was the one person I really wanted to hear it from. Yet I couldn't profess my true feelings, nor could I let her catch on to them, no matter how much more beautiful she grew with every passing day.

I sensed Bern's presence above me. One half of me wanted to protect her peaceful, sleepy moans. Another, darker half ached to hear a different type of moan altogether.

I suppressed that half, passing off as a gentlemanly knight for yet another day.

Chapter 4: Life at the Military Academy

THE new term started the day after the ball.

We had roll call each morning in the courtyard. I put on my breeches, shirt, vest, and school blazer. A glowing insignia, the mark of a cadet, adorned its collar.

The morning bell rang just as I bunched my hair up into a ponytail, indicating that we were to rush to the courtyard and form a neat row. The instructors kept strict time as it was considered part of our training.

After the morning assembly and workout came breakfast in the mess hall.

The military academy didn't discriminate with regard to social standing. All students were routinely deployed on large-scale engagements, and on the battlefield not even a prince could get away with asking for second servings of tea.

Arrayed on the table was the usual breakfast fare: black hardtack, soup, boiled eggs, seasonal fruits and veggies. When not on missions, second helpings were optional, and we could sit wherever we liked.

Our morning classes were centered around theoretical subjects such as history, politics, economics, and military theory, among others, while the afternoon period consisted mostly of elective subjects practical in nature. Afterward was self-study and various extracurricular activities including sports, ballroom dancing, board games, and survival contests and whatnot.

Free time lasted from dinner to bedtime, although some upperclassmen allegedly managed to avoid curfew through careful coordination with their fellows.

There were around twentyish first-year students. We'd been assigned living quarters based on our performance on a test at the beginning of the academic year. First place was granted his own dormitory room, second through fifth got two-person rooms, and the rest were relegated to four-person rooms. The

dorm housed a bathroom, shower, and kitchen. Those who wanted to take a bath had to do so at a bathhouse. Each room contained one to two double bunk beds, a small desk, and a centerpiece sofa.

Stern had been awarded his own room not because of his princely status but because he'd received top marks on the exam.

Felzen and I shared a room because we'd come in second and third place respectively. I had to get the same room as Felzen no matter what, which was easier said than done.

The physical gap between me and the rest of my class was becoming more and more apparent. I couldn't build muscle as fast as boys my age, so I'd gradually started falling behind in strength. Such a disadvantage was likely why women weren't permitted to become knights. I did my best to narrow the divide by focusing on studying and magic.

I met up with the usual suspects for dinner. Unlike breakfast, the evening meal had meat on the menu.

Stern sat down beside me, beaming, seemingly unaffected by the day's travails. Felzen settled across from me. Our eternal seating arrangement.

Stern was Second Prince. In Regenbogen Kingdom, all royal offspring but the crown prince became ordinary noble vassals upon turning twenty. Some lower princes pursued matrilineal marriage, a few even assuming their spouse's family name. Either way, they had to carve their own path in life. Perhaps that was why Stern was such a free spirit. He was nice but mostly blinding.

"How'd it go last night, Felzen?" Stern asked with a cheery smile. His default question following a ball or any other social event. He inquired half-jokingly, aware of Felzen's playboy reputation.

"I got to dance with Princess Marlena," Felzen replied, grinning—in other words, implying he had "made a move" on Stern's sister.

Stern laughed him off. "Try not to break her heart. She's a princess, lest you forget."

Despite Felzen's rakish notoriety, his friends knew there were lines he'd never cross. He whispered sweet nothings to dance partners but did little more than

that and never anything that would land him in hot water.

I, however, found their conversation a bit unsettling as a woman myself.

"I got to dance with the lady of the hour too. She's a landmine," Felzen continued.

"Landmine?"

"She flirts with anyone and everyone."

There it is. Felzen invited women to dance left and right yet regarded similarly coy females somewhat contemptuously. "Sorry to butt in, but what lady *wouldn't* get a little excited about you inviting her for a dance?" I had no idea who this "lady of the hour" was but felt the need to speak up nonetheless. I thought it perfectly normal for someone to feel elated about being chatted up by the Solar Fire Knight, even if they were uninterested in a serious relationship.

"I can think of one," replied Felzen sulkily.

"Really?" I was genuinely surprised.

I wonder who that could be.

"Said landmine brought a blue fan to the Sword Dance."

"She also happens to be one of my potential fiancées," Stern added, smirking ominously.

Wait...

"You're getting engaged?!" I blurted out.

"Is it that surprising? I'm at an age where engagement talks are starting to crop up every now and then. Nothing's set in stone yet, but I've received some indirect offers from foreign kingdoms."

"Foreign kingdoms?! You're not planning on leaving, are you?"

"That's why I'm rejecting them. Political marriage proposals just tend to pop up sometimes."

"...I see. Has Felzen evaluated any of your other prospects?"

"I don't recall asking him to," Stern said, looking annoyed.

Felzen scoffed. “Would *you* want one of your friends to get engaged to some bad news?”

He could be disgustingly cool sometimes. He’d danced with her to assess whether she was suitable for Stern, I just knew it.

Stern broke into a smile. “What about you, Felzen? Any ladies catch your eye for the long haul?”

“I’ve gotten a few offers here and there, but I’d rather take my sweet time, being the oldest son and all.”

“And you, Bern?” asked Stern, brimming with curiosity.

“...None for me.”

How could I? Not that it mattered, since I didn’t understand romance or marriage all that well anyway. It did come as a shock, however, to hear my friends gossip about tying the knot when I hadn’t even experienced love yet. The subject wasn’t unprecedented though, since we similarly discussed Lilia’s marital candidates on occasion.

“I kind of feel like I’m falling behind a little,” I admitted.

It felt...lonely. I’d never really given it much thought before, but we would all go our separate ways once we graduated.

“Not if I refuse to get married.” Stern laughed.

I felt an odd sense of relief at his words.

“I suppose there’s no need to rush,” I said. “It’s not like either of us is taking over the family headship or anything.”

“Anyway, why did you stand up for the lady of the hour, again? Are you acquaintances? Was it the blue fan? Did you meet at the White Lily Tea Party?” Stern fired off question after question, smiling wickedly.

W-Why are his eyes so scary? Is it because she’s one of his potential fiancées?

The White Lily Tea Party was an afternoon tea hosted by Lilia. I was invited from time to time, and it was always a terrifying experience. I felt like a sugar cube tossed directly into a swarm of ants. I hadn’t spoken with many of the

attendees at length but more or less knew all their names and faces.

"I don't know. Does she have a name?" I still had no clue as to who she was, so I could hardly comply with his interrogation.

"Like father, like son," guffawed Stern in amazement. "You're better off not knowing then."

"Tell me!"

"No."

"Why not? I can talk to her at the next tea party."

"I said no!" Stern snapped, glowering. "Don't you understand what her choice of fan means? If you approach first, her infatuation with you might just swell into something bigger."

He had a point. I didn't actually want to get involved, nor did I feel like stepping on anyone's toes and getting consequently kicked by a metaphorical horse.

"All right, forget I asked then," I conceded. "Wouldn't want to be a bother anyway."

"You're not being a bother it's just..." Stern sighed, scratching his head. "Aren't you...curious?"

"About what?"

"About her," he clarified, although he ostensibly had no intention to quell said curiosity.

Sure, I was intrigued, but it wasn't worth upsetting him. "Well, I wouldn't mind seeing what she looks like for you two to bring her up in conversation, but you seem to be getting uncomfortable, so it's whatever. I value your feelings more."

Stern looked embarrassed, his cheeks flushing pink.

I feel like I've seen him make that face a lot more often as of late. I wonder why.

"I hate it when you do that," he muttered.

“Do what?”

“Sweet-talk me to get what you want!” he exclaimed, puffing out his cheeks.

“Sw-Sweet-talk? Me? Do I look like Felzen to you?!”

“I’m nowhere near as bad as you are, trust me,” interjected Felzen.

“You’re so handsome that I just feel like squeezing the life out of you!” gushed Stern ironically, locking his arms around me

It hurts. “Get off! You haven’t showered yet!”

“I don’t smell, do I?”

“Of course not! Now, stop smelling me! No, really, stop! Someone get this man off me!” Even Stern’s sweat had a noble fragrance. *Some people, I swear.*

Felzen forcefully separated us. “We’re in the middle of dinner, people.” He sighed.

“Another time then.” Stern laughed, retreating a distance.

Another time? I don’t wish to be smelled, dinner time or not. “Give me a break.”

Stern smiled, not having learned his lesson at all.



CARD games, pool, chess, and reading were some of the ways we spent our free hours in the evening. And in a boys-only environment, dirty jokes and tales of naughty escapades were inevitable.

I returned to my dorm room. I took a shower then got into bed. My thoughts drifted back to the conversation at dinner. The revelation of my friends’ marriage offers and potential fiancées seemed to have left me thoroughly discombobulated.

A hazy mist of emotion blanketed my chest. It resisted classification, my strained mental efforts notwithstanding. I couldn’t identify what I was feeling, no matter how hard I tried. It was...weird. *Anxiety? Not quite. Jealousy? ...I don’t think so. What could it be...?*

The best way I could describe it was a fear of being left behind, a fear that I

was like a child among adults, but even that didn't feel quite right.

"Bern, let me in! Bern!" sounded Stern's voice from outside the door.

Felzen cursed. "He's actually here."

"It is what it is." I redid my ponytail, hopping out of bed.

Enough brooding. Couldn't brood with all this noise even if I wanted to.

And so the day passed, just like any other.

Chapter 5: The Monster Hunt

“FELZEN, I’m cold.”

We’d been granted a short break after finishing the morning’s roll call. The knight commander would arrive shortly, edict in hand. I inserted my hands under Felzen’s armpits.

Felzen’s body temperature was noticeably high, unsurprising given his magical affinity for fire. I, aligned with ice, was the opposite. Warming myself against Felzen’s body had become something of a tradition.

“Ugh, fine,” Felzen said, squeezing his arms to his sides.

“Aaaah.” I sighed euphorically. “You’re the best, Felzen.”

Stern let out an exasperated laugh beside us.

“Salute!”

I hastily did as ordered. The knight commander had taken the stage.

He read aloud a proclamation concerning a large-scale monster hunt. The excitement after such announcements was always palpable.

Hunting drills were conducted each month in a nearby forest, mere training exercises that lasted no longer than a day. Within the forest was a miasma-infested cave, purposefully left unsealed. By periodically clearing it out we developed survival instincts and honed our abilities. Our frequent purges ensured that powerful monsters never spawned there, but even weak ones made for good practice.

Actual monster hunts were a different matter and bona fide missions that enabled us to gain real combat experience as soldiers. Not everyone got to participate, however. Third years, yes, but only a select few were chosen from the lower years.

After he named the third-year students who’d be stationed at headquarters,

those of us also going were split into teams: “Second year. Sternchen, Felzen, Bernstein. Right wing!”

“Roger!”

We made our way to the designated spot, where the first years had already gathered. Only the best of the best got into the military academy, and though young, the assembled first years carried themselves with an air of confidence, their physiques remarkable. The teams were assigned to preexisting squadrons, ready to set off to the hunting grounds.



THE knights, clad in caped ceremonial uniforms and atop their most cherished steeds, paraded through the royal capital in a procession out of the city.

The capes varied by rank. Cadets’ capes were black, knight initiates’ white. Accent colors further differentiated the wearer’s rank and school year. The field marshal sported a red cloak, its black inner lining embroidered with a gold emblem seen on both sides of the material.

Stern rode a white horse. He flourished his white cape, smiling, and all the city girls swooned. To his side was Felzen, mounted on a sorrel. He waved with a grin, exposing his white teeth. Shrill screams followed. It was our first time marching together in the same unit, and I felt overwhelmed.

Whoa. This is...amazing...and kinda scary.

Suddenly I looked away, my face deadpan, pretending not to have noticed the blue fans. *You saw nothing. You know nothing.*



“Putting on airs again, I see,” muttered the underclassman riding beside me. He had silky, green hair cut in a bob and equally green eyes. His name was Kraut. He was a first year of medium build with a no-nonsense appearance. Unlike me, Kraut was easy to read, his emotions lying bare on his face. He was top of his class and considered a prodigy by many. A devout Stern adherent, he despised seeing me by the prince’s side.

It wasn’t the first snide remark he’d hurled at me either. He could always find something to criticize about me. He’d also challenged me to bouts on various occasions. I won every time, naturally, although not by a landslide, and he looked down on me for it.

Of course he’d think I wasn’t good enough for Stern. Father was a recluse, and my only real talent was horseback riding. Compared to Felzen’s bulky six feet and two inches or Stern’s muscular, five-foot-eleven frame, I was just some five-foot-seven nobody. I agreed that I didn’t measure up but had no intention of ending my friendship with Stern over it.

I shrugged off his disparaging comment. I was used to it. Fanatical Sternites and Felzenites frequently pestered me. Once in a while, I’d get angry stares too, as some of them were convinced that Stern or Felzen and I were in a relationship or something. Over time I’d learned that ignoring them was for the best.

Like it or not, I’ll have to put up with Kraut till the very end. People like him are everywhere, and handling them is part of your job. I held back a sigh, maintaining my neutral expression.



THE sky was painted orange when we reached the encampment and began our preparations.

The site was located in the forest separating Eisberk and the royal capital. Monster spawn rates in said woods, which happened to be my backyard, were surprisingly high. Felzen could make the journey by himself easily enough, but that was only because of his physical prowess; most travelers had to bring an escort. And Eisberk, rural and isolated, wasn’t all that important. Only merchants regularly passed through.

On the other hand, one could say that Eisberk's true purpose was to keep the forest under control. We were allowed to maintain a separate knights order, the Cavalry Brigade, for that reason.

The military academy team ranked lowest in the squadron and was consequently tasked with setting up tents and gathering firewood. We were divided into two groups. Due to my familiarity with the area, I was appointed to wood supply.

"Then I'll come with." Stern stepped forward.

Felzen raised his hand. "I'm familiar with the forest too."

The two stared each other down.

The team leader sighed. "Can't take only second years. Felzen, you stay. I need a first year. Anyone?"

"I'll go!" Kraut, the snide boy from earlier, volunteered.

Whyyyy. Why would he volunteer if he hates my guts? Maybe his love for Stern exceeds his hatred for me. I held back a sigh. *I'll let Stern deal with him.*

"Then it's settled."

Felzen didn't look happy. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"You too," I replied.

I entered the forest, leading the charge. It felt a lot more ominous than usual, which was perhaps to be expected. A pair of red, beastly eyes glowed from deeper within the trees. The animal seemed...irritated, under the miasma's influence.

We made our way along a tiny stream that originated in Lake Eisberk, its waters pure, resistant to the miasma. I'd always used it to orient myself. I knew the forest like the back of my hand, and after walking for a while, we came upon a glade.

"We'll collect firewood here," I announced.

Kraut glared at me. "Who put you in charge?"

"He knows the place best. Why wouldn't he be in charge?" answered Stern

before I could. Kraut begrudgingly held his tongue.

“Don’t venture too deep and stay within eyeshot. Something’s wrong with the animals,” I warned.

“Understood,” Stern replied, jumping straight to work.

I gathered several armfuls of nearby grass, dipped my hands in the stream, and began braiding the sheaves together.

“Playing with grass while His Highness collects firewood, I see,” said Kraut scornfully.

I sighed. “Observe.” I tied a rock to the end of my makeshift rope, before lassoing the contraption up a tree. The rope tangled around a perched bird’s feet, yanking it to the ground. I picked it up and restrained it. “Do you not want meat for dinner?”

“What the?” Kraut started to tremble, his face reddening. It appeared as though I angered him no matter what I did.

Stern burst out laughing.

“N-No faith in your bowmanship, I see,” Kraut sneered. “Resorting to such crude methods, how country of you.

“Bows are tools of war. It would be a waste.”

“Some self-sufficiency goes a long a way. Resources are finite, after all.” Stern’s comment only added fuel to the fire.

“Well, I’ll hunt down something bigger than a lousy bird!” exclaimed Kraut, dashing off, sword in hand.

“Kraut!”

“After him!”

We chased him into the undergrowth.



THE beast’s eyes gleamed high above the ground.

A bear.

It raised its massive forelegs. *He's in mauling distance!* I grabbed Kraut, flinging him away, while Stern fired an arrow at a nearby tree. The arrow whirred by the bear's head, distracting the animal just long enough for me to step in and sink my sword into its body.

I approached Kraut. His face paled at my blood-drenched sword. "What were you thinking?"

He was silent.

"Acting alone is against the rules, even if you did know the forest better than me."

"...Yes."

"And do you know what would've happened if you'd used offensive magic before the mission started?"

"It would've provoked the monsters."

"Worst-case scenario, we would've had to scrap the entire operation. Have you ever downed a bear without magic?"

"No."

"Your hubris will get you killed out here. That is all." I shook the blood off my sword, sheathing it.

Stern grinned as he pried his arrow from the tree. "Bern can get mad too, you know, just not very often. Don't think you got off scot-free, though. He's most certainly furious with you. Now, grab that bear for me, will you?"

Kraut nodded. He hoisted the bear over his shoulders, carrying it the whole way back without so much as a peep. My opinion of him improved slightly.

We were greeted with great joy upon returning to camp. Fresh meat was a feast in its own right.

Felzen looked at me in disbelief. "Bern... What on earth were you thinking?" For whatever reason, he'd chosen to chastise *me*. Not that he was off target, I was the one who had killed the bear after all.

"I didn't think I'd get flak for bringing meat back, of all things," I shot back.

“Tell me you didn’t use magic.”

“I used my sword!”

“Don’t be too hard on Bern. I had his back,” Stern interjected.

“He saved my—”

“Kraut!” I glanced at him meaningfully, signaling him to shush. His being put under suspicion of a military offense, trivial as it was, would result in a mountain of paperwork for me. I hated paperwork.

Kraut went quiet, his face turning pink. “Y-Yes, sir.”

Felzen put his arm around me. “Tell me everything.”

“We just ran into a bit of trouble is all.”

“Anything you wouldn’t want me knowing about?”

“Not really, just too tired to explain.”

“Too tired?”

“You should’ve seen Bern back there. He was sooo cool,” Stern said, a frosty smile on his face.

“Cool,” he says. I’m sure he totally means it. Why is he trying to provoke Felzen? Keep your mouth shut, traitor!

“Stern, you—”

“I do wish you’d hold back sometimes though.” Stern’s voice was cold.

Did I anger him somehow?

Felzen’s grip tightened. “Care to explain?”

“I will, I will! Just wait a little, okay?”

“Now.”

Stubborn as always. I sighed in resignation. “Come closer.”

“What?” Felzen blinked in confusion.

I brought his head nearer to mine, raising on my tiptoes. “Don’t tell anyone, you hear?” I whispered in his ear.

“I-I hear.”

“Kraut got attacked by a bear. If the higher-ups find out, I’ll be swarmed with paperwork.”

“That’s your issue? Paperwork?”

“Please.”

“...Alright.”

I released Felzen’s head. His face was notably pink. *Perhaps I squeezed too hard.*

Sensing someone’s gaze, I turned to see Stern’s displeased expression. The entire encampment seemed to have gone quiet. Stern glowered into the distance, his face flushed. Everyone else was looking at me funny.

Huh? What’d I do?

“What did I say about holding back?” Stern pushed between me and Felzen, separating us.

I might’ve gotten a little too buddy-buddy with Felzen.

Stern always inserted himself between us when that happened, fearful that I’d take his childhood friend away. I’d play along—I had no intention of stealing Felzen, nor did I wish to start a fight between us.

“I-I’m sorry,” I apologized, only to be ignored.

“Now then,” Stern said, “let’s bring our spoils to the chef.”

Kraut hefted the bear up again, and we hauled it, the bird, and the firewood over to the camp cooks, who began skinning the body. Meat was always appreciated in the field, where sources of protein were often scarce.

On our way back, Kraut suddenly started acting all friendly with me. “Thank you, again.”

“You’re welcome. Just, don’t bring up what happened around others. I don’t want to deal with any fallout.”

Kraut’s eyes lit up. “You’d cover for me? Why? I was prepared for whatever may have come my way.”

“I just don’t want to have to write up something so trivial. It’s not like we were in battle or anything.”

“How noble of you to undersell yourself thus!”

“No, no, you’re the one overselling me. “

What’s up with him? Is he still keyed up from just barely making it out with his life, or is he just the type to blow things out of proportion? Stern was listening to our exchange, his expression superficially gentle. *I know you’re internally mocking me,* I thought grumpily.

“I want to be like you one day, Bernstein”

How am I supposed to respond to that?

“I now understand why Sternchen and Felzen place their utmost trust in you!”

He’s gonna go on some weird rant, isn’t he?

“The way you took down your prey without spilling so much as a drop of blood was simply awe-inspiring. With handmade rope no less!”

Didn’t you make fun of me for it earlier?

“When I, your brother-in-arms, was about to be mauled by the King of the Forest, you wasted no time in coming to my rescue.”

Neither did Stern.

“You appeared before me, swift as the wind, my very own guardian angel!”

What is he saying? I can’t keep up. “...Uh, would you like me to teach you how to make rope, or?” I hazarded.

“By all means!”

Getting all starry-eyed over rope making. Where’d your knightly pride go?

“Also, I’d like to ask if you—well, how do I p-put this...” stammered Kraut.

Does he need to go to the bathroom or something? “Out with it.”

“Are—are you and Felzen d-dating?”

“The hell he is!” Stern barked. Kraut recoiled in fear, and even I felt a little disconcerted. “Right?” Stern drew nearer. “Right?!”

Your face—your face is too close!

“O-Of course not! We’re both guys!” *Officially, anyway.*

“It’s not all too uncommon nowadays,” Kraut pointed out.

It isn’t? Huh.

Kraut looked at me inquisitively, his face a rosy color. Stern gave me a “now you’ve done it” look.

I didn’t do anything!

“I thought I saw you two k-kiss just now, so I thought that maybe you, erm, swing that way.”

K-Kissing?

“No, we weren’t!” I protested. “I was whispering in his ear! You know, to keep his mouth shut about you?” *So that’s what caused all the awkwardness.* “We’re childhood friends, it’s how we talk.”

“Ah, I see.” He smiled. “What a relief!”

Relief?

Stern just glared at me

“Uh-huh. Well, glad I could clear things up.” If rumor spread that Felzen and I were dating, his search for a significant other would be greatly inconvenienced, which I naturally wanted to avoid.

“Bern, a word?” Stern wrapped his arm around me, an ominous smile on his face.

Oh, he’s mad. He’s so mad. “I swear there’s nothing between us! I would never dare take Felzen away from you; you know that better than anyone.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about Felzen. He’s a notorious womanizer, after all.”

“See?”

“You don’t get it, do you? I think we need to have a chat.”

“A chat?”

“A nice, long chat. Just the two of us.”

“Are you two dating?” Kraut asked abruptly.

“No, we’re not! We’re childhood friends too! I’m not going out with anyone, period!” I said, exasperated.

“Good!”

Good? What do you mean “good”?!

Stern’s smile had grown even more foreboding.

Help.



ONCE back at the tents, Stern dragged me into a covered supply wagon.

“On your knees,” he ordered, like a king would a servant. I dejectedly knelt. “I’m sure this isn’t your first campaign, but you seem unaware, so I’m going to warn you anyway.” Stern grabbed me by the shoulders. It hurt, but I didn’t say anything. His gaze meant business. “Places like this are breeding grounds for homosexuality. Don’t spark the flame.”

“Homosexuality? Ah, yes, hear it all the time,” I said casually.

Stern sighed. "You don't know what that means, do you?"

"It's when two men form a romantic relationship."

"Yes, and what do people in romantic relationships do? They kiss, *sleep together naked*, they—" Stern noticed my blush. "Called it!"

"I'm not sparking anything!"

"Yes you are. Have some self-awareness." Stern stared at me, serious.

Why's he acting so weird?

"Earlier it looked like you and Felzen were kissing. Onlookers'll think you're open to that kind of thing."

"But we weren't."

"I get it, but think of it this way." His hands slid up my neck and across my cheeks, his thumbs coming to rest in front of my ears. A shiver ran down my spine. The sensation was new to me. My face boiled over. I could hardly breathe. "If you were Felzen's little plaything, everyone would back off immediately, but you're not. Your apparent, unrequited love for the womanizer extraordinaire might be seen as a chance to strike for some."

"You're overthink—"

Stern's hands traced down my cheeks, his fingertips landing delicately on my lips, encouraging me to shut up. Their warmth embarrassed me. "I'm worried for you, simple as that. How about this—if the thought of being pursued troubles you so, then pretend you belong to me, at least while we're on assignment."

By "pretend to belong to him" does he mean act like we're dating?

Stern drew circles around my mouth. His face inched closer and closer, our noses about to touch. I felt too mortified to even breathe. *No.*

"Stop it. You're being weird," I blurted out, fixing him with an angry glare.

"Am I not good enough for you?" Stern's fingers stilled, his eyes narrowing as he gave me a cold smile.

How devilish for someone so angel-like!

“That’s not the issue. Do you really think I’d just use you like that? How poorly do you think of me?” *That sort of pretense might ruin our friendship. Besides, this won’t be my last time in the field. I have to look out for myself like everyone else. Why should I be the only one who gets to coast by with lies?*

Stern stiffened, slowly removing his hand. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s okay, I know you meant well in your own way, even if I can’t begin to understand it.”

“The miasma’s influence can make people do things they normally wouldn’t. I didn’t want you to fall victim to someone, even if it meant my being used,” Stern said unhappily.

I sighed. “While I may be no match for you, I can fend for myself just fine. If you’re still worried, just know that I’ll call for help at the first sign of danger. I trust you’ll come to my rescue.”

“I will.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

Stern chuckled, offering me his hand. I took it, getting back to my feet with a wince. “Oof, feet went numb.”

“Sorry.” His apology sounded so forced it made me laugh.

When I wobbled, Stern propped me up, and the size of his hand pressed against my back startled me. I realized I had to tilt my head up to see his face. *When did he get so big?* My heartbeat stuttered as an obvious reality finally registered emotionally.

“Whew. You went so hard on me!” I said aloud to myself in an attempt to drown out the thudding of my heart as I exited the wagon.

Chapter 6: Kraut von Wurzel

SHOCKED exclamations greeted me as I lugged the bear into camp.

“Where’d you get the bear?”

“Bernstein downed it,” I answered, and everyone went wild.

“Little bear downs the big bear!”

“Meat for dinner, baby!”

“Attaboy, Bern!”

They anticipated jerky for dinner, hence the excitement. Felzen, however, stalked up to Bernstein disapprovingly.

“Felzen looks mad.”

“Oh, he’s pissed.”

“Bern can fend for himself. Why so overprotective?”

“The man’s a beast in the wilderness.”

“You can say that again.”

Everyone watched curiously as Felzen harangued him. I found it unfair that Bernstein had to suffer due to my actions. I tried to explain what had happened but was interrupted by Bernstein pressing his index finger to his lips, telling me to zip it.

He’s shushing me. The same guy who just took down a bear. How adorable. My heart jumped in my chest, my face boiling hot.

“That first year, he...”

“Ah, he’s a total goner now.”

“Ooh, Felzen just snapped.”

“He’s got reason to.”

“My condolences, Bern.”

The peanut gallery clamored, my head spinning.

Total goner? What does that mean? Why would Felzen snap? I wondered as Bernstein rose on his tiptoes, bringing his face to Felzen’s cheek. For a moment, I almost thought I saw rose petals scatter in their vicinity. Felzen fell silent, his face pink.

D-Did they just kiss? No. No way. No. I knew they were good friends, but they’re not a couple...are they?

“Did you see that?”

“Bern just went right in.”

“For a k-kiss?”

“Felzen’s reaction says it all.”

“Felzen, world famous ‘womanizer’ —”

“Blushing.”

“Well, that shut him up quick.”

“Bern, what’re you doing, man...”

“I’ve always thought he looked kinda hot though.”

“I-I guess. He is the Lunar Ice Knight and all.”

“But still!”

“How come we’ve never noticed his...his—”

“Devilish allure?”

“I don’t know, man.”

“It’s definitely something.”

The crowd was astir, and so was my heart. The other men sneaked glances at Bernstein. Prying, lustful glances. I’d known there were gay students at the military academy, but to think that Bernstein had been one all along...

I might have a chance after all.

I felt weirded out by my own thoughts. I wanted him to kiss me too. So what if he was my upperclassman? So what if we were both boys?



I had once hated Bernstein.

Why? Because he was overly familiar with Prince Sternchen considering he was only the second son of a shut-in marquess and rarely visited the royal capital.

I lived in the capital and was also the son of a marquess. Yet I was prevented from growing up alongside Sternchen by the one-year age gap between us. It was frustrating, especially given that I, the top-scoring first year, was objectively more deserving of his companionship.

We Wurzels had reverently served the royal family for generations. Father had been classmates with the king, Mother was childhood friends with the queen, and Brother was close friends with the crown prince. And then there was me, born two days too late to be in the same school year as Prince Sternchen and unable to form a natural connection as a result.

It devastated my family. I nonetheless persisted, working tirelessly on myself, hoping for a miracle. And yet, Sternchen had chosen Bernstein over me.

I challenged Bernstein to every duel I could. I thought Sternchen would recognize me if I proved superior, but I never did. Time after time, I fell just one step short. It drove me crazy: I was basically already on par with Bernstein as a mere first year, yet *he* had Sternchen's favor and I didn't?

Felzen, on the other hand, made perfect sense. His grades were second only to Sternchen's, and his swordsmanship better. He was tall, well-built, handsome, from a respectable background. A man's man, looked up to by many.

But Bernstein was short, dainty. His "elegant demeanor," as some called it, perhaps befit a bureaucrat but certainly not a knight. Both his sword and bowmanship were lacking. Bernstein's only saving grace was his riding ability, but that was to be expected from an Eisberk. Of course he'd be good at it.

He wore a permanently blasé expression, immune to even princess Marlana's

unparalleled beauty. Some thought him “cool,” whereas I thought that such a coldhearted man didn’t belong by Sternchen’s side...or I had until the little incident with the bear.

I witnessed firsthand Bernstein’s familiarity with the forest, his wilderness survival skills, his capability for making split-second decisions. His swordsmanship truly shone in actual combat. He’d instantly recognized that Sternchen was supporting him from behind and defeated the bear without the use of magic.

I was stunned.

My actions warranted a verbal lashing, but instead of nagging me endlessly, Bernstein gave me a simple slap on the wrist. When Sternchen remarked that Bernstein seldom angered, my admiration for him grew even more.

Sternchen ordered me to carry the bear, and so I did. It was the least I could do, after all. As I dragged the heavy body along, I realized exactly why Sternchen and Felzen respected Bernstein so much. Not just anyone would fling themselves in front of a massive, hulking beast for some sharp-tongued underclassman. I knew I wouldn’t.

I was developing feelings for Bernstein, but after his “kiss” with Felzen I wasn’t sure if they were dating or not. If they were, then I might as well have thrown in the towel then and there, so I asked as much. Bernstein and Sternchen vehemently denied it, which made me wonder if they weren’t going out instead. I asked again; they denied it once more.

The knowledge that Bernstein wasn’t with anyone filled me with relief. That trio had always felt just a little too close for comfort. But if they insisted there was nothing between them, then what choice did I have but to take their word for it?

It meant I had a chance, no matter how small, and I wasn’t going to let it slip out of reach.

Chapter 7: The Radiant Light Knight and the Lunar Ice Knight

A puppy was following me around, a puppy by the name of Kraut. He'd been weirdly attached to me ever since the bear incident the day before. And I'd gotten so little sleep that I could've sworn I saw him dancing the *Valse du petit chien*.

I'd barely slept at all; I couldn't stop thinking about my conversation with Stern. I had never considered the possibility that guys might be romantically interested in me or that from an outsider's perspective it seemed like Felzen or Stern and I were dating.

It was all too much to process, and before I knew it, morning had risen.

"Bern, Bern!" called the puppy dog—err, Kraut, using my nickname.

"Yes?"

"What did you two discuss yesterday?"

My face heated rapidly. I could feel Stern's fingertips against my ears, visualize his somber stare, hear his voice as if only seconds had passed since we spoke. Kraut was looking at me strangely, so I replied with an ambiguous smile. "I got yelled at."

"Yelled at?"

"Stern enlightened me about the realities of military campaigns."

"I see. Glad you're such good *friends*."

"We are. It's just that, Felzen and Stern are so quick to anger sometimes, probably because of how weak I am. Get stronger, lesson learned." I laughed.

Kraut eyed me indignantly. "No, you're not! You're plenty strong!" he insisted, making a fist for emphasis.

I lightly tapped him on the head. "Thanks."

"Y-You're *wewcome*!" Kraut's garbled pronunciation made me laugh, and he

shyly joined in the laughter.

“Off we go then.” To maintain our advantage, we needed to defeat the monsters while the sun was still out.

Opposite the forest was Eisberk. I’d come not only to safeguard the royal capital but my home as well. The knight and cadet squadrons were tasked with defending the central force’s flanks. Kraut and the other wood magic users cleared the way forward. I formed protective walls of ice while Felzen initiated combat with his fire power. Stern reinforced his allies’ weapons and assisted the fighting with his metal magic. The tips of his arrows were coated with spelled mercury, making for one nasty combination. No monster stood a chance against his shots.

As expected, our foes were leagues above what we were accustomed to. No matter how many we downed, more appeared in their place. We just had to hold out until the main unit slew the horde leader. Yet as the battle dragged on, we started seeing injuries. I froze over soldiers’ wounds with my magic, temporarily stanching their bleeding, while we waited for the relief stationed behind us to arrive.

“Thanks, Bern!”

“Save it. Now go!”

A shockwave rippled through my ice barricade. I whipped my head around, spotting an enormous monster. I pointed my sword at the center of the barrier and unleashed a blast of magical energy. An icy spike lanced toward the beast, penetrating it, and the monster disintegrated.

Something’s not right. Why was that kind of monster here? The stronger ones are supposed to be further in.

“Aaaaah! Salamander!”

“What’s it doing here?!”

“Wasn’t the main squadron supposed to take care of it?!”

Screams of horror resounded through the forest. Dread filled the air as the highest tier of fire monster entered the field. The salamander flung its bright

red body against the trees, and I flinched at its heat, which emanated all the way to where I stood. We cadets were soldiers, yes, but weak and inexperienced.

“Retreat!” yelled the unit leader.

Kraut was still out front, freeing a path through the brush. I rushed over, deploying a sheet of ice to shield him. “Kraut, block it off!”

“O-Okay!” He conjured a hedge of trees.

As the salamander breathed fire on the blockade, I froze the wood so it couldn’t ignite. “Kraut, open the way back! Now!”

“Okay!”

“I’ve got you!” Felzen said, lining up beside Kraut.

Felzen, whose magic was of the same element as the salamander, could only do so much. It made the most sense for me to remain.

“Felzen! The stream! It flows from Eisberk—the Lord of the Lake!”

“Gotcha! Don’t do anything stupid, Bern!”

“I won’t!”

Felzen plunged his sword into the stream, vaporizing its divine waters into a mist. The salamander recoiled. Stern loosed an arrow at it, the projectile audibly melting upon contact with the beast’s blistering skin.

“Stern, it’s a fire monster! Your metal magic is useless!”

“I know, but I can’t just leave you behind!”

A bunch of inferior monsters materialized through the smoke, cutting us off from the retreating cadets. Stern positioned himself behind me, guarding my back while I threw up another bulwark of ice. “They just keep coming!”

“You can say that again.”

The salamander whaled relentlessly against the blockade. Everyone else had gotten away, but things weren’t looking so hot for me and Stern.

“Bit of tight spot, aye?” he said, a wry smile on his face.

“Can’t wait for the nonstop tactical retreat drills back home.”

The barrier’s going to break if I lose focus even for a second. I can’t keep this up for much longer either, I’m running out of energy fast. We need backup. If only Felzen had gone to get help! The salamander’s flames expanded outward, engulfing the barrier. *I can’t hold it any longer!* I thought just as Stern jumped off his horse toward me.

“Bern!” he shouted.

“Stern!”

His cloak wrapped around me as we fell to the ground, scorching-hot flames shooting past us. The stench of burning hair assaulted my nostrils. A flurry of arrows whirled overhead, causing the salamander to shrink back. Our horses, neighing defiantly, reared between us and the beast, their manes singed. Despite their fear of fire, they were putting themselves on the line to protect us.

“Is that you, Bern?” called a hoarse voice.

I lifted my head only to see the Eisberk Cavalry Brigade handily dispatching the smaller monsters surrounding us. A black-haired knight loomed at the forefront, an old childhood friend of mine. Muscular, with a knight-like physique and piercing black gaze. Everyone knew the name of the Cavalry Brigade’s commander.

“Wolfe!” I exclaimed, relieved at the sight of a familiar face.

Wolfe quickly dismounted and ran to me, his sword drawn. “Do you still have leftover energy?”

“Yes!”

“Then enhance our arrows with ice!”

“Understood!”

Another volley followed. This time the arrows reached their target, shaft after shaft sinking into the salamander’s body.

“Can you freeze moistureless objects?” Stern asked, groaning.

“Yes?”

“Then enhance my arrows too!” He painfully plucked one off the ground, knocked it. I imbued it with my magic, the silvery glow of the metal intensifying. Stern gritted his teeth and pulled the string back. He fired, striking the salamander right in the forehead. An unholy shriek echoed through the forest. The salamander fell, writhing in agony.

“Y-You did it! Stern, you did it!”

“I...did it.” Stern slumped into my arms, his cheeks red, his brow covered in sweat.

“Stern?”

“Let me stay like this...for a while.” He smiled, his face contorting in pain.

“Stop saying stupid things!”

The fire had burned through Stern’s cloak, charring his back.

It’s because he protected me. I should’ve noticed when his arrows scattered across the ground.

“Did I do good...Bern?” Stern mustered a crooked smile.

I can’t breathe. My chest hurts. Unable to speak past the lump in my throat, I wordlessly soothed his back with my ice magic.

“Thank...you,” mumbled Stern as his body went limp. His closed eyelashes quivered, his breathing haggard.

I embraced him. “Wolfe! What do we... What do we do now?” I asked desperately. *Stern’s gonna die if we don’t do anything!* I didn’t have healing magic. The salamander’s flames were magical in nature and resulted in particularly nasty burns, and Stern’s affinity for metal made him weak to fire in the first place. “No... No! It’s all my fault. I should’ve taken the hit with my affinity for ice.”

“Get a grip, man!” Wolfe yelled so loudly that I felt a shiver run down my spine.

I bit down on my lip to stop myself from crying. *No, no, no. I don’t wanna live*

in a world without Stern! I don't wanna.

Wolfe's hands sandwiched my cheeks, gazing into my eyes. My face felt numb. "It's okay. There's still time."

Tears started pouring from my eyes. Wolfe's voice was low, deep, and unwavering. *Wolfe is always right, always. When has he been wrong? Never. I've always looked up to Wolfe, trusted him like a brother. If he says it's okay, then it has to be.*

"There is?"

"Yes, there is. Now listen closely." I blinked, letting him know I was. "You're not injured, that means you can save him. Got it? You're going to save him."

"Got it!"

"Our headquarters are closest. We'll take him there."

"I'll put him on my horse."

"What about his horse?"

"Yuki's smart, he'll follow."

"Yuki? Is that His Highness Sternchen?!" Unease spread through the cavalry ranks.

Wolfe raised his hand. "Message the aid station. Tell them a fire salamander injured His Highness and that he's metal aligned! We have to save him at all costs!" A messenger sped off. "Keep His Highness cool while you follow me."

"Roger." I climbed atop Rain, my beloved black horse, situating Stern in the saddle so he faced me. I wrapped my arms around him, cooling the wound on his back.

Guiding me along the gentlest route available, Wolfe led the way to the Cavalry Brigade's garrison. There the medical staff had already set up a magically warded tent for Stern, a female healer on standby. The Cavalry Brigade's newly formed, all-girl squadron guarded the aid station. The idea was to make the physicians, who were mostly women, feel more comfortable.

I glimpsed Stern's back as I lowered him into the bed and saw that it was

blistering and red. “Oh dear...”

Burns stretched across his symmetrical, porcelain-white body from his neck all the way to his waist. *Look what I’ve done to a knight’s proud back.*

“Please continue cooling the affected area,” the doctor calmly ordered. She cast an anti-fire spell and healing magic, applied burn ointment, and swathed him in bandages. He still hadn’t woken up. I crouched beside him, hugging my legs, waiting for him to open his eyes “I sent a message out to your squadron,” Wolfe announced as he reentered the tent.

“Thanks.” I couldn’t really think straight.

“A few injured, but everyone made it out alive. Looks like Felzen’s mist did the trick.”

Everyone made it out alive. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Wolfe patted my head. “You used up too much energy. Go get some rest.” His hands were large and calloused, the kind that gripped swords, raised horses, trained dogs.

They’re so warm.

“I’ll rest here.”

“You won’t get any here.”

“How else will I know if he’s still breathing?”

Wolfe heaved a heavy sigh. “If this is about guilt, then drop it already. Think of your pride.”

“We’re here because I’m weak.”

“You’re not weak.”

“I am, and it makes others worry, makes them feel the need to protect me. I want to protect *them*, not *be* protected.” I was sad, sad about being a burden. I didn’t want to be one. I didn’t want to be left behind. Knowing that I might never catch up made me feel wretched and lonely.

Wolfe sat down beside me. He pulled a walnut cookie out of his chest pocket and handed it to me. It had a four-leaf-clover-shaped hole in the middle. “Eat.”

“Thanks.”

A nostalgic taste filled my mouth, that of Wolfe’s mother’s homemade cookies. Sweet with a slightly salty aftertaste. The walnuts inside had definitely come from Eisberk’s forest. I used to eat her cookies all the time when I was little.

“Do you worry for him because he’s weak? Do you feel the need to protect him because he’s weak?” Wolfe asked.

“Sorry?”

“Do you worry for His Highness because he’s weak? Are you in the rearguard because you think the knights are weak?”

“No. Of course not!”

“See? And Mother still worries for *me*—me, the Eisberk Cavalry Brigade’s fearless commander.” Wolfe took a bite out of his cookie. “It’s not because I’m weak, now is it?”

“No. She’s worried because she cares for you.”

“I’m worried for you too, and so are the others. So please, get some rest.”

“I’m scared. I’m worried for him, yes, but even more worried for myself. I know I’m being a nuisance; I know I should be resting, and even so I still wish to stay by his side. I’m nothing but a selfish coward.”

I buried my head in my knees. *How pathetic. Stern’s in horrible pain, and I’m being so selfish. What can I do? Nothing. Am I being a bother by not resting? Yes. I’m here for me and no one else.*

A fist lightly struck my head from above. A faint yet familiar sugary voice graced my ears: “You’re *my* selfish coward.”

“Stern!” I scrambled to my knees, peering into the bed. His face was red, and he was...smiling. My heart leaped, tears spilling from my eyes. “Stern.”

“That’s me.”

“You’re alive.”

“As you can see.” Stern grinned awkwardly, opening his arms.

I buried my face against his chest. *His heart's beating. He's alive.* Stern patted me on the back.

"Guess I'll be taking my leave then," said Wolfe, his exit accompanied by the sound of the tent flap closing.

"I could feel your magic the entire time. Thank you, Bern," reverberated Stern's voice from inside his chest.

"I'm sorry. It's all my fault."

"Bern." I lifted my head at the firmness in his tone. He regarded me regally. "I did what I did because I knew we couldn't fight the salamander without you. I reckoned that we'd get out in one piece so long as you avoided coming to harm. I used you to my own ends, Bern. And wouldn't you know, we killed the salamander and lived to tell the tale. You have nothing to be sorry for," he declared.

Stern's right, but he's not telling the whole story. He says he protected me for my ice magic, but he knows I'm someone worth keeping around even without it. He's just trying to make me feel better. Stern's amazing: smart, composed, and considerate.

"You're amazing, Stern."

A satisfied smirk appeared on his face. "Took you long enough to notice."

"Oh, I noticed, I noticed way back."

"Did you now?"

"Thank you, for everything," I said, though I felt words hardly conveyed just how grateful I was. He had slain the salamander, defended Eisberk, saved my life, and soothed my troubled heart. I pushed down another "I'm sorry". The last thing Stern wanted was an apology. "Thank you for saving me."

"You're welcome," he said with a shy smile.



WE spent the next few days in the care of the Eisberk Cavalry Brigade.

After the salamander's defeat, the rest of the monsters quickly followed suit:

our fellow cadets, itching to make up for their earlier retreat, put up a remarkable showing in the mop-up efforts. The Cavalry Brigade's performance was equally impressive, or so Wolfe assured me.

I, meanwhile, acted as Stern's personal round-the-clock nurse, becoming skilled at applying salves and bandaging wounds as a result. Even so, his broad back was still lined with red, weal-like marks on the day we were to return to the military academy.

That morning, I smoothed ointment onto his burns as usual. The rising sun streamed into the tent, illuminating his manly physique—his large, muscled back, his square shoulders, his well-defined deltoids... Although I'd seen his body countless times, I felt an ache in my chest.

Suddenly, as I was dressing his wound, Stern tugged on my hand, and my face careened into his shoulder blades.

"Watch it!" I yelped.

"...Bern." Stern's back shifted.

"What?"

"Are you going to continue once we're back home?"

"Continue what?"

"Continue bandaging me. In my room."

"Of course I will." *What kind of question is that? Why wouldn't I?* "I'm going to remain by your side till you're fully healed."

Stern tugged harder, and to avoid pancaking my face I rested my chin on his shoulder. "Stern?"

What's up with him? Is he worried about the wound? Back injuries are rough for knights. I placed my other hand against his back and channeled my magic, hoping it would alleviate some of his pain. Stern shuddered.

"Was it too cold?"

"No."

I still feel like I should apologize. "Sorry."

“Stop apologizing!” Stern’s grip tightened.

I hurt his pride, didn’t I? I swallowed yet another “sorry” before it left my mouth.

“It’s not that,” he said. “It’s just that I’d rather...”

“You’d rather?”

“...I’d rather remain wounded.”

“Eh?”

Stern turned his head toward mine, slowly. His face drew closer, our cheeks rubbing against one another, our noses touching. I tried to pull away, and when he didn’t relinquish my arm I braced myself against his back to lever it free.

“That hurts,” he laughed.

I eased up a bit. “Let go then.”

“I don’t wanna.” Stern nuzzled his nose against mine.

My heart started beating uncontrollably. I couldn’t breathe; I was completely flustered. *What is happening?*

“If the wounds never heal, you’ll have to stay by my side forever,” he whispered sweetly. His smooth skin tickled, his soft hair tickled. It felt like the inside of my chest was being tickled.

“I don’t need a reason to stay by your side,” I chuckled, only to be abruptly pinned to the mattress. I looked up in confusion, Stern’s amber eyes staring back at me. Their enigmatic sheen made my pulse race.

Stern gently brushed away some hair covering my face. “Bern.” Even his tone was different. The air inside the tent was warm and thick. “Promise you won’t say those words to anyone but me.”



My chest tightened at the pain in his voice. *What are these feelings?* Stern dolefully furrowed his brow as he circled my lips with a finger. I faced away in panic. *Who are you?*

“Please,” he pleaded.

I didn’t know what to do. My heart was galloping frantically. I wanted to escape but couldn’t, so I averted my gaze instead.

“Please, Bern.” His saccharine voice coated my ears.

I couldn’t move, like I was under some sort of spell. *Stern must be using some kind of weird magic. Water, and ice by extension, is weak to metal. He has to be controlling the metals inside my body. Why else would I be unable to resist?*

Right as I squeezed my eyes shut, a knock shook the tent canvas. Stern lifted his head, and I took the opportunity to escape while he was distracted.

“You guys ready yet?” sounded Wolfe’s voice from outside.

“The pest is here yet again,” Stern muttered.

For whatever reason, Stern didn’t like Wolfe near the tent.

“Almost,” I replied.

“Don’t take too long.”

I glanced back to see Stern putting on his jacket like nothing had happened. I relaxed, the tension in my shoulders releasing.



THE Cavalry Brigade, including the all-female squadron, escorted us to the academy, where a bunch of students had gathered on the upper floors of the dormitory to witness Eisberk’s famed cavalry.

“Look at them, they’ve been waiting for you,” observed Wolfe, their excited cheers bringing a wry smile to his face. “Anyhow, with a horse like that, you oughta visit more often, Bern.”

The horsewomen grinned at me cheerfully. “We’d love to learn more from you.”

“I will.” The dorm windows erupted as I fist-bumped Wolfe.

Chapter 8: Sternchen von Milchstrasse

MY pain was insignificant compared to the joy of hearing Bern's reassuring voice, of feeling his soothing touch as we rode to the aid station.

In sharp contrast to the plain canvas, the magical shielding on the medical tent was first class, the doctor top tier. The grievous wounds I had suffered from the salamander's attack healed before I knew it, no doubt the result of Bern caring for me day and night.

My heart had trembled at the fervor with which he pleaded for my wellbeing. I'd never thought I meant so much to him—the man who never lost his cool, not even against a marauding bear, breaking down utterly and completely. A wave of ecstasy had washed over me. The burns so bad I could barely breathe? I was grateful for them. For a moment I'd even been ready to embrace death. I'd believed that nothing could possibly top that moment of sheer bliss.

Oh, how I scorned my ignorance after experiencing Bern nursing me back to health with undying devotion.

Fast forward a few days after I was initially injured. While in the care of the Eisberk Cavalry Brigade, I was surprised to learn that female soldiers numbered among their ranks. Only men could become knights in the royal capital's order because putting women's lives in danger went against the chivalric code.

Yet as I watched them perform their duties in stride, I began to feel that maybe it wasn't just beefy men who had a place on the battlefield. I asked Bern about them only to learn that their inclusion had been his idea. *Interesting*, I thought.

Then there was Bern's magic. Never before had I seen someone enchant others' weapons without touching them or using a magic circle, but Bern accomplished the feat like it was the most normal thing in the world. The Cavalry Brigade also seemed to take his abilities for granted.

I could maybe enchant weapons from a distance if they were already charmed with my magic, but only if, and certainly not if they'd been previously imbued with a different element. Our enchantments might've looked the same at a glance, but mine only worked on metallic objects, not wood or skin.

His abilities truly know no bounds.

The more such unexpected sides of him I discovered, the more my love for him grew.

I'd been under his spell since the day we met. I still remembered it like it'd happened just yesterday—the day my seven-year-old self's world lit up.



WHEN we first met, Bern had no idea I was part of the royal family and I had no idea he was a nobleman's son.

For my seventh birthday, the Eisberk family gifted me one of their famed horses.

A horse? I wasn't really feeling it. I'd ridden ride ponies every now and then but never a horse so large as the one that was to be my present.

Both my father and brother had their very own Eisberk horse. Mounts from Eisberk stock were big, fast, and smart. They had a refined aura about them. Father and Brother's were massive and wouldn't let me touch them, as though they were looking down their elegant, pointy noses at me.

In the distance I glimpsed a stableboy about my age leading an ornately decorated horse out of a stall.

Is he not scared? I felt actual concern for the boy. The beast could quite literally kick the life out of him.

The boy wore ceremonial riding garb, his blue hair tied in a ponytail. They'd probably chosen a small child to emphasize the horse's size. *Poor thing*, I was thinking, when the horse suddenly raised its forelegs high.

Watch out! I held my breath in fear, but the boy smiled softly. *He's...smiling?* I couldn't tear my eyes away. He gazed at the horse tenderly, muttering something as he caressed its neck. Soon the horse calmed and resumed walking

like nothing had happened. The stableboy, unfazed, followed, his gait steadfast.
Like magic...

I wanted to examine the horse up close, so I slinked toward the stables the first chance I got. The adults couldn't know. If they caught on, they'd find one reason or another to prevent me from seeing the horse for another week at least. That was just how the royal palace worked: safety concerns, paperwork, ceremonies; they all ground everything to a crawl. I was used to constant compromises.



I eventually made it to the stables unseen. The blue-haired boy from earlier was still there and still in his formal outfit.

I observed him from behind a wall. The boy gently, lovingly, stroked the horse's neck and it just...let him. I wanted to get even closer, but he didn't appear to be leaving anytime soon. When I peeked around the corner again, our eyes met.

Damn it!

"Are you an angel?" the stableboy asked. I whipped my head around, thinking there was someone behind me. There wasn't, and I realized he meant me. Adults often proclaimed that I was "as beautiful as an angel," but never had a boy my age referred to me thus, and with such a serious expression besides. "Are you?" the boy asked once more, tilting his head inquisitively.

Flustered, I shook my head.

"Oh, you're not."

I shook my head again.

"What's wrong? Want to see the horse?"

I nodded, and he beckoned me over, a great, big smile on his face. "Aren't you scared?" I asked meekly.

"Why would I be? He's one of the nicest horses I know."

He speaks of horses like they're his friends.

“Come on. He won’t bite.”

I felt a tingling sensation. Only Felzen, a childhood friend of mine, spoke to me in such an unreserved manner, so the stableboy’s familiarity was rather new to me. Bracing myself, I lined up beside him.

“*Yuki*,” he said, calling out to the horse in some weird language. The animal whinnied cheerfully and dipped his head. “Go ahead. Touch him.”

The sudden invitation caught me by surprise. “M-May I?” I timidly asked. Neither Father’s nor Brother’s horse would have wanted my fingers anywhere near them.

“May he, *Yuki*?” the boy inquired. The horse regarded me mildly, lowering his head. “That means yes.”

I nervously put out my hand.

“Slowly, softly,” the boy whispered.

“Slowly, softly,” I repeated, touching the horse as delicately as I would a flower. He pushed his muzzle against my hand, seemingly requesting more. I was so happy that the remaining tension in my face eased completely. “He’s so warm.”

“He is.”

“And firm.”

“Yeah.”

“*Yuki*, was it?”

“That’s what we’ve been calling him ’til now,” the boy replied, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

“Does it mean anything?”

“It means ‘snow’ in a different language.”

“How fitting. Is he yours?”

The boy shook his head, his ponytail swishing from side to side. “We raised him like family, but Father says he’s to go to the prince.”

He's doesn't want to lose the horse. "Does that make you angry?"

"I'm sad to see him go, but I also think Yuki's the only one worthy of carrying a prince. They'll learn to appreciate one another, I'm sure."

"I see." I was genuinely astounded. *The horse he cares for so deeply is about to get taken away, yet he...*

"Hope he takes good care of you," he told Yuki, smiling.

I will.

"Yuki. Yuki," I said, trying out his name as I brought my cheek up to his muzzle. Yuki gazed at me docilely in return, and my heart throbbed. *I want us to become the best of friends, you cute, cute thing,* I thought from the bottom of my heart.

A series of footfalls sounded from nearby. I raised my head. *It's the palace guard.*

"Why now?" I groaned. *They'll drag me away if they find me.* I'd hoped to stay a little while longer.

"Are you on the run?" the blue-haired boy asked, a mischievous look in his eyes.

I nodded, and upon my affirmation, he tugged at my arm. I glanced at him in confusion only to see an index finger pressed against his lips as he dragged me into the stall.

Yuki will kick us if we get that close, I thought in alarm, unconsciously resisting.

"Stay quiet and everything'll be okay. Yuki, if you could move a bit."

Breath held, body stiff, I followed him. Together we hid behind Yuki's hindquarters. *It reeks.* We lowered ourselves onto a bed of straw, and Yuki pawed some more toward us. While I was busy freaking out, the boy simply grinned.

Just in time, Yuki quietly shifted to the side, blocking us from view.

"Not here either," a guard said dejectedly.

“Today’s offering is though.”

“An Eisberk horse.”

“A fine steed if I’ve ever seen one.”

The stableboy smiled.

“The shut-in is nothing without his horses. They may not’ve secured him a spot in court, but he sure as heck owes his status to them.”

Yuki neighed, his teeth gnashing. My heart started to pound; I had never witnessed an animal grow hostile right in front of me. Although he’d been calm mere moments before, he suddenly seemed like a giant beast to whom human reason meant nothing. Body heat radiated from him as he began to tremble—Yuki was furious.

I’m scared.

“Cut it out, the horse’s mad.”

“Huh? As if he understands a word.”

“Eisberk horses are smart. I own one, I’d know,” the guard said, and the other fell silent. “They’re kind and obedient, yet fearless. They’d do anything for their master.”

“They’re that amazing?”

“Adorable yet terrifying.”

“Like the woman of my dreams,” he laughed.

“True that.”

The laughter faded into the distance along with their retreating footsteps. Yuki slowly shifted back to his original stance and flicked his tail. The boy fondly rubbed his tummy, whispering, “Thanks.”

Yuki snorted in response.

As we exited the stall, the boy dusted off his straw-strewn clothing. Watching him, I wondered why I hadn’t yet done so. My attempt didn’t go too well, and giggling, the boy patted my clothes down for me.

The palace bells were starting to ring. *I better get going, fast.*

“Gotta run. See you!” I said, dashing off with a sour taste in my mouth since I wanted to stay.

“See you!” His reply filled me with joy.

After making it back to my room, I realized something: “...I forgot to ask his name.”

I hope we meet again someday. And if we do, let's ride alongside one another, though that's a big “if”.

I decided to keep the name “Yuki”. I had a feeling that the stableboy and I just might see each other again if I did.



WE would meet again three years later, on the day of the junior sword fighting tournament, which I attended in disguise (with royal authorization, of course).

Boys aged ten to twelve could participate in the annual competition. First through third place received a prestigious medal and a guaranteed spot in military prep school once they became thirteen. It was the earliest medal anyone could be awarded, the dream of every aspiring knight.

The boys who enrolled in the prep school at thirteen years old then graduated at fifteen, at which point they were officially considered soldiers. Those who sought to advance to an officer position entered the military academy at sixteen. Only students of the academy could refer to themselves as knights.

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw Felzen walking beside a blue-haired competitor. *That's the stableboy*, I thought immediately. How could I forget his hair, azure like the sky, or his deep blue eyes?

He's a participant! The thought of crossing swords with him filled me with glee. I had never felt more motivated to win. I steadily fought my way up to the semifinals, in which I would finally face off against none other than the blue-haired stableboy himself.

His midnight blue eyes gleamed underneath his helm. He didn't seem to

recognize me, however, the intensity of his gaze unchanging. In my disappointment, I charged forward.

Our swords locked with a high-pitched clang. *He's good.* I pushed, and he pushed back, playfully. *He's enjoying himself.* He couldn't possibly be some random stableboy, not with such elegant movements.

Show me. Show me more. More of yourself! I'd never experienced a match quite so...*fun.*

His sword went flying.

"Rassemblez! Saluez!"

The crowd erupted. The match was over.

Steadying my breath, I proffered my right hand. He grabbed it with an unmistakable firmness.

"Good luck in the finals!" he said in a near-whisper, smiling.

What a pleasant kid. I want to know—I want to know everything about you. It was the first time I'd ever felt so intrigued by someone.

I faced Felzen in the championship bout. My red-haired friend's swordsmanship was in a league of its own, and though I gave it my all, I just barely lost at the very end.

The consolation match was still underway. One of the combatants was the blue-haired boy, so I decided to observe it from the stands

His opponent dwarfed him, yet the boy fought relentlessly, refusing to give in. My hands sweated as I watched the contest unfold.

"Rassemblez! Saluez!"

He demurely bowed after the match was called, extended his hand. His former adversary shook it. He was the victor.

"Attaboy, Bern!" Felzen ran into the arena and bundled him into a huge hug in celebration of his performance.

Don't those two get along. I felt a sting inside my chest. *Am I worried he'll take Felzen away from me? Or am I sad that I can't be up there, celebrating*

alongside them? I balled my hand into a tight fist.

The award ceremony began. Standing hidden behind Father, I watched as they approached the podium. The blue-haired boy beamed happily at the bottom step, solemnly ascending the stand when his name was announced. I repeated it to myself so I wouldn't forget. *Where have I heard that last name?*

Father and Brother laughed as Felzen leaped onto the first-place platform with a roar.

Two guests of honor waved at the winners: the red-haired marshal and the blue-haired, "shut-in" marquess, as some called him.

That's where. I took a deep breath. *I don't care how long it takes. No more compromises.* I stared at my father's back. My mind set, I spoke.

Father turned to me, a kind, gentle glow in his eyes.



CUE the following morning. My heart was racing; Father had granted one of my rare requests: "I want to speak with the third placer." To no one's surprise but my own, the boy was friends with Felzen and the son of the reclusive Marquess Eisberk.

"That's it?" my father had laughed.

You make it sound so easy. I sat down in a chair and waited.

"...Go in," echoed a servant's voice.

The bulky door opened, revealing a red-haired boy and a blue-haired boy standing side by side. He looked rather small next to Felzen.

His eyes, as blue as a cloudless day, widened when he saw me. "Angel boy?!" he said, and my heart jumped.

He remembered. I wasn't the only one. A smile crept over my lips.

He turned to Felzen excitedly. Felzen glanced at him in exasperation, kneeling, and he hastily followed suit.

This isn't what I want. I started toward them. *I don't want to stare at the top of your head.*

“Felzen, buddy, lift your head!” I said.

I want to be friends with him, like Felzen.

Felzen looked up, sticking his tongue out. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

“Cut it! We’re in my room. There’s no need for that,” I admonished him.

The blue-haired boy stared at us in confusion. I smiled as our eyes met. “You’re Bernstein von Eisberk, yes? I’m Sternchen. A pleasure to meet you.” I offered him my hand, bare and gloveless.

“Th-The pleasure’s all mine, Your Highness.” He meekly extended his, and I squeezed it. The gesture seemed to put him at ease, since he squeezed back.

“I kept the name Yuki, you know?” I said, bringing a smile to his face in turn.

That was easy.

Bernstein and Felzen were childhood friends, so it didn’t take much to break the ice. Afterward, we held a three-way, no-holds-barred practice sword match in the palace courtyard, which was just large enough to play in. Bernstein’s deep blue eyes mocked me as I marveled at his swordsmanship. I shoved him back, and their cerulean hue darkened in surprise.

This is...fun! As fun as sparring with Felzen!

“Forgive me if I’m wrong, Your Highness, but didn’t we meet at the tournament?” he asked.

“We sure did! I was participating in secret.”

“You’re one naughty prince, aren’t you!” He giggled, causing me to laugh as well.

“Some tea, perhaps?” someone called.

I looked over to the gazebo and saw that the maidservants had prepared refreshments. He and I exchanged a grin.

“Prince Sternchen,” he said, gasping for air in the wake of our bout.

Don’t call me that.

“Drop the ‘-chen’. And while you’re at it, talk like a normal person, will you?” I

ordered, gasping for breath much the same. No one'd ever listened to me on the matter, but I had to at least try to break down the invisible wall between us.

"In that case, call me Bern. Okay? Stern."

I was caught off guard by his suggestion. My heart filled with delight. *He has no need for walls.*

"Okay, Bern! Now, how about some tea, you two?"

"Aye!" Bern and Felzen exclaimed, and the three of us scampered over to where the tea was set out.

And that was how our relationship began. Bern couldn't visit the royal capital all too often, but when he did, the three of us rode horses together, sneaked out into the city, shared secrets, and just enjoyed each other's company.



AFTER all those years, Bern still hadn't noticed my feelings for him. I couldn't come out to him, a guy, without being ridiculed, nor did I have the courage to force my way into his affections. I didn't want to ruin what we already had but didn't want to give up on him either, so I waited...at least until Kraut came into the picture. And as if that weren't enough, Felzen had also been getting worryingly close to Bern.

How I wished we had met sooner. How I wished I could have met him but a day earlier than Felzen. I could've grown up at his side, but instead Felzen had gotten Bern all to himself, just because they became childhood friends first. *How unfair.*

If anyone deserved Bern's affection, it was a man's man like Felzen. That much I recognized. What that womanizer lacked, however, was my undying love for Bern. I had eyes for him and only him. No woman could compare.

Which was what had led me to tell Bern to pretend that he was mine while we were in the military.

I wanted him with me, act or not. I finally put my feelings into words only to be curtly shot down. Bern had lain there as I traced his lips yet rejected my proposal the second I brought it up. I realized then that Bern wasn't the type to

use other people for his own gain, that he didn't care for my power as a prince—which was why I'd fallen for him in the first place. *What am I even doing?*

And then Wolfe showed up. The two were childhood friends. He spoke to Bern with superficial courtesy, maintaining a casual tone. The man lived up to his title as commander; his mere presence reassured Bern, much to my chagrin.

I had no intention of handing Bern over: not to Kraut, not to Wolfe, not to anyone.

I was worried—worried because everyone had realized Bern's charm, worried what would happen if someone like Kraut set their sights on him.

Really, a justifiable concern considering how much he'd let me get away with after I warned him about that exact thing: I'd put my arm around him, brushed my fingers over his lips, and somehow had still not crossed the line. Was he okay with it because I was the one doing it, or did it not matter to him whatsoever? I detested that hopelessly innocent side of his and found it endearing all at once. *I want to make him feel weird around me.*

Each morning, Bern applied ointment to my back. It was the only time we got to ourselves. I let myself bask in his kindness. I cherished his occasional awkward expressions, expressions only I was privy to. Inside the tent he cared for me and me alone.

A shiver ran down my spine every time his soft, frosty fingers pressed against my chest. My sensitive body couldn't help but mistake his gentle touch for a lover's caress, filling me with ecstasy.

It was all his fault. If only his touch weren't so delicate, so tender, so loving. If only he had tried to escape when our noses rubbed together.

On our last day with the Cavalry Brigade, I gathered up my courage and asked him to remain by my side until I was fully healed, the request one I could make only in that particular moment.

When Bern replied that he didn't need a reason to stay with me, I threw him down into the bed. I couldn't help myself, even though I was about to destroy everything we had built. I ached for him. I wished to explore every inch of his body. The wall between us was tall and thick, and I had to break it down before

someone else did.

The sight of Bern lying there, compliant, almost drove me to tears. His loose hair cascaded onto the bed. He faced away, the nape of his neck flushed, just begging to be devoured, while his all-too-blue eyelashes quivered in panic. The same Bern that had fearlessly stood against the salamander, had downed a ferocious bear, wordlessly trembling.

I'm going to get the wrong idea, Bern. He looked so enchanting that I was ready to throw away everything. I went in for a kiss only for a nuisance by the name of Wolfe to rudely interrupt us. The bastard always waited outside the tent whenever Bern was inside. Felzen had finally left the picture, yet we still couldn't be alone together.

"I'll go get Yuki and Rain," Bern volunteered, and once he'd left the tent, Wolfe shot me an angry glare.

"Listen here, Your Highness."

How rude.

"Don't you dare treat Eisberk's son like a servant," said Wolfe.

"Servant? I'd never. He's the love of my life."

"All the more improper, Your Highness."

"Rich coming from you."

His face froze over. "I'm not like you."

Liar, I know you like Bern. I can't lose to some spineless coward like you. "I'd give up everything for him."

"No, you'd take everything from him." The anger in Wolfe's voice indicated he didn't much care for royalty. "Wanna end up in hell? Go ahead, but don't drag Bernstein down with you. You have no right to tear down everything he's built."

I can tell he cares for Bern deeply, not that that's going to stop me.

"Hell? Heaven's my only destination," I retorted before leaving to finish preparations for our departure from Eisberk.

Chapter 9: Wolfe

I rode through the forest in pursuit of monsters, the Eisberk Cavalry Brigade following behind me.

I'd known Bern since she was a baby; we were childhood friends. I'd taught her how to ride, and the first dog I ever trained was her pup, Obli. Although I still addressed her somewhat formally, we were closer than that in reality.

I hadn't thought highly of her when she was little, back when Elfenbein and I played together. Lil' Bernstein was a spoiled, bratty, good-for-nothing crybaby as far as I was concerned. Then she learned to ride, joined us in our games. Her competitive nature made me see her in a new light. I found her persistent attitude endearing, even cute.

The lake incident was when I started feeling a special kind of way toward her. When Felzen flung his boomerang into the water and everyone had all but given up, she erected a bridge of ice to fetch it back. And get it back she did, in the end, although both she and Felzen ended up in the lake and were later admonished by their parents for their misuse of magic.

Bern's powers blew me away. The ability to carve a path where there was none seemed nigh miraculous to me. The occasion may've led to our receiving a thorough scolding, but it also provided me with a clear sense of purpose: I swore to protect the paths she walked—and to walk the paths she chose—from that day forward.



WE and the Knights Order were out on a monster hunt.

A forest and large river separated Eisberk and Neue Milchstrasse. The Eisberk Cavalry Brigade regularly patrolled the road leading into the royal capital. After noticing signs of increased monster activity over the past few days, we had employed the help of the Order.

Fevered calls to retreat echoed from deep within the forest. We rushed to the knights' aid, picking off monsters along the way. The salamander let out an earthshaking roar as it breathed fire onto an ice barrier. Bern lay on the ground beside the barrier, a knight stretched over her. The sight filled me with rage.

A flurry of arrows rained down upon the salamander, resulting in a momentary distraction while I called for Bern's support.

Soon her ice enveloped our arrows, reshaping them into something beautiful. Bern's magic never failed to amaze me, no matter how many times I'd seen it in action. Her power was utterly beyond my reach, yet I couldn't help but yearn for it and its wielder.

As wave after wave of glittering projectiles pierced its body, the salamander writhed in pain.

Gasping for air, the knight pulled himself off of Bern and nocked an arrow. I watched with bated breath as frost crept over its shiny, silver tip. *This man holds great power. Great, beautiful power, much like Bern's.*

The arrow whizzed through the air, nailing the salamander right in the forehead and killing it instantly.

Bern drew the collapsed knight into her arms, desperately pleading for help. I hadn't seen her so lose herself in years. The soldier had glistening golden hair, a face pretty even in its swollen state. Seeing Bern cradle the unfamiliar man sent a pang through my chest.

My breath caught when she told me he was Yuki's owner. He was the man that had robbed Eisberk of its icy crown jewel, the man who'd dragged her off to military prep school thinking she was a boy. He was none other than Second Prince Sternchen von Milchstrasse.



THE burns on his back required immediate medical attention. We transported him to the aid station, where, given the severity of his wounds and his royal status, a special tent had been prepared.

After observing Bern devotedly nurse him back to health, it didn't take a wise man to realize he meant more to her than a random classmate. Bern, being

Bern, might've done the same for just anyone, but her earlier freakout wasn't normal. She had cried, cried for *him*.

I was jealous. Jealous of the man who preyed on Bern's kindness, who feigned weakness to get in an extra touch or two, who lusted for her despite his belief that she was a man.

All that awaited her down that path was tragedy. She'd be free if she just returned to Eisberk. There she could don armor as a knight or dress as a lady, and nobody would say a word. But if Bern continued at Prince Sternchen's side, she'd have to pretend to be a man for the rest of her life. In other words, she'd never be able to settle down with anyone. She would never find happiness, not as man, and not as a woman.



I saw them off to the academy dormitory. I spotted a bunch of curious faces peeking out of the windows, waiting for Bern and the prince to return home to them. *What a warm welcome. Bern's one lucky lass, but she belongs in Eisberk nevertheless.*

"With a horse like that, you oughta visit more often, Bern," I said.

She replied with a wholesome smile, and I fist-bumped her, really rubbing it in that we had a special relationship they didn't.

She was originally supposed to lead the Cavalry Brigade.

Glass-shatteringly loud cheers at our backs, as we set off for Eisberk, I vowed that I would bring her home one day.

Chapter 10: The Scent of Stern's Back

I'D been feeling strange lately. I hadn't been able to look Stern in the face ever since the monster hunt.

Whenever I walked to his dormitory to apply more ointment to his burns, my heart slammed against my chest. I didn't want to see him but disliked the thought of leaving him in someone else's care even more.

Felzen had looked at me funny when I first nervously entered Stern's room. Unable to bear his puzzled expression, I fled in a panic. Although I wasn't doing anything wrong, I couldn't help but feel a weird sense of guilt. Felzen tagged along a few more times until, abruptly, Stern threw a massive fit. Stern put up a brave front when he and I were alone, but I doubted he was comfortable exposing his wounds to others.

One day, I knocked on his door and opened it only to see Stern fresh out the shower and smiling. His wet, golden hair was practically glowing. A stray drop of water trickled down his collarbone. I didn't know where to look.

Has he always been this...er...um, seductive? I averted my gaze, sighing as I wondered what had happened to the cherubic boy I once knew. *He was so cute back then.*

I'd never forget how I confused Stern for an angel when we first met in front of the royal stables. The lighting had made his flaxen head of curls and matching amber eyes appear green. Just looking at him had filled me with delight. I'd wanted to gobble up his soft, creamy, peach-pink cheeks. His guarded, fairylike gaze had been so cute that it didn't seem human.

Now he's nothing but a devil. I stopped my train of thought, schooled my face into a deadpan expression. Stern had gotten a little too used to teasing me. *I must hold my ground!*

"Show me your back."

"Here you go." Stern sat down on the arm of the sofa and did as requested.

It's gotten so much better. I'd recently started using a moisturizer instead of

the medicated salve. Marlana had sent it, saying it'd lessen the chance of scarring.

The lotion had a nostalgic, foresty smell that brought me back to my childhood days. The scent reminded me of wind blowing through Eisberk's abundant pine trees. I dabbed some on my palms and smoothed it over Stern's back.

There's no way he'd be able to apply this himself.

Stern's shoulders shuddered whenever I touched him. The sight of his back still trembling after so many sessions was a guilty pleasure of mine. Only I got to see that side of him.

I ran my fingers across his slightly puffy wounds. They'd become hardly noticeable, yet remembering that he'd gotten them protecting me filled me with emotion. The joy I felt exceeded my guilt, which in turn made me feel guiltier.

"They're almost fully healed now," I remarked, a sense of emptiness washing over me. *How awkward.*

"Shame." Stern's reply took me by surprise.

I was both embarrassed and happy that we felt the same way. Mostly embarrassed. "Shame? What if they leave a scar?" Reluctant to reveal my true feelings, I said the opposite of what I thought.

Per usual I rubbed the leftover lotion into the backs of my hands. *So pleasant.*

"And what if they do?" Stern asked.

"Not this again."

"They're a badge of honor."

"There's nothing honorable about a back wound."

"They're proof that I protected someone deeply important to me. What could be more honorable than that?"

Shocked by the gravity in his voice, I glanced at Stern only to see him soberly staring back. "I... I don't know." I looked away, unable to muster a proper

response.

Stern sighed as he stood up. "I'll go pour us some tea."

"Thanks."

Stern had recently started to offer me tea after our moisturizing sessions. It had become something of a tradition for me to return to my room after finishing a cup.

Stern placed a teacup in front of me while I settled onto the sofa. I felt weirdly tense, though I never did otherwise—neither in class nor when the three of us were in my and Felzen's room—it was only in Stern's. Being alone with him, just the two of us, scared me. I wasn't intimidated by him or anything, it was just that I'd feel something welling up deep inside my chest.

Pre-hunt Stern and post-hunt Stern were like two different people. He'd get angry out of nowhere for seemingly no reason now. I didn't know how to handle him.

Stern sat down beside me. "Do I make you uncomfortable?" he asked, leaning closer.

I stared at my hands. "No. Why would you?"

"Liar," he said, calling my bluff.

I didn't know how to explain myself. He hadn't done anything; there was no real reason. I had no idea what was causing my unease. In the past I'd been able to occupy the same room as Stern. I could have gazed at his naked body, and my only thought would have been that his skin looked whiter than Felzen's. *What changed?*

"You do make me a bit uncomfortable, yes. I couldn't tell you why—but I don't think it's you that's the problem. It's me...probably," I muttered, stumbling over my words. I ducked my head.

"Hmm." Stern grinned, pretending to sink deep into thought. "Do you feel uncomfortable around me?"

"Not when Felzen's around, no. It's weird."

"Felzen..." The air suddenly grew chilly. Stern placed his cup down. "How's

this?" He snaked his arm around my shoulders. "Does this make you uncomfortable?"

Stern often did the same in the mess hall and hallways, and I never really thought much of it. I still felt mostly okay. "This is fine-ish."

A shiver rippled down my spine as his hand slid across my cheek all the way up to my ear. I was reminded of the time he lectured me in the back of a wagon, and my chest tightened.

"What about this?"

"A little." My heart was racing. Truth be told, the "a little" part was a lie.

Something's wrong with me. Stern can't find out. I don't want him hearing my heartbeat.

I gasped as Stern's other hand snatched my chin, forcing it upward. He lowered his face, the tip of his nose chafing against mine.

"Stop. Please..."

"And this is bad?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you resisting?"

"Because you put me under some weird spell. Knock it off. I'm scared."

Stern's eyes widened in surprise, and an angelic smile graced his lips. "Magic doesn't work that way. You can freeze blood gushing out of a body, but you can't freeze the blood inside one, can you?"

Thank you for the polite explanation, Professor Stern. "Maybe I can't, but I'm sure you could."

"I wish."

"Then...why?"

"Really think about it."

"Haven't got the slightest clue."

"Here's a hint."

“A hint?”

Stern smiled. “You mean the world to me, Bern.”

“Likewise?”

“You’re not following.”

“Following what?”

“You do realize I’m trying to kiss you, right?” he said with a wry smile.

I shoved his chin away in shock. *I did it. I’m free of his magic.*

“A little rude, don’t you think?”

“I, erm, I’m a guy, remember?” I sputtered. *Well, I’m not but am. Actually, does he know I’m a woman?* My head began to spin.

“And?”

“D-Didn’t you give me a whole speech about—”

Stern’s eyes lit up. “I said you mean the world to me, Bern.”

“But wouldn’t that make you a homose—”

“I’m not into guys. I’m into you, Bern. Your gender means nothing to me.” His intense gaze pierced my very soul.

“I-I’m sorry. I don’t know how these things work.”

“I know you don’t.” Stern laughed. “If I ever make you feel unpleasant in any way, make sure to show some resistance. Lead a guy on, and they might just get the wrong idea.”

Unpleasant? I find it uncomfortable, maybe, but not unpleasant.

I can’t let him find out that I’m a woman. I’ve lied about it for so long. Actually, I’ve been deceiving Stern for as long as we’ve known each other. How can I accept his love if I haven’t even shown him my true self?

I hung my head, biting my lip. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do you hate me?”

“Why would you ask me that? You know I don’t.”

“I just wanted to hear it from you.” Stern grinned. He knew what he was doing.

“Sorry, but I’ll have to turn you down.”

“Who’s the lucky someone? Felzen? Wolfe? Someone from the White Lily Tea Party?”

Why is he bringing up those two?

“No one. It’s a me thing.”

Stern’s eyes narrowed, a wicked smile on his face. He took my hand, inserting his fingers between mine. The lotion made our hands slippery. *How embarrassing.*

“Understood. I won’t bring this up again. I’ve heard everything I need to hear. It’ll do for now.”

“Sorry, and thanks.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry. I hope we can remain friends.”

“Of course.”

I liked Stern. Was it a romantic kind of like? That I didn’t know—but I did know that I wanted to stay his friend.

Stern gave a satisfied nod.

“I’ll head back. It’s getting late.” I pulled my fingers from his grasp. They slipped right out of his hand, another shiver running down my spine at the perverse sensation. Stern got a laugh out of my reaction. I looked down in shame.

“See you tomorrow.” Stern blew hot air into my ear, the whisper of a devil.



I sighed as I entered my room. *I’m beat.*

“You okay? You can always just ignore him, you know?” Felzen said.

“I’m fine.”

“You sure? You’ve had Stern’s smell all over you recently.”

Felzen's wording made my heart skip a beat. "I-It's the moisturizer. I have it on my hands."

Felzen grabbed my hand, sniffed it. *He's so warm.* My body stiffened, though the contact was within our usual boundaries. I felt self-conscious.

"So that's why."

"Marlena picked it out, apparently."

"Your secret's still safe, right?"

"Should be. I haven't done anything that would make him question my gender." *Not that I could ask him even if I had.*

"I'm here if you need someone to talk to. Don't take on everything by yourself."

I can't talk to him about Stern's confession though. I don't want to threaten their friendship or bring Felzen into this mess.

"I won't."

When I smiled, Felzen nodded.

I only hid my identity to maintain my spot at the academy; I'd had no intention of lying to Stern. I was me before I was a girl or boy, or that was how I thought of it. That had worked all my life, and I had no reason to believe it wouldn't continue working. Yet I was starting to feel terrified, terrified of being neither.

I'd never worried about such things. I questioned how long I could keep up the boy act, wondered when I'd be able to return to being a girl again and if Stern would despise me when he found out.

Stern liked knight me, not girl me.

Girl me was too tall, chestless, and had a face easily mistaken for a boy's. Stern wasn't overly fond of women either; she stood no chance at earning his affection.

He'll think I'm a liar. I shuddered at the thought.

As the one in the wrong, I'd have no right to complain about how others

reacted once the truth came out, which made me think: *What if I never let it?*

Chapter 11: Spring Break in Eisberk

EVERYONE went home come spring vacation. Because the social season was still underway, however, many traveled no further than their town houses in the capital. Yet social season or no, my shut-in father spent most of his days in the countryside. And I had no social events to attend, so I decided to head back to Eisberk like any other year.

Elfenbein belonged to the royal knights order and had to remain in Neue Milchstrasse for the time-being. Lilia would be staying at our residence there. She had found someone else to escort her to social events.

I returned home excited. I had things to do during my stay. When I entered the stables with my trusty steed Rain in tow, I spied Wolfe washing a horse.

“Welcome back,” he called.

“It’s good to be back!”

Obli and some children popped out of the stall. *Seems like he’s been teaching them how to take care of the horses.*

“Hey there.” The children backed away at my voice. I smiled at them and received some awkward smiles in response.

“You’re going into town, yeah? I’ll come with,” Wolfe said. Wolfe knew everything that went on in Eisberk and was always kind enough to fill me in about what I’d missed, much to my appreciation.

“Sure thing.”

“Better bust out your finest outfit, or you’re not coming anywhere near me!”

His cocky attitude made me laugh. “Right back at you!” I replied, turning to go back into the house. Obli, of course, tagged along.

As soon as I opened the door to my room, I undid my ponytail, tossed off my uniform, and hopped into bed. A nostalgic smell graced my nostrils. *I could stay*

like this all day.

After enjoying some peace and relaxation, I opened the closet in which I kept my favorite selection of dresses. Just thinking about what I was going to wear filled me with glee. The academy uniform was cool, but wearing it every day had staled fast. Men's casual clothing also lacked a variety of color, which I didn't really like.

I picked out a flared, pink, flower-patterned dress. I twisted my hair into a half-updo replete with a bow. The airiness of the dress made my heart feel light in turn.

As I walked down the stairs, I saw Wolfe standing in the hall dressed like a proper gentleman. While his work clothes might highlight his masculine figure, his formal attire gave him an entirely new, sleek look.

Wolfe squinted at me like he was being blinded by a brilliant light. "You look gorgeous."

"Thanks. You look quite dashing yourself." I walked out the door with a spring in my step.

What we called a town was at best a modest country village. Eisberk was huge, yet its main settlement was anything but. The town was nowhere near as wealthy as the royal capital but wasn't dirt poor either. Folks could purchase their daily necessities and not much else—that sort of place.

We stopped by a bunch of shops. New ones, old ones, all kinds. Surprisingly, Wolfe made zero sour faces as I bought myself some things I couldn't in Neue Milchstrasse: cute stationery, ribbons, sweets. I had completely forgotten how fun and liberating it was to be able to act the way I wanted when I wanted.

We went to our favorite café, where the usual waiter prepared our usual table. Wolfe ordered his customary black coffee, and I asked for my standard plate of assorted seasonal fruits, which comprised an abundance of strawberries and stewed apples topped with whipped cream and blueberry jam. It came with two forks and an extra, smaller plate, as a lot of people liked to split the dish.

Everything was the same, and that comforted me.

I divvied up the fruit and handed Wolfe the smaller plate.



“Nice to see nothing’s changed in Eisberk,” I commented.

“I guess it hasn’t. How’ve you been holding up?” Wolfe asked with a smile.
“Are His Highness’s wounds healed yet?”

“Pretty much. They look much nicer.”

“You saw them?”

“Of course. I’m the one looking after him.”

“You’re not his servant. Where’s your pride as an Eisberk?”

The indignation in Wolfe’s voice made me chuckle. We Eisberks weren’t a very conventional noble family, and he knew it. It was why we were walking around town to begin with.

“He’s my friend and they would’ve been my wounds if not for him.”

“‘My wounds’...” Wolfe muttered, snatching a strawberry off my plate.

“Hey! What gives!”

“Quit hogging all the strawberries.”

“Since when did you care?” I grabbed one off his plate in rebellion.

“Fair enough.” Wolfe grinned. “So...any post-graduation plans?”

“I’d like to stay in the military while I’m still welcome there. Problem is, Vulkan knows I’m a girl. He’s been willing to turn a blind eye for now, but...who knows.”

“You’re always welcome here. The female cavalry unit is dying to have their leader back.”

“I’m no leader, but sure. I’ll come back if things don’t work out.”

“And if they do, you won’t?”

“No.”

“No hesitation, huh?” Wolfe sighed. “What’s so great about the royal capital, anyway?” he asked, his black-eyed gaze full of judgment.

“It’s not about the capital.”

I'd choose Eisberk over Neue Milchstrasse any day. It's just that... It's just that...?

"Then what is it about?"

I'd like to know the same thing.

"Why would you ever want to live there? You can't go around dressed like that; you can't buy or eat the things you want."

Wolfe's right. I can't even window-shop for the clothes I like. Is there really any point in continuing to flatten my gradually growing chest—in squashing my true self, just to remain in the capital?

Stern's golden eyes flashed before mine, whisking my breath away. "I'd just like to stay a little while longer."

At least while I still can.

"Uh-huh," Wolfe grumbled, taking a swig of coffee.

We left the café and made our way home through the mulberry fields. Every summer, my fingers would turn blue from eating the berries, the pulp trapped underneath my nails.

"Remember the thing you did with your skirt, Bern?"

That sentence was all it took for me to realize that we were contemplating the same memory. "Mulberry stains don't come out."

"They sure don't."

One day we had all gotten together to gather mulberries for Lilia, who couldn't come out to play. I carried them home, using my skirt as a pouch, which became irreparably stained, naturally. The head maid was furious and forced me to scrub the garment alongside her. I learned the hard way that mulberry stains didn't come out.

Despite her anger, though, she'd made mulberry jam the next day. I remembered handing out the mulberry jam cookies that Lilia baked afterward to everyone.

The frosty, white moon hung low above us, the sky the very color of that

midnight-purple jam.

“Enjoying your jaunt under the moon, Sir Lunar Ice Knight?” Wolfe chuckled.

“Not funny.”

“Did you have a good time today?”

“I did. Thanks, Wolfe.”

Wolfe scratched his cheek and glanced away for a split second before his gaze found me again. His eyes, darker than night, bored into mine, oozing willpower.

“Come back to us, Bern.”

“I—”

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

When I failed to come up with an answer, Wolfe flashed me a toothy grin like nothing had happened. “I almost forgot. Put your hand out. Come on.” I did as told, and a cold object fell into my palm. A four-leaf clover brooch. “Take it. Mom’s always said four-leaf clovers’ll help you survive any battle.”

“Thanks.” *He must have bought it while I was absorbed in my shopping.* I squeezed it tight.

“Take care,” he said with a gentle smile and began to walk away.

I waved goodbye, and just as I was starting to think that he wasn’t going to look back, he stopped and did exactly that. Wolfe gave me a hearty grin, then turned around once more and didn’t look back again.



THE following day, I decided to see how the female cavalry unit’s training was coming along. I figured I should check in on them as often as possible before I had to leave.

The Eisberk Cavalry Brigade was, at its core, a band of mercenaries. It recruited anyone willing whenever the need arose, offering them wages. The model worked because Eisberk’s community was tightly knit—everyone knew everyone.

Wolfe was a horse trainer by trade. As commander of the Cavalry Brigade, he

trained people. He routinely organized drills that anyone could attend, though the only compensation for participating was a complimentary meal. Attendees were free to leave midsession or to just drop out of the program entirely. Some joked that they were only there for the food or to get some much-needed exercise.

Either was a perfectly valid reason, in my opinion. Even if they didn't take the training seriously enough to enter the Cavalry Brigade, this was still a good opportunity for commoners to learn basic reading and writing and developing social skills. That kind of education wasn't available to everyone, so this was Eisberk's way of making it more available to our people.

I wanted women to have that same opportunity, which had spurred me to start the first female-only practices a year prior. Pretty waitresses working for trendy cafes, mothers with five-year-old children; the new drills attracted all sorts of people. While the relative difference in physical strength between sexes was a factor, by far the biggest reason the drills were segregated was that everyone struggled to stay focused in a coed setting. Embarrassment was not conducive to fruitful training.

One of House Eisberk's servants had been running the women-only sessions in my absence. She had self-defense training and good instincts, so I had requested her specifically.

As I quietly observed the squadron gallop gracefully across the grassy fields, their mounts abruptly slowed unbidden. Confused, the riders began to search for the cause. A sharp-eyed girl finally noticed my presence, and before I knew it, I was surrounded.

"Bernstein!"

"How goes the training?" I asked.

"It's been going well."

I was relieved to hear that.

"Come join us!" She bowed. "I insist!"

Glad to see they're enjoying themselves.

After I sparred with every woman there, we sat down outside the fence and had ourselves a little tea party. The warm drinks warded us against the chilly spring wind, and as we sipped, they told me everything that had occurred while I was gone, the good and the bad.

“How did yesterday’s date go, Bernstein?”

The question came out of nowhere, and I almost choked on my muffin. An employee from one of the shops Wolfe and I had visited happened to be present.

“D-D-Date?!” The word instantly piqued the attention of the gossip-loving girls.

“We were just walking around town. You know, like we always do?” I’d resided primarily in Neue Milchstrasse since enrolling in military prep school, so Wolfe and I would religiously pace around town whenever I was home.

Why are they bringing this up all of a sudden?

“You were dressed awfully cute for it to be just a walk about town,” she said, grinning.

I didn’t know how to respond.

“Your Lunar Ice Knight persona is cool, but it feels...distant. Seeing you in a dress reminds me of the Bernstein we all know and love.”

Her admission made me feel genuinely happy. “Thanks.”

“That being said,” she continued, pointing at the four-leaf clover brooch pinned to my chest, “where’d you get that, hmm?”

“The commander?!” someone guessed, gasping.

“The commander? You’re not dating, are you?!” another leaned forward, eyes sparkling.

“No, we’re not!” I exclaimed.

“Now I see why he never settled down.”

“Can you listen to me for one se—”

“You wouldn’t believe how happy they looked walking around together. Why,

I'd never seen the commander wear such a warm smile!"

"The commander, 'wearing a warm smile?'"

"He bought that brooch at our store, you know. Was real careful about it too, monitoring Bernstein's every move. He even refused to have it wrapped, claiming it was for him!"

"For him, he says!"

"They split a fruit platter at my place too!" the waitress added, further stoking the fire.

"We always split it! And need I remind you that it's meant to be split!" I retorted in protest.

"'Always,' huh. How dreamy"

"They stole strawberries off each other's plates too!"

"The commander stealing strawberries? No way!"

All of the girls were dumbfounded—except for those who'd also known Wolfe from childhood, who just quietly smiled. To them this side of Wolfe was nothing new.

"Is this really how people think of him?" I asked them incredulously.

They giggled. "'The brave commander of the Cavalry Brigade, adored by men and women alike!'"

"Huh."

"What intrigues everyone is that he's never had a girlfriend despite the fact."

"I see. We're not like that though. Wolfe's like a guardian angel to me. Always has been," I explained, only to get wide smirks in response. *Gross, don't look at me like that.*

"Would you happen to have anyone else in mind then?"

Stern's face flashed before my eyes. *Why, why, why?!* My face must have brightened in response, because more giggles filled the air.

"You do, don't you?" one cackled. "Is it him? The gentleman at the aid station

who—”

I pressed my finger against her lips. She closed her mouth, her face turning pink. She’d been stationed at the garrison. “Not one word more. I’m considered a man in the royal capital, lest you forget.”

When in Eisberk I often forgot that reality myself. Neue Milchstrasse me was a man. He had to be.

“The Lunar Ice Knight isn’t allowed to love anyone,” I declared.

The girls exchanged glances. “How awful...” one of them quietly muttered.



ELFENBEIN and Lilia had returned home by the time I came back from the fields.

Elfenbein had turned twenty-four earlier that year. Because he was vice-commander of the royal knights, we didn’t get to see each other very often.

Lilia was nineteen and supposed to be enjoying the social season back in the royal capital.

After a rare family dinner, we decided to play some chess. I’d never won a single game against Lilia; she was just too good.

“How’s the female squadron?” Elfenbein asked, glancing up from the chessboard.

“Fine. I actually attended one of their training sessions today. Want to come with tomorrow?”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt.” He smiled lightly. “Heard you took down a salamander. They say your abilities are already officer level.”

“Correction, it was Prince Stern who downed it.”

“But how? Isn’t he metal aligned? I read the report but couldn’t make much sense of it.”

“I coated his mercury-imbued arrow with ice, which melted upon impact with the salamander’s forehead. The heat from the salamander’s body enhanced the mercury’s toxic properties, leading to its swift demise.”

“You coated his magical arrows in ice?” he repeated, his gaze locked on mine. Puzzled, I stared back. “Can you freeze anything?”

“Anything but fire. Can’t you?”

Elfen was ice aligned like me, while Lilia’s affinity was for wind.

Elfen stroked his chin, concern evident on his face. “Only if the object in question contains moisture. I can freeze dirt but not dry trees or other people’s magic.”

“Huh. What about you, Lilia?”

We looked over to Lilia only to see her gently shaking her head. “I’ve never so much as heard of the ability to overlay magic over another’s, let alone possessing that ability myself.”

Her response shocked me. If she didn’t know something, then it definitely wasn’t common knowledge.

After a bit of thinking, Elfen moved one of his pieces, then shifted his gaze back to me. “Okay. All right. So, do you plan on joining the army?”

“I’d certainly like to, but it depends on the marshal. He knows I’m a woman, after all. He permitted me entry into the academy, but whether he’ll let me into the army is another matter.”

“Right, right. Completely slipped my mind.” Elfen snorted. “I can’t imagine our little Lunar Ice Knight as anything other than an officer.”

“Not you too!” A family member referring to me by my alias was just embarrassing.

“A shame, really. The role’s perfect you.”

“If only Neue Milchstrasse had something like the female cavalry unit,” I said.

Elfen looked at Lilia, and she smiled, turning to me. “You’re right, they should. According to ancient literature, man-hating monsters known as Lilitu used to live across the northern mountain range.”

“Interesting. Tell us more,” Elfen urged, his voice brimming with curiosity.

“Taking the appearance of big, beautiful birds, they’d sing to men, promising

to fulfill their every desire, only to put them under a curse. The men'd be stripped of their most cherished memories, reduced to thralls whose only purpose was to serve their Lilitu masters."

"That's...horrifying," Elfen said, his face souring.

"Is there a cure?" I asked.

Lilia smiled softly. "To lift the curse, the man must kiss his beloved before losing his memories, whereby they'll remain in the form of a gem."

"Sounds like something straight out of a fairytale," laughed Elfen.

Lilia glanced at me. "It does, but point is, you'd need female knights to fight back such a threat, would you not? Therefore, I believe it would be in the kingdom's best interest to establish a female knights order," she asserted, placing a piece down the board.

I half-heartedly smiled. It was nothing more than a pipe dream. Even if we had the power to do as she suggested, nobody would agree to it. To protect fair ladies from harm was a knight's way, the core principle of chivalry, after all.

"Setting that aside, there's something I've been meaning to ask you, Bern."

"Yes?"

"It concerns a certain Prince Sternchen." My heart skipped a beat at the mention of his name, my face boiling over. Lilia giggled at my reaction. "How are his wounds?"

"They're almost completely healed."

"That's a relief. I've been worried sick ever since I lent Marlena some medicated cream after she came to me for advice."

"You lent her that moisturizer?"

"Don't you remember? It's the same lotion I made for you when you were young and would get injured constantly. Can't leave wounds on a lady's body, now can we?"

"That explains the nostalgic aroma," I muttered.

Elfen's eyebrows shot up. "Why do you know what moisturizer Prince

Sternchen uses?”

“Because they’re back wounds and I’m the one applying it?”

“Aren’t there medics at the academy?”

“Would you want to expose your injuries to others? Besides, I’m the reason he got them in the first place, so it’s only natural for me to take responsibility for them.”

How many times must I have this conversation?!

Lilia shot Elfen an icy smile, shutting him up. Elfen crossed his arms and quietly stared at the chess board.

“Sounds like he means a lot to you.” Lilia appraised me with her clear, light blue eyes.

“He does,” I professed.

Stern did mean a lot to me. I wanted to remain at his side for as long as I could, and when I couldn’t anymore, I still wanted to help him in any way possible.

“Then we better use our time wisely to make it so you can stay in the capital.”

“What?!” yelled Elfen suddenly.

Lilia laughed at his outburst. “Checkmate.” She smiled as she took his king.

He heaved a heavy sigh. “You win.”

Chapter 12: The Princess's Guard Maid

THINGS had gotten much more hectic since I started my third year at the academy, mostly due to an increase in military assignments. The classroom was dead silent as we were presented with yet another painful task. Awkwardly, everyone's eyes were on me. We were to choose someone to act as Princess Marlana's bodyguard on her tour of inspection. Ever since her societal debut, Marlana had proactively involved herself in official matters. She had never been on a royal tour before, however, and it turned out that her security detail was lacking.

"Bern."

"Definitely Bern."

A couple of classmates volunteered my name, and Stern and Felzen immediately disagreed: "I object."

"So do I."

Such moments made me realize the true value of friendship.

"I mean, look at his elegant mannerisms," someone said, undeterred.

"Or his slender physique."

"Or his lack of facial hair."

"You just don't want to wear the maid uniform, do you?"

They ducked their heads, smirking. Yep, it wasn't just any escort mission, it was an escort mission dressed as a maidservant. Usually, students fought tooth and nail for every assignment—not the one currently up for grabs though. They were desperate to foist it on someone else. *Sure, just make me take the fall!* *Problem solved!*

"I'm sure it'll suit you, Bern!"

"I'd die to see you in a maid outfit!"

"No!" I cried. "I don't want to wear it either! Who's ever heard of a five-seven

maid? No one!”

“Five-foot-seven? That’s like your average female actress! What’s not to love?”

“Do I look like ‘your average female actress’ to you?!”

“Hey, relax. I’m sure you’ll look positively stunning.”

“Then why are you laughing!”

“Okay, if we’re being serious for a moment, you’re the only one we can trust to keep their cool around Princess Marlana.”

“Yeah, exactly. We’d get all nervous around her, start sniffing her perfume.”

“She’s just too cute for her own good.”

“What if we got to be in a room together, all alone?”

“And got to see her tightening her c-c-corset?”

The sight of them drooling at the mouth made me think that maybe I was better suited for the job after all.

Stern—Marlena’s brother—cleared his throat. His gaze met those of the other students, and the room fell into awkward silence.

“I suggest we pass the assignment on to one of Eisberk’s female cavalry soldiers,” I proposed.

“Seconded! They’re the coolest!”

Hearing a classmate voice their enthusiastic support filled me with joy. And yet, it appeared fate had other plans for me.

“Denied. We were given the assignment, not Eisberk’s Cavalry Brigade,” said our instructor, swiftly shooting down my proposal. It didn’t help that the all-women squadron, being newly established, lacked reliable experience. “Taking everything into account, I believe Bernstein’s the man for the job. Princess Marlana also listed you as her top pick,” he continued.

“I see. If only we had a female knights order here in the royal capital,” I replied in defeat.

Stern heaved a sigh. “I think it’s about time we seriously consider establishing one,” he admitted, and my heart leaped.

I wouldn’t have to live a lie anymore, I thought.

In the end, I was picked for the job. I put on the long black dress and tied a white, frilly apron around it. I pulled my hair into a bun, topping it off with a mobcap. *I look like a palace maid.* I had a real maidservant do my makeup. I stuffed a few precautionary anti-magic implements into the skirt. When I reappeared before the class, everyone was speechless.

“Laugh! Come on!” I barked.

“I...uh...”

Don’t look away all bashful like!

“This is... Wow.”

“He’s cute. Beautiful even.”

“K-Knock it off!” I felt like exploding. *Think of all the maids you’re spitting on when you call me that!*

“No, really. You’re cute as hell!”

“Cute? No—pretty.”

“I want to be punished! Slap me.”

“I’d go gay for you.”

The sound of a fist banging onto a desk shook the room. I looked over to see that Felzen had stood, flames rising from his back. “We had our fun yet?” he growled.

Felzen, who rarely ever lost his composure, had completely snapped over what was obviously some light fun. Even I was frightened, and that was despite knowing his anger was out of concern for my safety.

“Y-Yes,” mumbled the other students.

Silence descended once more.

“*This...this is why I objected,*” Stern muttered. He wasn’t pleased either.

A dark cloud hung over the room, and it was because of me. I had to do something. “No need to comfort me out of pity, friends, but if you think you’ve got what it takes to knock me off my feet, you’re more than welcome to try!” I jested, settling into a fighting stance.

Everyone began to laugh.

“Some things never change.”

“Who’d want a woman like that?”

“Knock you off your feet? You, Bern the bear slayer? Never in a million years.”

I was relieved that the mood had lightened yet felt a sting in my chest. “There, you had your fun. Now I’m going to get dressed.”

I ran out of the classroom. Once outside, I clenched my fist. I’d done what I had to, so why did I feel sad, empty, humiliated?

As I took a long, deep breath, Felzen jogged up from behind and put his arm around me. His warm hands melted my frosty heart. “Sorry for earlier. I didn’t mean for things to turn out that way,” he murmured.

His words made me feel a bit better. “I’m such a burden, huh?”

“You’re no burden. I’ll do whatever it takes because I want us to graduate together.”

“Thanks.”

“I also—er, forget it.”

“Out with it,” I demanded.

“I also think you look cute...in the maid outfit.”

“Sorry?”

“The way they seriously seemed to be into you set something off inside me. Sorry.” Felzen looked away, his face reddening. His reaction caught me by surprise, and I flushed in tandem.

How...unlike him. “I, uh, is this where I say thanks?”

“No need. Our relationship means more than that.”

“O-Okay then?”

“I have to say though, the outfit goes perfectly with your modestly sized chest.”

“Why you!” I decked him in the nose, shaking off his arm.

“Ouch! That was a compliment!”

“Back off, boob guy!”

“Hey! I’m into asses too, you know!”

“Back. Off.” I upped my pace. Felzen followed closely behind, attempting to placate me. The silly exchange brought a smile to my face, the tension in my shoulders easing. *Everything’s fine.*

Felzen caught the changing room door as I tried to close it. Confused, I glanced up at his face, a set of serious, fiery red eyes staring back at me. “Don’t let their words get to you. You’re beautiful inside and out, never forget that,” he said, releasing the door.

Shocked, I sat down. *Now I see.* My eyes watered. *Their comments, they... hurt. I made a laughingstock out of my woman self, and hearing their laughs hurt. Felzen saw right through me. He was tending to the wounds I didn’t even know I had.*

“Since when are you so considerate,” I whispered. His kindness overwhelmed me. I realized then exactly why Felzen was so popular with the ladies. His compassion made me feel happy and simultaneously pathetic for needing it.



AND so, the dreaded day came. Inside the coach was a maidservant, a lady-in-waiting, and me, the cross-dressing knight.

Her debut behind her, Marlana was allowed to begin carrying out her duties as a royal. That day of the tour would take us to the Wurzel demesne. The Wurzels were historically fanatical supporters of the royal family, making their territory perfect for Marlana’s first overnight stop.

Only, a princess embarking on such a tour was unheard of. Coupled with the weird letters she’d apparently been receiving, the circumstances warranted a

guard maid. Her protection consisted of me, a few knights, and Kraut, now a second year. Kraut—a Wurzel—had been permitted to accompany us as an exception.

“Weird letters?” I asked.

“Usually, letters addressed to me go through my ladies-in-waiting first, but these didn’t. They were found in my room.” Marlena knitted her brow.

Who wouldn’t be concerned if they were dealing with someone who could sneak past the palace guard, locate the princess’s chambers, and place a letter therein, undiscovered? While multiple maidservants and ladies-in-waiting were in her room at any given time and Marlena had yet to come to any harm, the threat of abduction or assassination was very real.

“They don’t appear to be cursed or anything, but the contents are a little...”

“A little?” I pressed.

“Questionable. Quote, ‘Marlena, hng’h,’ unquote.”

“Sorry?” *What does that mean?*

“‘Marlena, hng’h’ is all they wrote!” She blushed.

It did sound embarrassing just hearing her say it. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Marlena confirmed, starting to tear up.

“Sicko.” I couldn’t comprehend why anyone would do such a thing. I could understand love letters, in which an admirer might introduce themselves and wax poetic about their feelings for Marlena, or even an attempt at blackmail. Instead, all the notes contained were “Marlena, hng’h”.

What a bad joke. I was disgusted. Why did the writer feel the need to convey those words? To let others know just how sick in the head they were? No one gained anything. *Creep.*

“Please protect me. I beg of you.”

My heart skipped a beat at her plea, her hands clasped together as though in prayer. Marlena was precious, maybe too precious for her own good. “They won’t be laying so much as a finger on you. I guarantee it.”

“Thank you!”

The maidservant glanced at me with a twinkle in her eye. Dressed as one myself, I couldn't exactly put on noble airs. She cleared her throat, so I bowed. “Apologies for any inconvenience I'm bound to cause. I hope for your guidance.”

“Me, guide you? The Lunar Ice Knight?”

“I wouldn't want to bring shame to the palace maidservants. I am to guard Princess Marlena as her maid, after all.”

“I-I see.” The servant hung her head, her cheeks turning pink.



WE arrived at our destination. The Wurzels' land teemed with fields of flowers and medicinal herbs. Their country manor was massive, standing solemnly atop a hill and overlooking the surrounding region.

We exited the coach and took a short break. As I was preparing Marlena's table, an envelope materialized seemingly out of thin air, causing her to shriek in alarm.

“If I may,” I said as I took it in hand. Nothing appeared suspicious about the letter, nor did it seem like it was hexed. I walked away from the table and opened the seal.

“Marlena and the maid sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

Gross! No way they're above a two IQ.

I was still reeling from what I had just read when Kraut came up to me. “Is something the matter?” he asked.

“I-I think my head hurts.” Kraut appeared to puke a little in his mouth as he scanned the message. “Keep your eyes peeled,” I warned.

“Understood. I won't let them have their way, not in my domain!” Kraut tapped his chest proudly before returning to his assigned position.

Reliable as always, I thought, making my way back to Marlena.

“Wh-What was in there?” she asked tremulously.

“Same filth as always. What’s more concerning is that they know we’re here.”

Marlena’s face froze. *I know you’re scared.* I took her shaky hand in mine, squeezing it.

“Bernstein?”

“Let’s get you some tea. It’ll help take your mind off things.”

“Very well.”

One of the Wurzel maidservants filled Marlena’s teacup. To everyone’s surprise, the liquid was a deep blue color, and she calmly explained, “It’s mallow tea, made from the flower of the same name. It starts out blue, as I’m sure you’ve all noticed, and slowly turns purple.”

“Looks just like your hair,” Marlena said to me, giggling.

“Now watch what happens when we add in some yellow.” The maid plopped in a slice of lemon, turning the tea from a blueish purple to pink.

“Amazing!” Marlena exclaimed, clapping.

Like magic.

I gently intercepted Marlena’s hand and lifted the cup. “Pardon me,” I said, taking the first sip just in case the cup or tea itself had been poisoned. Given their track record, I had every reason to believe Marlena’s stalker was capable of slipping something into her beverage right under our noses, and I had received permission to test Marlena’s food and drink for poison before our departure.

“Please forgive me for that. It’s the best way to protect you while we’re out and about,” I explained.

“B-Bernstein...” Marlena had blushed bright pink.

Is she not feeling well?

“You should’ve let us handle it,” the ladies-in-waiting rebuked me.

“And let you risk death? We knights train our bodies to withstand poison. Please, save your worry.” I smiled to put them at ease.

The maidservants and ladies-in-waiting fell quiet, their faces turning pink

much like Marlana's.

"Thank you. It's delicious," Marlana said after taking a sip. Her rosy cheeks were adorable.

Once our tea break was over, we were shown around the fields. I stuck close to Marlana's side, while the rest of the knights stayed a bit further back. A colorful carpet of flowers, organized in rows, stretched from the top of the hill to the foot. The blooms' petals were moist with the previous day's rain, each drop reflecting light like a prism.

Marlena gasped in awe, prompting some enthusiastic exposition from the lead field hand. He was the one who managed the fields, although Kraut's father owned the land. A wholesome atmosphere suffused the scene. Servants picked blossoms, some of which were apparently unsuitable for use in flower arrangements and thus unsellable. The laborers' children threw those into a communal basket.

"What is this one used for?"

"Drying, pressing, and potpourri. Other flowers are edible and used for tea or candied. Sometimes these're used in wedding ceremonies as well, which are especially common this time of year, to shower the newly wedded couple in petals."

"How dreamy," Marlana said, her eyes glimmering.

A small boy approached us and offered Marlana a modest posy of flowers. I examined the bouquet to make sure it was safe. Sure enough, it was, and I lifted the boy up so he could hand his gift to Marlana directly.

"Fow you, Pwincess," he said, extending his arms.

"What are you—?" The boy's mother, or at least who I assumed was his mother, came sprinting toward us. I gave her a stern stare.

"Thanks." Marlana smiled, taking the bouquet.

The boy seemed satisfied, if a bit red in the face. I put him down, and he scampered back to his mother, who was apologizing profusely.

"Cute, isn't he?" I remarked after she left.

Marlena blinked in surprise, her cheeks flushing. “D-Do you like children?”

“I think they’re cute, yes.”

“M-Me too! I love children!”

Though the enthusiasm in her voice startled me, I found it endearing nonetheless. “I’m sure children love you too. They can tell a kind heart when they see one.”

“O-Oh my...” Marlena had just looked away, avoiding my gaze, when a shower of petals rained down from above. The ground underneath her swelled abruptly, and she screamed in horror.

A shadowy black form popped out of the dirt. The knights readied their swords only to be blocked off by a wall of earth. I jumped in front of Marlena and her attendants, shielding them.

“Lovey-dovey happy wedding!” spat the masked, dark figure. I instinctively roundhouse-kicked his chin and froze the soil beneath him to ensure he couldn’t escape. “Briefs? Really? Wimp! Coward!”

“Shut your mouth!” I pulled several magic-suppressing knives out from under my skirt and pinned his cloak to the ground. I tackled him, ripping off his mask just as the knights broke through the wall.

“Is that...”

“Grand Mage Zanto?”



Everyone went silent upon realizing that it had been an inside job all along: Zanto was part of Marlana's royal tour of inspection countermeasure team.

Zanto had earned the title of Grand Mage at a young age. He was responsible for keeping the palace safe, which would explain how he'd been able to slip letters into Marlana's room undetected. *What a waste of talent.*

He was also, albeit unofficially, one of Marlana's marriage candidates. The twenty-four-year-old had had a bright future ahead of him.

A pair of purple, almond-shaped eyes peered out through his long bangs. People knew him to be enigmatic and taciturn. Ladies considered him handsome for reasons I didn't quite understand. Little had anyone suspected that underneath he was nothing more than a sad, sad man.

"Marlena, hn—"

"Marlena, hng' this!" I smacked him with the pommel of one of my knives.

"Ahn!"

Ignore him. Just ignore him, I was telling myself when his hands suddenly darted under my skirt. I felt them touch my legs and reflexively brought my knees together. "Eek!"

"Garter-belt-knife combo? Mmm. Briefs? Yuck." I pinned his arms to the ground, and he grunted, "How forward, hnn!"

The earth underneath us began to rise again despite my layer of frost. Even with my charmed knives I couldn't keep his magic under control. Dirt crawled up my shins, and I squeezed my kneecaps tight so it wouldn't reach my thighs. Goosebumps erupted all over my body. *Help.*

"Ste—" I quickly closed my mouth before I could finish the name. *He's not here,* I remembered, tearing up. *Help.*

Kraut rushed to my side. He tied Zanto up with rope enchanted to smother magic and stepped on the mage's face for good measure. He slid his hands underneath my armpits, lifting me up. I clung to his arms in relief, and he nodded, as though telling me everything was going to be okay. "Go die in a ditch, perv!"

“Marlena and her maid. Oh, how precious. Om nom nom nom.”

It was terrifying how little sense his words made. *Revolting*. In spite of our success in his capture, I felt dead inside.

“Bern...” I felt something gently brush against my hands, returning me to reality.

I looked up and was met with Kraut’s concerned gaze. *Get a grip, Bern*. “Thanks,” I managed.

“I only did what anyone else would.” Kraut smiled, taking a step back. I watched blankly as the guards dragged Zanto off.

“Looks like we found our culprit,” I said to Marlena.

“I suppose.” Unsurprisingly, she was completely dumbfounded. “Lovey-dovey wedding...” she mumbled absentmindedly.

I’d really prefer it if you didn’t.

“Is everything all right?” I asked, looking into her eyes. She seemed to snap back to the present, staring into mine in turn.

Why does the color of her eyes feel different? “Princess?”

“Bern!” Marlena buried herself in my arms.

Poor thing. If I was creeped out by that thing, then Marlena was probably absolutely horrified. I patted her on the shoulder. “It’s okay now, Princess.”

“I’m scared.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m right here.”

“Bern...”

Marlena had wrapped her arms snugly around my back, which put me in a bit of a bind: to those in the know, it appeared that we, members of the opposite sex, were hugging. Bewildered, I looked to the maidservants for help, only to see them approvingly nodding and giving me a thumbs up.

Do you not see anything wrong with this picture?!

“Princess, I—”

“Let me stay like this a little longer. Please.”

Even I wasn't cold enough to deny her after that appeal. I awkwardly glanced around. Everyone was grinning, aside from Kraut, who was shooting a glare my way. *Right, I almost forgot that he's a royal family fanatic. Marlena, like Stern, is nothing short of a deity to him.*

Unable to endure his glowering any longer, I removed myself from Marlena's embrace. She hung her head, so I kneeled to meet her eyes. “I understand how you feel, I do, but we can't remain like this any longer. There are people watching.”

“M-My apologies,” stuttered Marlena, averting her gaze in embarrassment. Such an ordeal on her very first tour of inspection had no doubt left her anxious at best and traumatized at worst.

I wanted to ease her nerves, but there was only so much I could do in my position. “If I may ask you to put out your hand.” Ultimately, I figured that I wouldn't get too much flak for holding the hand of a frightened young girl, at least not while disguised as a maidservant.

Timidly, she resumed eye contact. “You would let me hold your hand?”

“If it pleases you.”

Marlena beamed from ear to ear. It reminded me of a younger Stern and his angelic smile. As she latched onto my pinky, I wondered if this was what it was like to have a little sister.

“Am I not a bother?” she asked, her light brown eyes apologetic. They had a soft shimmer to them unlike Stern's blinding glow.

“Quite the contrary, it's an honor to hold your hand. Not to get too sentimental, but it's like I've just found the little sister I never had.” I smiled back at her.

Marlena nudged me. “Mind if I call you ‘sis’? Just for now.”

“Not one bit,” I said with a chuckle.

“What's going to happen to that man, sis?”

The restraint to call that thing a man. What a well-raised girl!

"It's hard to say, although personally I'd like to see him punished, and harshly if possible." Pervert or not, he was a grand mage and had to be handled as such. If it were solely up to me, however, I'd go as far as to suggest the death penalty for the distress he'd caused Marlena

"Has he done anything to warrant such an opinion?" Her question caught me by surprise. "All he did was send me some letters."

"Some disgusting letters."

"Disgusting, perhaps, but not threatening or slanderous."

She does have a point.

"He assaulted you."

"Did he? I don't recall him laying so much as a finger on me."

As much as I would've liked to disagree, he had been, indeed, unarmed. He hadn't threatened to kill or kidnap Marlena leading up to the encounter and had merely spouted a bunch of random nonsense and showered us in petals during it. I still couldn't quite piece together the reason why he'd erected the dirt wall, but needless to say, the evidence against him was anything but overwhelming. "He knew the location of your room and your destination."

"What if his position in court allowed him easy access to said information?"

"Using such information to one's own selfish ends isn't right."

"But does it warrant harsh punishment?"

I couldn't grasp her thought process. *Does she want me to smack some sense into him before handing him off to the law? Wouldn't he enjoy it?*

"I'm not quite keeping up, Princess."

"Sis..." Her light brown eyes had glazed over. "I felt something back there, something I've never felt before."

"He didn't cast some weird spell on you, did he?"

"No, sis, no, he didn't. I want to befriend him."

"Seriously?" My usual self slipped out for a moment. *A perv and an innocent little princess, friends? In what world?*

“I want to talk to him,” she declared.



WE visited Grand Mage Zanto at Marlana’s request. He’d been clapped in magic-suppressing cuffs and thrown into the Wurzels’ dungeon.

I watched him carefully from where I stood in front of his cell, Marlana hidden behind my back.

“Eek! Stay away, stay away from me, Marlana! The light, it burns! Forgive my existence!” screamed Zanto, retreating to the far wall, as nasty and incomprehensible as ever.

Marlena called out to him. “Zanto, sir, can I have a word?”

“She knows my name, she knows my naaaame!”

“Let’s go. He’s clearly not in the mood for decent conversation,” I growled as I turned around and grabbed Marlana by the shoulders.

“Sis, please.”

“‘Sis,’ she says! I can’t, I can’t anymore.” Zanto wept, pressing his palms together in prayer.

My head hurts.

“There! That’s exactly it!” exclaimed Marlana to both my and the pervert’s surprise. “Your words opened my eyes to a whole new world! I think we can become friends, I really do!”

“F-Friends?” Zanto tilted his head. The gesture was awfully cute for a pervert, and I recalled he was what some called handsome.

“Remember how you gave us your blessings? S-Sis and me.”

“Why, of course! I had no intention of causing you any harm, rather, I didn’t know I was even considered a threat to begin with. Me, assault Marlana? Not in a million years, I can assure you. The very thought is downright laughable,” he rattled off coherently out of nowhere, disconcerting me. “I had your back in secret, but you and the maid are so perfect together that I just couldn’t help but congratulate you two on your marriage. You were getting married back there,

right?”

What is he even saying?

“Yes! Yes, we were!” cried Marlana enthusiastically.

Sorry? No, we weren’t. We’re both women, too.

“You were, you were! You one hundred percent were!”

“This is precisely why I wanted to talk to you in person.”

“Nuh-uh, no way,” he said, waving his hands in the air. “Me, some rando, get between a *yuri* couple? I’m not touching that landmine with a ten-foot pole.”

Marlena tightened her grip on my arm. “Say something to him, sis,” she pleaded, her baby-squirrel-like eyes directed at me.

I looked away. Normally I’d assist Marlana in any way possible but not when she wanted me to help her become friends with a pervert. “I strongly advise you to abandon this course of action, Princess.”

“Hnnnn! The sister-maid is angryyy!”

“Shut your mouth, perv!” I yelled.

“I know I’m walking into a landmine, I do, but how can I refuse you, Marlana? I don’t know if I can handle talking to you though.”

“Then what if we were to write to each other in a shared notebook instead?” Marlana refused to give up.

“Sh-Shared notebook...” muttered Zanto, his face flushing, before fainting. *Knocked him out cold. Marlana’s quite the deadly one.*



THE investigation that followed deemed Zanto incapable of harming Marlana. No one seemed to find the letters particularly incriminating, brushing them off as the product of poor judgment arising from a man’s natural excitement about making it onto Marlana’s list of fiancé candidates.

Why?

During his defense, Zanto claimed that he’d “only wanted to shower the

newly wedded couple with petals.” Marlana chose not to press any charges, and so he got off scot-free.

Why are you okay with this?

Either way, given that his admiration for Marlana rendered him unable to so much as have a conversation with her, let alone go anywhere near her, he was determined a nonthreat.

At Marlana’s behest I delivered a notebook to Zanto in his cell. She and the rest were in the middle of a banquet.

Zanto threw a relaxed smile my way when he noticed my approach. “Hey there, maidy.”

“It’s like you’re a completely different person. Tell me, was it all some elaborate act?”

“You do nothing for me alone, maidy, not without Marlana.”

If you say so. Either way, I welcome the transformation.

“Besides, do you think I’d get any work done if that was my default modus operandi?”

Fair. I let loose a heavy sigh. “I was sent here to give you the shared notebook, at Princess Marlana’s request.”

“Haa, haha,” he cry-laughed.

Gross. “She said she wants it delivered to her room once you’re done.”

“Hnnn, a true goddess she is.”

My thoughts exactly. Why else would she show such kindness to a helpless perv like you?

“I’m willing to overlook your actions so long as you keep your hands to yourself.”

Zanto grinned. “You’re a girl, yes?”

“What of it?”

“You tell me, Bernstein.”

The air around me went chilly, I felt blood sloshing around in my head. “I see you are privy to the details of this operation.”

“That’s precisely why I kept tabs on Marlana, in case some lecherous knight accidentally developed feelings for her.”

As if you’re one to talk. “Then you must know that I myself am a knight.”

“I do, but your ‘feigned’ womanly mannerisms are awfully spot-on for a man, to the point that I had to wonder if there was a girl inside you waiting to hatch, which I was totally cool with. But there isn’t, is there? Because you already are one.”

“No, I am not.”

“Yes, you are. I knew the moment I touched your legs.” I clenched my fists to stop myself from trembling at the disturbing memory. “Relax, I don’t plan on threatening you or anything of the sort.”

When I didn’t respond, he probed further. “Tell me, is this part of some grand Eisberk conspiracy?”

“No! It’s nothing like that!” I froze in place.

It’s out, my secret is out. Wild accusations like this are exactly what I feared. I couldn’t breathe, my chest hurt, my head was spinning. It’s over. I can’t show my face in the royal capital ever again. All that’s left now is to run, throw away everything I’ve worked toward. I’ll never see Felzen again, I won’t even be able to send him letters.

But what hurt the most was knowing that Stern would think me traitor.

“Why the sad face? Your secret is safe with me, assuming you hold no ill will toward the royal family, of course.”

“I’d never!”

“I know, no enemy of the royal family would treat Marlana the way you did.”

I said nothing.

“All right, what say we make a deal?” he offered.

“Blackmail me all you like; I’m not playing your games!”

“Blackmail? No. Think of it as a small request.” Zanto grinned at my silent, angry glare. “Get intimate with Marlana!”

“Huh?”

“Apologies, Freudian slip. Ahem, what I meant was, bond with Marlana, please please please!”

“Sure? I’d like to bond with her myself, assuming she’s fine with it.”

“Preciousness overload!”

“Not sure how you see our relationship, but to me she’s like the little sister I never had.”

“I-I-I-I kneel,” he said, kneeling before me.

What is going on in this man’s head? Whatever it is, ew.

“You don’t know how much that means to me. Thank you. Now, please make me your slave! I promise I won’t tell anyone—I’ll even help you keep your identity under wraps, please! This scenario is a dream come true for me!”

“No, you sicko. And please, never say such things in front of the princess.”

“I, hnngh, I’d never! I’d never set off that landmine! The letters were admittedly a...err, moment of weakness on my part, otherwise I’m content with observing from a distance, with being a nameless face. What is it, if not arrogance, to believe myself worthy of Marlana’s affection?”

“Don’t forget to write something in the notebook.”

“Oof.”

That went well, I think. I still worried whether I could really take him at his word, but further questioning wasn’t going to make my uneasiness disappear, so I left. *I should mention him to Elfen. They’re the same age, he’s bound to have some valuable insight,* I thought.



WITH a sigh, I regarded the banquet lights seeping out into the garden. Talking to that pervert had worn me out completely. A chilly night breeze swept over the trees, complementing the cold clutch of anxiety tightening my chest.

Such moments made me long for Felzen's warmth.

If Zanto exposed me, Felzen's warmth would become a distant memory, his kindness unreachable. Felzen would have to pretend he knew nothing of my deceit and label me a traitor. I'd be forced to cut all ties with the royal capital and return to Eisberk for good. Those were the conditions I'd agreed to when I enrolled in the military academy.

What a lonely feeling. A shiver coursed through me. My legs didn't seem too happy about wearing naught but a dress in the brisk outdoors. *There'll be no Felzen to warm them once my secret is out.*

"Bern?" rang a familiar voice.

I turned to see Kraut in his knight uniform. *Why is he not at the banquet?* "You could've signed off for today, you know," I chided him.

"I can't abandon my post. I volunteered for the position."

"You're out here while the princess is in there. How admirable. Heard your and the royal family share close ties?"

"Close enough to exchange friendly banter. Brother and Father, that is. Not me though, not me," Kraut said as he melancholically stared at the light leaking out of an open window. "I'm sorry, I just—I get a little lonely thinking about it sometimes."

"I know how you feel. I feel the same way."

"You do?"

Even if I was close with men, even if we were childhood friends, I just didn't *get* them. I didn't know what it felt like to love a woman or how it felt to despise one. I could understand men, but I didn't get them. "Unfortunately."

"That's...unexpected. You didn't seem like the type."

"Sorry to say that I'm just as weak and pathetic as anyone. Thanks for rescuing me back there, by the way."

Kraut exhaled sharply, his eyes widening, and he blushed so vibrantly that I could discern the pink of his cheeks through the dark. "I just couldn't stand seeing him put his hands on you, is all," he said.



Rays of moonlight streamed in through the gaps in the trees, the wind whistling. Kraut lifted his head and looked me in the eyes. “In the heat of the moment, you called out to Sternchen, didn’t you?” He knew. “You called out to him when I was right there next to you. Do you have any idea how that feels?”

I gasped. His green eyes reflected the light, sparkling. *They’re beautiful, they really are. But sadly...*

“I like you, Bern. More than a friend.”

His gaze was so intense that I had to look away. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, I know I’m not good enough for you.”

“It’s not you. I’d turn down anyone in your position.”

“Anyone? Even a woman?”

“Even a woman.”

My man self, my fake self, has no right to love another. The stuffy pre-summer air made it hard to breathe.

“Is that the source of your loneliness?” he asked.

“Probably, yeah.”

I was okay with the loner life once. What changed? Why is my head a mess? Why do I feel so...lonely?

“May I think of you when I’m lonely? To remember that I’m not alone in my suffering?” Kraut smiled, the moonlight casting shadows across his face.

“I’ll remember you too.” How could I forget one who shared my pain?

“Thank you.” Kraut bowed, turning his back to me.



ZANTO didn’t tell anyone after all.

When I brought his name up to Elfen, my brother smiled and said, “Believe it or not, Zanto’s a competent man, one who’d never backstab those he likes.” Whether or not I qualified in that sense was questionable at best, but I felt relieved knowing that my secret was safe regardless—at least for the time

being.

Chapter 13: A Bridge to the Villa

AFTER the Zanto incident, I received request after request to escort Marlana, most of which didn't involve wearing a maid uniform. Apparently, in the maidservants' eyes, the fact that I hadn't hugged Marlana back showed that I knew my place well, so they'd put in a good word for me.

It was an honor, of course, yet I couldn't help but think that maybe a female knights order was the better solution.



"BERN! Is it true that you made it onto Marlana's marriage candidate list?!" Stern grilled me as we sat down at our breakfast table one morning.

Everyone's eyes were suddenly on us. Kraut lifted his head up, gazing in our direction. Felzen stared at me, despite his knowledge that I was a woman.

"Where'd you get that from?" I asked.

"The maids from that one tour of inspection, they're pushing for your addition."

"They are? That's not good..."

"Not good? Bern, that's my sister you're toying with! Rest assured, I've heard all about your relationship. You're all she talks about!"

"Drop the overprotective brother act already, it's hard to watch," a classmate teased. "Besides, aren't you getting engaged to some princess up in the north yourself?" There had been a rumor to that effect making the rounds recently. I'd felt a slight prickling sensation in my chest the first time I heard it.

Stern had vehemently denied it. "I turned her down!"

"But she's not backing down, right? Plus, I hear she's a real beaut."

"So? She's not my type, and if you think I'm marrying for political reasons, then think again!" Part of me felt bad for that princess. Part of me was also

relieved. “But enough about me and more about this guy! Marlana said you two threw a little wedding ceremony! Was real happy about it too!” Stern barked, resuming my interrogation.

None of the other students were bothering to hide their curiosity anymore, all of them listening in on our conversation with perked ears.

I heaved a sigh. “We didn’t throw anything. Some small child gave her flowers, but that’s about it. And either way, Father wouldn’t allow it, regardless of what the king says.”

“What, is a member of the royal family not good enough for him?”

“No Eisberk is allowed to marry a member of the royal family. It’s a family rule.”

“It is?” Stern gawked at me.

There wasn’t an official agreement between the two parties or anything like that; the restriction was just something that our family, many years before, had agreed was necessary. *I better clear up any confusion.*

“Our family is the only noble family permitted to maintain a private army,” I began.

“The Cavalry Brigade.”

I nodded. “It’s why we don’t involve ourselves in politics. Why fight for political power when we already have military power, right? If any of us were to marry into the royal family, we’d risk getting accused of treason sooner or later. Besides, isn’t the prospect of civil war absolutely horrifying? We’re happy so long as Eisberk is in our hands. No reason to tread on thin ice.”

“Thin ice...” Stern was completely dumbfounded.

Felzen grinned. “The royal family has no sway over the Eisberks. While others vie for a single drop of the Milchstrasse’s power and influence, they see it as ‘treading on thin ice’.”

The mess hall filled with laughter interspersed with the occasional shout of pity. *I understand you’re all crazy for Marlana, and don’t get me wrong, she’s cute, but that’s all there is to it.*

“Marlena’s cute, charming—very charming even—but I couldn’t marry her even if I wanted to,” I said firmly.

“No Eisberk is allowed to marry a member of the royal family,” Stern repeated in a low voice, chewing on every word.

“That includes Elfen and Lilia.”

By that point, everyone’s interest had completely waned. I was relieved to have prevented any weird rumors from spreading. Felzen happily dug into his breakfast. Stern, on the other hand, seemed dissatisfied. *Does he still not believe me?*

“I don’t think Marlena likes me as a man anyway.”

“How would you know?”

“She likes it when I cross-dress, calls me ‘sis’. And I think of her as a little sister,” I said, hoping to calm him down, but the furrow in his brow only deepened.

“I don’t like this one bit,” he groused.

Felzen smirked. “Jealous much, bro?”

“No, I’m not!”

“You should try cross-dressing. Maybe she’ll call you sis too,” I jested.

“Not you too, Bern! Like I have a sister complex!”

“Whatever you say. Now eat, before your food gets cold.”

Stern begrudgingly bit off a mouthful of bread. “It’s not fair. I love you way more than she does.” His nonchalant tone made my heart stutter. After his initial confession, Stern heeded neither time nor place to declare his feelings for me. Everyone else just laughed it off as the usual Stern antics. “It’s not fair...”

“You’re still harping on about that?” I giggled at sulky Stern.

“Why does Marlena get to go on trips with you?”

“Political trips.”

“You never go on any political trips with me!”

“Why would I?”

“Bern! We have to go somewhere for summer break!”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?” Felzen interjected.

Stern frowned. “My apologies, I should’ve made sure you weren’t around before bringing the topic up.”

“Either way, that’s a no from me. Dragging escorts around blows,” I said.

Stern’s pout intensified. “It’s our last summer break together. Come on!”

“No.”

“Please, Bern! I beg you!”

“Nope.”

“Then take me to Eisberk. I’ve never been there before, Bern. I’ll go incognito.”

“Noooo. Eisberk blows even harder. There’s nothing to do there.”

“Felzen goes on hunts when he’s there, doesn’t he?”

“Felzen’s no prince, nor is he incognito. Uncle Vulkan’s fine with sleeping in stables, are you?”

“Berrrrrrn.” Stern refused to give up.

All of Eisberk knew my true gender, so letting Stern visit could end in disaster. *What if one of the kids accidentally gives me away? No, out of the question.*

“What about the Villa?” Felzen proposed.

Stern’s face lit up. “The Villa of Mirrors!” he exclaimed. “Of course! I wouldn’t even need to go incognito!”

“The Villa of Mirrors?” I echoed in excitement. The Villa belonged to the royal family. Located on an island in a lake, it was completely isolated from the shore. To reach it the Milchstrasses had to enlist the help of a knight of House Eisberk, who would erect a bridge of ice to span the water.

“You can get us across, right?”

“I guess.” I had been to the Villa of Mirrors once before. The whole family had

gathered to cheer Elfen on while he created his first bridge across the lake. I hadn't actually gotten to traverse it, just observed from landside. Elfen's ice elegantly gliding over the lake's surface had been a sight to behold. *But can I pull it off?*

"Don't expect too much," I cautioned.

"Just try not to send us for a swim, all right? You got this." Stern grinned.



THE Villa of Mirrors was a day away by coach, located in the city of Milchstrasse. Despite the relatively short journey, we chose to spend the night in a town en route in order to get to the villa just past noon. Daylight would make my job a little bit easier.

The villa stood in the middle of a lake, its white walls reflected in the water. The only normal means of access was by boat, which was how the groundskeepers made their rounds.

The royal family, meanwhile, had no need for boats, as we Eisberks, the kingdom's most proficient ice magic users, could freeze a path across the surface wide enough for the passage of their broughams. In requesting our assistance, the royal family displayed its trust while we demonstrated our loyalty to the crown.

At one point, during a period when the two families' relationship had soured, there was an actual bridge. The incident had spawned the idiom "bridging the villa", which was used as a euphemism for pointless fighting. The idiom served both as a shameful reminder and warning to both families

I knelt before the lake, submerging my palms in the soft, warm water. Praying for Stern's safe crossing, I worked my magic. A layer of ice spread across the surface with a crackling sound. After freezing a sufficiently large chunk, I stepped atop it. Focusing all my magical energy, I swung my arm, instantly solidifying a strip of the lake from shore to shore.

The servants that had accompanied us went wild. Reflected in the new, translucent bridge was the midsummer sun. Vapor rose from the ice, forming a thin layer of fog underfoot. It must've been the carriage horses' first time

navigating such terrain, as they were pawing anxiously at the ground. I smiled, gently stroking their muzzles, which seemed to calm their nerves a little. They responded to my touch with quiet neighs, their breaths foggy.

I walked ahead of the coach, freezing the air around us just in case, kicking up a cloud of diamond dust with every footfall. *Whew. So far so good.*

After everyone had crossed, I pulled out my sword and sunk it into the foot of the bridge. The structure splintered with a powerful *crack*, leaving behind an assortment of ice floes. Illuminated by the bright sun, they looked rather picturesque.

I sheathed my sword to a flurry of cheers and applause.

“I knew you could do it!” Stern cried, launching himself into me.

Felzen was unusually quiet.

“Glad I didn’t send you for a swim,” I muttered.

“Me too,” laughed Stern, “or else we’d have to ‘bridge the villa’ again.” The grin on Stern’s face brought one to mine. *Never again.*

The villa’s interior was gorgeous. The thoroughly polished floor reflected light like a mirror. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, sparkly gold and silver ornaments everywhere in sight; it was as though the royal family’s essence had been condensed into a single area.

We were each assigned different rooms. *That’s at least one worry off my mind.* My view of the lake was exquisite.

The days that followed were some of the most fun I’d ever had. We dined on our favorite meals in our tiny rooms, could sleep and wake at any time, and had access to a pool table and large garden. And if that wasn’t enough, there was even a nearby town we could go hang out in whenever we felt like it: Milchstrasse, the former royal capital.

While Neue Milchstrasse was the current capital, the denizens of Milchstrasse still saw their city as the real center of the kingdom. To them, “that other town” was just some phony. Their biggest point of pride was the city’s cultural significance, which they considered superior to Neue Milchstrasse’s. Perhaps

due to its history, Milchstrasse's citizens were incredibly receptive and respectful to members of the royal family, as evidenced by their interactions with Stern.

The city had a lot going for it—opera houses, museums, and much more. Before I knew it, my summer vacation sans academy uniform was nearing its end.



“MILCHSTRASSE Festival is tonight,” Stern announced.

“Milchstrasse? Like the royal family?”

“Yup. Legend has it that Milchstrasse was where my star-riding ancestors first landed,” he said, laughing.

I'd heard that legend too, once. Something about how the Milchstrasses had been sent from the Milky Way. How they'd landed on Earth astride a giant star and the resultant crater created the villa lake. The name *Sternchen* also apparently meant “little star”.

“It's a celebration of that arrival. People head to the lake to take some of its water back home. There're stalls, performances.”

“Does the royal family do anything?”

Stern shook his head. “No. Or rather, it's tradition for us to do nothing, as in, leave the villa unattended. So yeah, let's go check out the festival.”

“Then let's see what this year's festival is like,” Felzen said.

“Agreed!” I said. After all, who could resist a festival?

The plan was to dally in the city until night rolled around. We rowed to shore disguised as servants, as per tradition. The boat was tiny and rather unstable, and trying to maneuver it was kind of fun in its own right.

We toured around a bunch of stalls. We bought ourselves skewers and ate them as we strolled. Some sort of skit was being performed in the plaza, a hallmark of the festival supposedly. Stern didn't seem too interested, but Felzen and I enjoyed the production as it was our first time seeing it.

My legs froze when I saw a stand packed with pretty accessories.

“Go ahead,” urged Felzen.

But I’m in my boy clothes.

“They’ve got barrettes,” he added.

Of course, like I can use that as an excuse.

“I guess I may as well get myself something. You know, to celebrate the occasion,” I conceded. I peeked inside and saw a variety of astral items: a lacy ribbon with tiny little stars woven into the fabric; a silver, star-shaped hair ornament; a filigreed hand mirror. There were even beads embroidered in the pattern of the Milky Way. *So sparkly and pretty.* “I’ve never seen so many star-themed things in one place!”

The stall keeper smiled at the excitement in my voice.

“I remember Marlena shopping here once.” Stern narrowed his eyes in nostalgia.

While Felzen nosed around, presumably searching for a gift for one of his lady friends, I purchased a souvenir for Lilia and picked something out for myself as well. I also bought a small jar to fill with lake water. According to custom, after collecting the water, I was to store it at home for a year.

There were all sorts of containers available—big jugs, elaborate decanters, transparent or colored flasks—and all of them had miniscule, golden, star-shaped particles sifting inside. I selected a transparent jar engraved with a star. It came with a white paper bag and candle. I found that odd but didn’t think much of it. My jar in hand, we walked to the lake, cutting our way through a sea of giddy people.

There were no stalls there, no lights, only a thick, black veil of darkness. The transition from rowdy loudness to dead silence gave me whiplash. We approached the water’s edge, and reflected in the mirrorlike surface of the lake was the pitch-black night sky threaded with stars. It was as if land and space had merged into one.

“It’s beautiful,” I mumbled.

Stern nodded gravely. "Take some. Tonight, it's not water but a drop of the Milky Way."

I scooped up a jarful of liquid stars then stoppered the lid, trapping a drop of galaxy within. The grains inside danced.

We shuffled back, letting the people behind us have their turn. Everyone stood reverently near the water, except for Stern, who was moving further away.

"Where are you going?"

"It's a secret," he replied, smiling.

Felzen and I exchanged glances. We knew there was no point in arguing with Stern, so we quietly followed. We climbed a gentle hill, the sultry summer wind clinging to our skin. A strong smell of grass hung in the air, and a chorus of owls sang to us as we drew closer and closer to the sky.

Stern pointed into the distance as we sat down on a tepid patch of grass. I looked and saw a black lake, a white castle, a swarm of people. "My ancestors' spirits are supposedly inside the villa at the moment, which is why no one can enter until the festival concludes."

All at once, spots of soft, faint light began popping up across the shore before floating into the air. *Lanterns*. I gazed upward, marveling. Lanterns filled the night sky, painting it orange.

"It's beautiful." Felzen took the words right out of my mouth. The sight was utterly breathtaking.

"That's how we send my ancestors back to where they came from," Stern said, opening the paper bag from earlier. *It was a lantern all along*. He placed the candle inside, then had Felzen ignite it. As the air within warmed, the lantern took flight. It ascended high into the sky before burning out and disappearing into the night.

Once every lantern had met a similar fate, the crowd of people began to disperse. We waited for them all to leave before returning to the villa. We paddled across the pitch-black lake, the sound of the oars our only company.



THE servants wouldn't be back until the next morning, so we made our way to our rooms upon landfall. I was about to head to bed when I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to find Stern.

"Bad time?" he asked.

"You could say."

"I won't keep you long. Come," he said, dragging me toward the roof.

There the sky was close, so close that I felt like I could reach out and touch the very Milky Way.

Stern handed me a small mirror he'd bought at the night market.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Aim it at the Milky Way. It's a superstition." I did as told, and then he instructed, "Now stay as you are."

"Okay..." I ventured. Stern's silence unnerved me.

He still often declared his love for me in public but not in private, not anymore. I had nothing to worry about, especially since he'd also stopped with the weird touching. And yet all I could do was awkwardly stare up at the sky, my chest tightening.

"You can stop now."

"What's the superstition?" I asked.

Stern's naughty grin, its wicked beauty, sent a shiver down my spine. He stepped behind me. He grabbed my hand, bending the mirror toward us. His eyes sparkled like tiny stars in the night. "It's believed that by pointing a mirror at the Milky Way, the next person reflected alongside you is your soulmate," he whispered in my ear.

Good thing it was dark, or else he would've seen me pink to said ears. "That's cheating..."

"I make my own fate."

I gasped at the conviction in his voice. Our eyes met in the mirror, and I

quickly dropped my gaze.

Stern released my hand. “Keep it or break it. Do as you like.”

My heart ached witnessing his gloomy smile. I didn’t want to see him so disappointed. I realized I loved him just as he loved me. But I couldn’t lay my feelings bare—if I did, I’d never get to be by his side again.

Chapter 14: The Clay Puppet's Secret and Zanto's Soiree

I spent the remainder of my summer vacation in Eisberk training the female cavalry unit alongside Wolfe.

On my way back to the academy, I decided to drop by our town house. Upon entering my room, I noticed a blank, white envelope sitting on the desk. I opened it, and a shiver ran through me when I saw that the letter inside started with "Marlena, hng".

He must've missent it. Actually, wait, are they sharing a diary and sending each other letters on top of that? I thought in surprise, only to shudder again upon reading my name:

"Dear Bern. Come to my place, alone. And if you tell anyone, well...we both know what happens."

My breath stopped. *He's blackmailing me.* My fingertips froze over the parchment. *Do I tell someone? Do I ignore him?*

I recalled Zanto's purple, enigmatic eyes. Elfen had said I could trust him, but I wasn't fully convinced. I crumpled the letter, my mind set. *I'll go. Maybe everything'll go fine, and if not, well...I might just have to get a little rough.*



WHEN I arrived at Zanto's estate, I noticed his servants were scurrying about in a massive rush. The lack of a threatening atmosphere lessened my unease, if only a little. I was haphazardly escorted to Zanto's private study, where he greeted me with a great big smile. "Bern, what brings you here?"

"You brought me here."

"Feisty, aren't we?" Zanto remarked casually, brushing off my annoyed response. "I have a favor to ask you, Bern."

"Out with it."

“M-Marlena’s c-c-coming to my soiree tonight. I say ‘my’ though she’s the one making me throw it. How forceful.”

“How *nice* for you,” I said dryly.

“There’s n-n-nothing ‘nice’ about it! I can’t, Bern, I can’t. It’s too much for me! I don’t even have a hostess, just butlers!”

“Good luck,” I replied in a monotone voice. *Why did he call me here again?*

“I-I need your help Bern!”

“Uh-huh.”

Zanto’s eyes filled with tears. “You can’t leave me alone with Marlena, you can’t. The crown prince is escorting her, so please, stay with me, if only for introductions!”

“What do you mean?”

Zanto began explaining. Apparently, he wanted me to act as his hostess—adding that of course, he wouldn’t introduce me as one—in order to avoid one-on-one interaction with Marlena. Thus far he had kept his perverse urges concerning Marlena a secret from most of high society (only the maidservants and knights were privy to what happened the other day), and I just happened to be the most convenient tool to maintain his ruse.

Nuh-uh. I want nothing to do with this. “I’d blow my disguise if I accept, so I’ll have to politely decline.”

“I’ll mask you with my magic! No one’ll know it’s you! You have my word!”

Pervert or not, Zanto was the kingdom’s greatest grand mage. His word carried weight. I sighed while the same grand mage desperately clung to me on the verge of tears. *I suppose it can’t hurt to indebt him to me.*

“I’ll do it.”

Zanto smiled. “Put out your left hand.”

When I did, he drew a magic circle on the back of my hand as he chanted an incantation. The light purple ink took on a weird shape.

“What’re you—”

“It’s camouflage magic; it’ll make your eyes and hair look different. No one’ll know it’s you, not a single soul. You’re my clay doll now. I’ll introduce you as Puppet—the evening’s entertainment.”

I looked into the mirror Zanto had just handed me. My reflection had light brown hair and eyes. Her tresses were soft and wavy, unlike my own straight hair. She was even dressed in a girl’s typical townwear. We looked like completely different people.

“Don’t make a sound or else the spell will wear off. There’re maids waiting for you in the next room. They’ll help you get dressed,” said Zanto, handing me a pair of gloves, which were presumably to hide the spellmark on my hand. I slipped them on and entered the indicated room. There I was met with fancy gowns and a group of eager maidservants, none of whom recognized me. Forbidden from speaking, I had no choice but to let them do with me as they pleased.

“Clay doll? No, you’re a *doll*, hon! A doll! Beautiful!”

Finding the overly enthusiastic maid a tad intimidating, I glanced at myself in the mirror only to see a gorgeous young lady. *Is that me?* I had yet to debut as a woman, so there was something exciting about the whole experience.

The dress was lightweight and just lacy enough to look extravagant without coming off as tacky. A ribbon trailed from my half-up hair. I curtsied, receiving satisfied nods.

“Don’t let Master down now, Puppet!”

I nodded in turn. Their energy might’ve rubbed off on me a little.



THE soiree had begun. I stood beside Zanto as he greeted his guests. He introduced me as his clay doll, noting that, because I was a puppet, I was unable to speak.

Everyone looked at me like I was some fun new toy. The male guests in particular seemed very interested. Their unreserved stares discomfited me.

Marlena and the crown prince were the last to arrive. Zanto immediately

froze up, so I gave him a little nudge to the back. Startled, he glanced at me. Using just my eyes, I told him to get a grip. He inhaled deeply, switching back into business mode. He stood before Marlana, his gaze locked on the crown prince.

“Is that a doll?” the crown prince asked, regarding me curiously.

“She’s beautiful. I want one too,” Marlana murmured.

I curtsied, smiling. I took Zanto’s arm in mine, forcing him to straighten.

“I’m afraid my clay dolls are mostly a novelty. They can’t speak, nor do they last very long,” Zanto finally replied, his gaze averted. Deciding that enough was enough, I pulled on his arm, tapping my left hand. “Time’s up, it seems. Allow me to recharge her real quick,” Zanto said as we fled the scene.



“**HEE-HEE.** I thought I was dead for sure.” Zanto laughed creepily as he collected his breath. “Feel free to wander about while I rest. If anyone makes you feel uncomfortable, run.”

He waved goodbye, and I returned to the hall. I figured it’d be weird for both hosts to abandon their posts, not to mention I’d spied a delicious-looking tower of sweets earlier.

I’m sure no one’ll bother talking to me. Not like I can reply back.

Despite my best attempt at an inconspicuous entrance, a startling number of eyes swiveled my way. *Is this what ladies have to put up with?* I was accustomed to receiving looks as the Lunar Ice Knight, although those gazes weren’t really aimed at me so much as the Lunar Ice Knight as a concept. I had never really gotten stared at directly.

As I beheld the teeming confectionery display, a gentleman with a plate in hand walked up to me. “Here, have some,” he said, offering me a small, bite-sized piece of chocolate.

I bowed, then plucked the chocolate from his hands and tossed it into my mouth. A rich, sugary flavor blessed my tastebuds. I grinned. Zanto had gone to great lengths to impress Marlana.

The gentleman's eyes caught mine, and he gulped, his face turning pink. "You like sweets?" I nodded. "In that case," he said, grabbing me by the hand. Puzzled, I looked at him and was met with a smile. "Can't have cake while standing, now can we?" he explained to me like one would a small child, before dragging me out to a gazebo in the courtyard.

He gestured to me to sit on the bench then plopped down next to me. I simply nodded and had started to smile—my way of thanking the man for his generosity—when suddenly he placed his hand on my thigh. I instinctively swatted it away.

"You really can't talk, can you?"

His smirk sent a shiver racing down my spine. I tried to get up, leave, and he latched onto my arm. For a moment, I considered knocking his lights out but quickly reconsidered. I didn't want to land Zanto in any hot water.

"Not even a squeak?" He gazed into my eyes, his hot, malodorous breath puffing against my face.

If I were in boy mode, you'd be sorry! I tried to push his face away, and he seized my other arm as well.

"What's going on here?"

The man froze as a quiet yet imposing voice rung out. I looked up only to quickly duck my head back down when I saw Felzen standing there in his knight uniform.

What're you doing here?! We're on summer break, why are you on guard duty?!

I knew Zanto's camouflage magic still disguised me, yet I couldn't help but worry about the worst-case scenario. I hadn't told Felzen that Zanto had discovered my true identity. Of course, I hadn't told him about playing hostess either.

"What's going on here?" Felzen repeated, slower.

"We're whispering sweet nothings to each other, if you don't mind," the man snobbishly replied.

I shook my head in protest.

“Looks like you forgot to ask for consent, now doesn’t it?” said Felzen, noticing my reaction.

“Consent? She wouldn’t be here if she didn’t consent! Have some common sense!”

“Backing off at the first sign of discomfort is common sense. Am I wrong?” Felzen pressed.

That time the gentleman fled with his tail between his legs. I bowed, relieved Felzen hadn’t recognized me. *Thank you.*

Felzen turned to me, anger lingering on his face. He had the same glint in his eyes as he did whenever he was really mad. “Do not, under any circumstance, wander off somewhere with a guy you don’t know,” Felzen chastised me.

I meekly hung my head. Having never debuted as a woman, I didn’t know how to act in such situations.

“Watch out next time, okay?” He placed his hand on my head.

He’s so nice and gentlemanly, even to a stranger like me. I lifted my gaze, smiling to indicate that I would.

Felzen gasped. His hand slid down to the back of my head, while his other hand brushed against my cheek. “The one...”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Never before had I witnessed Felzen’s expression so intense, so feverish. I turned away, unable to bear it any longer. His hand slipped to my collarbone, tracing it. *Who are you? What did you do to Felzen?*

Something tugged on my ribbon as I tried to escape.

“Run, and it’ll come loose.”



I shoved Felzen away and gunned it. I couldn't care less if my hair got messy.

Oh god, oh god. Firsthand exposure to Felzen's seductive smolder made me realize exactly why people called him the hot-blooded knight. *What kind of womanizer do you have to be to go after a clay doll?*

My heart pounding, my fingers shaking, I sprinted back to Zanto's study.

"Is something wrong?" Zanto looked at me, confused. "Don't tell me you—"

"No," I replied, catching my breath. "Not a peep."

Zanto frowned. "Then why's that strand blue?"

Panicked, I looked over to the mirror and saw a blue streak running through my disheveled, ribbonless hair. Zanto's magic was waning.

"What? How?" Zanto hastily removed my left glove. A section of the light purple magic circle had turned red. "I've never seen anything like it. Did you run into someone very close to you? They might've seen through my magic."

Did Felzen know? If he did, then why would he... My head was spinning.

"They took your ribbon too?"

My face boiled over. Zanto thought for a bit more before telling me to head home for the night.

Chapter 15: The Solar Fire Knight and His One

ZANTO had asked me to fill in on guard duty, and so there I was in uniform during summer break. He'd also called upon a few members of the royal guard, since Marlena and the crown prince were expected to turn up. I monitored the courtyard—a hotspot for rendezvous—from the shadows, making sure not to accidentally disturb anyone.

I was patrolling the area when a girl with wavy, light brown hair came into view. I knew she was Bern the second I laid eyes on her. I didn't know why she looked the way she did. I didn't know what she was doing at Zanto's estate.

But I did know that no matter the color of her hair or eyes, I could never forget her face. I watched as she let herself be dragged off like some innocent little kid, obviously unaware of what was coming next.

The man was notorious for making quick work of his prey, and Bern was the perfect target. I rushed after them only to see him having his way with her. Furious, I charged to her rescue and was rewarded with a relieved smile.

Even underneath the makeup I could recognize the charming bridge of her nose, her thin, cold lips that nonetheless produced oddly warm smiles. The sight of her hair in a half-updo like she'd worn the first time we met set something off inside me. I felt the air in my lungs expand as a flame lit within my chest.

What if I touch her? Her cool skin would soothe this burning heat. No, that's just an excuse. What you really want is to touch the woman of your dreams.

I couldn't touch her at the academy, couldn't even whisper sweet nothings to her, till graduation day. I thought that maybe, just maybe, it wouldn't count if I played along with her act.

"The one."

She turned away. I put my hand to her cheek, slowly slid it down. The nape of her neck, normally buried under her uniform, could finally breathe. Her collarbone was like limestone: luminescent, dewy, chilly to the touch. Oh, how I

had longed for that moment.

I snatched at her ribbon when she tried to escape, hoping it'd give her an excuse to stay. "Run, and it'll come loose," I said, before she shoved me back full force.

The ribbon unraveled, making a complete mess of her hair. She didn't care. She just ran. My heart ached at the undeniable fear in her eyes. I couldn't touch her; she wouldn't let me. She'd...rejected me.

I'm not her one. The realization drove me to the verge of tears.

I wound her ribbon around my fingers, giving it a quick kiss. *No one can know this happened, not even Bern.*



BERN returned to the dorm once summer vacation ended. "Did you have guard duty during the break?" she hesitantly inquired, likely worried that I had caught on to her.

"Zanto asked me to fill in once. How do you know?" I said, feigning ignorance.

"Just a rumor I heard."

"That reminds me. I came across this woman. Slender body, beautiful posture, dignified air, cute smile. Ticked of all my boxes."

Bern's eyes widened. "The 'one'?"

"Yeah, or so I thought, until I found out she..."

"She?"

"She was one of Zanto's clay dolls." I shrugged my shoulders.

Bern's answering sigh of relief pained me. I didn't want her to feel relieved, though I didn't want her to be scared of me either. If she were, we wouldn't be able to live in the same room. I knew she'd leave me one day, so I'd hidden the truth. I wanted us to stay together for longer. If not as lovers, then as friends.

"Sounds rough," she said.

"You can say that again. Just when I thought I'd found her."

“I’m sure you’ll find another one eventually,” Bern reassured me, a smile on her face.

No woman can compare to you. I grasped the ribbon coiled inside my pocket. “Wouldn’t be ‘the one’ if there were multiple, now would it?” I laughed, sealing away my feelings.

Chapter 16: The School Festival and the Northern Princess

PREPARATIONS for the annual school festival began as soon as summer vacation ended. The festival marked the arrival of fall and the end of the social season. And much like the New Year's sword dance, it was held at the coliseum. The event served as an opportunity both to demonstrate the fruits of our training and for the locals to mingle with the knights. The school festival always brought in massive crowds because it was the only time the townspeople could interact with us.

The first day of the festival consisted of social activities: exhibitions, public training drills, and the like. On the second day we'd show off our skills, such as martial arts and horseback riding, to name a few, after which a ball would be held at the royal palace, officially closing the social season.

Each class at the academy had to put on some kind of performance as part of the first day's festivities, and because class sizes averaged twenty or so, choirs, concerts, and skits were the usual picks. We were presently discussing plans for our own.

"How about a dance performance?" Stern proposed.

"Us guys, dancing?" a classmate asked doubtfully. His reaction was about what you'd expect. I myself was of a similar opinion.

Stern nodded. "You do know that the northern princess is going to be watching, right? I asked Marlana what she thought a princess would enjoy, and, well, there's your answer."

My chest tightened at Stern's mention of the northern princess. The two had once been in engagement talks. Ultimately, Stern had rejected her offer, but not without meeting significant resistance. For whatever reason, the thought of her coming made me anxious. I wanted to see what the northern princess—famed for her stunning looks—was like but also didn't. And I didn't want her to

see Stern in his knight uniform.

Stern continued, oblivious to my feelings. "I think us all dancing the tango would make for quite the spectacle."

"Who'd wanna watch a bunch of guys tangoing?"

"Bern!" Stern called out all of the sudden.

I walked over to him, confused. He put out his hand, which I reflexively grabbed. He pulled me toward him and dipped me, my hair swinging through the air.

"Doesn't look too lame now, does it? The tango was originally a male dance for a reason." Stern grinned. Amid our classmates' excited cheers, he lifted me back up. "Sorry if I startled you," he whispered, my ear catching fire.

"Sounds good to me. Now we just need to decide on pairs."

"Dibs on Bern!" Stern declared.

Laughter ensued. "Stern's Bern infatuation is acting up again."

"No, I call dibs on Bern," Felzen snarled.

More laughter: "There they go again."

"As always."

"Toss Stern a bone, man. You and Bern'll be dancing for New Year's anyway."

Felzen fell silent, his face twisting.

"What do you think, Bern?" Stern shot a playful gaze at me. *He's testing me.*

I knew that I might never get such a chance again, so the answer seemed clear.

But before that, some payback. I took Stern's hand like a gentleman inviting a lady for a dance. "May I have this dance?" I winked. Stern's face turned pink, the other students' whistles going off in the background. *How do you like them apples?*

"Not fair! How can I resist your prince-like charm!" Stern protested.

"Says the prince," sniggered Felzen.

“Take him to pound town already, Bern!” a classmate jeered.



DAILY dance practices followed. The sessions were rather intense, because we—soldiers, all—were determined to be perfectly in step with our respective partners. All those side stripes on our pants moving perfectly to the beat were beautiful to behold.

I was so happy to be able to dance with Stern under the guise of practice. Without such a convenient excuse, I never would’ve gotten the chance. And when our bodies touched as we rehearsed, I didn’t even feel guilt. All I felt was joy.

And so came the inaugural day of the festival. Masses of people had gathered in the coliseum underneath the vast autumn sky. The class performances were about to begin. We would be the last to go.

When our turn finally came, we tangoed atop the stage in seven pairs. Stern and I stood in the center. Behind us were three knights: one playing the bandoneon, one the violin, and the third a guitar. Felzen crooned a love song in a lilting tenor.

What first started as a comical dance routine soon turned into a series of acrobatic turns. My and Stern’s long legs intertwined as we stepped lightly across the stage. He embraced me a little roughly, I wrapped my legs around his waist, he did a half-turn, lowering me on the opposite side. I swiveled, pushing him away, only to be pulled back more forcefully. I met his provocative stare with one of my own.

Felzen’s melancholic voice resounded through the coliseum: “My heart burns only for you.”

We held each other in *abrazo cerrado*. The dance steps were no different from what we’d practiced, yet there was a certain passion behind them. We gazed into each other’s eyes, his hand on my cheek, our lips within kissing distance. I snatched his wrist, shoving it away. I could have almost lost myself in it all as our breaths blended together.

Our first and last time dancing together. A wave of loneliness washed over

me. I gripped his hand, and he squeezed right back. *I love you too, Stern. Sorry for being a liar.*

We finished with a dip just as the music stopped. Stern pressed his lips against the base of my throat, noiselessly whispering, “I love you.”

A whirlwind of grief welled up within me, driving me to the brink of tears. I cursed the selfish part of myself that was okay with lying just to remain by Stern’s side.

A brief moment of silence followed the end of the dance before the stadium erupted. We turned toward the stands, bowing.

Afterward, I helped out at a frozen yogurt stall. Using my ice magic, I froze cups of yogurt topped with a garnish of the customers’ choosing then handed them out. Due to the high temperature of the early autumn day, an enormous line of people had formed to try the treat.

Many of them had seen our class’s performance. It was nice to hear their thoughts and impressions, although one pushy lady insisted that I tango with her, at which point I diverted the conversation.

Felzen, meanwhile, was grilling meat at a kiosk nearby. His beautiful singing voice, previously unknown to the public, had attracted an even larger crowd than usual.

Elsewhere, Stern ran archery drills. Public training sessions always drew in a ton of kids excited to learn techniques directly from the knights.

“Bern!” I was in the middle of a short break when Kraut came traipsing toward me with some more of the jam that the yogurt stall had sourced from his territory. The pleasing colors of the Wurzels’ flower-and olive-based jams made them a popular topping among female customers. “Your dancing was phenomenal!”

“Thanks.”

“If it’s not too much to ask, maybe you and I could—”

“No!”

“Sorry?”

“I know what you’re about to ask, and the answer is no. I’ve had enough of everyone and their mother inviting me to tango,” I replied, fatigue seeping into my voice.

“Everyone and their mother...” Kraut repeated with a pitiful grin.

“Like, at least get to know me first before making ‘humorous’ passes.”

“Sounds rough.”

“Though I’m happy they seemed to like my performance, at least.”

“Like it? Everyone *loved* it.”

“Really? Maybe all that practice wasn’t for nothing after all,” I said, smiling in relief.

Kraut smiled back. “I can make you some Wurzel tea later, if you’d like.”

“Would I! Do you have mallow?” I asked.

“Of course! I’ll come over to your place once we’re done for the day,” Kraut said, returning to his post.

“Can’t wait!” I called after him.



ON the second day of the school festival, we were to present the results of our training.

I felt uneasy. I’d heard that the northern princess, who had arrived incognito the day before, was going to be in official attendance. *I hope it’s just me being jealous*, I thought as I peered across the stands, searching for familiar faces. I had invited the female cavalry unit to observe the proceedings. I figured the chance to see the cadets fight firsthand would do them good.

I eventually found them. Lounging in dresses, they were completely unarmed and had gone all out, many of them excited to visit the royal capital for the first time. Lilia was sitting with them.

Two teams, one in red, the other in white, would compete: first in martial arts, then swordsmanship, followed by horseback riding and mounted archery, before finally facing off in a mock cavalry battle. Magic wasn’t allowed, and

participants in the mock battle wielded wooden swords and wore paper balloons strapped to their heads. Whichever team popped more of the other's balloons while on horseback won.

The sight of cadets solemnly duking it out with balloons on their heads was funny yet oddly captivating at the same time. The cavalry battle was so popular that there were apparently even gambling rings staged around it each year.

Stern led the white team while Felzen captained the red. I was on the latter. After a tight contest, the white team just barely edged out a victory. Stern acted all high and mighty about it, much to my and Felzen's chagrin. Soon all that was left was the closing ceremony and our sword dance.

An autumn breeze blew over the restless coliseum as the ceremony began. A sense of loneliness crept over me at the realization that our final school festival was nearing its end.

"Our northern neighbor has brought us a gift." The host's announcement caused a stir among the audience. He indicated a square box with a large cloth draped over the top.

Why do I sense some kind of monster in there?

The northern princess stood beside the box, smiling. Her hair was a luscious black, reaching all the way down her back, while her skin, in contrast, was as white as snow. I could almost feel myself getting sucked in by her seductive, blood-red lips.

She—she desired Stern, and yet he'd rejected her. *Why is she, of all her family members, here? Why would a royal family send their daughter to a kingdom whose prince had just rejected her? Did she want to come here herself? Did she want to see Stern? Has she...not given up yet?* I shook my head. *So what if she hasn't? It's not like you have a say in anything!*

Stern looked at me. "Is something wrong?"

"Just admiring her beauty is all," I said.

"So she's your type, then?"

The resentment on Stern's face sent a shiver down my spine. "Not really, no.

She's just pretty, you know?"

"I don't," he said, sulking. "You're the prettiest one here."

My face went pink. "Me? Prettier than a princess?" I muttered, ducking my head, only to raise it back up when I felt an ominous aura radiating from her. Stern glanced her way as well.

Sensing Stern's gaze, she grinned, her black eyes glaring as she placed her hands on the fabric cover. The hairs on my skin stood on end. I looked to the stands and saw the cavalry unit waving. *They're here.* I exhaled, calming myself. *It's okay, it's okay.*

"Rise, Lilitu!" She tossed the cloth aside, revealing a large bird in a cage. The bird spread its brightly colored wings, letting out a shrill shriek when the princess opened the cage door.

"Monster!" a cavalrywoman yelled. Spinning around, I saw cadets crouched on the ground, clutching their heads.

I unsheathed my sword, squaring off against the bird. Its large wings kicked up a scorching gust. *Fire magic.*

"Obey me, and I'll grant you the one you desire," reverberated its words inside my head.

The princess stared at the bird, admiration in her eyes. *Did she...unleash it on purpose?!*

"Obey me, and I'll grant you the one you desire." The offer resounded once more, Stern's face flashing before my eyes as the monster deflected my weapon with its talons.

Grant me the one I desire? I felt my conviction falter.

No, Stern'd never forgive me for giving in to a monster.

All the cadets had collapsed, immobilized by pain, even Stern and Felzen. *Lilitu's curse.* The men in the audience were just as enthralled, while the women looked on in horror.

The Lilitu charged toward me. With my ice-enhanced blade, I cut through the wave of blistering heat that preceded it only to see its claws plunge into my

chest. But then it leaped back, bewildered. The four-leaf clover brooch pinned to my front had repelled its talons.

Get a grip, Bern! Are you so weak as to give in to some monster just to win the man of your dreams? You're not. I know you're not. I want to believe you're not.

The Lilitu screeched as though mocking my glare. I whipped my head to the side, whistling to the female cavalry unit. *They're part of the Cavalry Brigade, they'll know what to do.* Several women wearing dresses raced down the rows of panicking spectators.

I swung my sword, erecting a pillar of ice. The Lilitu kicked up another burning wall of air, slicing down the barrier and knocking my sword out of my hand.

"Bernstein!"

"Grab a sword, quick!"

The cavalrywomen wrested the cadets' swords from their scabbards before surrounding the Lilitu. I froze its legs to the arena floor, preventing it from flying away, and enchanted the cavalrywomen's swords with ice. They bravely charged in but were beat back by its fiery wings.

Other monsters began to emerge from beneath the earth, attracted to the Lilitu's miasma. It was all I could do to hold them back: the cavalrywomen couldn't use magic. The cadets were in no condition to fight. It was looking bleak. We needed something, some kind of weapon or spell powerful enough to bring down the mind-controlling beast.

Stern! If what Lilia had said was true, there was only one way to remove the curse. I wasn't sure if it would work, but what other choice did I have? I ran to Stern, who was clutching his head in pain, and pulled him into my arms. His muddled eyes stared into mine, shock on his face. He seemed to be calling out to me, yet no words left his mouth. *He recognizes me. There's still hope.*

"Forgive me," I whispered, on the brink of tears, wrapping my cloak around him. *My first and last kiss, the beginning of the end.* Our lips touched in the darkness underneath the cloak.



Before we part, allow me to tell you the truth. Before we part, oblige me one last lie. I love you, Stern, I really do, but I want you to forget. Erase me from your memory, and I'll erase you from mine. "I loved you too," I murmured. Gazing into his eyes, I saw a twinkling gold star. Light was returning to them, their gleam the kingdom's only hope. "Stern, you here?" He nodded. "Coat your sword in mercury."

After Stern did as asked, I layered his mercury-covered sword with ice, taking it from him, and lowered him down. He coughed, then puked his guts out. The curse was lifted.

I looked at him. "I leave the rest to you," I said before dashing up to the Lilitu and chucking Stern's sword straight into its chest. The blade melted, spreading toxins throughout its body, and the creature fell to the ground shortly thereafter. The remaining monsters, however, were refusing to back down.

"Can any of you stand!" rang Stern's commanding voice through the stadium.

"Aye!" The cadets slowly got back to their feet. When the Lilitu died, so had its curse. The northern princess fell to her knees.

My eyes met Felzen's. His face was ghastly pale. *I know you're worried.* I pressed my finger against my lips—a secret gesture we had shared since early childhood—telling him to keep quiet. The truth was out. I had no place there anymore.

Felzen nodded, his face stricken with grief. I waved, ordering him to fight. Felzen shook off his despair and created a wall of fire between us and the stands.

Providing a distraction for me to escape. Thoughtful to the very end, I see.

Aware that we were no longer needed, the cavalrywomen and I sprinted out of the coliseum.

Chapter 17: The Moment My World Fell Apart

I couldn't take my eyes off the giant, beautiful bird, vivid red and blue flames rising from its wings.

“Don't be afraid. Come, let us sing songs of love. Forget these people.” An alluring voice echoed inside my head, giving way to desire.

What is it that I desire? What is it that I crave? There's something missing deep inside me, but what? What does my insatiable heart hunger for? Maybe the bird knows, maybe it can fill the hole in my heart. I took a step toward it, toward heaven.

Something welled up inside me, lodging against my throat. *Go away.* I felt a sweet, sweet urge to just let go, set myself free. *It hurts.* I wished to surrender myself to the bird, but my knightly pride wouldn't allow it. Something was stopping me. The conflict brewing within me tormented both my mind and heart. All I wanted was to be free. *Bern*, I called, yet no words came out.

It was then that I saw him facing off against the bird all alone. I had always found his ice magic pretty. *The bird's a monster? I have to get up, get up and fight.* But I couldn't move, as if some force had taken over my body.

Bern. My voice couldn't reach him. *Bern!*

He whistled at that same moment. A bunch of fancily dressed women poured from the stands, drawing swords against the magnificent bird. *Why can they move? Why can only Bern and the cavalrywomen move?* The answer would have to wait because I couldn't form a single coherent thought with the bird's song playing in my head.

As the surroundings started to blur, my eyes found his. He was apologizing, his gaze pained. He inexplicably wrapped his cloak around me, separating us from the rest of the world. Shrouded in darkness, his cold lips met mine. It was clumsy, awkward, childish; more a peck than a kiss. My vision brightened, a hot sensation rising in my chest.

I love you. Even if you can't be mine, even if you can't fill the hole in my heart, even if you don't accept my love, I'll never, ever stop loving you.

"I loved you too," he whispered tearfully.

I was confused, not quite sure what to make of his words. *You loved me? Is that why you're apologizing?* I had a million questions and couldn't voice a single one because of whatever was stuck in my throat.

Bern reentered knight mode, asked me to enhance my sword with mercury. I obliged as best I could. *Anything you desire, I provide.*

"I leave the rest to you," Bern said, turning from me as he advanced toward the bird. As I stared at it from behind his back, it no longer appeared like anything other than a disgusting, hideous monster.

Bern struck it down, then vanished. All that remained was a shard of blue amber that I'd coughed up. It was what had been blocking my throat, what the monster was trying to steal from me. I wanted nothing more than to throw it away; merely holding it filled me with pain and misery. Yet its dazzling glow proved too beautiful. *My very own piece of Bernstein.*

I stood, shouting orders to protect the kingdom Bern had fought for. And though we eliminated the monsters, we lost Bern in the process.



I hurled myself onto the couch, waiting for Felzen, one of the room's occupants, to arrive. The other occupant wouldn't be returning any time soon.

Should be here any minute. His questioning can't possibly drag on much longer than mine.

The two had been roommates since prep school; of course the military would suspect Felzen of knowing the truth.

But I didn't. We've known each other since we were kids, but she hid the truth from me. She...didn't trust me. I slammed my fist on the table before me. *Why? Because I'm a prince? Why would she hide her gender? Why would she lie to me all these years?*

Their desks stood side by side, much to my eternal envy. Looking at the top

bunk, I couldn't help but think that she was coming back later that day. Why else would everything feel so...normal?

The door flung open. I lifted my head and met Felzen's gaze. His hair was tousled, the raging fire in his eyes dying as he registered my presence. Gently he closed the door. "Oh... It's you," he muttered, sighing.

Furious, I rose from the sofa, stormed over to Felzen, and grabbed him by the collar. When I pinned him against the wall, I realized he was letting me, which only made me angrier. "You knew, didn't you?!"

Felzen matched my glare with one of his own, silent.

"Didn't you?!" I shouted. *Say something. Why won't you say something?* "How long—how long have you known?"

"I can hear you just fine!" He took a deep breath. "I've known since the very start. She was wearing a dress when we first met." His words were soft, but the pain they inflicted was anything but. He'd known from the beginning, before Bern and I had even met, and he'd lied to me. They'd lied to me.

My arms dropped as my world slowly collapsed, piece by piece. *Pathetic*. I felt so stupid that I had to laugh. I had thought them my friends, people I could trust, and who could trust me in kind. I'd told myself that they were different from the rest and yet, there I was.

They had betrayed me. They didn't trust me. As someone in a position of power, I was no stranger to treachery, expected it even. Theirs hurt unlike any I had ever experienced.

"Why? Because I'm a prince?"

"No," he answered without hesitation. "I hid the truth from you because I was afraid you'd..."

"I'd?"

"Because I was afraid you'd steal her away from me," he mumbled, biting down on his lip.

All this time. I gulped. *All this time, Felzen's been...*

"You couldn't visit her, and she can't visit you all that often, so I thought, 'I'll

just keep my mouth shut.’ After all, there was no way you’d fall for her thinking she’s a him.”

Been in love with her.

“And look where that got me, huh?” he said with a crooked smile on his face, holding back tears. I nodded. “What was I thinking? It was bound to come out sooner or later.” His voice shrank as I struggled to find the right words. “Remember how we told Bern to come to prep school with us? How she followed through on her word? She was ready to lead a life of lies over some silly promise between kids. And I was so happy that she would go to such lengths just to maintain our relationship. I made her a liar.” He covered his face with his arm. “And yet, I failed to protect her and will have to pile on more lies. Only I could protect her, but not anymore. Now I can’t, even if I wanted to.”

“Why not?”

“I made a deal with her father. In exchange for letting Bern into prep school, he made me promise to guard her innocence and to immediately cut off all contact if her secret came out.” He fell silent, the air around us growing heavy.

If it were discovered that the marshal and his advisor, who also happened to possess the only private army in the kingdom, were meddling in military affairs, they could very well be accused of planning a coup d’état. Felzen’s involvement had to remain a secret.

Had I known and willingly turned a blind eye, the best-case scenario would have been that I got my title stripped. Worst-case scenario, we’d have all been executed for treason.

“I didn’t want to make you a liar too,” he said, hanging his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you...okay with me knowing?” Felzen had just told me a secret he and Bern had maintained for years. *What if I had flipped out and told someone? Your families would be in hot water.*

“Of course,” he said with a gloomy smile. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

I felt something burst inside me. *My world, collapsing? No, it’s right here, held up by them, by their lies.*

I grabbed Felzen's shoulders. "I'll bring her back. Will you help me, Felzen?" I was prepared to do whatever it took. He and I, of all people, had no right to simply carry on with our lives like nothing had ever happened.

"The fact that you're the one asking me...is why she didn't pick me," Felzen said with his usual grin.

Suddenly, a knock rapped on the door.

Felzen opened it, revealing Kraut, whose green eyes brimmed with determination. "I've come to ask you a favor, Felzen." He bowed, clutching a stack of papers. "Please help me save Bern."

"What you got there?" I asked, sneaking a peek.

"P-Petitions. I got as many as I could."

Felzen and I exchanged glances. "Isn't she a lucky one?"

Felzen smiled. "She sure is."

A warmth swelled inside my chest. *With this many people we might just be able to pull it off—we have to.*

"We were just thinking the same thing. Will you help us?"

"Of course!"



AND so, Operation Save Bern officially began. The plan was to carve out a space where she could be her true self—to establish a female knights order within the royal capital.

The court had been thrown into chaos: opportunists who sought a cut of the Eisberks' vast territory, conniving schemers hoping to replace House Eisberk, and sly foxes who boasted how they had lurked in the shadows awaiting the perfect opportunity to strike, ran rampant. And then there were those with good intentions, those who held their peace.

Marlena announced that she was removing herself from all governmental affairs on account of losing her primary escort. If anyone made a good argument for why a female order should exist, it was she. Marlena was so

beloved by the people that even the anti-Eisberk crowd wanted her to resume her tours of inspection.

The Wurzels pleaded with the court for Bern's forgiveness. Bern was quite popular among their vassals, who had witnessed Bern defend the princess firsthand. Kraut had also mentioned the bear incident to his parents, so it was their house's way of repaying the favor.

The White Lily Tea Party members rallied their support for Bern. High society's largest clique started a campaign of rumors—how Lilia had been heard to say that her family, in a show of subservience to the crown, would not set one foot outside Eisberk, nor deliver a single horse, until granted pardon.

That in particular gave the Eisberks' detractors a good scare. The Cavalry Brigade occasionally cleared out the monsters in the forest bordering their lands, so what would happen if they suddenly stopped? And if Eisberk no longer supplied the kingdom with horses? The consequences would be plain to see.

Elfenbein was deployed to a remote outpost in the south, likely as a means of detaching him from the rest of his house for monitoring purposes. The region was an infamous gathering ground for insubordinate officers and ruffians, and initially there were doubts regarding Elfenbein's ability to endure such a harsh social environment given his gentle nature. But he didn't just endure; he thrived in the position, further bolstering trust in the Eisberks. Some even clamored for his promotion to captain, an appointment he agreed to accept only in exchange for Bern's exoneration.

Perhaps Elfenbein's mild demeanor had merely been an act all along. Bern's siblings were terrifying wherever they went, it seemed.

Marquess Vulkan didn't come to the Eisberks' defense, quite the opposite: he dismissed his advisor as punishment for breaking military law. Allegations of collusion between the two families slowly dwindled as a result. Felzen, likewise, feigned complete ignorance. Knowing Felzen, I suspected the act was taking an immense emotional toll, but, as the man himself said with a smile, he'd give up his life if it meant resolving the situation.

Zanto's behavior was the most confusing of all. He didn't mount any pressure on the royal court whatsoever. When questioned on the matter, he tiptoed

around the subject. And yet, whenever he had the time, he went on “private trips,” as he called them, to Eisberk. There was seemingly no merit to befriending the Eisberks at a time when even the Vulkans kept them at arm’s length. His movements didn’t make sense, which worried the opposition.

Blue fans symbolizing support of the Lunar Ice Knight’s return began cropping up here and there. There were no protests or shouting; people simply went about their day with a blue fan in hand, the color, of course, meant to represent Bern.

Eisberk showed no signs of revolt, only begged for pardon. And despite the house’s lack of status, the incident sparked massive interest.

Chapter 18: The Seasons of Eisberk

MOTHER welcomed me home with a table full of my favorite foods. I filled out and sent a withdrawal form to the military academy that same day.

I still hadn't heard back, which was understandable given how much controversy the recent events had generated. After all, the northern princess, with clear ill-intent, had smuggled a monster into our kingdom. Her actions were in no way permissible, even if she had been under the Lilitu's control.

And yet, I sympathized with her plight. I longed for Stern, despite knowing full well that it was wrong for me to do so. Her feelings for him were obviously strong, so of course she'd fallen under its influence. Heck, I almost had—I considered it for a good second, and the only thing that stopped me was the knowledge of how Stern would react to such underhanded means. What was the point of securing my love for him only to be despised?

Then there was the revelation that I, Bernstein von Eisberk, was a woman. I'd been deceiving the kingdom since prep school all the way through my time at the military academy, the fact of which was grounds for an investigation.

Sure enough, rumors that I was a spy intent on sabotaging the Knights Order from within spread in parts of the royal court. I wouldn't have been surprised if my request for withdrawal was denied because of them.

Lilia came straight home after hearing about the incident. She didn't say anything to me when she arrived; she just gave me a big, warm hug.

Elfen, following his house arrest, was demoted and deployed to the south, far from Eisberk. In his letter he wrote, "Don't worry, we'll take care of this."

Felzen, per the agreement, feigned complete and utter ignorance.

Stern, from what I'd heard, was absolutely floored by the news.

Officially speaking, there was no woman by the name of Bernstein in Regenbogen Kingdom, which likely complicated matters legally.

Father and his long-past prayers were the cause of the entire affair, and while he held no seat in the royal court, he was nonetheless dismissed from his position as Marshal Vulkan's advisor the very day my secret was discovered. He secluded himself in Eisberk in a show of remorse, but it was hard to call his voluntary confinement an act of contrition when he barely ever left our territory to begin with. For the punishment to mean anything, either his lands or title would have to be revoked, neither of which was realistically going to happen, lest a civil war erupt.

The Cavalry Brigade was on edge following my flight from Neue Milchstrasse, furious at the way I was being treated despite the countless lives I'd saved. I visited their training sessions every day in hope of assuaging their frustration before something happened.

Father praised my judgement, saying I had done the right thing. And no matter how many times I replayed that day in my head, I couldn't imagine myself doing any of it differently. I couldn't have abandoned the royal capital to its doom, even if it meant that my loved ones would suffer.

I just hoped the villa wouldn't be bridged solely because of me.

My secret had to have come out eventually; I'd merely sped up the process. Though I hadn't thought my first kiss would be so depressing. A kiss from one's beloved was the only way to dispel a Lilitu's curse. Strong feelings toward another were key. It had been very much a gamble, but I'd thought that maybe, just maybe, I was his. I'd kissed him, and he...he'd woken up. Even if we never saw each other again, I was content.

I touched my lips, looking into the mirror on the table. My reflection wore her hair down, the me he'd never gotten to see.

That fateful day, I had left the mirror Stern gave me back in the dormitory, where it—along with the rest of my memories—yet remained as I had no way of retrieving them. The jar, the ribbon Felzen gave me that same day, knowing I couldn't buy one myself. I hoped they didn't get tossed out. I couldn't help but feel a little nostalgic, even though I'd been the maker of my own ruin.



WINTER arrived in Eisberk.

I helped Wolfe conduct drills and spent time inspecting the march. Winter was peak training season because no farming could take place during the cold months. Everyday life there was peaceful and a little lonely, just as I'd imagined it. It had come a bit earlier than I expected but would have happened eventually anyway. Enough time had passed since the school festival that even the Cavalry Brigade had mostly cooled off.

Trees, houses were all blanketed in snow, painting Eisberk white. The social season had already begun anew in the royal capital, yet Lilia was adamant about staying home. *Sorry, Lilia's boyfriend.*

Kraut had performed the New Year's sword dance, apparently. He'd been sending me messages in secret. His unsigned letters always contained a purple, heart-shaped petal. The petals were mallow, a flower which grew exclusively in the Wurzel demesne, hence my recognition of the missives as his. They were written to be as inconspicuous as possible while still informing on the state of affairs in the royal capital.

Zanto surprised me the most. I'd thought he would turn on me after everything came to light, but no, he mailed me a letter through the royal post—and signed his name, no less. Though the note did start with the words "Don't make Marlena cry." He'd explained he wanted to know more about Lilitu, so naturally I introduced him to Lilia. He visited Eisberk whenever he had the chance ever since.

That day, for instance, the three of us were having tea together.

"How's the research coming along?"

"I believe I've finally managed to make a breakthrough, thanks to your input, of course, Lilia. It would appear the reason the Lilitu was able to sneak through as easily as it did was—as you might've already surmised—because of its ability to control the minds of men. A knight inspected it. Said it 'just looked like some weird bird.'"

"Yet more proof of the need for female knights."

"Hahaha." He forced out a laugh. "I wouldn't be so definitive myself, but rest assured, my report will contain nothing but the facts. Indeed, I would personally like to see Bernstein escorting Princess Marlena again."

“And why is that?” Lilia inquired, a spine-chilling smile on her face.

“Because the princess wants her back, even if it all stemmed from a recommendation by the White Lily Tea Party.”

“My, quite the unflattering rumor, isn’t it?”

“Hahaha. Rumor, yes, if that’s what you wish to call it. I must admit though, having the princess bear witness to Bernstein’s achievements firsthand—brilliant, absolutely brilliant.”

Lilia retaliated with an icy Eisberk grin. “I suppose there’s no reason for you to come back to Eisberk, now that your research is over. We wouldn’t want to cause you anymore trouble, especially given our family’s current reputation.”

“Please, I’m not a grand mage for nothing. I’m not scared of anyone or anything.”

“I am aware, yes. A man of your stature surely can’t be so idle as to visit us without reason?”

“Reason? If it’s a reason you want, then why don’t we begin with Bern’s enhancement magic?” he suggested, taking my hand.

Lilia swatted his away. “Apologies, there was a bug on your hand, a most disgusting one. Ohohoho,” she said with an exaggerated laugh.

“Can you not enhance, Zanto?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Not without chanting or a using magic circle.”

“I see.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“Hmm, I didn’t really learn it. It came to me naturally, just like it did for everyone else, or so I thought. Though, there was a specific event that got me to try it—when I was a child, a kid saved me from drowning by heating the water around us. I thought, ‘Why don’t I try surrounding something in a protective layer of magic?’ And I just went from there.”

“Is it just a matter of visualizing it?”

“I couldn’t really say.”

Zanto frowned.

“There goes your last reason. Off you go now, Zanto, sir,” Lilia interjected, curtailing the conversation.

“Hahaha, and here I thought *Elfenbein* was the kind-faced intimidating type.” Zanto forced out a laugh. “Reason or no, I’d like to visit again in the future, so try not to go too hard on me, okay?”

Lilia’s voice sharpened. “Why?”

“I’m getting tired of these verbal games, so let me be completely upfront with you: I don’t like seeing the princess cry.”

Lilia’s eyes widened. “My!”

“I-I am m-more or less on her f-fiancé l-list.” His Marlina-itis appeared to be intact. “She wants to keep tabs on Bern. That’s why.”

“I see...” Lilia smiled.

My chest tightened. Marlina worried for me even after I’d betrayed her.

“Well, there’s also the fact that my ‘private trips’ here are driving people absolutely nuts trying to figure out why I would bother.” He sniggered. “‘Is the royal family somehow involved?’ ‘Does it make sense from the Grand Mages’ perspective?’ ‘Is it something entirely beyond our grasp?’ Hilarious, isn’t it?”

“My, what a bad boy you are,” she said, a satisfied smirk on her face.

The two of them may have had more in common than I first thought.

“So, Bern, mind if I take some of this candy for Marlina?”

“Of course not. Just make sure to tell her Lilia made them. I don’t want to inconvenience her, so I can’t send her anything myself, but please let her know I appreciate the concern.”

“I will.”

“Tell her I’m doing well for myself.”

“I will.”

“Thank her for crying on my behalf.”

“Aaaaaa!” Zanto teared up, creeping Lilia out. “Precious, still precious!”

Once a pervert, always a pervert.



AND so, spring came to Eisberk. The snow started to melt, snowdrops began to bloom.

One day, I decided to visit the lake then swing by town afterward. I could finally wear feminine clothing whenever I pleased, and yet there was an academy-uniform-shaped hole in my heart. My dream of donning a knight’s white cape one day—gone. Not that I was even supposed to have hoped for such things to begin with.

The lake was slow to thaw that year, probably because Felzen hadn’t come for autumn’s hunting season. The Lord of the Lake was fond of Felzen, or at least that was the impression I got.

Maybe he’s lonely, but...it’s already March. Snow had fallen in a thin layer over the frozen surface of the lake. *Forgive me,* I apologized. *Felzen won’t be coming back here ever again.* I’d hurt so many people with my selfish whims, and somehow they still cared for me.

Ice crunched underfoot. “You really were a girl all along,” sounded a familiar voice from behind me. How could I possibly forget that soothing, firm, princely voice—Stern.

Oh, how I’d missed it. How I’d longed to hear it again, even if in a dream.

And yet, I was scared, scared of him seeing my true self. I couldn’t turn around; I wouldn’t be able to bear the disappointment on his face. I wanted to run, but my body refused to comply.

Years upon years of lies led up to this. My comeuppance.

Snow scraped underneath his boots as he walked up beside me, his footfalls steadfast. “Bern,” he called. My breath stopped, the inside of my chest about to burst. “I’m here to take you back,” he said.

I’d been born in Eisberk, I belonged there, and he said he was there *to take me back*. I snuck a nervous glance. His warm smile almost drove me to tears. I

tried to speak, but no sound came out.

As I struggled to regain my breath, the sound of hooves striking ice resounded across the lake. I looked up to see Wolfe jump off his horse and sprint toward us.



“Get away from her!” Wolfe pulled out his sword, pointing it toward Stern.

“Wolfe! No!” I shielded Stern. “He’s a prince, Wolfe! Have you gone mad?!”

“So what!” he yelled. “A spoiled little princeling like you has no right to stand at Bernstein’s side!” Wolfe’s anger was almost palpable.

Stern approached him. “I threw away my title. Nothing disrespectful about it.”

I gasped. *Already?* Princes were demoted to vassals only upon reaching adulthood at twenty years of age.

Stern unsheathed his sword, trading glares with Wolfe. Tension filled the frosty air, ready to snap at any second.

“Stop it, you two!” I inserted myself in between them. I didn’t want to hurt them, nor did I want them to harm each other. “Lower your sword, Wolfe. That’s an order. You too, Stern.” They begrudgingly laid down their arms, and anger welled up inside me. “What is wrong with you!”

Why do they have to hurt one another? Why?

“Pick, Bern,” Stern said.

“Pick what?”

“Are you coming with me to Neue Milchstrasse or are you staying here with him?”

Wolfe remained silent, his black eyes fixed on me.

I sighed. *What kind of question is that? There’s no place for me in the capital anymore.* “You know I can’t go back.”

“Yesterday it was declared that females can officially become knights.”

“What?”

“And you’re the first one up.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Of course, there are people opposed to the idea, people who don’t trust the Eisberks. It won’t be easy, certainly not as easy as the life you have here, but I’m asking you to come back to the academy with me, nonetheless. Let’s graduate,

together.”

A warm feeling spread throughout my chest. The dream I had long since abandoned, my dream of the three of us all becoming knights together, was within reach. *But should I reach for it? What if my dream ends up hurting others again?*

I looked to Wolfe. His gaze was gentle, urging me to go. “If it ever gets to be too much, you always have a place to come back to. Never forget that.”

“I won’t.”

“Best of luck.”

Wolfe had always had my back. He’d pushed me toward my goals, and when I came back a failure, he’d been there to support me. “Thanks, Wolfe.”

He nodded. Then he mounted his horse and rode off without looking back.

“Bern.” My heart leaped upon hearing Stern say my name. “The look, it suits you,” he said with an awkward smile, the abrupt compliment turning my cheeks as pink as his.

“T-Thanks.” I hung my head, staring down at my nails.

What do I say now? Confused by the sudden silence, I peeked upward only to drop my gaze back down when I saw his lips. *I forced a kiss on him. It was an emergency, sure, but man, what was I thinking?* I’d only had the courage to do it because I’d thought we’d never see each other again. I felt thoroughly awkward.

“What did you mean by ‘I loved you too’?” he asked, and I was too embarrassed to answer. “Why ‘loved’? Do you not love me anymore?”

The sheer sadness in his voice made me raise my head. I had never seen him look so dejected. “I do! I just thought we’d never see each other again. I thought you’d despise me after learning the truth.” I lowered my eyes. “I’m sorry. Sorry for lying to you this whole time.”

Stern brought his hands to my cheeks, lifting my face toward him. “No, I’m sorry for making you lie. I love you, Bern, just the way you are.”

His words melted something deep inside me. *Just the way I am. That*

something so simple could make me so happy.

“I love you too.”

Stern smiled, letting his hands fall. “I’m a vassal now.”

“I heard.”

“Marry me, Bern.”

My brain was refusing to process what he’d said.

“The Eisberks’ ‘no-marrying-into-the-royal-family’ rule doesn’t apply anymore,” he pointed out with a playful grin. I was still speechless. “It sure would be embarrassing if I got rejected now, especially since everyone at the academy knows I threw away my title just for you.”

“You told them?!” It appeared he had me backed into a corner.

Devilish angel.

“I even bragged how there was no way I’d get rejected.”

“That’s not the issue!”

He gave me a woebegone look. “Are you mad at me?”

“No, it’s just—underhanded!”

Stern’s not-sorry-in-the-slightest smirk made me smile. After a pause, he transfixed me with a serious expression. *I can’t move, he’s got me under his spell again.*

“I make my own fate,” he said, repeating what he’d told me that fateful night, as his large hands cupped my cheeks. He had to be boiling the metal in my blood because I was suffused with warmth from the inside out. His magnetic affinity was attracting the iron within my body, making me want to touch him. Our noses bumped, our breaths intertwined. “Run while you still can,” he teased.

“Dispel your magic then.”

He laughed. “Jokes aside, have you finally figured out the cause for it?”

As humiliating as it was to admit, there could only be one answer. “My love

for you,” I said, kissing him to hide my humiliation. He locked my head in place when I tried to retreat in embarrassment and gave me a passionate kiss.

I’m so glad that lifeless kiss didn’t turn out to be our last.

Stern caught me in his arms as my body melted into mush. “You know what came out of me when you dispelled the curse? A blue amber. The monster tried to steal my feelings for you,” he said. “Thanks—for protecting me. Now promise, promise you’ll marry me.” His intense gaze pierced my soul.

As if there’s a need for promises.

“I promise.” I offered him my pinky. Stern shyly hooked his around mine. We’d frequently made pinky promises since we were kids, but this one was special. “Break it and I’ll cut your pinky off.”

Stern nodded, beaming.

The lake ice creaked.

The ice is thawing. Spring is here.

Chapter 19: Graduation

STERN brought me back to the academy just in time for graduation day. Apparently, he'd done everything he could to ensure my attendance.

I'd put on the ceremonial uniform Stern gave me. It was a little tight across the chest.

I felt nauseated; my fingertips were numb. *Stern might've forgiven me, but will everyone else?*

We dismounted our horses at the gate. I took a deep breath. *No one's looking out the windows.* That was all the answer I needed. The dorm windows were closed, as though shutting me out. On the day I brought an injured Stern back from Eisberk, everyone's head had been poking out the windows. They'd waved.

"It's okay," Stern reassured me.

It's okay. It's okay. It's all going to be okay. I pushed the thick, tall gate open with trembling hands. It had never felt so heavy. It opened with a dull creak.

What I saw before me took my breath away. Cadets stood on either side of the doors, also clad in ceremonial uniform. They were all waiting for me.

"Welcome back, Bern," said Felzen, extending his hand.

"Welcome back, Bern." Kraut beamed as several other welcomes resounded.

A warm feeling welled up within me, my eyes tearing over. "Thank you!"

Thank you for forgiving me.

"Come on, why you cryin'?"

"Took you long enough."

"Bet you're glad you could make it in time."

Hands reached for my downturned head, cuffing it good-naturedly. It was

nice to know that our boundaries remained the same.

“Thank you?” Felzen gazed into my eyes, an unreserved smile on his face. “Let’s try that again.” It’d been too long since I’d seen that familiar tanned skin, his red eyes. “Welcome back, Bern,” he repeated.

I smiled. “It’s good to be back.” There was still a place for me. “It really is.” Tears streamed down my cheeks.

“Course it is.”

“You’ve saved our asses more times than you can imagine.”

“It’s about time we return the favor.”

Warmth spread throughout my chest. “Thank you, everyone!”

They grinned.

“Sorry it took so long.” Stern caressed my back.

I shook my head. *We made it in time for the graduation ceremony. I couldn’t ask for more.*

“Would the graduates please gather?” Kraut announced, and we assembled in front of the auditorium as instructed. The graduation ceremony was about to begin.



THE master of ceremonies announced its start. Graduation would double as a commissioning ceremony. Students stood row by row as we walked through the auditorium. Thunderous applause resounded up to the building’s tall ceiling. Soft, spring sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows as though congratulating us.

First, we sang the kingdom’s national anthem, followed by the school anthem. Our elegant performance of the former sharply contrasted the emotional rawness with which we choked out the latter.

Then medals, marked with our graduation year, and officer capes were handed out. Our names were read off one by one alongside all of our achievements over the past three years. Afterward we were each informed of

our new station as division insignia were pinned to our chests.

Stern was first. He was commissioned to duty with the Seventh Division, down south where Elfenbein was posted. Felzen was assigned to the Fourth Division, up in the north.

We're all drifting apart.

Because I had just barely passed the minimum attendance requirements, my name came very last: "Bernstein von Eisberk."

"Yes!" I rose, walked forward.

"You went up against a foreign threat, displaying remarkable bravery, and successfully defeated it. In light of this accomplishment, I'm assigning you to the kingdom's Central Readiness Force's female knights division as its first member."

I saluted, about-facing as the auditorium erupted.

The insignia adhered to my uniform had blue wings, likely a unique design made for the newly established division. Upon receiving my white cape, I finally started to feel like I was no longer a cadet but an officer.

After the principal's congratulatory address, Kraut presented the farewell speech, to which Stern replied, speaking on behalf of our class. When the ceremony officially ended, we ran up to the second-floor balcony, as was tradition, while the non-graduates rushed out of the hall.

I glanced down and saw a large crowd of people massed in front of the auditorium, ready for the hat toss. It was customary for new graduates to throw their cadet caps from the balcony, and some even tucked notes inside. I tore up my student identification card and scrawled a message, inserting it into my hat.

"What a crowd." Felzen smiled, as did Stern.

Down below I saw Kraut, his arms in the air. *Huh, never would've thought him the type.*

A sea of restless eyes looked on with anticipation. Among them, a girl in pigtails jumped up and down, holding her training sword overhead.

"Toss!" exclaimed Stern, and a bunch of white caps flew into the air before

spiraling downwards. A swell of hands reached toward the sky like a field of flowers.

I lobbed mine in the direction of the twin-tailed girl, hoping it'd reach her, only for it to be snatched by the boy in front of her. *What a shame*, I thought, but then the boy turned and placed it on her head. The two bowed, waving at me. I waved back, the sight filling me with nostalgia.

"What did you write?" Stern asked.

"It's a secret," I replied, laughing.

Stern sulked. "Your secrets are the worst." He shot a glare at me, a shiver running down my spine.

"They really are," a classmate agreed, the numbers advantage going to Stern.

I shrugged. "I'm too embarrassed to say..." I grumbled, but Stern refused to let me off the hook.

"I'm sure it can't be that bad."

"To whoever catches this hat, I hope that you too will one day get to toss yours. The view here is priceless." Saying it aloud was extremely embarrassing.

"I stand corrected. It really could be that bad!"

Stern put his arm around my shoulders, Felzen placing his from the opposite side. One after another, classmates piled on top of me.

"Watch it! Enough already!"

Cheers sounded from below as the bugle corps played the school anthem. Our shoulders locked together, we sang once more as the graduation ceremony came to a close.



LEAVING the noisy campus, I returned to my dorm room. Some cleaning was in order before it could be passed off to the next generation. Felzen and Stern, popular as they were, were still surrounded by a press of well-wishers.

A nostalgic smell greeted me when I opened the door: Felzen's scent, mallow leaves, the fragrance of Stern's lotion. I felt a bit chagrined realizing how

strongly scented the moisturizer had truly been to have lingered this long.

I made the beds. Two desks stood side by side, and I emptied mine of all my schoolbooks and stuffed them into my backpack. I opened the locked drawer to check if all my valuables were still in place. Stern's mirror, the jar of stars, the ribbon Felzen gave me, Zanto's comedic letters, a pressed flower bookmark from Marlena. *Just as I left it.*

As I packed, there was a knock at the door. "May I come in?"

Kraut.

"Go ahead."

He timidly entered. "Congratulations on graduating."

"Thanks. Stern told me you helped collect signatures."

He awkwardly shook his head. "It was nothing, really. Everyone signed immediately, explained just how much of a help you've been to them."

"I see. That's nice." I was happy to hear that my efforts hadn't gone unappreciated, even if I wasn't expecting thanks.

"Would you exchange pins with me?"

Cadets wore pins that identified them as such. It was tradition to trade badges with underclassmen on graduation day.

"You, top of your class, want to swap pins with *me*?" I asked, laughing.

"Year-ago me would lose it if he found out," Kraut chuckled.

"He was rather bratty, wasn't he?"

"My apologies." He hung his head in shame.

Maybe I went a little too far. "I'm joking, I'm joking. Chin up, come on." Kraut lifted his head, his gaze shifting away from me shyly. I removed the pin from his collar then pulled mine from my pocket, attaching it in the other's place. It gave off a dull glow. "Enjoy your last year at the academy."

"I will! Thank you!" Kraut said as he exited the room.

After wiping down my desk, I looked out the window. People were still

hanging around in the courtyard. The curtains swayed in the wind.

A lot has happened over the years, both good and bad. At times I felt weak, at times I felt shallow, but my friends were always there when I needed them. But I'm glad I came here and am standing here today.

"Bern!" Stern raised his arm, beckoning from below.

"Come on down here!" called Felzen, smiling.

"Be there in a sec!" I closed the window and pulled the drapes shut. I bowed to the room as it darkened.

Thank you for protecting me all this time.

Light filtered in through the gap in the curtains, illuminating Felzen's desk. I locked the door, saluted it, before turning smartly and sprinting down the hall.

Run. Run, so we can all start a new life, together.

Epilogue: The Radiant Light Knight and the Lunar Ice Knight

IN a small church somewhere on the outskirts of Neue Milchstrasse, a wedding took place.

The church door creaked open, revealing the newly wedded couple.

The groom was Sternchen von Quelle, otherwise known as the Radiant Light Knight. Quelle was one of the surnames given to members of the royal family upon abdication of their title. Despite the change in last name, his presence was no less imposing, further enhanced by the ceremonial knight uniform adorning his slender body.

The bride was Bernstein von Eisberk, or the Lunar Ice Knight. Her blue hair cascaded over her white dress, shining like the night sky. The guests gasped in awe at her unusually feminine attire. Bernstein was the kingdom's first female knight, the one who had laid the foundation for the establishment of a female knights order. Many young girls gazed at her with admiration in their eyes.

A crowd of people had gathered next to the church steps to celebrate the marriage: knights, blue fanners, even members of Eisberk's Cavalry Brigade. The stoic, black-haired man at the forefront of the latter was apparently their leader. Even the fierce all-women cavalry unit had decked out for the occasion.

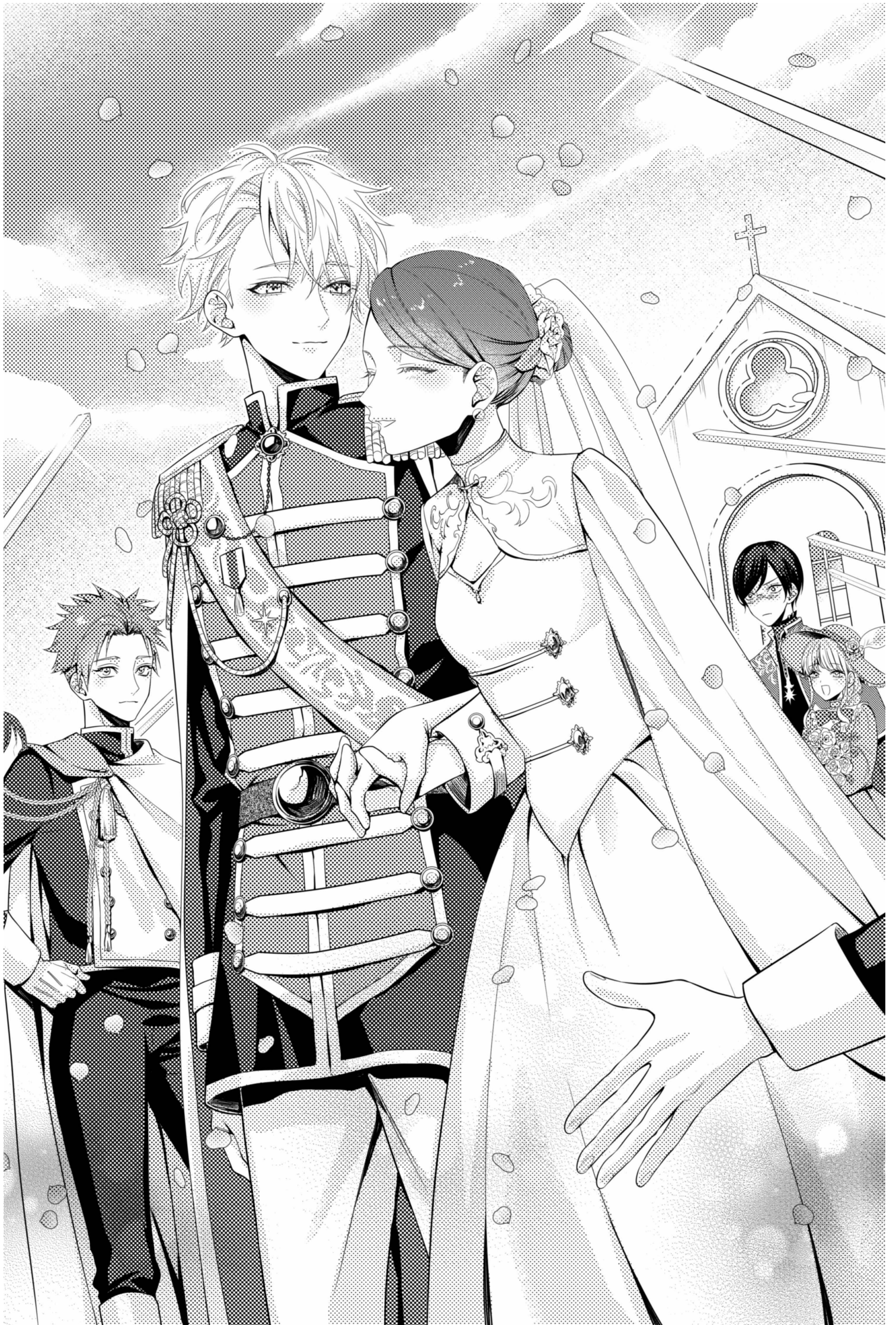
Also present was Grand Mage Zanto von Marmore, his blueish purple robes marking his status. Standing beside him was Princess Marlena von Milchstrasse, her long, golden hair swaying in the breeze. Zanto looked deathly pale and shivered when Marlena linked her arm through his. He appeared nervous about his escort duties.

Bernstein grinned, tossing her bouquet. It landed right in Marlena's hands. "You're up next!" resounded Bernstein's voice. Marlena smiled while Zanto's face turned pink.

Green-haired Kraut von Wurzel threw a purple, heart-shaped petal the

couple's way, cuing a shower of flowers to rain down upon their heads.

Uniformed knights split into even rows on either side, forming an arch with their upheld sabers. The newlyweds walked down the pathway, a blue amber ring on each of their clasped hands.



Upon reaching the coach parked outside the church, the two stopped. In front of them loomed a large, red-haired man—Felzen von Vulkan, the Solar Fire Knight. He screamed her name: “Bern!”

The crowd stirred, confused.

Felzen pointed at the sun rising over the church’s roof. Bernstein nodded, mirrored his gesture. An arrow of ice shot from the Lunar Ice Knight’s fingertips, glistening as it arced toward the sun. The Solar Fire Knight released a gust of hot air in the direction of the arrow.

A mist spread, a halo enclosing the sun. “Live happily, you two!” he exclaimed, several voices echoing his words.

The newly wedded burst out laughing. “Of course!” They waved, disappearing into the coach.

Wedding bells tolled, and a white rainbow hung in Regenbogen’s sky.

Side Story: Grand Mage Zanto and Princess Marlena

I, Bernstein von Eisberk, Regenbogen Kingdom's first female knight, had been summoned by Grand Mage Zanto. Zanto was one of Princess Marlena's fiancé candidates. His purple eyes and hair made him seem mysterious and aloof, but in reality, he was nothing more than a Marlena-obsessed creep.

Said creep had called on me once more, and unfortunately, after all he'd done for me, I just couldn't say no.

"Thanks for coming, Bern."

"What is it this time?"

"I'll cut straight to the chase—I was ch-chosen to e-escort M-M-Mar-Mar-Mar..." His brain seemed to have exploded mid-explanation.

Realizing we wouldn't get anywhere at that rate, I tossed him a question. "Is this about the soiree?"

He nodded. There was an upcoming soiree at the royal palace, and he had likely been selected as Marlena's escort for the event. The two of them exchanged letters in a shared notebook; he was no doubt at the top of Marlena's list of potential fiancés. I too would be attending, as Marlena's guard.

"So, what do you want from me?"

"Dance...practice..."

"You want to practice for your dance with Marlena?" He nodded again. "What good would that do? I'm not a good substitute for Marlena; our heights are too different."

"Of course you're not. There's no such thing as a 'good' substitute for Marlena. The very notion itself is absurd!" And yet he had no issue voicing his protests toward me.

Good luck winning me over with that attitude.

I turned to the door. “See you around then.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Well, actually I’m not, but let’s pretend I am. I’ll make you look like Marlana, so please, don’t abandon me!” he babbled, rapid-fire. *Ew.* “You’re the only one who knows this side of me, Bern. I’ve got no one else to turn to.”

Only those who’d been present on that fateful day knew of Zanto’s infatuation with Marlana. He really may have had no one else.

I do owe him. He did his best to help me return to the capital as a female knight, after all.

I begrudgingly nodded in resignation.



AND so, we began our dance practice.

Zanto wasn’t a bad dancer by any means, nor was he a terrible escort. The problem was that he turned to mush in Marlana’s presence. He cast a spell on me, changing my appearance to that of Marlana’s for a short time.

“Marlana would never spread her legs like that,” he said with a cold gaze.

“Sorry. I’m not used to being girly.”

“She doesn’t say ‘sorry’ either!”

“Apologies...”

“No, no, no! I meant she doesn’t apologize without reason!”

“Give me a break...”

Zanto’s fastidiousness made my head hurt. *We won’t get any practice at this rate.*

“It’s not enough to look the part if you don’t act it too,” he said, disappointment in his voice. “This experience is making me appreciate her existence all the more.”

Something inside me snapped. *Why are you even comparing me with her, the perfect princess, the pinnacle of femininity? Also, I’m the one doing you a favor, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t get all up in my face over the tiniest mistakes! I*

stared up at Zanto. He, likely sensing my annoyance, looked down at me mockingly. I stepped toward him in silence. *I know you're weak to this face.*

He stepped back, confused. "B-Bern?" I smiled, continuing my advance. Zanto retreated, his face pinkening. "I-Is something wrong?"

Still smiling, I cornered him against a wall, pinning him with an audible bang. "So, are we going to or not?" I wanted to get it over with already.

Zanto buried his face in his hands, sliding down the wall. "Aaaah! Forceful Marlena! Imagine, Bernlene and Marlena, side by side! The stuff of dreams!" he wept, creepily mixing my name with Marlena's to form Bernlene. "Precious. So, so precious."

I fell to my knees. *I should be the one crying.*



THE day of the soiree arrived without Zanto making any progress toward conquering his Marlena-itis.

Out of options, I handed Marlena a magic-infused necklace to wear for the occasion. She donned the piece happily, even though it was enchanted to suppress her attractiveness. Cunningly, Zanto had charmed the necklace such that it only affected those who came into physical contact with her. He claimed it was purely a last resort, although, knowing him, it likely doubled as a "pest" deterrent.

I, meanwhile, was tasked with bringing him back to his senses with my ice magic should anything happen.

The pair stood side by side, Zanto's eyes already wandering. Standing close together wouldn't trigger the spell, so he was trying his best not to look Marlena's way.

Noticing his discomfort, Marlena smiled. "I'm a little nervous myself. May I touch your hand, if you don't mind?"

Zanto covered his mouth and nose, his eyes widening.

I conjured a chilly aura and approached Zanto, whispering, "Nothing's going to happen so long as you don't touch, right?"

“Y-Yesh.” Zanto nodded, shivering.

Marlena grabbed the cuff of his sleeve, shooting a smile at him in an attempt to calm him down. It was as beautiful as a blooming flower.

I sent a cold breeze down Zanto’s back before he lost his mind. Zanto straightened, wringing out a smile.

The two must’ve looked lovely together, as everyone around them collectively gasped.

“I can’t, the spell’s no use. She’s too beautiful,” muttered Zanto.

Marlena blushed.

They made a cute couple, even if Zanto was creepy.

Side Story: A Honeymoon Under the Stars

WE'D been traveling for the past few days on our honeymoon. Me, Stern von Quelle, a prince turned vassal, and my wife, Bernstein.

Currently we were on a ship en route to our final destination. My lovely wife, her blue hair in a loose ponytail, sat beside me, dozing. Her head banged against the cabin window, but apparently, she was too exhausted to stop herself from swaying from side to side.

I snuggled up to her, placing her head on my shoulder. Bern slept on unfazed. Satisfied, I gazed at the passing scenery, reminiscing on the events leading up to that day with a wry smile.



OUR first stop had been Kraut's home. We'd originally planned on heading straight to Eisberk—three days away by brougham—and enjoying a bit of sightseeing along the way. Kraut, however, suggested that we visit his family's country estate, since the Wurzel demesne lay along the path to Eisberk.

I gladly agreed, having heard countless, firsthand stories of the region's beauty from Marlana. I also figured that, because I had abdicated, we'd receive a relaxing, humble welcome.

It turned out to be anything but. The Wurzels greeted us like we were royals, and while I appreciated the top-quality food and accommodations, I found their hospitality a little overwhelming. Nor did we get much time alone: Kraut had taken time off from school just to spend all of it pampering Bern. Part of me cynically wondered if he was interfering on purpose.

After some time there, we set off for Eisberk. We stayed overnight in a nearby town and reached Eisberk the following afternoon.

Bern delightedly remarked on how long it'd been since she traveled home in a carriage. After all, her nimble horse could get her there within a day. Bern never really rode via coach, preferring to be light on her feet. We wanted to take our

honeymoon nice and slow, however, which involved a lot of luggage, so the brougham was the obvious choice.

Even the Eisberks were in a welcoming mood, though not quite so welcoming as the Wurzels, likely due to the “shut-in” part of the epithet “shut-in marquess”. I asked Bern to show me around. We explored Eisberk’s rustic town, and I was surprised to find that everyone knew each other there.

We picked mulberries out in the fields. Apparently the place meant a lot to her. I looked down at my blue-stained nails as a bittersweet taste spread throughout my mouth. Basking in the evening sun, Bern was almost unbelievably beautiful. I extended my mulberry-dyed hand toward her, only for Wolfe to arrive at the most inopportune moment and catch it in his.

He dragged us off to some local pub, where over a pint of beer he poked fun at me for once thinking Bern was a guy. Bern even chuckled alongside him. It was a relief to hear them laugh off an old insecurity of mine. Wolfe kept us there till late at night. We were completely exhausted by the time we returned to the house. Again, I wondered if the entire evening had been a trap to prevent us from spending a nice, relaxing night together. Bern seemed too sleepy to listen to any complaints, so I begrudgingly went to bed.

We left Eisberk the next day, a jar of mulberry jam our souvenir, which reminded me of Bern’s hair. We took a rowboat down the river that snaked through Eisberk’s forest. Upon reaching a canal, we boarded a larger vessel heading south toward our final stop.



I don’t think I’m being delusional. Kraut and Wolfe also... Bern.

Bern had nodded off, her head resting against my shoulder. Awake, she’d never act so cute. I felt an odd sense of pride that she only let her guard down around me. Then I remembered my red-haired childhood friend. *Well, maybe not only me, but it is what it is, I guess.*

I ran my hand through her hair. The strands slipped right through my fingers, straight and clean, just like her personality. I wanted to stay there forever, uninterrupted and unseen, as my lovely wife seemed to attract people’s attention wherever she went.

And yet, despite my prayers, we arrived at the harbor. Sounds of luggage being unloaded and people greeting one another could be heard all the way to our cabin.

Bern opened her eyes. “Wha? Ah! Sorry, Stern!” She lifted her head, leaving my shoulder lonely.

“It’s okay. You can put your head back down.”

She rose from her seat, her face flushing. “Let’s just get off. Felzen’s waiting!”

I sighed, a prickly sensation inside my chest. We had just arrived in Vulkan.

Our final destination was a place of memories for me, although as a former prince I hadn’t made too many outside of the royal capital. And we’d already gone to the Villa of Mirrors once before, so I had decided we’d journey to the Vulkan province—a place I visited a few times as a child.

Felzen was waiting down the pier. He and Bern exchanged hugs. Then we embraced, slapping each other’s backs just a little longer than necessary. I shrugged slightly. *Pests everywhere we go.*

Felzen grinned. “I can tell your honeymoon hasn’t had much honey from the look on your face,” he teased, lowering his voice so Bern wouldn’t hear.

“I’m happy just having Bern by my side. No complaints here,” I said, when in reality, I desired nothing more than some time alone with her. I wanted to go where no one knew our names—but where would we, a former prince and the kingdom’s first female knight, have found such a place?

Felzen burst out laughing as though he’d seen right through my act.

“Felzen?” Bern whipped her head around.

“It’s nothing. Now, let’s get going,” he said, guiding us through a barren flatland dotted with pulverized cliffs.

It was Bern’s first time seeing such a landscape, but I felt nostalgic. We were at one of the Vulkan region’s former mining sites. This one in particular had been abandoned a long while back. It was also my and Felzen’s childhood hideout. We’d sneak into the rocky caves to play in peace away from the public eye. Our hours there had been some of the rare occasions we actually got time

to ourselves.

It was the first place that popped into mind when I was planning our honeymoon. I'd asked Felzen to build a lodge there, just for this day.

We approached the tallest crag. Gazing upward, I could sight a hole in the cliff face near the summit. A hot-air balloon sat at the base, which Felzen clambered into.

"Jump in!"

"*You're* flying it? Wouldn't it have been easier to hire a pilot?" The unexpected development left me floored. *I guess we're not getting any alone time after all.* I unenthusiastically climbed into the basket.

Bern, on the other hand, appeared ecstatic. "Whoa! This is awesome!" As the balloon rose, her eyes sparkled, taking in the view below. Felzen quietly smiled.

My heart ached watching them.

The balloon halted in front of the cave entrance. The door had been left open, revealing a neatly decorated, well-lit interior. I'd had Felzen refashion the cavern into a lodging. There was no one inside as it was intentionally designed to only be accessible by balloon.

"Honestly, I thought you were crazy when you said you wanted a villa out here of all places, but I stand corrected. It's brilliant!" Felzen laughed, and Bern tilted her head in confusion.

"Felzen?"

"An inland island, accessible only by balloon, not a servant in sight. If anything happens, use the fireworks. Who needs servants when you've got all that billeting experience under your belt, eh, Stern?" Felzen smirked.

"Freedom!" exclaimed Bern, oblivious to the true meaning behind his words as she tossed off her jacket and sprinted inside. "Wow! This place is huge! And there's food too!" Her excited voice echoed throughout the cavern.

"Her majesty seems pleased. Ain't that nice?"

"Sure is..."

Felzen cracked up. “Go get ’em, tiger!” He gave me a thumbs up, before hopping back into the balloon. Despite his nonchalant demeanor, I knew Felzen still loved her. The way he descended back to the ground seemed a little sad.

“I will!” I yelled.

Felzen raised his hand, his back turned. “Try not to fight and set off the fireworks too quickly, eh? I’m a busy man!”

“I’ll try my best!”

Hearing our voices, Bern ran back to the door. “He’s leaving already? Thanks for everything, Felzen!” Felzen swiveled, waving goodbye to Bern with a smile on his face. “Why’d he have to leave so soon? Surely he could’ve stuck around longer,” she muttered.

I knew she didn’t mean anything by it, and yet I couldn’t help but feel a sting of jealousy. I pulled her into my arms, whispering, “It’s so good to finally be alone, just the two of us.”

She gulped, her shoulders trembling. The air between us instantly tautened, and her body stiffened. I wondered if it was only my heart that was beating so loudly that it almost reverberated across the cave.

“There’s a balcony too. Wanna have a look?” I could see that she was frightened, so I released her, flashing her a smile. The tension in her body faded.

We passed by the bedroom, glancing at a queen-size bed, as I dragged her out onto the balcony. The afternoon sun dipped over the horizon.

Bern placed her hands on the balustrade. “Whoa,” she marveled. “So this is where you spent time as a kid.”

“Technically in the cave below this one. It was me and Felzen’s secret play spot.”

“And the balloon?”

“I got the idea when we launched the lanterns into the sky. I thought, ‘Couldn’t we reach the cave up top like that?’”

“And you even set up a lodging here.” Bern turned back to the vista with an

innocent smile. “It’s lovely. It really is!”

I hugged her from behind. “I set it up for you, Bern. I wanted a secret we could share together.”

Bern folded her arms over mine. *They’re shaking slightly.* This side of her was both cute and somewhat pitiful at the same time.

“No one can interrupt us now,” I continued. Bern turned pink to the ears, gripping my wrists. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head, looked up at me. “No, it’s just, you draw attention everywhere you go.”

My chest tightened hearing her say those words. “I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“It’s completely diff—”

I smiled, pecking her sulky lips.

“Stern!”

“I’ve waited so long, Bern. So, so long.” I knew just how desperate I sounded but couldn’t stop myself.

Bern seemed dumbfounded. She hung her head, awkwardly clearing her throat. Then she silently raised her eyes to mine. “I love you,” she said, all the pent-up emotion coalescing into a sigh.

“I love you too,” I replied, snatching her chin.

Bern closed her eyes, and the evening sun shone upon her quivering, deep-blue eyelashes.



WE kissed until the sky turned mulberry blue, the moon replacing the sun.

“The stars are so close, this one especially,” Bern said with a playful smile as she caressed my cheek. She was referring to my name, Sternchen, which meant “little star”.

“I fell out of the sky just so I could be with you.” Joking to mask my embarrassment, I wrapped my arms around her. The corners of my lips quirked

up watching her revel in my embrace.

The fated lover I'd seen reflected in the mirror the day of the Milchstrasse Festival, I held in my arms.

"I'll make us tea for breakfast, you bring the mulberry jam and muffins."

Bern nodded, gazing up at me with loving eyes. This was the heaven I sought all those years.

Afterword

HELLO, Iota AIUE here.

Thank you for picking up this book.

I'm absolutely honored to have had *The Strongest Knight is Actually a Cross-Dressing Noblewoman?! translated alongside As the Villainess, I Reject These Happy-Bad Endings!*

I couldn't be more grateful to Hakuseki for bringing the setting to life with their beautiful illustrations and to Cross Infinite World for reaching out to me a second time.

Bern, the protagonist, is a girl gifted both physically and magically. She may seem tough, but her heart is as delicate as any other. I hope you'll enjoy watching her and her friends fight for a world where she can be herself.

I'd also love it if you took to the Internet and let me know who your favorite characters are because this one's full of hunks!

I hope we can meet again in another novel someday.

-Iota AIUE



cross infinite world



**AS THE VILLAINESS,
I REJECT THESE
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
AVAILABLE NOW!

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YAMIGO
AVAILABLE NOW!

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



**I REINCARNATED AS EVIL ALICE,
SO THE ONLY THING I'M
COURTING IS DEATH! VOLUME 1**

STORY BY: CHII KURUSU
ILLUSTRATION BY: MINATO YAGUCHI
AVAILABLE NOW!

A gothic romantic comedy where the reincarnated heroine's only way to survive this dark otome game is by not falling in love!



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THE DRAB PRINCESS, THE BLACK CAT, AND THE SATISFYING BREAK-UP

STORY BY: RINO MAYUMI
ILLUSTRATION BY: MACHI
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Seren attempts to break off her royal engagement with the help of a black cat familiar—who might actually be a tsundere archmage?!

SINCE I WAS ABANDONED
AFTER REINCARNATING, I WILL
COOK WITH MY FLUFFY FRIENDS

STORY BY: YU SAKURAI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KASUMI NAGI
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



I'D RATHER HAVE A CAT THAN A HAREM! VOLUME 1

STORY BY: KOSUZU KOBATO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HINANO CHANO
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Cats are better than harems! Amy has reincarnated into an otome game world as a villainess, but she's more interested in cats than boys!



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