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The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices

Mamecyoro
Illustration by
Mitsuya Fuji

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of Convenient
Plot
Devices

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Alexis

Esfia's second prince. Octavia's confidant and beloved little brother. Currently away on a mission.



Sirius

The crown prince of Esfia and the soon-to-be king. Has a strained relationship with Octavia.



Sil Burks

The main character of the BL novel *The Noble King* and Sirius's boyfriend.



Rust Byrne

A nobleman whom Octavia marked as a potential (fake) boyfriend. He's supposed to be at the junior ball...



Rosa Reddington

A countess and host of the junior ball where Octavia hopes to find a (fake) boyfriend.



Derek Nightfellow

Duke Nightfellow's son and Sirius's friend.



Klifford Alderton

Octavia's bodyguard. His past is shrouded in mystery. He forged an Adjutant-Sovereign pact with Octavia.

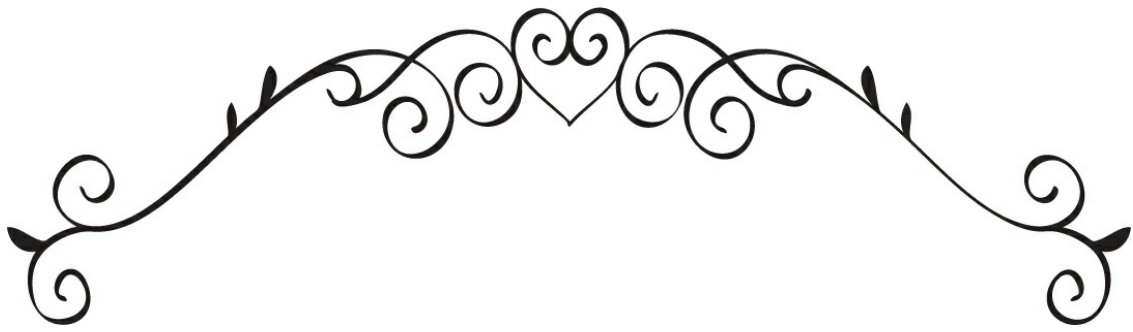
Octavia

A former high schooler (and fujoshi) who was reincarnated into the world of the BL novel *The Noble King*. She's the princess of Esfia, fighting to thwart the arranged marriage in her future!

Meet the
characters of
*The Princess
of Convenient
Plot Devices.*

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Nnngh. Sleepy.

The gentle rocking of the grandiose horse-drawn carriage, replete with four horses, was lulling me to sleep. To shake it off, I'd been blinking my eyes over and over for the past several minutes.

My sleepless night is really doing a number on me.

And why couldn't I sleep, you might ask? Well, part of it was that my little brother Alec left on a secret mission! I mean, come on, he's my angel and my source of comfort, and I can't see him for ten whole days!

Alec was missing from our family dinner last night, too. The "official" reason was because he was sick in bed, but that wasn't actually true. Since eating dinner together as a family was a major tradition in the castle, whenever a family member couldn't make it, the whole dinner was canceled.

But that was still enough to make me really feel Alec's absence. I was so lonely...and so worried.

What was Father thinking? Why did he suddenly send Alec away on a secret mission?

These questions wouldn't leave my mind, even when I went to lie down for bed. So I had decided to think about something else. Namely, the very

destination my carriage was traveling toward right now: the junior ball at Paradise in the Sky... But that had backfired. I was wide awake for much of the night. I kept wondering if I would meet Rust Byrne there.

If I was to escape a political marriage, having a boyfriend was essential... And I was going to the junior ball to search for a (fake) boyfriend. Which was nice and all, but I was living in the world of *The Noble King*, a BL fantasy light novel.

I had to compete against men *and* women for romance—why were the hurdles I had to jump so dang high?! And even if the competition wasn't so fierce, there were plenty of other ways I could fail. When I shamelessly showed up at the junior ball carrying Blackfeather, my fan of black wreven feathers, would I be able to withstand the mocking eye rolls?! Come on, I didn't know that wrens were feared as birds of death and avoided! And that was only half of my worries...

I couldn't even count the number of times I'd tossed and turned in my royal canopy bed. I did manage to sleep eventually, though. I probably owed that to the scent of the flower by my pillow. Just after Alec had left, I had stopped by the tiny castle garden. And there, my bodyguard Klifford picked a Lieche orchid and put it in my hair.

Having flowers in my hair reminded me of my past life, hitting me with a wave of nostalgia. As Princess Octavia in this world, the only decorations that were available to me were made of precious stones and metals.

The Lieche orchid hadn't withered yet, so instead of throwing it away, I'd put it in a vase in my bedchamber. Just the one bright white flower gave the room an elegant ambiance. And its scent must have relaxing qualities—before I knew it, sleep was calling to me.

And then, it was morning.

Even though I was clearly sleep-deprived, my chief lady-in-waiting, Matilda, along with Sasha and my other handmaids, dressed me in my junior ball battle gear and styled my hair and makeup. By the time they were finished, all traces of my sleepiness were gone.

...Until drowsiness had returned with a vengeance a few minutes ago.

The seat of the royal carriage was dreamily comfortable, with ample room for lying down. The driver was skilled—the carriage was rocking as gently as it possibly could. And all these elements were singing alluringly to me, *“You’ve only an hour until you arrive. But an hour is an hour—you still have time! Come on, just have a little lie-down and rest your eyes. Sweet dreams, Octavia, till you reach Paradise in the Sky!”*

I can’t... I definitely can’t. The cube-shaped carriage had a big window in the front. *There’re no blind spots! The carriage interior is hella exposed!*

The carriage was surrounded by eight seasoned soldiers on horseback—including Klifford—who were there to protect me. Three men in front, three men behind, and one man at each side of the carriage.

Sleeping is absolutely taboo! I sleep with my mouth open, and I sometimes talk in my sleep—I don’t have the balls to let people see me sleeping!

Moreover, my appearance was the fruit of my handmaids’ excellent work. I usually kept my hair down, but a portion of it was pinned up—if I lay down, I would mess it up.

But I could still just close my eyes and... *No, Octavia! If you close your eyes, I have no doubt you’ll fall asleep sitting up! Stay awake... Stay awake...*

Ooh, I know! I’ll watch the scenery go by! Let’s just scoot over to the edge...

“Huh?” When I looked out the window, my jaw dropped in shock.

There was a wobbly horse-drawn carriage—with two horses—approaching from behind at quite a great speed. It was headed in the same direction we were. There was ample room on the highway for several carriages to be next to each other. On the day of a junior ball, nobody throws a fit if somebody of lower rank overtakes a carriage of higher rank. Ordinarily, however, passing the carriage of someone higher in rank was forbidden.

Some nobles make a point to pass royal carriages on days like this just because they can... But it didn’t seem like that was this carriage’s deal. One of its back wheels had fallen off, and part of the coach was dragging along the ground. And that wasn’t all. The driver wasn’t gripping the reins. His arms were extended outward, and he was...unconscious? The horses didn’t seem to need

their driver to keep running forward, but the coach was leaning dramatically, shaking violently in all directions.

The door to the carriage swung open, and... Huh?

“Lord...Sil?” Any sleepiness vanished, and my head was suddenly clear. It was definitely a man—and an androgynous beauty, at that. The man in the runaway carriage had to be my brother’s lover and the main character of *The Noble King*: Lord Sil.

Aaaggghhh! Lord Sil is hanging on to the wooden door for dear life with just one arrrm!

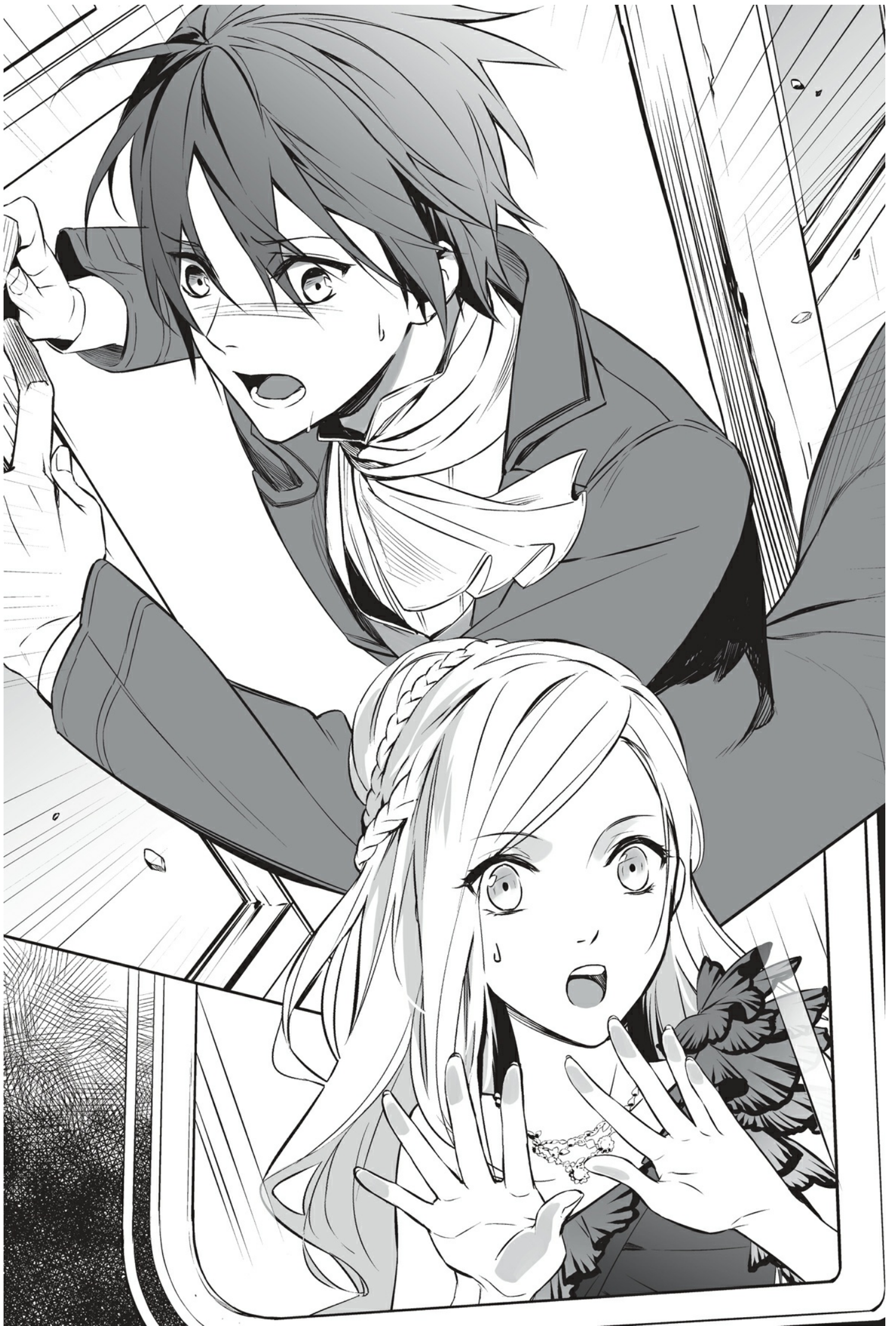
“Klifford!” I shrieked at my bodyguard, who was riding a galloping horse on the other side of the window. “Stop that runaway carriage!”

Klifford didn’t answer, though he steered his horse toward the wobbly carriage. But then the carriage I was in dropped speed, and Sil’s carriage overtook it. We were being pulled farther and farther apart.

Carriage accidents were common occurrences. No matter how well maintained they were, carriage wheels fell off easily, and it was quite common for horses to suddenly go wild and for the driver to lose control of the carriage. Now, you may be wondering, what’s the best way for one to handle a runaway carriage?

Don’t you *dare* go near it!

If the carriage collides with something, it *will* stop. Your main goal here should be to keep your distance and prevent anyone else from getting caught up in the accident—*not* saving the people inside the runaway carriage. So my driver was technically in the right by slowing down and putting distance between us and the runaway carriage. However...



“Driver! Don’t lose sight of that carriage! If you can, drive up next to it!”

Our four-horse carriage dashed along the highway, catching up to the runaway carriage ahead. Meanwhile, the two horses pulling Sil’s carriage got frightened and dragged the carriage even faster. To make matters worse, the second rear wheel was dangerously close to falling off like the other had.

Klifford...where are you?! I looked far ahead, and there was Klifford. He’d pulled his horse up alongside the carriage...and jumped on the bench!

Then he grabbed the reins... At least, I think that’s what he did. The carriage slowed down a little right after that. And my four-horse carriage and Sil’s runaway carriage kept going on the highway until we were side by side.

Good, if we can all just slow down... “Ah!” The loose rear wheel flew off.

We were coming up to a gentle curve in the road...and we still weren’t slowing down. And even with Klifford at the reins, there was no guarantee the carriage could make the turn on just two wheels.

“Get our carriage close to theirs!” I yelled at my driver, gripping the golden door handle and opening the coach door outward. Wind smacked me in the face. Luckily, I had a really skilled driver. Steadily, he closed the gap between Sil and me.

We can make it...! “Lord Sil! Over here!”

“Princess Octavia?!”

Sil’s carriage hit a large rock in the road—it lurched violently...then it flew. Sil’s face twisted in horror as he started to fall out.

“Now!” I screamed, stretching out my arm.

Sil gripped my hand. He grabbed a hold of the door to my carriage with his right hand and stepped on the edge of the coach. Before we reached the curve in the road, Sil had safely switched over to my carriage.

Immediately after, we entered the curve. Both carriages made it through the turn...but Sil’s carriage had turned on its side and was being dragged along by the two horses.

Well, that was a close call. Carriage accidents...are truly horrifying.

Just after the bend in the road, the rampaging carriage came to a stop. My carriage pulled over to the shoulder, to stay out of the way. The two horses seemed to have forgotten whatever it was that had riled them up—they were happily nuzzling Klifford's hand as he petted their noses. Klifford's clever horse cantered over to his master's side unprompted.

Once we'd made sure we were safe, Sil and I stepped out of the royal carriage so it could undergo repairs. It's not like I could just be like *"Glad to see you're okay. Well, I'm outta here!"* and just leave Sil right after all that.

As it turned out, nobody was hurt. One of the causes of the accident was the loose wheels falling off and throwing the carriage off-balance. The second was that the elderly driver had a seizure and lost consciousness. That's what had scared the horses. It was unclear which had occurred first.

With a little care, the driver regained consciousness, and we asked a soldier to take him to a doctor. All that remained then was to deliver Lord Sil back to my big brother...or to call for my brother. If my brother was busy and couldn't be reached, he could at least send someone quickly in his place.

So I asked Lord Sil which he would prefer...but his answer confused me.

"Neither..."

Does he mean that we should keep going toward our destination? "You do not wish to contact my brother? Are you sure that's what you want, Lord S—?" but I stopped right there. There was something in the eyes of the seasoned soldiers who had surrounded us protectively... It was a gleam. The gleam of curiosity! Try as they might to remain professional, they simply could not hide the twinkle of interest in their eyes!

"You men... A little room, please," I commanded. Then I walked Sil away from the shoulder of the road and over to where the royal carriage was parked. Now we could speak freely without worrying about the soldiers. Though Klifford, as usual, stood rather close as my bodyguard...

Better to be safe than sorry. "Klifford..."

"Do not repeat a word of what I hear, Your Highness?"

“Correct.” I turned back to Sil. Whenever I saw him, he was usually—well, he was *always* with my brother. So this was our first time speaking one-on-one. His indigo hair was sparkling in the sunlight. His eyes were hazel. Neither of these colors really popped on the page or on the cover art of *The Noble King*. You just can’t beat the real thing... That cliché is really the most apt line for him.

Lord Sil’s full name was Sil Burks. He was the third son of Baron Burks...on paper. If my vague wording confuses you, it’s because there’s some kind of secret surrounding Sil’s birth.

The Burks family belonged to the Adulterous Nobles faction. After Baron Burks lost his third son in childbirth, he took in Sil and raised him as his own. But as for who Sil’s true parents were, that remained a mystery.

Incidentally, *The Noble King’s* readers *knew* about this plot twist from the very beginning, but his true parentage is never revealed in the actual story.

So Lord Sil was headed in a horse-drawn carriage for a junior ball as a representative of the Burks family.

I could say, “*My, what a coincidence! I, too, am on my way to the countess’s junior ball!*”

But when I’d looked at the list of invited attendees...Sil’s name was nowhere to be found. Which was to be expected. He had decided to attend at the last minute. What’s more, if my intuition was correct...he didn’t tell my brother about it?

Sil lived in a mansion in the royal capital rather than on his father’s land. It was nice that he was able to get out, but it seemed as though he didn’t have much time to prepare for his trip. This was valid, considering his stature as third son of a baron, but his travel personnel included his driver—a longtime servant of the Burks family—and a bodyguard he’d hired just for the journey out with what money he could scrounge. There were three total in his party. And the bodyguard had bailed when the carriage had gone wild.

If my brother found out what had happened—that Sil had left in secret, when he wouldn’t have let Sil go by himself in the first place...

“Lord Sil... Given the circumstances, I do think the best course of action would

be to tell my brother what happened.”

The safest place for Sil to be was by my brother’s side. And there were a few things I’m sure my brother would want to investigate: Were there signs of tampering on the carriage wheels? Was the driver’s seizure really a coincidence? What happened to the bodyguard who’d deserted? And was the accident overall truly a series of unfortunate events...or was everything planned?

“Yet...you still wish to leave him in the dark, no?” I asked Sil.

“Yes, Princess...,” he answered firmly. There was no confusion in his hazel eyes.

“Would I be incorrect in assuming you two are *not* quarrelling?” That passionate make-out session I’d bumped into in the castle hall was still fresh in my memory.

Sil nodded in reply, then he snapped to attention as if he’d suddenly remembered something. “Princess Octavia...please, forgive my rude behavior yesterday.”

“If you speak in regards to my brother’s declaration, you need not feel any guilt, Lord Sil.”

I don’t love anyone, yada, yada... My brother was the one who said that, Sil, not you! Even though you boys are in love, my brother is still his own person! And you’re your own person, too, Lord Sil!

“But tell me, Lord Sil, why do you wish to keep this accident a secret? Is it because you do not wish for my brother to know that you are attending Countess Reddington’s junior ball?”

“Yes, Princess...,” he said, coming to terms with his feelings as he spoke. “Sirius has... His Highness has been irritated as of late. He is displeased when I go out in public. I spend all my time confined to the castle or to my family mansion... If he knew I was attending the junior ball, he would scoff at it.”

Hey! Asshole brother, Lord Sil outsmarted ya, buddy! Whoopsie, stop that, Octavia. Keep your composure... Lord Sil was in an accident—now’s no time to gloat...

I whipped out my fan to conceal the catlike grin that was creeping onto my face. *Wipe that damn smile off your face! You're a dignified princess... A dignified princess!*

"You needn't refer to my brother as His Highness for my benefit. However...I am surprised you were able to pull the wool over his eyes."

"Derek helped me."

"The son of Duke Nightfellow..." *Derek Nightfellow? As in, one of Sirius's friends?* "But he was also invited to attend Countess Reddington's junior ball. Couldn't you have ridden in his carriage? You need only have asked, Lord Sil..."

Between the Nightfellows, there were at least two carriages: one for dear Uncle Nightfellow, the man I worship, and another for his son, Derek. And they were both definitely quite trustworthy.

"Well, there was no way I could... It would have subjected me to unwarranted snooping. And my heart belongs to Sirius."

The blinders vanished from my eyes. *That's right...! We're in the royal capital of Esfia! It's a world where romance between two men is prized above friendship in every scenario! How thoughtless I've been...*

Just imagine the drama that would have unfolded if Lord Sil—the lover of Esfia's crown prince—was seen alone in a carriage with the next Duke Nightfellow! *"A love triangle! Is Sil Burks cheating on Prince Sirius with the next duke in line?!"* That's exactly what would happen...

Then again, carriages are known for their big windows—they're not exactly the best places to go for a little secret nookie. You're on full display to the outside world!

You could just draw the curtains and cover all the windows... But if you did that, it's like flashing a neon sign that says WE'RE TOTALLY DOING SOMETHING NAUGHTY INSIDE!

That's why you've always got to wash your windows till they shine and don't mess with them. Even if you lower the curtains to keep out the sun, you always leave them at an angle where people can still see inside the carriage.

Take a look as long as you'd like! That's Esfian carriage travel for you! It's a

space where no funny business is possible!

As for vehicles that have no use for curtains, like covered wagons for carrying goods or the stagecoaches used by the masses, however, this rule doesn't really apply.

But if you're a noble or royalty, and you ride in your personal carriage with either covered windows or no windows at all, it's considered a major scandal. Everyone will see you as the devil. So it's actually better for your image to be caught fooling around with someone in full view from your window. Naturally, this only really applies to married or engaged couples—or people who are dating.

Also, some people use this exhibitionist culture to intentionally show off. To make sure everyone sees you riding in a carriage with someone and hint that you're in a relationship.

"I fully comprehend that you were traveling alone, Lord Sil... But why would you go to such lengths to attend the junior ball?"

Sil seemed a bit too much of a stickler to be doing this as an act of rebellion against Sirius or to take a break from him.

"Well, I..."

"I understand... It is something you cannot tell me, yes? Nor can you tell my brother."

In *The Noble King*, whenever something relating to his birth came up, Sil would suddenly become terribly proactive. Sil not knowing his own origins was always his biggest struggle across all the published volumes of the series.

There were many scenes where he couldn't return Sirius's feelings, no matter how much he loved him. And this was why. There were two big problems that had arisen: How would Sil open up to Sirius about the origins of his birth, and how would they produce an heir when they were both men?

So is this little episode related to that?

In the Turchen Arc, I was starting to think as the events unfolded, *Oh, gee! I think they're finally gonna reveal the main character's secret...!* Too bad I never

got to read what happened next.

As a reader, I was very emotionally invested in imagining what Sil's secret was. Were he and Sirius actually blood relatives, and this story was taking an incestuous turn? Nah... That wouldn't happen. Now that I'm Octavia, I know that for sure. So I considered that maybe he was the illegitimate son of a neighboring king. This's the one I'm betting on now!

"My family...", Lord Sil muttered to the ground... Then he looked up sharply, a gleam of acceptance in his eyes. "My real family... I heard they would be attending Countess Reddington's junior ball."

"Say what?" I was so shocked that Sil was actually sharing a secret with me that my princess facade slipped.

"I am...not a true son of Baron Burks. I am adopted. And while adopted children's parents are usually known..."

"Lord Sil?"

"...the origins of my birth are a complete mystery."

Whoa...! Huh? Lord Sil, are you sure you wanna share this with me? You haven't even told my brother yet...

"So, Princess Octavia, that must be why you deemed me unworthy for Sirius... for your elder brother. I think it is completely understandable why you would not accept me..."

Whaaat?

"Princess Octavia...what must I do to earn your approval?"

That's the same question he asked me two days ago. So *that's* what he'd meant by it? More specifically, he meant: "Princess Octavia, what must I (a man of unknown birth) do to earn your approval?"

Er... Hell if I know, Lord Sil!

"I am grateful that you concealed your feelings for our sakes, Princess

Octavia. If you were against my relationship with Sirius, you could have divulged those feelings from the very start.”

“Well, I...” I can’t. Does not compute.

Is it just me, or does Sil think I knew about his secret all along?

What brought this on?

Of course it was only natural that I knew Lord Sil’s birth was shrouded in mystery—I read the books. But I don’t recall ever showing any indication to Sil that I knew...unless I let something slip?

But wait a minute—I haven’t spent enough time with Sil to let something slip in the first place! Unless there’s the possibility that Sil jumped to a false conclusion based on some misunderstanding...?!

No, no, no, the fact of the matter is: I did know Sil’s secret. So at the end of the day, I’m right?

“Lord Sil, I truly have no idea what you are talking about...”

“Did you not make arrangements...so that this would return to me?”

Sil pulled a chain out from under the collar of his formal attire. He removed it and placed it in the palm of his hand. Strung on the chain was a very small ring. It would be very difficult to find an adult with fingers small enough to wear it.

Sil was showing me his guardian ring. I didn’t expect it would make an appearance in this context... I stared, fixated at the ring, and sighed.

“The merchant... He told you, didn’t he?” I said.

It was tradition in Esfia to have a ring crafted when someone was born. Since the rings were made for infant fingers, they were very small. These rings were called guardian rings. Everybody had one—and only one. The parents crafted it, and the baby’s family name and date of birth were carved into the inside of the band.

If they were put up for adoption, their family name would be different (if they lost the ring or a ring had never been made, that was another story), but an adoptee would symbolize commitment to their birth parents by leaving their former family name on the ring and etching the new family name next to it.

Sil's ring had the name *Sil* and his date of birth etched onto it. *Sil Burks* was added onto it later, after he was adopted into that family. It was clear that Sil's birth parents were different from the parents who raised him. But since he had a ring to begin with, this proved his birth parents had loved him. And since his birth parents hadn't etched their family name onto Sil's ring...it meant there was some extenuating circumstance that prevented it.

If someone gave birth amid some sort of problem, they left only the baby's first name on the ring. It signified that the infant's birth origins were a mystery... and there was a reason the information was withheld.

Now, back to Sil's guardian ring—the one artifact that linked him to his birth parents. In *The Noble King*, it was stolen from Baron Burks's home right at the beginning of the series by a male servant who was in unrequited love with Sil. Out of spite, the servant ran off with the jewelry box Sil kept it in. He stole the jewelry box not because he knew Sil kept his guardian ring in it—he had no idea, actually—but because Sil loved the jewelry box... Either way, he's a thieving piece of shit!

Fast-forward to the day Sil was out in the castle town with a certain someone. He happened upon the ring at a shop and bought it back. And who was this "certain someone," you may ask?

...'Twas I. Sister-dearest from *The Noble King*!

Octavia went to a jewelry store, and Sil's attention was grabbed by a jewelry box on the shelf. It looked exactly like the one that had been stolen from him. Yes, the spiteful servant had pawned it!

When Sil opened the box...it was empty. However, he opened its false bottom. And inside was Sil's guardian ring. It had stayed safe and sound in there all that time because he'd thought to hide it.

And from that day on, Lord Sil kept his guardian ring on a chain and wore it around his neck like a pendant necklace. But in this version of the story, Sil and Octavia—me—never took a chummy shopping trip into town to find the ring.

Which meant there was a possibility that Lord Sil hadn't retrieved his guardian ring...

So that's how it was, huh?

He would have to either go into town with my brother and find the ring or get it back some other way.

I was optimistic about it all...until The Incident happened.

This happened long before Klifford became my bodyguard, back when my bodyguards were still playing musical chairs. One day, when I was in town on observation, I happened upon the store of the merchant who had sold me Blackfeather (the fan that, unbeknownst to me, would later adopt such a cringe nickname).

And it was there that I had seen it: a jewelry box much like the one in question!

Thinking I was probably mistaken, I had timidly reached out to it. *There won't be a false bottom*, I'd said to myself, laughing... But I checked for one just the same.

And...there it was. A tiny ring sat inside. *The name written inside might be different!* I thought.

But yeah... It was Sil's guardian ring.

I quietly shut the ring back in the jewelry box. I felt weighed down with responsibility and guilt. Chronologically speaking, we were well past the point in the story where Sil was supposed to have gotten his ring back... But it was still in the store!

This is ridiculous... This one hundred percent happened because I'm Octavia, right?

This was the one link our hero of unknown origins had to his birth parents. In *The Noble King*, his guardian ring was what connected everything.

What if the hero of the story never got his ring back? It...couldn't be...

Oh, but it could be. Now that I was looking at the ring with my own eyes, I couldn't deny it.

And then...I thought long and hard about a way I could get the ring back to Sil. I could buy the jewelry box and give it directly to Sil... That was, for many

reasons, very difficult. For me to visit the mansion where Sil lived, I would first need to find a plausible reason to rearrange my schedule, then I would need to wait to hear from Sil... That would not only be grandiose—it would make a big scene.

I could wait for Sil to visit the castle and approach him then...which was possible, but it was almost guaranteed that my brother would be by his side. What if I randomly gave Sil a jewelry box right in front of my brother?

Awkward... It would be just too awkward!

I couldn't give it to him directly. So I'd have to give it indirectly. I'd seek outside help!

I set my sights on the merchant who ran the shop. If there's one thing I learned by being a princess, it's this: People are suckers for money and power! I bribed the merchant to keep his mouth shut, then I had him go to Sil with the jewelry box and some additional items as a decoy. If Sil saw the jewelry box, the rest of the events would unfold as fate had intended.

And as fate would have it, the merchant later told me that Sil had indeed purchased the jewelry box. I was thoroughly relieved to hear it.

But now...

"When...did you discover I was involved with this?" I asked.

"Ever since the merchant came to my mansion to deliver it..."

That's way too immediate.

"The guards always search anyone who comes or goes from the property... So when they were about to drive the merchant away, he insisted that he had come on orders from the princess."

It was not that unusual for merchants to hawk their wares at the houses of nobles. In fact, they were usually welcome guests. So if the merchant had been that deeply suspected...was it my brother's doing?

"When the merchant mentioned your name, I went out to see for myself. The merchant was there to sell me the jewelry box that was stolen from the Burks's estate. And inside the box...I found my ring." Sil lifted his hand a little to show

me the ring. “The merchant told me that you had discovered the ring in the jewelry box in his store, then you’d put it back in the box and ordered him to deliver it to me as quickly as possible. You ordered him not to open the box under any circumstances, though you would not tell him why.” A smile of mixed emotions formed on his face. “It was then that I realized...you were *cognizant of everything* when you made the arrangements.”

S-Sil found me out... I could feel sweat start to bead at my temple. *I can’t believe I bribed that blabbermouth to keep quiet.*

This had to be much worse than if Sil had never gotten the ring back... Where my gaze had fallen, Sil’s guardian ring twinkled modestly.

Wait...huh? I blinked hard. *When I first saw the ring in the merchant’s shop, I was so distracted by checking for Sil’s name on the band that I hadn’t noticed it. But...is that what I think it is?*

I thought back to the symbol I had seen glow on my hand for just an instant. The mark that bound an Adjutant to his Sovereign.

It looks like...an Insignia?

“Princess Octavia.”

Hearing my name, I snapped back to reality and locked eyes with Sil. He closed his fist tightly around his guardian ring.

“I beg of you, Princess... Please don’t tell Sirius about the crash. Please... I simply must go to the junior ball.”

Oh...that’s right! We were still in the middle of figuring out how to deal with Sil’s accident. And I was trying to convince him to send word to his lover for help. But Sil’s more-than-unexpected flurry of confessions had made the matter at hand slip my mind... And I was still worried about the mark on his guardian ring, too.

I quietly brought my fan to my face, soothing my racing heart in the soft sensation of its fluffy feathers. *Okay. What do I do now?*

“Lord Sil, the reports of your real family being at the junior ball... Exactly how credible are they? Couldn’t it possibly be a trap?”

“That possibility...is something I won’t deny. The rampaging horses might have been intentional, too. But at the very least, the person who leaked this information to me knows that I am not the legitimate third son of House Burks.”

“And if it *is* a trap...one can assume the person who set it will be at the junior ball.”

“Yes, Princess. And I believe this person must know something about my real parents. So I want to gamble on that... No, that is the only thing I can gamble on.”

“A gamble...you say.”

Okay, I know what I’ve gotta do. I snapped my fan shut. “I will not tell my brother what happened.”

“Are you...sure, Princess?” He answered like someone who had half given up on what he was requesting. He stared at me with wide hazel eyes.

“I do not mind. I’ve made my decision, and that’s that.” Sil had taken action while knowing this whole thing could be a trap. Let’s reward that moxie!

There was never a story arc in *The Noble King* where Sil’s carriage happened to go berserk close to Octavia’s on the way to the junior ball to seek answers about his lineage. And naturally, not everything that happened now had happened in *The Noble King*. Also, like my shopping trip with Sil in the castle town, not everything that was written in *The Noble King* had actually come to pass this time around.

It even made me wonder if this recent string of events was triggered because Sil had received his guardian ring later than he was supposed to.

In Esfia, it was tradition for the king and his husband to take the children of female royalty as heirs. And in *The Noble King*, that role was filled by Octavia. And when I changed the events of the story...I had made a gamble of my own. A risk that could lead to prosperity or misery.

Okay, let’s keep betting...on the hope that this will lead to prosperity.

In *The Noble King*, my brother was supposed to remain faithful to Sil, succeed the throne, and get an heir from among his little sister’s children and live

happily ever after! ...But I finally had a safeguard that would prevent me from falling into that trap: Sil was now in my debt. So my motives were just a tad selfish... Okay, that was a lie. It was way more than a tad.

“However, Lord Sil...I have a few conditions.”

“Yes, Princess...” Sil nodded, a solemn look in his eyes.

I gave Sil three stipulations. First, he would ride in my carriage with me to Paradise in the Sky. After all, there was no guarantee that something dangerous wouldn't happen to him the rest of the way there. And we had the same destination: the junior ball. If he was with me, we would both be safer.

Second, he had to tell Derek Nightfellow about the carriage accident. When he insisted he wouldn't tell my brother about it, I considered who else we could trust with the information...and I decided on Derek. He was not only one of my brother's followers, he was also—in a way—Sil's accomplice.

Third, if he learned anything about his real family, he would tell me. This was...just for my own selfish reasons! Just thought I'd put it out there! I mean, this is Sil's identity we're talking about—it was never revealed in *The Noble King*. And what with the Insignia-looking thing on the ring, now I really wanted to know!

Annnd that's how we got here.

Awkward silence filled the carriage interior as the short journey to Paradise in the Sky resumed. There were now three passengers in our coach: me, Sil...and Klifford.

Klifford and I sat side by side, and Sil sat across from us. Even Klifford, who was usually discreet enough to keep some distance between us while guarding me, could not mask his aura in such a small, cramped space. He radiated masculine beauty in waves—despite being seated.

Why did things have to go this way, you may ask? Well, it has to do with Esfia's exhibitionist travel culture! While we were the prince's lover and little sister, we were still technically an unmarried man and woman. And what's more, I'm the princess. And even though he was only riding with me because his own carriage had been damaged, we wouldn't be able to explain that to any

eyewitnesses until after the fact...which would give rise to unwelcome speculations.

Then again, me riding alone with Sil would be a *much* smaller scandal than if Sil rode with Derek.

So after some thinking, we decided to increase our numbers. If two passengers wouldn't do, we'd just go with three! And we deemed that as he wore an official bodyguard's uniform that was easily recognizable, Klifford was the ideal choice.

The choice was seconded by the other guards. When we resumed our travels, we left one of our soldiers behind to tend to the driver and the broken carriage. We went from eight soldiers to seven. Now, the difference may seem negligible to the subjects to be guarded, but to the guards, it made a huge difference. However, if another guard was added to the coach, that would lessen our instability a great deal. Actually, soldiers or knights don't normally ride in the coach to protect its occupants, so in our case, it didn't really matter who rode where—it wouldn't be perceived as a problem. Though this *was* a rather special case. People usually only did this when they were traveling through particularly perilous places.

Anyway, that's why there were three people jostling in the carriage...in dead silence. Ever since I introduced Klifford and Sil, nobody had uttered a single word!

But... As I glanced over my shoulder to check on Sil, I did a double take. It looks like Sil is a bit unnerved by Klifford's presence. He looks kinda like he keeps wanting to ask my bodyguard a question but always stops himself at the last minute. What could it be?

Aha! Could it be...? Could it be...maybe he's bothered by the fact that not only did our conversation go totally deep, but that Klifford overheard it all? I was fine with it because I trust Klifford, but he's a total stranger to Sil... Should I vouch for Klifford? Mmrrrgg... If this were The Noble King as written, that would work since Sil and I are BFFs in that version. But here, I think that would be pretty meaningless... Hmm... What else can I do...?

"Lord Sil...do you wish for Klifford to pledge an oath?"

“An...oath, Princess?” he asked in a tone as if to say, “*But why?*”

Huh? Was I wrong? “Why, yes, an oath to not divulge the contents of the private conversation we just had to outside parties.”

“Oh... So that’s what you meant.” Sil nodded in understanding... Then he followed it up by shaking his head no.

“Before we spoke, you and Sir Alderton confirmed that our conversation was to remain private. That was more than satisfactory. I trust you both.”

“Yes, but—”

“Princess Octavia, if anything, isn’t it I who must earn your trust? Besides...” Sil trailed off, unsure of whether he should finish his thought.

“Besides...what?” I encouraged him.

“Well... I’m not certain of this, but...Sir Alderton, weren’t you the hero...who saved my life four years ago?”

Wait... Is that the reason Sil’s been nervous around Klifford? Four years ago... Well, since Sil is seventeen right now, that would’ve made him thirteen. And Klifford was twenty-one. It’s just, for someone who supposedly saved Sil’s life, Klifford sure acts aloof around him... That must be why Sil kept stopping himself from asking outright—he wasn’t sure he remembered. I guess that’s what’s going on here.

“Well, I have no knowledge of it... Klifford?”

Even though we were talking about a man who might have been him, Klifford was staring out the window. He turned and looked at me, then shook his head at Sil.

“I did not meet Lord Burks until after I was assigned to be your bodyguard, Your Highness. Up until today, we had never exchanged words. He must have the wrong man...”

Sil’s hazel eyes filled with disappointment. “Oh...so it was someone else,” he said with a deep sigh.

“Forgive me, sir,” Klifford apologized. There was an icy hollowness to his voice.

“The man who saved you, did he resemble Klifford a great deal?”

“He did...though I didn’t get a good look at his face... But it doesn’t matter... I’m sorry. I can’t explain it well. It was my mistake, regardless.”

So Sil has a lifesaver. Sounds pretty significant. It wasn’t in The Noble King, though... Urrrgh, was this supposed to come up in the Turchen Arc?

“If you were to meet your rescuer, would you thank him?”

“Yes. I didn’t get a chance to thank him when he saved me, so if I ever meet him, I want to thank him...and I want to ask him something.”

“Ask him what?”

“I would ask him...if he and I were related.”

So Sil’s hero also holds a piece of his birth-mystery puzzle?

Perhaps reading my thoughts, Sil smirked, shook his head at me, and said, “No, it’s not what you’re thinking. I don’t have any proof of it. I just...think it would be really nice if he was my family.”

Sil’s words hung in the air as the coach once again fell into silence.

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The soothing shaking of the carriage once again began to lull me to sleep... I gripped my fan when I felt it starting to slip out of my hand. That woke me up. *Ah, that was a close call. I almost drifted off there.*

I sensed we were still a ways from our destination. The horses were still trotting along. *Why do I feel so sleepy? Am I gonna have to start sparring with the sandman again?*

I jerked my head up to counter all the nodding off my subconscious had been trying to do. Seated across from me, Sil had his arms folded and his eyes closed.

Sweet! He didn’t catch me sleeping! I cheered silently, with an internal fist pump for good measure... Then Sil’s head leaned farther and hit the window. *Huh? Sil...are you asleep?*

It was followed immediately by a harsh voice. "Shall I wake him?"

"No, let him sleep. Lord Sil must be tired."

"Yes, Princess..."

I closed my fan and stood up.

"Your Highness?"

I adjusted the curtain on the left side of the carriage so that anyone outside couldn't see Sil sleeping at the window. My eyes met with the veteran soldiers who were riding alongside the carriage. They nodded in understanding.

"You shouldn't do that..."

Even though I hadn't put the curtain all the way down, a large shadow fell over me. Klifford's tall frame was hunched over beside me.

"He's sleeping... It takes courage to sleep in front of others, Klifford. The fewer people around, the better. Could you perhaps shift the positioning of Lord Sil's head for him?" I instructed Klifford to move Sil's head away from the window so I could lower the curtain properly.

"If by that, you mean you wish for me to trap a man into a vulnerable state while he can't fight back...then I will gladly comply."

With Klifford's help, we completely covered the left window. Then we did the same to the right. *There. Now Sil can have almost full privacy while he sleeps.*

"Personally, I take it to mean that Lord Sil feels safe around you and me, Klifford."

Although, it's probably a side effect of the guardian ring. I was floored when I found out the merchant had leaked the information to Sil... But in the end, that merchant actually did his job well! A textbook lucky mistake!

Now, only one thing remains... I looked up at Klifford. "Tell me the truth... Are you sure it wasn't you?"

The fact that Sil thought Klifford was his lifesaver and that he was letting himself sleep so vulnerably in our presence now had to have been connected.

Klifford's lips twitched, his blue eyes narrowing slightly. "Your Highness...do

you doubt me?"

"What I *doubt* is that there are many men in this world who resemble you." The thought of another supreme specimen like this existing in the world... Inconceivable!

"Lord Burks said that he didn't get a good look at his rescuer's face. On height and build alone, there are countless men who resemble me. It was many years ago, besides."

"Then...allow me to *sovereignly* ask again." *As I recall...an Adjutant cannot lie to his Sovereign...right?* "The man who rescued Lord Sil four years ago...was that you?" I asked explicitly. It was the same way Sil had asked the question earlier.

Will your answer be different this time?

"Oh!" The carriage made a sudden jolt.

D-did we roll over a rock or something? My vision blurred. Since I'd been standing, I lost my balance and started to fall, but Klifford caught me.

The moment his arms touched me, he replied, "No... It was not me, Your Highness."

Well, that was blunt.

"Oh... Understood."

"Take my hand and have a seat, Your Highness. It's too dangerous to stand."

He escorted me back to the bench seat of the coach. Once he'd made sure I was safely seated, Klifford lowered himself onto the bench next to me.

Only a few minutes had passed since we'd lowered the curtains. And the sandman, who'd already ensnared Sil, had now turned his attack on me. I'd stifled yawns behind my fan so many times that I'd lost count.

I'll just rest my eyes for a bit... And that spelled my defeat. Little by little, the grains of sand fell. I tried with all my might to lift my eyelids...but the sandman kept them glued shut. And just like that, sleep overtook me.

One side of my body...feels so warm.

I'm gonna have sweet dreams...

But my prediction was way off. *Those* memories started to seep into my dreams...and it really bummed me out.

There was a starry sky above. It could only be that place—the place I'd been to just once. And the scenery in my dream morphed into it.

I would sometimes have this nightmare when I slept. A nightmare of my shitty, haunting memories...

No... I've gotta wake up. I hate this dream. It hurts.

No matter how hard I resisted it, I could never wake myself from the dream. The stars in the sky grew more and more vivid. Before long, *that bastard* would appear...

I squeezed my eyes tight. I blindly reached out into the dark clouds...clinging desperately onto my lifeline...until my hand touched something...grabbed something.

Is somebody...there?

Something touched my head... It was a large hand. I felt...a little better.

Ahh... So this is a dream, too. Somebody's caressing my hair to comfort me... Yeah. It was just a dream. After all, no such person exists in this realm... Alec is far, far away... This doesn't feel like his hand, either. But since this is all a dream anyway...

I brazenly nuzzled against the hand. Then the hand froze—its owner seemed confused.

It made me sad.

But it was still a helpful dream for me. Because whoever it was...they didn't disappear. They just kept caressing my hair. A bit clumsily...and a bit timidly...

I'm so happy you're here.

Wake up, Maki!

Yeah, I know, Mom. You said I'm gonna be late for school, right? Okay, I'm up. Geez. Could you be any louder...? Breakfast? Sure.

Oh, that's strange, sweetie. Don't you usually say you don't want any?

Well, I feel like eating today. I'm in the mood for some nice runny eggs, sunny-side up.

"Your Highness."

No. I don't wanna wake up yet. It's a good dream. If I wake up...I'll forget everything.

"Your Highness, we will be arriving shortly. Please, wake up."

A familiar, handsome voice hit my ears.

Your...Highness? Your Highness... That's me... I'm Octavia...and this voice belongs to...

My eyes shot open...to find Klifford's face just inches from mine. For some reason, just one side of my body was oddly warm. And my right fist seemed to be squeezing some fabric.

Huh?

It took several seconds for me to register what was happening. And during those several seconds, I got a good long stare into those indigo-blue eyes.

Oh..... This must be a dream, too.

Well, if it's a dream...I think I'll just stay asleep for a bit longer. It's so nice and warm.

"My apologies for waking you so late, Your Highness."

"No... It was my fault for falling asleep so easily," I murmured dreamily, my head still resting on Klifford's shoulder.

"Did you sleep well?"

Wow, dream Klifford seems to be a perfect reflection of my desires... He genuinely appears concerned over how well I slept.

"Yes... I had a very good dream." I smiled without meaning to. It really was a good dream, though—I still felt so blissful from it...but I could no longer remember the details. Too bad. It's always like this when I wake up...

My train of thought suddenly hit a snag.

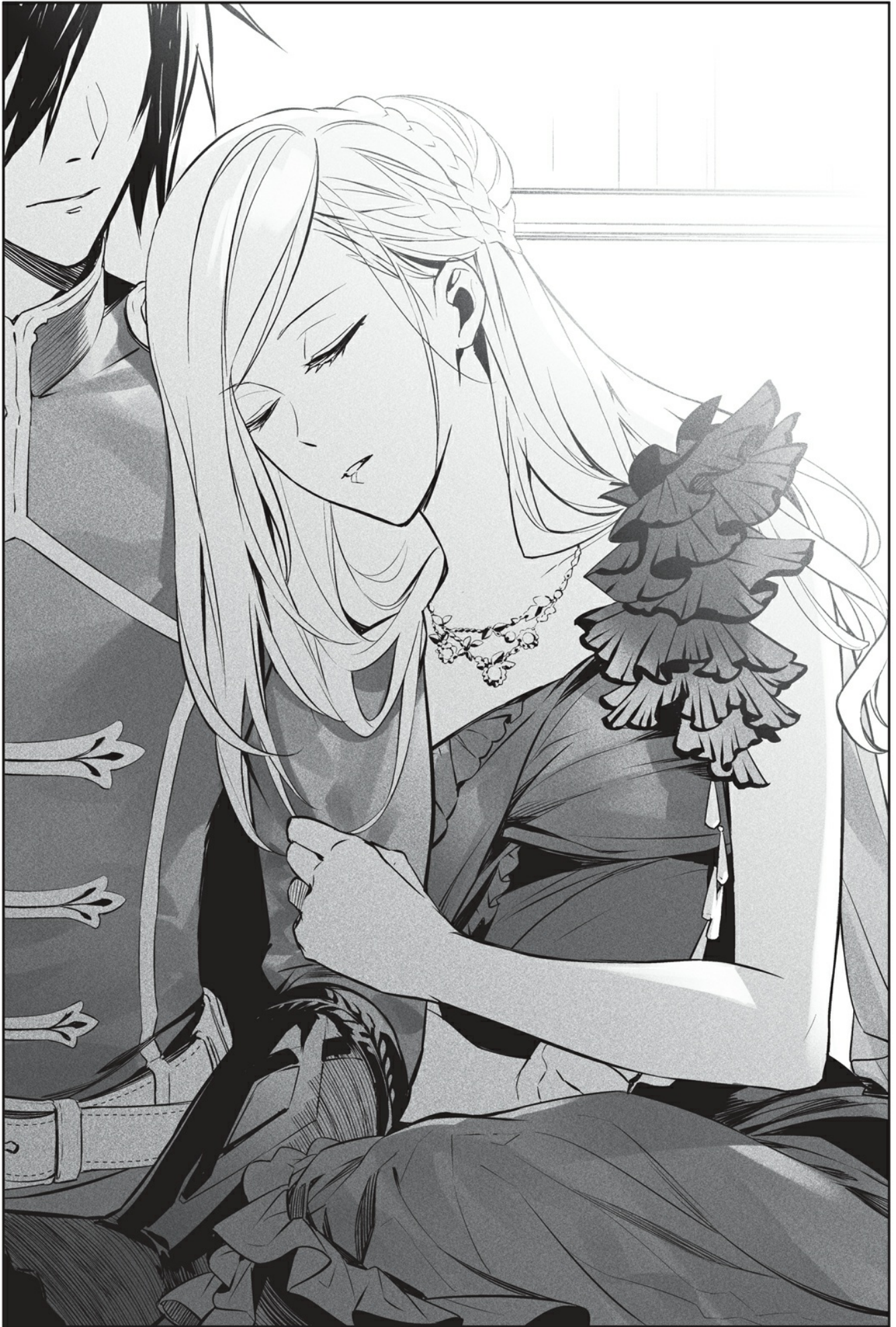
When I...wake up? Wait, is this a dream inside a dream... No...Wait... It isn't?

I'm leaning on Klifford's shoulder...in reality? And my right hand, it's not gripping my fan... It's gripping the left sleeve of Klifford's uniform...like I desperately want him to stay?

My delirious brain snapped to lucidity. My memories from before I fell asleep flooded back to me.

I'm in a carriage.

This is real.



Which means... Th... Th-th-th-this situation I'm in...?!

I was zonked out on Klifford's shoulderrr!!! And let's throw in "was gripping his sleeve" while we're at it! And as if that wasn't enough, I nestled against him and had a conversation in my half-asleep staaate!!!

C'mon, wake up faster, woman! I mean, you're a princess! You're not supposed to fall asleep! Oh, curse you, feeble psyche of mine! I want a do-over! Lemme turn back time and start over!

C-calm... Stay calm. What's done is done—y-you can't take it back. If you freak out, you'll only make things worse. O-okay, let's start with taking your head off his shoulder. Cool as a cucumber. Cooool as a cucumberrrr.

I relaxed the muscles in my right hand, releasing my death grip on Klifford's sleeve. It sure was a good thing that bodyguard uniforms were made of thick, sturdy fabric—I was spared the embarrassment of wrinkling his clothes.

I slowly sat up. I robotically snatched up my fan off my lap. If my right hand had to grab something, *this* is what it should have grabbed! As I enjoyed the soothing sensation of the fluffy feathers, I hid half of my face behind the fan and looked around the coach interior.

Sil was still asleep. And the curtain on the right side of the coach where Klifford was sitting had been freshly closed. When I fell asleep on his left shoulder and grabbed onto his sleeve, I must've pinned him down! And even though he'd said this sort of thing should never happen, he'd still used his free hand to lower the curtain for my benefit.

"Thank you... Sorry I made you uncomfortable." If only there was a hole around that I could crawl into.

"You needn't worry yourself, Your Highness."

"But I was surely in your way." As I said this, intense anxiety attacked me. I realized that while I'd originally leaned my head against the window, I'd shifted my head onto Klifford's shoulder in my sleep. So...why did I have to grip his sleeve, too?

My awkward sleeping habits must have reared their ugly head! That's what

happened, right? I might've accidentally done something else embarrassing in my sleep...! I'd better double-check!

"So...did I act disgracefully?" Like, did I talk in my sleep?! Or did I kick you or punch you?!

"....."

Awkward silence! Fantastic! So I really did talk in my sleep? Or did I kick him? Punch him? Or did I grind my teeth? Oh my god, what if it was all of the above...?

My eyes shot down to my deviant right hand when—

"No...you did not," Klifford answered. "All you did was sleep, Your Highness."

"Ah...well, good, then." I'm gonna take your word for it, okay? I'm holding you to those words, Klifford! I didn't say or do anything inappropriate in my sleep!Yeah, let's go with that.

As my chest rose and fell, the carriage came to a stop. I looked out the window that wasn't obscured by a curtain and saw that we had arrived at the front gate that led to Paradise in the Sky. Not even a royal carriage was permitted to simply pass through it. We needed to stop and undergo a security check.

I've gotta wake up Sil. "Lord Sil... Lord Sil!"

After calling his name a few times, his hazel eyes popped open. Sil stared at Klifford and me...then he pushed himself away from the window with a start. His brain had instantly started working again.

"Pardon me, Princess Octavia... How disrespectful of me." He was terrified. But up until just a couple minutes ago, I was in the awkward sleeper's club with him. So I was kind of in no place to talk.

"Good morning, Lord Sil."

"Good morning..."

"Don't fret—you and I are in the same boat. I, too, had a little catnap." *Not so much a catnap, but more like an epic sleep-talking snooze fest!* It's only human nature to want to keep that a secret. "We were, you might say, restoring our

energy? The main event... It's about to begin."

For both Sil...and for me.

Dang, this is so nerve-racking. Standing in the carriage, I breathed deeply and checked over my appearance. My dress...had no strange tears or stains in it. The fabric billowing off my shoulders was also okay. *I think I'll pin my sapphire pendant to the center of my chest.*

And my hair... Despite falling asleep on Klifford's shoulder, not a strand was out of place. Gotta hand it to Sasha and the handmaids. The craftsmanship on the braided portion was sublime—not a single pin had been used.

Lastly, I opened Blackfeather. *Okay, now I'm complete.*

We were let through the gate. Our royal carriage drew quite a lot of attention as we cantered through Paradise in the Sky premises until we arrived at our parking spot.

I was dazzled by the pretty flowers I saw through the window along the way. One corner of the garden was buried in a carpet of white flowers. We'd passed by them too quickly to tell for sure, but I think they were Lieche orchids.

My hand wandered up to my head. I had absolutely no complaints regarding my hairstyle. It was very dignified and princess-like. But I remembered that while Sasha and the handmaids were styling my hair and Matilda was barking orders at them, I'd wanted to say something...but I'd stopped myself. I figured they would have reluctantly agreed to my request saying, "If you insist, Your Highness..." but I'd held back.

I shook my head. *C'mon, you already let it go. Just forget about it!*

All that remained now...was to step out of the carriage. The curtains were no longer lowered. It was customary for royal carriages to receive a welcoming party. A small crowd had already formed around the carriage. When the junior ball guests saw that not only Klifford, but Lord Sil was in my company as well, their faces filled with astonishment.

Klifford was the one to step out of the carriage first. Then Lord Sil. *Guess it's my turn now...*

I manifested a smile and descended from the carriage. A breeze filled with the scent of the garden's Lieche orchids hit my nose.

A myriad of gazes pierced my body from head to toe—the attention I'd gotten while I was still in the carriage could not even begin to compare.

"Is that Sil Burks with Princess Octavia?"

"So *that's* Blackfeather..."

"Is her bodyguard Count Alderton's son...?"

"Her dress is gorgeous. I wonder who made it?"

I could pick out a variety of comments from the sea of murmurs. It was customary for an unengaged princess to be escorted by her bodyguard to such functions. As soon as I walked through the door, I took Klifford's hand with my left.

"Princess Octavia."

A hand reached out to me on my right side. It was Sil. This is exactly as we'd planned just before we'd arrived. We kinda thought, hey, we might as well make a big show of the fact that Sil is attending the junior ball? Whether he was about to meet his real parents or walk into a trap, Sil and I made quite an extraordinary pair. So we wouldn't sneak around—we would stand proudly in the limelight.

I deliberately broadened my smile. I closed my fan and placed my right hand in Sil's. The crowd stared at us. I could practically hear their eyeballs saying, "*What the hell is going on here?!*"

Holding my left hand was Klifford. Holding my right was Sil. *I'm in a hottie sandwich... Well, not exactly. More like, I'm sandwiched between two men of totally different types of beauty? And let's not forget, one of them is technically my big brother's boyfriend!*

With a man on each side of me, I spoke to the crowd around us, crisp and clear, "Well, good day, ladies and gentlemen."

With Klifford and Sil on either arm, I walked into Paradise in the Sky, the party hall where the junior ball was to be held. All it took was a couple steps to extinguish all my nervousness—if anything, I felt emboldened!

Walking forward filled me with confidence. Bumping into Sil along the way had put us a little behind schedule, but we were okay since we'd left the castle early. In the end, we were right on time, and it's a good thing we were. Unhurried, I was able to walk calmly with each man in hand.

In other words, this scenario was *made* to set one's heart aflutter. I mean, come on, this position is, like, every girl's dream! Strolling arm in arm between two distinctively gorgeous *ikemen*... It's the epitome of Heroine Vibes! *This* is the juicy thrill that only a princess can experience!

...As long as you averted your eyes from the impending harshness of reality, that is. Klifford was actually just here as my bodyguard—it's his job—and Lord Sil was only acting this way as an emergency precaution due to unforeseen circumstances. Neither of them was giving me a smidgen of a swoon... But as long as I banished those facts from my brain, it was all good!

Yep. Self-deception is a valuable skill!

The closer we got to the central area of the junior ball, the more people (and prying eyes) there were. As I defiantly immersed myself fully in Heroine Vibes, I didn't forget to smile at the people as they greeted me. If I had a sour look on my face in a social function such as this, I would be a disgrace to the royal family, you see! Anyway, as long as I smiled, I'd make a good impression.

However...in contrast to my cool demeanor, there was something odd building up on my right side. Since Klifford wasn't showing the slightest bit of nervousness or agitation on my left, the contrast was all the more striking.

With each step forward, Sil's gait became more stiff and stilted—he was tense all over. At this rate, he was about to cross the line into unnatural levels of awkward.

Guess I have to do something about this... For better or worse, Sil was famous.

And though that made my plan to stand out a great success, the way in which we were standing out was not entirely advantageous.

Lord Sil was my brother's lover. For this, he received grace and goodwill...but he also received abuse and animosity. And at a place like the junior ball, this was particularly obvious. What's more, Sil's partner, Sirius, was not on his arm today.

I was on his arm, though!

In the end, it was an undeniable fact that my brother had been a shield to Lord Sil in every possible way—even psychologically.

"Are we having second thoughts...?" I whispered to Sil as I smiled and waved to the crowd around us.

Sil's neck snapped to look at me.

"Would you like to run home to my brother?" I pressed him further. "If you do, I would be quite all right with that." I was dancing that fine line between provocation and encouragement.

"I...mustn't go home," Sil answered with renewed vitality in his hazel eyes. His jaw was clenched tight—he still didn't look quite himself—but he was able to form a convincing enough friendly smile befitting of his noble status.

"Good. That's the spirit."

Sil's eyes widened slightly...then a real smile bloomed on his face. "Thank you."

Th-that's our hero! He's already a pretty boy as it is, but his smile is damn destructive in the flesh! It could put up a good fight against Alec's angelic smile. Oh, Sil...you terrifying bishounen!

I suppressed my swooning and continued forward. We climbed up the grand staircase that led to the front door and arrived at the red carpet that ran through the central corridor.

When we got halfway through the corridor, I stopped in my tracks. Somebody was coming right at us, short of breath. Klifford flinched. His warmth left my left hand. Klifford stepped in front, to distance me from the approaching

gentleman.

“What are you doing?” the man demanded.

“I cannot allow anyone with weapons to approach Her Highness...no matter who he may be,” Klifford answered calmly.

But the man showed no signs of balking and... *Wait a minute, weapons? Why would a party guest be carrying weapons?* I peeked over Klifford’s broad shoulder for a little look. The man was dressed immaculately in formal attire. His entire look said, *Hey, I’m a genuine nobleman! And a high-ranking one, at that.*

A sneer formed on the man’s chiseled face at Klifford’s rebuke. “Oh dear. I have no such intentions. I carry a weapon for my own personal protection. The world is a dangerous place. One can never be too careful.”

“Did you get Countess Reddington’s approval?” I cut in.

“But of course, Princess. Just as she did for your bodyguard, she made an exception for me,” he replied with an affable smile.

No matter where junior balls or royal balls were held, carrying weapons was strictly prohibited. In exchange, the party host would arrange to have the venue fully guarded. And this junior ball at Paradise in the Sky would be fully guarded. Trust is a very important commodity, you know.

But guests who brought their own weapons to the party were disliked. The party host didn’t want such guests to be mistakenly apprehended as thieves by the guards. And while armed guards might accompany guests to a ball, they were not permitted to go any farther than the area where the carriages were parked. And if they did enter the party hall itself, they had to undergo a thorough search to make sure they weren’t carrying anything that could be considered a weapon.

Conversely, the invited guests did not undergo such strict searches. They were merely given a glance as they passed through the front gate to the manor in their carriage. After all, if you did bring a concealed weapon to a social function, and it caused a scandal, your life was basically over... So attendees were given the benefit of the doubt, knowing they wouldn’t risk such a thing. It’s a People

Are Fundamentally Good worldview!

But bodyguards like Klifford were exceptions. Royalty needed special treatment! So bodyguards were permitted to carry weapons, even inside the junior ball. And with special permission from the host, ordinary attendees could be armed, too.

The hall had fallen into a suffocating silence. If someone approached his mistress in a public place with his weapon carelessly drawn, it was Klifford's job to be on guard, no matter who that person may be.

But the person in question wasn't backing down. The crowd held its breath, waiting to see how the scene would unfold. And on my right-hand side, I could tell a nervousness of a different variety was consuming Sil.

"Klifford... He's safe." *I hope!* "But...that's right..." Klifford's indigo eyes looked back into mine. "If you encounter another suspicious person, inform me at once. I will be vigilant."

'Cause I like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, too! As long as a person isn't clearly suspicious or openly hostile, my danger sensors probably won't kick in! Even if one of the invited attendees was carrying a concealed weapon, I wouldn't notice! If I receive intelligence to that effect, then I'll pass judgment! I'm doing my best here! So I'll leave making that distinction to you, Klifford! And by the way, you can back off now! I thought hard, willing my feelings into my stare.

"As you wish, Your Highness." And with a bow, Klifford stepped back to his place beside me as if nothing had happened. Then he extended his hand again, and I took it. For some reason, I felt relieved.

A smile crept onto my face. *Is it because Klifford is cool as a cucumber at heart? Is that why he...makes me feel safe?*

"Being treated like a suspicious person by your bodyguard truly hurts. Surely you and I are not unacquainted, Princess." Now that the obstruction known as Klifford was out of the way, the man approached me.

We're not unacquainted... Way to word that in the most confusing way possible, buddy...

“My deepest apologies, Lord Derek. But my bodyguard is quite gifted, you know? Of course he would notice you have a concealed weapon.”

Is this insight a trick only an Adjutant could utilize? I am increasingly grateful that Klifford is on my side. If he were my enemy, that'd be just too scary.

“Just as you did, as a famed master of Spot the Weapon, Princess?”

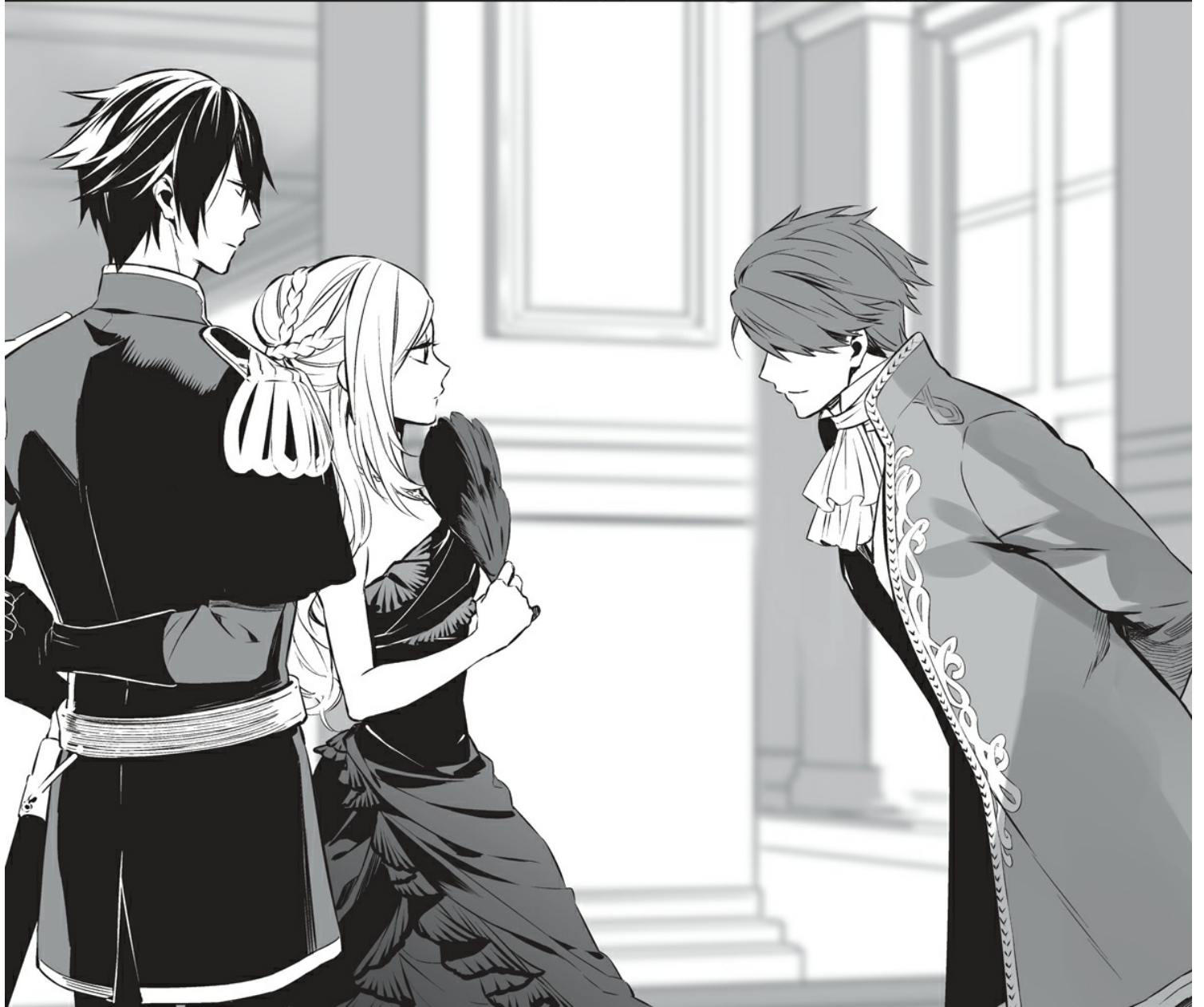
No, you've got it all wrong! Klifford was the one who noticed; I was totally in the dark! Then again, going out of my way to correct him would be a hassle... Well, whatever.

The young man—who had the social backing to brazenly approach a princess and speak directly with her without blame—looked at me and bowed elegantly.

“Princess...it is an honor to see you.”

The formally dressed man was a young nobleman with brown hair and black eyes. Though his features were rather forgettable, his gracious appearance and high status made him very popular among the ladies of the nobility...and also among the gentlemen! And the latter was probably greater in numbers, too.

He was my big brother's friend, Derek Nightfellow. While Sirius was a perfect superhuman and was, consequently, difficult to get along with, Derek, though he was definitely not soft, did possess an easygoing, gentlemanlike aura. And yeah, he and I have at least known each other by name and face since we were little. If I had to guess, I think he belonged to the True Love Nobles faction of the nobility—he would do anything for the love of a man.



It looked like he'd heard that Sil and I had arrived together and hurried to greet us. *Because* he was Sirius's friend, he was probably especially curious about why Sil had arrived with me. He figured it just couldn't be true, and he needed to see it with his own eyes to believe it.

So when Klifford blocked his way, and when he saw Sil holding my right hand, the elegant smile that Derek was wearing—a smile that was standard-issue for any high-ranking member of the nobility at such a social function—easily crumbled away.

However, unless I was mistaken, from the expression that replaced his formal smile, it seemed an awful lot like Derek was thinking, *Dude. You've gotta be shitting me.* Hmmm... I could be wrong, though.

Derek was, after all, Uncle Dearest's son. And even though we had seen each other now and then since childhood, I wouldn't exactly say we knew each other well.

"Why, yes. It is so good to see you again after all this time." I figured I'd at least smile and test the waters. But it was as if that flash of indignation I'd seen earlier was an illusion. There was no longer a hint of two-facedness in Derek's smile. That's a duke-to-be for you. Mind tricks are their forte. I knew he wanted to speak to Sil first. But by greeting me—the princess—first, he'd kept his wits about himself.

In addition, he'd brought a concealed weapon to a junior ball, even though he was a sophisticated nobleman as far as anyone could tell.

From what Sil had told me about why he'd given Sirius the slip, it seemed clear that Derek was his ally. But the thought that he might also be *my* comrade... Well, that was unclear.

I mean, I highly doubt he'd charge at me with a sword or anything. That's why I had Klifford back off, you know?

But anyone who was Team Sil x Sirius had one thing in common: They all felt awkward around me! So I couldn't be too careful.

"Did you wish to speak with me about something?" I asked, bracing myself for the advanced verbal assault that might explode from Derek's mouth. *Bring it*

on, baby! ...But if you don't wanna bring it on, that's also cool!

"Yes. I've come here on behalf of Sirius. Though I feared for my life for a moment there when I was hampered by your knight."

Completely emotionless, Klifford brushed off Derek's sarcasm.

"May I have the honor of escorting you to the great hall, Princess?" Now the verbal barrage took a strange turn. There was a soft gasp among the crowd who observed the little standoff between Derek and me. Yet the very man who'd asked the question was the only one who looked unfazed.

"You came...on behalf of my elder brother?"

"Oh dear, did you forget?"

Of course I forgot!

"I remember clearly how Sirius used to always be your dance partner."

Oh... Is that what he'd meant?

"My... That does bring back old memories."

Was Sirius my partner when I had that realization that I sucked royally at dancing? Then my bodyguards started taking on that role... Then when Alec got old enough, he had become my default dance partner.

"On that day long ago, Sirius instructed me to escort you in his stead if he should be absent. And now, at last, I have been blessed with the chance to fulfill my duty." Derek flashed a congenial smile and bowed with his hand pressed to his heart.

So fake! Fake from the very first word of his speech! But...he still looks like the picture-perfect nobleman. All eyes were on him.

"Please do me the honor of being your brother's substitute."

Um...no, I'd rather not!

...Aha. I've spotted a comrade.

It was a trio composed of two noble ikemen and an elaborately adorned, beautiful daughter of the nobility. Was it that so-called childhood friend relationship?

Ordinarily, there would be sparks of rivalry flying between the two gentlemen. But in Esfia, it goes something like this! Sparks of rivalry fly between a young man and a young woman...over another young man!

But these two men...look like their love is unrequited! Back when I was a *fujoshi* in high school, my degenerate soul would drool over such a juicy situation as this. But now that I live in this world, my sympathies tend to go toward the redheaded girl caught in the middle.

The noblewoman must have been thinking, *Just hook up already! But I'm not being your matchmaker—not in a million years!* what with her dead fish eyes and her vacant, artificial smile...

Ahh, I wanna be her friend.

Derek followed my gaze and said, “That pair over there is in the middle of a budding romance.”

“Well...aren’t we knowledgeable?”

“Intelligence is everything. It cannot be underestimated as an ‘ordinary romance.’ That ‘ordinary romance’ might someday play the part in a radical transformation.”

“Oh my. Are you by any chance in love, Lord Derek?”

“Sadly, romance isn’t in the cards for me.”

A section of our eavesdroppers shivered with excitement when they heard that statement.

Now...why was I having a conversation with Derek, you might ask? Well, it’s because I, understandably, couldn’t bring myself to tell him no thank you...and now I’ve got *three* escorts!

Advancing on someone so publicly like that was a method of showing you wished to be friends. And unless one wanted to sow discord, it was bad manners to refuse such an invitation. Derek was the next duke in line, and he was also my big brother’s friend. Which meant, when you considered our social standings, asking me to join him at the party was not at all out of place. What’s more, regardless of the sincerity of his intentions, bringing up that

embarrassing childhood story with my brother was not cool!

If I'd turned him down, that would basically be declaring I'm at odds with not only Derek, but with Sirius as well. And since Sil was my escort when Derek had asked me to join him, the outcome would've been just too wild if I'd said no. In short, the moment Derek asked me to join him, I really only had one choice.

Now that I had three men escorting me, I didn't have enough hands for them to clasp. So Operation Hottie Sandwich had to be modified. Now I was just awkwardly surrounded by the three men on all sides as I walked.

I feel kinda like I'm a prisoner in a convoy... The Princess Vibes are so far, far away from me now!

As before, Klifford was still on my left side. Sil and Derek were on my right, and Sil was on the outer side. The firstborn son of a duke outranked the third son of a baron, so Derek was prioritized.

And since I'd accepted his friendship and was walking alongside him, I now had to pretend to be friendly with him as we walked down the corridor to the main hall! But Sil had taken a hint and fallen silent, and Klifford was, unless I initiated a conversation with him, the strong silent type.

Which meant conversation was Derek's and my role. We both plastered smiles on our faces and conversed loudly so those around us could hear.

"Princess, you're dressed with a more refined elegance than usual today."

"Oh my, how kind of you to notice."

Derek also seemed to be in the know—everything he said to me was incredibly bland and unoffensive. Even though I knew there was one question he was dying to ask—why did I come here with Sil?—he didn't touch the subject at all. I guess it was to be expected, seeing as there were too many people watching us then. For that matter, ever since Derek joined our party, the number of eyeballs on us had multiplied! The sides of the corridor were starting to get awfully crowded with people who had moved there to get a closer look at us.

That's Derek Nightfellow, unattached, superfine specimen for you! When he said that love "wasn't in the cards" for him, that was really him making his value

skyrocket by announcing he was single!

And speaking of superfine specimens, Klifford was getting his own fair share of passionate stares from men and women alike. And thanks to his little confrontation with Derek, it was like they'd thrown gasoline on the fire of the fangirls and fanboys squealing, "Ahh, Sir Knight!"

And Sil's smile was deadly, too. There was a section of people (men) who kept stealing smoldering glances at him, undeterred by his romance with Sirius...!

And how did everyone react to *me*, you might ask?

Well, I guess you could say I sensed an intense array of rivalrous death glares from jealous men? Yup! I guess you'd call that a delusion! I choose to believe it could have been painfully intense affection for me, too!

"Thank you for the compliment...is what I would say, except there isn't a soul at this junior ball who hasn't noticed. That is just how uniquely you are dressed tonight, Princess."

"Well, isn't evolution important in all things? Pray tell, Lord Derek, how do you find my appearance?"

"I find it captivating. It suits you well... Terrifyingly so."

Terrifyingly so... What's that supposed to mean? Is that a compliment or a complaint? So this is what having a conversation with a nobleman is like... Thanks for making that painfully clear to me, Derek!

I swallowed all the questions I wanted to ask him and giggled instead.

I should probably be doing something to steer the conversation away from me... I could pick a conversation topic Derek would like without even using my brain... Eureka! Uncle Dearest!

"Oh, Lord Derek, is Duke Nightfellow doing well?" My voice squeaked a little against my will.

"Oh, he is in very good health. Not even killing him would make him die."

"Killing him? My, what a very unpeaceful turn of phrase."

"Please understand that I meant to express just how healthy he is. After all,

he's taken the initiative to work hard at the daily housecleaning."

Housecleaning, eh...? "Knowing him, I wouldn't be surprised to see him mopping the floor at this party hall."

"Personally...I'd hope that he would refrain from it."

"But wouldn't that be just like Duke Nightfellow?" Uncle Dearest loved cleanliness. So much so that he was one of the rare noblemen who cleaned his own home! He'd say, *"It's best to do it yourself. You can't rely on other people—they always miss the most important things. I sometimes find cobwebs they missed!"* And since I still have a working-class spirit from my past life and sometimes catch myself cleaning my own room, that's one thing we have in common!

"I do look forward to seeing him," I said. My primary objective was Rust Byrne. And finding some gentleman to be my (fake) boyfriend! But I hadn't forgotten the possibility that I'd see Uncle Dearest. If only he were a bachelor just twenty...ten years younger! Then I definitely would've asked him to play the part of my boyfriend... In fact, I'd drop the whole "fake" part of the boyfriend thing, and... Ack, stop that! I love Uncle Dearest because of how much he loves his wife!

"What with your affinity for cleaning... When it comes to you, Princess, my father has taken quite a liking to you." There was a not-so-subtle note of frustration in Derek's tone. And unless I was mistaken, the air about Derek suggested that what he'd wanted to say was *"Old man's got trash taste."*

Oh, how deplorable! You're his own true son, and yet you don't understand him. You just don't understand him at all, Derek Nightfellow!

"He is a wonderful man. Why wouldn't he take a liking to me?"

As a devoted husband, Uncle Dearest had a particularly special, diamond-like sparkle in Esfian society. He was Duke Nightfellow! From past me's perspective, his love of cleaning made him a great family man, too! I know it was considered a red flag to the nobility in Esfia, but to me, it was a huge green flag!

"Someone like your father would make a perfect husband," I said.

"Does that mean, Princess, that your beloved is a man like my father?"

The art of socializing was a compulsory skill among the top nobles. With the ultimate smile that hid any feelings he might have to the contrary, Derek casually posed the question to me.

“Well...” And we’ve taken a sudden turn into asking about my boyfriend! So my brother sent a spy! I was keeping up so well when we were talking about Uncle Dearest, and now I felt like I was at a severe disadvantage. I...I need to restore my dignity! How should I answer him...?

I pointedly covered my face with my fan and paused a few seconds for dramatic effect. By doing this, I also had a chance to see how everyone around me was responding to the wreven feathers on my fan—Blackfeather. Incidentally, Sil seemed completely unfazed. He didn’t even look like he was faking it. *Maybe he’s not the superstitious type? Okay, so there’s a high possibility that Sil could learn to appreciate the wonders of wreven feathers!*

So how’s Derek doing? Even when confronted by Blackfeather’s wreven feathers fluttering close to his face, his expression was steadfast—he didn’t show so much as a flicker of discontent. But perhaps this was also his genius-level art of socializing at work... *A formidable foe, indeed!*

“Word travels quickly...,” I said. “I’m surprised you knew I had taken a lover. Did, by chance, my elder brother tell you?” *It’s only been two days, my dude. And Esfia doesn’t even have texting or social media.*

Derek casually shook his head. “I didn’t need to hear the news from Sirius. Among the nobility, those who have not heard the news are in the minority by now...regardless of faction.”

Th-that many people know? I’m shook. N-no pressure, right...?

“Everyone is most interested in your mysterious lover, Princess. And since you’d decided suddenly to attend, many people just assumed he would make an appearance at the junior ball.”

Ooh, sorry, but that’s not correct. So close, yet so far! Rust Byrne, the guy who might become my (fake) boyfriend, will be making an appearance! I hope...

“My, how amusing.” Had this been someone else’s business, I’d have been all abuzz with curiosity over who the mystery man was!

I adjusted my cramped princess smile behind my fan. “Lord Derek... What sort of man do you imagine my lover would be?”

Yup. The bar’s been raised anyway. I might as well take this opportunity to hear through Derek what a high-class nobleman would consider acceptable parameters for my boyfriend. It might even give me a hint as to what my father had meant when he said there was an “exception” to who he’d allow me to date.

I looked up eagerly at Derek. But he just shook his head.

“I am sorry, but a mere man such as myself cannot begin to imagine. That is why everyone is dying to know who he is, Princess.”

“Well...that was a rather bland answer.” *What a bummer. I was hoping for, y’know, an image of a boyfriend that could give me some clues!* “I wish you would give it a little more serious consideration.”

“If it’s a titillating answer you’re looking for, then how’s this? It’s a theory a friend of mine had...” Derek’s expression turned serious. And his handsome gentleman veneer dissolved away. “He said...that the princess doesn’t actually have a lover.”

Uh-ohhh!!! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner!

M-my heart... This’s so bad for my heart...

So who is this “friend” of yours? I need names! No... Wait a minute. Usually when people talk about “their friend” like this, they’re actually talking about themselves! Which means Derek suspects me? Did he, like, see right through the fact that I lied about having a boyfriend just to spite my big brother?

But I can’t act flustered... That’ll basically be like saying he’s right!

I smiled through my pounding heart and leaned on my fan for help so Derek wouldn’t be able to read my emotions. “Lord Derek... I would like for you to deliver a message to this *friend* of yours: ‘I hope I see you there when I present my beloved publicly.’ On that day, he will find out who my lover is, whether he wants to or not.”

Gee, I hope I find out who he is... I *will* find out, right? You’re gonna work hard

to make sure that happens, right, future me? I just know that on that day, my (fake) boyfriend will be standing by my side!

“Will you deliver this message to your *friend*?”

“Yes, absolutely. You have my word.”

We exchanged smiles. *Urgh! Conversations with Derek are exhausting. I’ve gotta get to the party, stat!*

An elegantly dressed noblewoman was standing at the entrance to the main hall. She wore a simple, long pea-green gown over her slender body, and her coppery hair was braided up in a complex knot and adorned with a veil. Her bright-red lips were oddly not at all garish—they looked quite refined.

That was Rosa Reddington, the host of the party, the countess in the flesh.

“Octavia, dear! Welcome to my junior ball. I am so pleased you could attend.” Countess Reddington lifted the hem of her long dress and curtsied deeply at the waist. Her movements were crisp and so very beautiful.

“Likewise, Countess. It is an honor to be invited.”

Now that our greetings were over, if things ran along their usual course, Countess Reddington would escort me into the main hall... But she stayed put.

“If you wouldn’t mind...” Countess Reddington’s eyes darted over to Sil for some reason.

Hmm...?

“If you wouldn’t mind, before we go to the main hall, may I speak with you for a minute? Your three gentlemen escorts may join you.”

What’s this...?!

My sixth sense—the one that usually doesn’t serve me well—perked up.

I’ve got a really bad feeling about this!

21

There were many ladies among Esfia’s nobility. However, it was rare for any

of them to receive a title. And those few ladies who did have titles... Well, they were battle-hardened veterans.

This was because noble society was male-dominated. When your world is catered toward BL, that tends to give men a boost. Simply being a woman made life an uphill battle. And these women managed to secure titles for themselves and survive without falling from grace—each and every one of them was a certified Bad B. Countess Reddington looked like she might bite your head off if you let your guard down around her for a minute. Still, as a fellow noblewoman, she was by far more approachable than any run-of-the-mill noblemen... Then again!

All her approachability flies out the window if I've got a really bad feeling about her... Just sayin'!

I followed Countess Reddington into the VIP lounge to talk. She offered me a seat, but I declined. I wanted to telegraph to her that I'd rather stay standing and keep the conversation as *short* as possible.

My three gentlemen escorts, whom she'd insisted join us, were also in the lounge. Except they were all scattered about. Klifford had a home base for moments like this: stationed by the door on guard. Sil had entered the lounge and just stopped after a few steps. In a way, that was his home base. It was a real hassle, but VIP lounges had a designated range of where one was allowed to move, depending on rank. Where Sil stood was a spot reserved for the third son of a baron. When Countess Reddington saw him standing there, an indescribable smirk spread on her face... And oh, was it horrifying!

That left just one person: Derek. He was leaning against the western wall. Since he was the next in line to be duke, as long as he did nothing to offend Countess Reddington, he was allowed to be anywhere within the VIP lounge that he pleased.

Okay, let's do this... I snapped my fan open. "Countess Reddington," I addressed the lady standing in front of me. I'd learned my lesson from the indirect, roundabout conversation I'd had with Derek. It was time to be candid. "What did you wish to speak with me about?" I started the conversation, not waiting for her.

“Oh, please call me Rosa while you’re here at my junior ball. Your Highness, I am very pleased that you accepted my invitation.”

“I cannot allow myself to address a fellow lady I respect by her first name alone, Lady Rosa.”

“You’re a charmer, Your Highness,” Countess Redding—Rosa chuckled. “Even so...” She looked at each of the three men in turn. “You surprised me, Your Highness. You have not one, but three lovely gentlemen in your company. The next duke in line, Derek Nightfellow, Prince Sirius’s beloved, Sil Burks...and a man who, though common-born, was highly sought-after for his battle skills, adopted into the house of a count, and now serves as your bodyguard: Sir Klifford Alderton. You have graced us with a truly intriguing array of faces.”

I’m not surprised she knows who Derek and Sil are, but she’s studied up on Klifford, too? Lady Rosa...you are truly a formidable foe! Or wait... Was Klifford actually pretty famous all this time, and I was just indifferent to him?

Then the countess’s tone lowered. “However...I would advise Lord Burks to leave.” At the last word, her eyes fell sharply onto Sil. “A very angry, high-ranking nobleman seems to be searching for him right now.”

Very angry. High-ranking. Nobleman. You don’t say?

I looked over my shoulder and exchanged glances with Sil. I just know we were thinking the same thing.

It’s Sirius!

He already noticed Sil went missing... I wish he hadn’t noticed... Then again, if he hadn’t noticed at all, I’d kinda worry about his risk management techniques, so maybe this was actually a good thing...?

Anyway, in my brother’s eyes, Sil is missing. And even if he knew Sil had acted spontaneously on his own...yeah, he’d still come looking for him. It’d be weird if he didn’t.

So he’d set the wheels in motion and sent an investigation report to Lady Rosa?

It looked like my really bad feeling was right on target.

“Oh dear, are you an accomplice, Princess?” Rosa’s eyes twinkled. Then she looked at Derek and continued, “Are you in on it, too, soon-to-be Duke Nightfellow? You received a letter by carrier pigeon from a high-ranking noble, did you not? Then, when you heard that the princess and Lord Burks had arrived, you rushed to intercept them, correct? And yet...here you all are together now.”

I don’t think it’s necessary to suspect Derek, in regard to the whole “being Sil’s accomplice” thing. Otherwise, when he saw me walking hand in hand with Sil, he would’ve just sent him straight back to Sirius. Sil being together with me was probably an unexpected twist.

“Is it not your intention to send a report to this angry, high-ranking nobleman?” she asked Derek. “And the sooner, the better?”

“Countess Reddington...you mischievous woman.” Derek sighed, wrinkles forming between his eyebrows.

“Compared to your father, I am but a meek little baby chick.”

“And so modest, too,” Derek muttered.

“And because I’m a meek baby chick, I have arranged this little meeting. To send Lord Burks home discreetly and without incident.” Countess Reddington turned her sharp gaze back to Sil and took on an admonishing tone. “This high-ranking nobleman is desperately searching for you. If he was to find out that you were here, at my junior ball... Well, I do not wish to fan the flames. And the other guests will soon catch on to the fact that you are here. However, there is still time to salvage the situation.”

“You mean to say...if I leave now,” Sil said quietly.

“Yes. Return to where you’re supposed to be. You shouldn’t cause your high-ranking nobleman such worry. If you wish to attend my junior ball, there’s always the next one. Rosa Reddington would welcome you and your high-ranking nobleman to attend together when the time comes.”

But that would be pointless. It has to be today. It has to be this junior ball.

I loudly snapped my fan open. All eyes in the room fell on me. And I said, “Lady Rosa. What if I were to ask you to invite Sil Burks here on my behalf?”

“On...your behalf, Princess?” Rosa’s red lips lifted into a smirk. “My, how deeply moving. Well, yes... I could honor your request, if you would do me a little favor in exchange...”

Aha... So she’s open to negotiations? But before Rosa could finish her thought, she was interrupted.

“Understood. I will leave.”

“Lord Sil?” He’s leaving? But didn’t he just say earlier that he “mustn’t go home”? Come on, Sil, you’re not supposed to be the one to back off here!

Sil shook his head and told me firmly, “Regardless of what would be best for me to do...I cannot inconvenience you any more than I already have, Princess Octavia.”

“You have the wrong idea, Lord Sil. I am acting for my own benefit as well as yours.”

But he just shook his head again. “For...your benefit, Princess?” Sil asked, conflict forming in his eyes.

“Yes. For my benefit. In helping you, I am also helping myself. Do not forget that.”

I mean, if Sil goes home now...that wager I decided to make will all have been for nothing. I’m already in this too deep. I can’t let someone else swoop in and interfere. I need to do everything in my power to put a firm stop to this anticlimactic ending!

For the future! I will be the change I want to see!

I turned and looked directly back at Rosa. “Lady Rosa. What is this little favor you wish to ask of me?”

It was a tense few moments. I was a nervous wreck inside as I braced myself for her answer.

“The opening dance... I wish for you to lead it, Your Highness,” Rosa answered with a cherubic smile.

In the corner of my eye, I could see Derek’s eyes widen in surprise. But I understood how he felt. After all...I was in a bit of an astounded daze myself.

I was like, *Huh...? Dance? You mean, all I have to do is dance? That's all?!*

I was a little (a lot) let down. I mean, come on! Usually when someone asks you for a “little favor,” nine times out of ten, it’s anything but little! Sometimes it’s even an unreasonable demand!

Besides, this is actually kind of a really difficult problem for Lady Rosa: Should she side with me or with Sirius? For most people, the choice was obvious: my big brother, the crown prince of Esfia. Meaning, Rosa’s request was extremely natural...as long as she expected something significant in return. Like exercising the use of powers only the princess has or calling in a favor later!

But her “little favor” turned out to actually be little!

“Once my speech as junior ball host is over, the men and women pair off for a dance, yes? If you led the opening dance, nothing in the world would make me happier. It would practically ensure the success of my junior ball. I could deal with the angry, high-ranking nobleman and fan the flames so hard that sparks fly onto me while I smile—and I would no longer care what would happen to me.”

Let's make a deal?

“I accept your terms,” I answered promptly, smiling broadly back at Rosa. *Just one dance, and Sil is allowed to stay at the junior ball? That's nothing!* My aversion toward dancing hadn’t completely disappeared, but I did get my groove back. I wouldn’t make a royal ass of myself anymore...I hoped!

Thank God I practiced with Klifford. Seriously, thank God.

“Well spoken, Princess.” Rosa nodded in satisfaction.

“With whom?” Derek suddenly broke the cheerful mood. “Whom shall Her Highness dance with, Countess Reddington?”

My partner...! That's right! Those things are kinda really important!

If I had to dance with a partner as bad as I used to be, my technique would be insufficient to cover up their mistakes. The nightmare that was my first royal ball flashed before my eyes. This was my first junior ball in quite a while—and I was leading the opening dance, at that. I couldn’t let myself relive that

nightmare again...!

“Naturally, the princess’s partner would be someone suitable to her. Wouldn’t the three gentlemen in this room—yourself included, soon-to-be Duke Nightfellow—be qualified? After all, you three were escorting her earlier. And I believe any one of you dancing would create a stunning visual...and stunning results. It would be most beautiful, indeed.”

Klifford...Sil...or Derek? Klifford and I had already practiced dancing together once. And Sil was actually rather well-known for being a good dancer. And I did recall seeing Derek dance with a spring in his step at a royal ball once...with another man.

Okay! No matter who I’m dancing with, he’s definitely not going to be worse than me. Looks like I can bypass reliving the nightmare of my first royal ball after all! I gave myself an imaginary high five as I looked over the three men.

...But hmm. Let’s ignore Klifford’s poker face—that’s just him. But why does Lord Sil also look deeply perplexed? Hmmm... Oh, is he worried that, since he’s attached to Sirius, this’ll be blown way out of proportion? Okay, yeah... If he danced with me on top of being my escort at this junior ball...I can imagine what would happen afterward. Just being my escort would barely fly as it is—man, we’re gonna have to deal with a lot of backlash, aren’t we...?

Then there was Derek. Derek might as well have had *Well, this sucks* written on his face. Though, when he noticed I was looking at him, his expression seamlessly changed into that of a normal nobleman.

Um... Huh? Is it just me, or is there a twinge of awkwardness hanging in the air? But still, my dance partner is an important choice!

I ran for the hills. “Lady Rosa, if I must choose between the three gentlemen in this room...then I wish to dance with Klifford.”

Of the three, my safest bet could only be Klifford! I had but one option! For starters, I’d just practiced dancing with him yesterday. Also, he’s my Adjutant. But most of all, Klifford isn’t at all responsible for the awkwardness hanging in the air! Yup... Even though it could be just his poker face!

Also, if I dance with my bodyguard, that won’t cause any drama! If anything,

it'll be more natural? Sometimes bodyguards served as escort and dance partner to princesses at royal balls and junior balls.

I glanced over my fan at the area of dead air where Klifford was masking his presence. "Say, Klifford? Would you mind being my dance partner?"

I kind of didn't want to make it an order. I was fine with the decision, since I'd made it myself, but the opening dance at a junior ball was a pretty big deal. And to the prospective dance partner, it was sometimes a heavy burden of responsibility. It was a very public affair, after all.

Besides, I trusted Klifford to give me a firm no if he really didn't want to do it. And I'd take the L if he did!

Klifford's indigo eyes stared hard back into mine... He was trying to read my mind. "Of course...I will do as you wish, Your Highness," Klifford answered, bowing from his upright position. It wasn't a reluctant yes, either...I hoped.

Okay! I closed my fan. The matter was settled...until an unexpected voice said, "Not so fast, Princess." It was Rosa. "Wouldn't that be unfair to the other two gentlemen?"

Uhhh. You mean Sil and Derek? I don't think either of them particularly wants to dance with me...albeit for different reasons. Though, personally, I'd love to dance with Sil at least once! I mean, he's a star dancer, you know? He was elegant even in the cover art for The Noble King, and I saw him dancing with Sirius at last year's royal ball, and...it was frickin' amazing! It's like they were flying in the air. And I remember staring at them with envy, thinking about how much fun it would be to have Sil as a dance partner... Then Sirius glared at me over Sil's shoulder. Grr!

"But, Lady Rosa, would it not be *more* problematic for me to dance with either Lord Sil or Duke Derek?" *Don't you dare make me mention the awkwardness in the air!*

"Well, let's ask the gentlemen in question themselves whether it's problematic. Lord Burks, would you flatly refuse the honor of dancing with the princess?"

"Of course I wouldn't refuse," Sil answered promptly. And rather vigorously,

too. “However, I fear that someone such as myself who has yet to receive Princess Octavia’s approval...is unworthy to dance with her.”

That’s your angle? Is that seriously why you were looking so deeply perplexed, Lord Sil?!

“Unworthy... Is that the verdict you have reached after taking into consideration every dance partner Princess Octavia has had *up until now*? Here the princess is, exerting herself, and you refuse to have confidence in your own abilities, Lord Burks? Where’s that dashing young man I saw only a few minutes ago?”

All my dance partners up until now? As in plural? It’s always been Alec at all the royal balls. I mean, if you included my epic fail at my first royal ball, I guess I have had another partner besides him.

Sil fell silent.

Derek, who had been leaning against the wall all this time, stood up. “Countess Reddington,” he called her reproachfully. “It is obvious that you intend to give Lord Burks the *honor* of dancing with the princess. Then, what about Derek Nightfellow, the next duke in line?”

A smile formed on Rosa’s lips. “Are you perhaps...intimidated?”

Um, hellooo? Lady Rosaaa? It’s just the opening dance with me... Are the stakes really that high? Now I feel uneasy about all this... Is Lady Rosa, knowing I kinda suck at dancing, plotting to put on a hella difficult song for me to dance to or something? Is this a trap?

“Intimidated? Whatever gave you that impression?” Repartee in the form of smiles broke out between Derek and the countess. “I could imagine no greater *honor* than being Princess Octavia’s dance partner.”

“Well, in that case...” Countess Reddington’s eyes shifted from Derek...to Sil... to Klifford...and lastly, they settled on me. “I really do think opportunities must be granted equally. Forgive my disrespectfulness, Princess... Earlier, you chose Sir Alderton as your dance partner.”

“Yes...”

“Well, surely you must have had a reason for that.”

Not a reason, per se...more like, I retreated to Klifford seeking asylum from the awkwardness in the air.

“When one makes a decision, as long as human will is intertwined, the decision will always give birth to the root of evil. I think any of these gentlemen would be suitable dance partners for you, Princess. I say this in earnest. However, if I must single out just one of them, then I would choose...yes, Lord Burks, perhaps? I have my own reasons.” Rosa touched an index finger to her smiling lips.

“Fine. Should I dance with Lord Sil, then?” I asked, figuring it was what she—the person who’d made the proposition to begin with—was hinting at.

But Rosa shook her head. “Why don’t we...consult the Sky?”

“The Sky...” Aha. So that’s what she means.

The Sky wasn’t really a word that struck me as significant in my past life, but if you’re born in Esfia, “consulting the Sky” could only mean one thing.

Rosa nodded. “This is a not a decision for you or me to make, Princess... It is for the Sky God to decide.”

The VIP lounge contained paintings and flowers to entertain the eyes, a chaise, desk, and other pieces of furniture to relax upon, and various toys and games to play with. Rosa Reddington took one of these toys from the shelf and held it up for us to see. There was a three-sided die between her thumb and index finger.

The pentahedron cylinder—well, it was more like a triangular-shaped pencil that was cut short—had been turned into a die by rounding off its extra sides. It actually rolled pretty well. Each of its three sides had a number etched onto it: one, two, or three.

And why were there three sides, you might ask? Because the number three was a sacred number in Esfia. The Sky God was the third god to be born...or so the legends say. The first and second gods are incredibly overshadowed. Due to this, three is the supreme number in Esfia...and it is also the number of the Sky God.

Thus, this die. It can be used to play games, but it frequently has a different application: whenever one is faced with a three-way choice. If the matter involves threes, then you leave it to the Sky God to decide for you with the die. That is what it meant to “consult the Sky.”

The only strange part about the tradition was that while the three-sided die technically was functional, when you rolled it to determine your fate...from the way it landed, you could always see two numbers from the top. You would take the number facing downward as your answer. *From the Sky to the Earth...* In other words, the Sky God was giving an answer to the people on Earth below. It was interpreted that the number that touched the bottom was indeed the answer the Sky God deemed best. This knowledge had been crammed into my royal lessons as something very important to know.

Would the triangular shape fall on one, two, or three? Well...in the end, it was just a game of chance.

“This is the best way to make a choice without letting human will taint it. Especially in matters such as this. We shall all empty our minds and simply wait for the results. Your Highness, you and I need only submit to it.”

“And I will... I have no intention of refusing.” I mean, I was the genius who used eeny-meeny-miny-moe to pick Klifford as my bodyguard. I’d be a hypocrite if I turned down Lady Rosa’s suggestion.

“Number one shall be the future Duke Nightfellow. Number two shall be Lord Burks, and number three shall be Sir Alderton. Are there any objections?”

The three men who were scattered about the room gathered around the ornate desk. *Are there any objections?* I scanned the men...and something about Klifford caught my eye. He was wearing his trademark poker face...but...was there something else? What was it...?

“Well, Your Highness, please do the honors.”

Rosa Reddington’s voice zapped me back to reality. I stared at the die in my hand. It was the usual three-sided sort—it hadn’t been tampered with. None of the sides felt abnormally heavy or shaved down. There was nothing off about its shape, either. It was cheater’s bane!

I took a deep breath in and out. Then I turned to the desk and carefully threw it down.

Come on, Three!

It was all up to chance. And a little luck, too! *Three is Klifford! Come to me, Klifford! Or I'll take Sil at Two!*

The die rolled with vigor...until it completely stopped. When I looked down at the three-sided die, the numbers I could see on the top were...Two and Three.

Which meant my roll was...

“One.” Rosa Reddington lifted the die off the desk to show me the bottom before returning it to the desk.

Yeah, it'd have to be One... If the numbers you can see are Two and Three, the only number that could possibly be on the bottom side is One! Yes, yes, I hath indeed confirmed it with mine own eyes.

My partner for the opening dance would be Derek Nightfellow.

“The Sky God has made our decision for us, Your Highness.” But Rosa Reddington did not look even slightly disappointed. If anything, she looked like she was enjoying the turn of events...unlike me. I was still reeling from not rolling a Three. And from not rolling a Two, for that matter.

Why, of all numbers, did I have to choose ‘One’ for Derek! I quickly pressed my fan to my mouth. My princess smile had vanished, and I was dangerously close to exclaiming a very unladylike “*Dang it!*”

“Please be gentle with me, Princess Octavia,” Derek said, reverently extending his hand with a grace beyond that of textbook-perfect socializing. “Isn’t this exciting?”

Damn, I wish I had your carefree smile. Wait, I just remembered: I have horrible luck, don't I...? I mean, I'm here, aren't I?

In my past life, convenience stores held promotional raffles sometimes—the kind where if you bought hundreds of yen worth of stuff, you’d eventually win a product of some sort. And I lost every single one of them...even when I bought entry tickets!

After it was determined that my partner for the opening dance would be Derek, Lady Rosa said, “Well, I shall send a messenger to a certain high-ranking nobleman at once. I will tell him that Lord Burks is very much not here. That way, if he discovers Lord Burks was here after I’ve already sent the messenger, no harm shall come to me. It was just an unfortunate missed connection. Your Highness, feel free to stay here with your party for a while. Nobody else can enter here, so feel free to make yourselves comfortable,” and with that, she elegantly left the VIP lounge.

Originally, Countess Reddington had hoped that Sil and Sirius would attend her junior ball as a couple. But my big brother had quickly RSVP’d no. But she never even dreamed that Sil would come alone. And as one would expect, it had taken her a very long time to notice that Sil was there—at least, that’s what she was going to tell Sirius. *“Oh, when you sent me that carrier pigeon, he hadn’t arrived yet.”*

The countess sent her polite reply to my big brother and fulfilled the bare minimum of her duty. It just wasn’t exactly the truth...

Well, I’d bet money that Sirius will find out Sil was at the junior ball after the fact. But for now, as long as there isn’t any further weird meddling, we’ll be in the clear!

Having Rosa Reddington—the host of this junior ball—on my side was a really big deal!

Now...where we last left off, I was quietly glaring at the die on the desk that had landed on One. Sil and Derek were standing a bit away talking to each other. They’d only started doing this after I’d encouraged Sil to make himself comfortable as Lady Rosa had kindly suggested.

I insisted on one condition: He must tell Derek about the carriage accident. This was our one chance to speak in private about it before the junior ball began. We absolutely couldn’t pass it up!

But I figured the story should come from Sil alone, so I didn’t include myself in the private conversation. So I had nothing to do with myself.

Klifford was still standing with me near the desk, since we'd all moved there to consult the Sky earlier. But he didn't really seem to be in a talkative mood.

Then again...there was something I suuuper wanted to test right at that moment!

I stood there in silence for a while...until, unable to resist the temptation any longer, I picked up the three-sided die. I sensed Klifford's gaze on me, but I kept my mouth shut and threw the die once more.

Yup! This is exactly what I was wanting to test! *Okay, this time, roll a Three! Or at least a Two!*

.....But the number on the bottom was, once again, One. *Well, there's no need to panic yet. This sort of thing is definitely probable.*

One more time!

I rolled a One again. This made three times in a row.

Um...where's Two? Where's Three?

I'll admit I was starting to take it personally. I continued to roll the die ten times in all.

And the results? I rolled a One six times. I rolled a Two four times. And I rolled a Three...zero times.

Why? Dude. Why? Is probability slacking off on the job? Aren't we a little biased?!

And um, excuse me, Sky God? Can you maybe not?!

Is it because the unluckiest person in the world is rolling the die?

"I can't roll a Three... Do you think the Sky God hates me?" I muttered to Klifford, clenching the die in my hand.

"You are a royal of Esfia and thus blessed by the Sky God, Your Highness. That cannot possibly be true."

And we have a flawless word of encouragement from Klifford! But ya know...
"Well, sorry to disappoint...but I have never once felt blessed."

As Klifford said, Esfia's royal family is blessed by the Sky God...or at least,

that's what the legend says, and people still believe it to this day. In the Great Corridor of the castle, there's a painting of the creation story to honor that. But in my eyes, it's nothing more than a piece of art...

The Sky God is widely worshipped in all of Esfia, but I never once felt its presence. Yes... I never felt a connection with the Sky God...

Oh... But wait...

"But Alec might feel blessed. He really loves anything related to the Sky God or the creation story."

"Yes, Your Highness. I encountered Prince Alexis in the Great Corridor once."

"Well, yes. He loves it in there." Alec loved the Great Corridor so much that if you wanted to catch him when he had some time to himself, your best bet was to go straight there.

"It seems he does, yes... He appeared to be deeply enamored with it."

Hmm? Is it just me, or was there a hint of sarcasm in his voice? My curiosity whetted, I turned to look at Klifford.

"The person the Sky God hates is not you, Your Highness... It very well may be me."

If you isolated just the literal words that he said, it was a disappointed sentiment. But...he didn't sound at all disappointed. In fact, he sounded...the opposite?

"*You*, Klifford?"

"If that was so, what would you do, Your Highness?"

What would I...do? I shook my head. "I wouldn't do anything. I'm merely a little bitter that I can't seem to roll a Three."

Klifford chuckled softly.

"Anyway... Sky God or no, I would at least like to roll a Three once."

If you think about it logically, dice have nothing to do with Sky Gods and legends... It's just a matter of luck and probability!

So. This. Doesn't. Make. Sense. A die would never roll a Three zero times out

of ten. I didn't want to suspect Rosa of foul play... This isn't a trick die, right? Right...? It's an ingenious device, the likes of which an amateur such as myself could not discern upon one mere glance! Oh, Lady Rosa, forgive my soul for being so tainted!

"Your Highness, may I see it?"

Aha! So Klifford also suspects fraud a little?

I put the die in Klifford's big hand...and he set it down on the desk, while still holding it. But after a few seconds, he returned it to me.

"Try again, Your Highness."

I stared critically at the pyramid-like piece. *Hmmm... How finely made this is! As one would expect, coming from a VIP lounge.* It also had a lovely sky-blue color. Most three-sided dice were colored in blues, since they had to do with the Sky.

"Well...I suppose I'll give it another roll."

Eleventh time's a charm!

I psyched myself up and gently tossed it. I held my breath and waited to see which way it would roll. And the die...stopped. The two numbers that appeared on the top were One and Two.

So the bottom must read...

My shaking hand lifted the die so I could see its bottom with my own eyes. And there, carved into the die's bottom, was the number Three.

I rolled a Three! I almost jumped for joy, but I stopped myself. *I'm a princess. I'm a princess...* I snapped my fan open with a flourish to regain my poise.

"Klifford...I rolled a Three."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You...didn't do anything to it, did you?" Finally rolling a Three was nice and all, but my tainted soul still doubted, even this late in the game! It made me wonder if the die had been rigged, but that Klifford had done something to them during those few seconds... Y'know, something like that!

“I merely made a wish...that you would roll a Three,” my loyal bodyguard said softly with a bow.

“My lords and ladies, I am pleased to welcome you to my junior ball...”

Wow, what a pretty chandelier. I can see why it's one of Paradise in the Sky's prized features.

The beautiful chandelier hanging from the high ceiling was a masterpiece. That one light fixture contained hundreds of candles, many of which were already lit. But what a pity that it was still daytime. The junior ball was to start at three in the afternoon and end at eleven at night. The candlelight wouldn't unleash its true mystical beauty until after the sun set.

Let me be frank... Only royal balls were allowed to begin their festivities after dark! They would go from midnight to dawn. Royal balls came into being as sources of after-dark entertainment and as a means to make one's influence and power known. But around the time the first royal ball was held, candles were terribly expensive! So basically, only the king could afford to spend grand amounts of cash on the best candles and illuminate the dancing all night long.

But other nobles wanted to hold balls of their own. So to cut costs, these lesser nobles would start their balls during the daytime so they wouldn't have to burn the expensive candles as long. And over time, a distinction was made—balls hosted by nobles that began during the daytime were called junior balls. And with the cost of candles no longer a factor, and rental venues like Paradise in the Sky available to anyone, these two distinguishing differences and the start time of the balls continued on as tradition.

As I admired the chandelier above, I slowly brought Blackfeather up to hide my face... Oh, I wish. I had the opening dance just ahead of me. I was going to hand over my fan to one of the waiters, but he clearly recoiled at the sight of my fan, so I had Klifford hold it for me instead. I do think it's always best to have someone who's not scared of wreven feathers hold it.

Since I had nothing to hide my face behind, I gave up and listened to Lady Rosa's opening remarks in the great hall of Paradise in the Sky.

The great hall was designed in a purely Esfian style—it resembled the Great Corridor more closely than any other hall. Once the guests had arrived and it

was time for the junior ball to begin, the host's opening remarks would signify the start of the festivities. Depending on the scale of the event, the venue could hold several thousand attendees. If that was the case, there was no way the host could possibly speak to each and every one of the attendees. So in a way, the opening remarks were a way of saying, *"Sorry if I don't talk to you at all tonight!"*

And while the opening remarks are taking place, you can infer a lot of things from where people are standing or whom they're standing with. Like, their class or which faction they belonged to or how they related to people.

As a rule, the ones standing closest to Lady Rosa as she gave her speech were the top of the upper class—and the most powerful and important people. The ones far away at the sides of the room were... Well, they were the foot of the party.

Well in the know about who was above whom in rank, the party guests could get a good look at the lineup from their respective positions. Once the host's speech started, they would watch vigilantly to see just whom they would approach to chat with. Conversely, the time before the host's speech was an opportunity to engage in small talk within established cliques, but at the same time, refraining from contacting the people they really wanted to socialize with.

It was basically a networking event. To scope out your enemies' movements. To confirm factions. To gather intel. To seek out a spouse or a one-night stand. Everyone had their own motives. It was a vortex of desires. It was...a battlefield without bloodshed! *That* is a junior ball.

The center of the main hall had been left empty for the opening dance, which would soon commence. I was sitting in a seat reserved for royalty. The highest of the upper echelons. And beside me was Derek Nightfellow. Our original plan was for him to escort me to the main hall, but to take Sil off with him once we'd arrived. But now that our plan's been ruined...let's lean into it, baby!

To that end, Sil was also in one of the seats reserved for royalty. And since he not only escorted me to the hall, but he was still with me during the opening speech...the party guests were undoubtably creating a wide variety of theories about us.

Also, word seemed to have gotten out about Derek and me doing the opening dance together, so they were gossiping about that. That was, of course, why Derek was beside me. He was my partner for the opening dance. After Lady Rosa finished her speech, my dance with Derek would begin.

“I wish to make this junior ball a very elaborate one, indeed. So let’s end this trivial speech of mine and get to the opening dance!” Lady Rosa lifted the long skirt of her pea-green dress and bowed elegantly. The orchestra began to play.

Urk!

For an instant, my entire body froze. *Not...this song!*

I was transported back to the dreaded day of my first royal ball. The day that I was confronted by my own arrogant foolishness...when this very song played! Compared to the popular court dance music, you could say it was kinda obscure. It was the *Danse Noble*!

Why, of all songs, did you have to go with this one, Lady Rosa?! I know I can technically sorta dance now, but this was the one song I wanted to avoid!

But for some reason, I wasn’t the only one who tensed up when the song started. Derek was also nervous... Or, wait a minute, the whole party hall was nervous? That’s what the general vibe radiating through the crowd of party guests told me.

“Bloody hell,” Derek cursed under his breath. “It looks like Lady Reddington wants to do a reenactment of that day.”

A reenactment of that day... Even I knew what those words meant.

“The day of my first royal ball?”

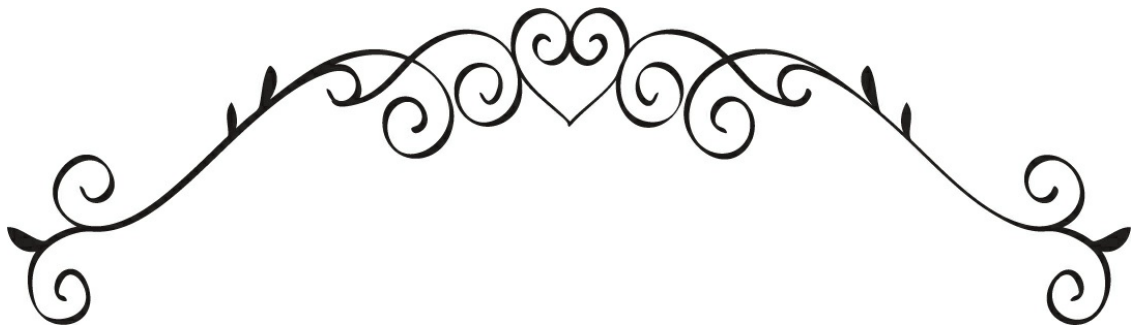
It had to be that.

“Yes. It seems she wants me to fall to my destruction. No... I think she’s indifferent to the outcome. It’s pure curiosity. She wants to see...which way the chips will fall.”

Um, Derek? Your comment was way too vague!

Derek pulled himself together and turned to me. “Well... Shall we dance, Princess?”

And with that, we danced out into the center of the hall.



The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: 3

Octavia and Derek Nightfellow began to dance to the music. Most of the party guests were watching them with scrutiny, speculating on how things would unfold.

Klifford kept one eye on the crowd and the other on his Sovereign, Octavia... and noticed someone closing in. Countess Rosa Reddington, the host of the junior ball, stopped in her tracks and stood beside Sil Burks, whom she had permitted to sit with the royals as a favor to Octavia. They watched the pair grace the main hall with their suitable performance of the opening dance.

After a while, the countess spoke to Lord Burks. "What a beautiful sight. However...if Sil Burks, renowned dancer, were on the floor right now, the opening dance would surely be blooming with a beautiful flower of a different variety."

"Oh, no, my lady, you flatter me too much..."

"Are you being humble? Or is it something else...? Judging by your behavior in the VIP lounge earlier—oh, I wish you would not make that face at me. I don't mean to tease you."

"Forgive me, my lady..."

“You are an honest man, Lord Burks.”

After a few moments, Lord Burks broke the silence. “Lady Reddington...why did you request that Princess Octavia perform the opening dance?”

“In exchange for keeping quiet about you attending my junior ball?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“My, what solemn eyes you have. Well, Her Highness rarely makes appearances at functions like this, you know. I felt so giddy that I betrayed the sophistication of my years and asked her to perform the opening dance.”

Her reply was prompt and without hesitation. Surely, it was not her real reason, but she made it sound like it was. Lord Burks seemed like he was going to press her further, but he held his tongue.

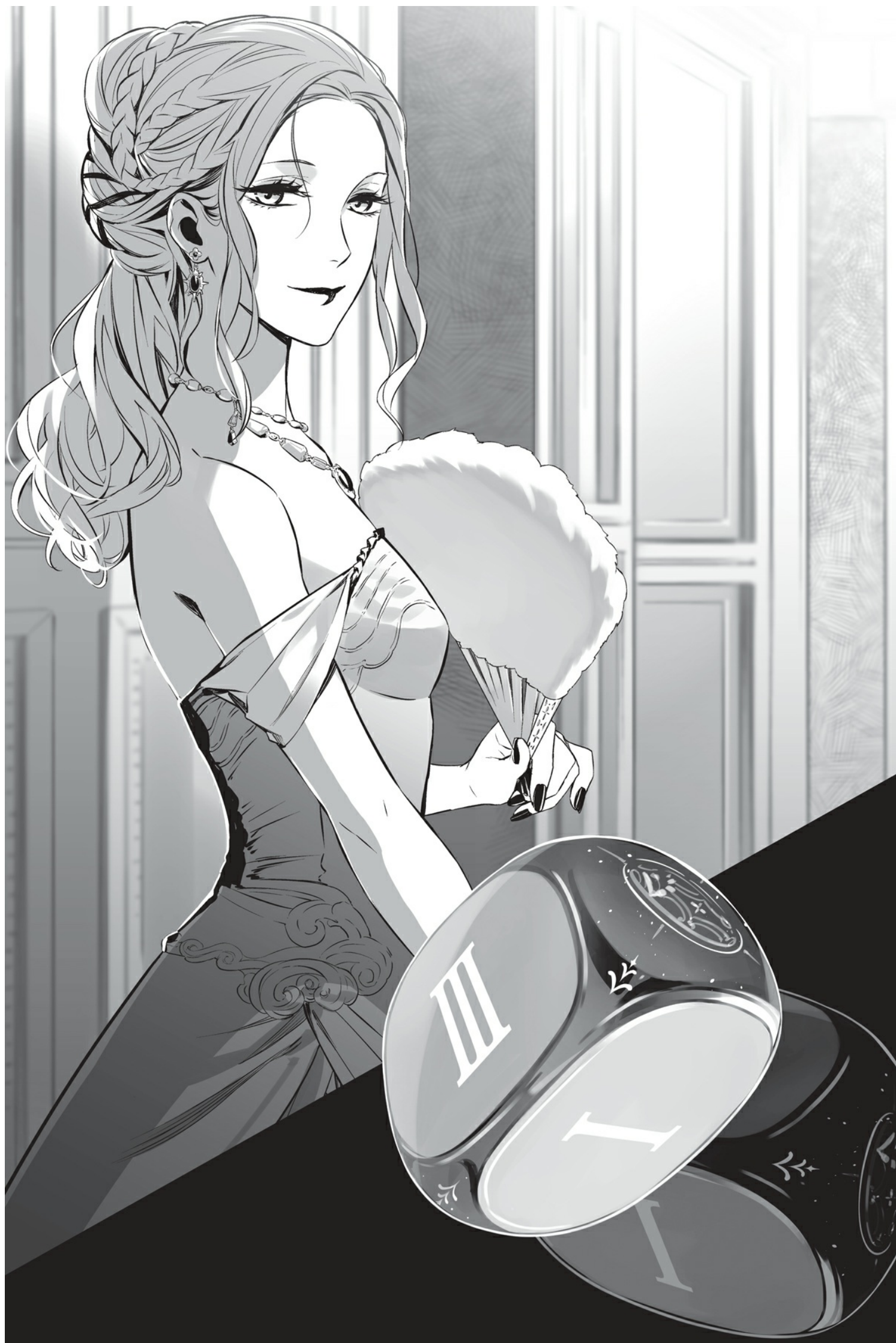
With a little giggle, the countess turned toward Klifford and switched the interrogation over to him. “Come to think of it... You were one of the dance candidates, too, Sir Alderton. What drove her to suggest that? Let’s not forget, Sir Alderton, you were her first choice as a dance partner. Then I heard that, after the fact, Her Highness consulted the Sky many times...and it wasn’t until you touched the die that she rolled a Three. If you had done so before the Sky God had given us our answer, then perhaps things would have gone the way Her Highness wished.”

Klifford looked into her probing eyes and said, “The Sky God did not choose me. Therefore, that was surely the correct choice.”

“So you say that Lord Derek—the soon-to-be Duke Nightfellow—was the most suitable dance partner for Her Highness?”

The die had three sides with the numbers One, Two, and Three. It was inevitable that a Three would be rolled after enough attempts. But Klifford figured that this was not what the countess was trying to say.

That was because the three-sided die they had used in the VIP lounge was a die that would never roll a Three. What she was trying to say here was: “*I know you did something to the die to make it roll a Three.*” Or she might be trying to figure out how much of a hand Octavia had in it.



“Let’s consult the Sky”...was a rather brazen turn of phrase, considering.

Even if she’d used the act of consulting the Sky God as a ruse for tampering with the results, an unspoken truth had still made its way to light. One or Two. Derek Nightfellow or Sil Burks. If Rosa Reddington truly was consulting the Sky, she was actually presenting fate with those two choices. Klifford was never in the running.

She would make Octavia—Esfia’s first princess—partner with either Sil Burks or Derek Nightfellow for the opening dance. In the game room, she had deliberately made her intentions clear: If she were to choose someone to be Octavia’s partner, it would have been Lord Burks. But in actuality, she would have been fine with either of the two men. Perhaps *that* was why she’d had such a difficult time deciding who would be the better choice.

One or Two. The most important thing was to use the die to make everyone think that it was the Sky God that had made the decision—not the countess.

“I suppose that would mean the Sky God rejected me.” Klifford didn’t mind if his words were taken literally. Better that than to be liked.

A very girlish giggle tumbled out of the countess’s mouth and melted into the music of the *Danse Noble*.

“Perhaps so. Though an adoptee, you are still in Count Alderton’s house. Princess Octavia may have forgiven you, but the Sky God has not... Perhaps one could look at it that way?”

“Forgive him...?” Lord Burks murmured.

The countess answered, “The royal family is blessed by the Sky God—to defy the king is to defy the Sky God. Do you not agree, Lord Burks?”

“Did you know that a noble family incited a rebellion against King Eus—Esfia’s glorious former king—only a few months after his enthronement? Naturally, the rebellion ended in failure.”

Lord Burks shook his head.

The countess’s questioning gaze returned to Klifford. “What about you, Sir Alderton? Do you know the name of that noble family?”

“I do, my lady. It was House Alderton.”

In the past, the Count Alderton incited a rebellion against the young King Eus just moments after he was enthroned. But in a way, one could say his rebellion had been a success, not a failure. Because *his goal had been achieved*.

“King Eus was briefly dethroned—ordinarily, one would expect his reign to come to an end then and there. And House Alderton regained political relevance primarily through its military exploits. Those who envied Count Alderton proclaimed that House Alderton was synonymous with disgrace—that the Sky God had abandoned them. That this was why Aldertons rarely birthed boys... All the while, the Aldertons had sent countless knights as candidates to serve as royal bodyguards, but none of them were selected. This only further fomented that theory.”

The countess raised a finger as if she was about to make her point. “But Princess Octavia chose you as her bodyguard. Is that not so, Sir Alderton? And while His Majesty King Enoch did heavily utilize House Alderton’s aid in the war against the Saza Church, the more hardheaded members of the nobility such as myself were most surprised, indeed.”

“I am deeply grateful to Her Highness,” Klifford replied.

“Yes, you seem to have carved a niche out for yourself. While House Alderton’s exploits in battle are noteworthy, they were always kept at a distance from the royal castle... I had a passing thought, Sir Alderton. Did you have any reservations about involving yourself with House Alderton?”

“Reservations, my lady?” *Ridiculous*.

“House Alderton was abandoned by the Sky God. Wouldn’t that concern you?”

“Does it concern you, Countess Reddington?”

“Well, yes. I am a coward.”

“As a common-born man, I was unfamiliar with House Alderton’s history.”

“Oh my. So...you didn’t know?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“But you have surely interacted with the nobility a lot by now. You would have heard about it. Not to mention the fact that you are now a part of that history.”

“Before I received the good fortune of joining the Count’s house as a common-born man, I did hear snippets of harmless gossip.”

“Harmless gossip... Coming from a man entrusted to hold Her Highness’s Blackfeather, Sir Alderton, perhaps that is a little too convincing.” The countess’s eyes fell on the fan in Klifford’s hand.

“Excuse me, Countess Reddington,” Lord Burks called out to her.

Her attention turned to him. “Yes? What is it, Lord Burks?”

“In my humble opinion, if the Sky God had truly abandoned House Alderton, they wouldn’t still be around today. And while yes, the number Three did not appear when Princess Octavia rolled the die...I just think that...”

“Oh my.” A hint of playfulness filled the smile etched onto the countess’s face. “That seems like a cause for possible misunderstanding on the part of a certain nobleman. Lord Burks, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were taking Sir Alderton’s side. Could it be...that you two know each other well?”

“No...of course not...”

“Well! Then whyever did you say such a thing?”

“I’ve never spoken with him before today. I simply thought that because Sir Alderton...is Princess Octavia’s bodyguard that he is a trustworthy man...”

Something in his tone sounded stilted. He probably had wanted to say, *because he saved my life.*

Klifford turned again to look at the man who seemed to have something he wanted to say to him.

“Sir Alderton, weren’t you the hero...who saved my life four years ago?”

He had asked Klifford that question back in the carriage. His hazel eyes were filled with just as much suspicion now as they were then. Deny it as he might, Lord Burks would not believe him. He still suspected that Klifford Alderton was his savior on that fateful day.

I suppose letting him see my face was a mistake...

It was but one command of many from a Sovereign to an Adjutant. And he had emotionlessly obeyed and saved the boy's life, all the while thinking he would never see the boy again.

If not for that command...

The countess's attention had shifted to the center of the room. "Perhaps it is glory that the soon-to-be Duke Nightfellow will grasp ahold of," she murmured.

The crowd watching the opening dance was clearly surprised. Octavia and Derek's dancing had metamorphosed. Both dancers—Derek Nightfellow, in particular—had relaxed quite a bit, and Derek was leaning into Octavia.

Klifford's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sir Alderton...what is it that you want?" Rosa Reddington asked as she watched the pair dance. When Klifford didn't answer, she continued, "When Her Highness consulted the Sky, which number were you hoping she would roll? Pray tell, Sir Alderton, were you hoping that her partner for the opening dance would be *you*? Or someone else...?"

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We danced to the music of my nightmares: *Danse Noble*. Even I could tell my dancing was a bit stiff at first, but Derek did a good job leading me. Uncle Dearest sure knows how to raise 'em! Future Duke, your dance skills required for socializing are more than sufficient!

However...even though I was dancing with a superfine specimen of a man, a vortex of tension was swirling relentlessly between us.

"Lord Derek, when you mentioned earlier that Lady Rosa wished for your *destruction*...what did you mean by that?"

Because I did some thinking...and unless I'm just being paranoid, all I can come to is the terrifying conclusion that the countess thinks that whoever dances with me will be destroyed!

But Derek just stared at me in confusion. “Why are you bringing that up now...?” Then he cut himself off, suddenly remembering something. After a little pause, he continued, “Will it be destruction or glory?”

So you’re saying that dancing with Princess Octavia will result in one of those two things?

Derek had said it with such casual grace.

“The first *destruction* happened on the day of your first royal ball. The man in question was, at the time, in good social standing. Now, there were rumors that he was doing some shady business behind the scenes, but there was no proof, so he was given free rein as a merchant. And his son, in the most public way possible, was thoroughly destroyed by your dancing. Now, since it was the deed of an innocent child, everyone looked the other way. But the other nobles interpreted that the incident was clearly orchestrated by the royal family. So what do you suppose happened to the merchant? Surely you know the answer, Princess Octavia.”

Whoa, hold up—it’s time to reveal the shocking truth!

“Well, he...” I couldn’t even string two words together. My dancing had just sucked—that was all. And yet people had jumped to the fantastical conclusion that the royal family had orchestrated the whole thing?! Isn’t this, like, the same thing that happened with Blackfeather?

“That was the first life you destroyed, Princess. As I’m sure you’re aware, most people forgot about the incident with the passage of time. They forgot because you—the destroyer in question—refused to dance with anyone in public for a while.”

Yup! That’s because I was spending all that time desperately practicing on my own to get myself up to average!

Derek’s smile completely disappeared. “However...your next dance partner was also ousted from power... Incidents like this occurred one after another—and quite infrequently, one of your dance partners would be an exception and clinch a successful outcome. Every person you’ve danced with—without exception—has either fallen to destruction or risen to glory. That came to be the popular theory.”

Well, that theory can go to hell!

“Though the majority of your partners were destroyed. Oddly enough, not a single person came out of it unchanged. As it stands now, the only exceptions to the rule are Prince Sirius and Prince Alexis, perhaps.”

The...the riddle that puzzled me for so many years has been solved! I always thought that, for a princess, I sure wasn't asked to dance much! And because I was still insecure about my bad dancing, I was actually glad nobody asked me to dance. Dancing with Alec was lots of fun anyway!

But I always thought it was because of my first dance fiasco! In a way, it was... But I was totally looking at it the wrong way.

“So the reason gentlemen never asked me to dance was...” *Because they believed they would be destroyed if they did...* That probably played a part in perpetuating my vicious spiral of confusion over having so few dance partners over the years. If only I could dance with, like, thirty people at every ball...

I looked over Derek's shoulder and saw the sea of faces watching us. All the pretty girls and boys were casting anxious and worried glances at Derek...and now I knew why.

Yup. The Theory is currently working its magic!

That's also why Sil and Derek had such uncomfortable reactions in the VIP lounge and... *Hmm? Wait, I'm sure Rosa knew about The Theory. So when she asked me to perform the opening dance in exchange for her favor...was it because she was a believer? Or was she a skeptic? Which is it?*

Derek smiled angelically at me. “I assure you, not a soul here is wishing for me to be destroyed.”

“Could you please stop speaking as though I destroy lives intentionally?” *I need to set the record straight!* I took deep breaths in and out as I danced. “Lord Derek... Dancing with me does not bring destruction. Neither does it bring glory. The success or failure of a man has nothing to do with whether he danced with me—it has to do with the paths he chose himself.”

Oh, shit! Setting the record straight was nice and all, but I got so preoccupied with standing up for myself that my footwork fell apart! I'm gonna step on

Derek's feet!

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” Derek said, sidestepping my foot. (Okay, I’ll at least give him credit for that!) “There was one instance where a desperate man, grasping at straws, asked you for a dance. And you accepted with a gracious smile, I remember. And that man disappeared completely from society. However, one man, under the exact same circumstances, attained glory... How do you explain Viscount Winfell?”

“After he asked me for a dance...I did wind up helping him out a little bit.” *Or rather, I had no choice but to help him out.*

The Viscount Winfell of whom Derek spoke would be a young man named Houghie Winfell. He was a lovely person, both inside and out, and he had a pretty fiancée named Cissy Lewry. Cissy is a girl, by the way! That’s very important!

Houghie and Cissy. They were a couple whose engagement was founded on one of the most important...one of the most *very* important romances in Esfian society. But they faced many obstacles along the way.

There were no problems at all with their feelings. Cissy had loved Houghie for a very long time, and Houghie was never attached to any other man. Charmed by Cissy’s devotion, he said yes to her...and he treated her like a queen. Damn, I envy them...

However! Those on the sidelines just wouldn’t give them peace.

There was someone who was in love with Houghie. It was the second son of a duke. He saw Cissy as his bitter love rival—he was under the delusion that if only Cissy were out of the picture, then Houghie would be his! So he used his power to put the pressure on the viscount’s house. Even now I don’t understand why the young duke thought his idea would work... But anyway, he kept the faith and continued applying pressure.

Houghie was cornered—if he wanted the harassment to end, he would have to get engaged to the second son of a duke! At the end of his rope, he asked me for a dance at the royal ball.

After the fact, I totally understand why he did it... He looked awfully pathetic

when he asked me for a dance. At the time, I thought it was because he was nervous asking a princess to dance, but it turns out I was wrong...

Houghie had asked me to dance because he'd been pushed to the edges of desperation, and it was sink or swim... If he let things run their course, he would lose Cissy and be doomed to a life of misery. So he'd taken a big risk by asking me to dance, in hopes of gaining a princess as a social connection. And even if it did bring him destruction...he felt that there was no way he could possibly destroy his life any more than it already had been.

But when we danced, and he told me about his problem, I decided to help Cissy and him out. I turned up my Princess Privilege to full power! I kinda overdid it, actually...

But the happy couple got engaged, and I won a valuable friendship with Cissy from it, too! We're enthusiastic pen pals! I can't really leave the castle much, and Cissy can't just casually come for a visit, either...so we don't really hang out, I guess. Oh well!

"Lord Derek, surely you have heard about the viscount's son and my friend Cissy. For a while there, most of the nobility couldn't stop talking about that couple. Using hideous jealousy as an excuse to try to rip a loving couple apart—only a fool would do such a thing."

This is true both for same-sex *and* opposite-sex couples!

"Well... Unfortunately, House Winfell was on the decline ever since the elder Winfell's generation, but that was because he'd fallen out of favor with the former king. That had a lasting effect—they were kept at a distance from the royal family for years. Though they were a viscount house, they were able to attain vast lands and were deeply respected by Esfia's older noble families. Houghie Winfell took on the title of viscount and made some progress, in part thanks to your contributions, Princess.

"He is the prime example of someone who received not destruction, but glory... And because of this, if he had to choose someone in the royal family to side with, it would surely be you. And some nobles who are easily moved by their emotions would side with Viscount Winfell if he sided with you...as would even some nobles who are usually difficult to persuade."

My eyebrows drew themselves together. *Is it just me, or does he think helping Houghie was a self-serving calculation on my part? Well, sorry, buddy, but I'm not shrewd enough to be the evil mastermind you think I am!*

"Lord Derek... You are my elder brother's good friend, are you not?"

"Yes..."

"And I consider Viscount Winfell's fiancée, Cissy, to be a friend. Isn't it only natural to wish to help one's friends when they are in trouble? Lord Derek...do you help Sirius because he is the first prince of Esfia and the next king? Or do you simply help him because he is your friend?"

"Because he's my friend, of course..."

Then again, in my case, while I didn't have any selfish motives, I did have the evil ulterior motive of helping one of the few boy-girl couples in Esfia live happily ever after!

The difficult dance trudged on. During this interlude, I cooled my head a little and was able to clearly understand the meaning behind the vaguely worded hints that Derek had been dropping.

"Y'know, for a girl who keeps insisting she doesn't lead men to their destruction, isn't it funny how you totally take ownership of the man you brought to glory?" Right?! Okay, I worded that a bit too sarcastically, but that's basically what he was saying, and I knew it!

We were at the part of the *Danse Noble* where the steps were really tricky, and I had to concentrate hard or I'd mess up. So I waited for the difficult part to pass before I spoke.

"However, I have a correction for you, Lord Derek. I will acknowledge the fact that I did bring Viscount Winfell to glory. If one would say that helping him break through his obstacles to be engaged to Cissy is 'glory,' that is. However, the other instances were merely coincidence."

"If they were all coincidence, then what fate do you suppose will befall me for dancing with you now, Your Highness?"

"Your destruction or glory...is not for me to decide. I am not pulling any

strings,” I declared on a firm exhale.

If anything, my big brother’s the one who’s pulling strings! Why obsess over one measly dance I did in the past, when my big brother’s actions are way more important?! His actions probably affect you way more, too, Derek!

“If that is true...then in a way, one might say that it was because you *weren’t* ‘pulling any strings’ that those men were destroyed.”

Because...I *wasn’t* pulling any strings? I furrowed my brow.

“Well, Princess, whether I suffer destruction or attain glory in the future, I will accept either outcome as coincidence.”

Well, that was Derek’s answer... But whether he actually believed me on the whole dancing-with-me-does-not-destroy-lives thing still remained an utter mystery. Especially since he was wearing his best socialite smile!

Hmmm...but...hold on. I looked up at Derek while I danced and said, “Lord Derek...I still have one question. Would you please answer it for me?”

“Anything, Princess.”

“If you believed that dancing with me might destroy you, then why did you agree to dance with me? This was part of *my* negotiations with Lady Rosa—you could have turned it down.”

“But glory could come my way, too.”

I glared icily at Derek. He was bullshitting me—it was just too obvious! The first reason I could think of why he agreed to dance with me was...

“It was for Lord Sil, wasn’t it?”

This time, Derek gave me an actual answer. “Well, yes, it was partly that...but my main reason was that I had an advantage.”

“An...advantage?”

“Yes. There was a personal matter I wished to discuss with you privately, Princess. But due to our social standings, that was a rather difficult undertaking. So I thought it wouldn’t be entirely a bad thing if I was your partner for the opening dance.”

To speak freely with me in public, without being disturbed by anyone...

“We have the Sky God to thank for giving us this opportunity,” Derek said.

“You wished to speak privately with me? I cannot even imagine what you might want to speak with me about.”

We hardly ever saw each other, except when we were kids.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t be able to...” Derek took my hand and pulled me closer to him. And with his carefree smile and his polite veneer dropped, the real Derek continued, “Princess Octavia...do you have any strange inconsistencies in your memory?”

My...memory? He can’t mean my past-life memory, can he? I knew that couldn’t be the case, but...I still couldn’t help but put up my guard.

Then Derek smirked at me. “Sorry, I worded that a little vaguely. What I meant was... Do you remember when you two were children...before you and Sirius grew so distant?”

Did I remember Sirius...when we were children...?

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Did I remember my big brother when we were children? So he wanted to know what kind of relationship we had?

The *Danse Noble* was a piece of music with sudden, dramatic changes in tempo. It was like a succession of mountains and valleys that undulated through the whole song. But during the valley sections, it had a relaxed few moments with a repetition of basic steps.

And at present, we were in a valley.

“.....”

I ignored my dancing for a moment. My brain was filled with nothing but question marks. That’s why I was quiet a lot longer than what was considered natural... But Derek seemed to have a different aura about him, too.

With earnest eyes, he pressed me further. “Could we perhaps drop the polite

pretense and... I mean, will you please be frank with me, Princess Octavia?"

Derek hadn't called me by name since we were kids.

"I want to talk as Sirius's friend to Sirius's little sister."

"And I suppose...that lies and falsehoods are prohibited?"

"Yes. I promise I'll be honest with you, Princess Octavia."

"That's a very good thing, indeed."

I'm in! This means we won't have to do mind-draining things like reading between the lines or feeling each other out! No lies! No falsehoods! Let's be honest! I just love those phrases!

Though, real talk, if he wanted to talk about my big brother... The conversation topic might also fall onto me. It looked like *this* was the conversation Derek had wanted to have. Which made it all the *more* confusing why Derek was bringing up our childhood now, of all times.

"So I'll get right to the point. Could you answer the question I just asked?"

"I do remember my childhood...and I remember Sirius back then, too." Of course I remembered. I didn't have amnesia.

Then Derek solemnly began to recount something that had happened in the past. "Do you remember my relationship with Sirius...how I used to bully you? How one day, Sirius and I had quite a rowdy brawl..."

"How could I ever forget?"

Maybe I should air my grievances! I am the type of gal who holds grudges! I never forget when people screw me over! Why, yes, I very clearly remember you bullying me when we were kids, Derek!

Then again...I was born with the brain of an eighteen-year-old, so I wasn't at all scarred from his abuse. I mean, if you've got a ten-year-old Derek versus a six-year-old Octavia with an eighteen-year-old mind, it's like I'm winning by disqualification.

His bullying didn't injure me physically, either, for that matter... Oh, *that's* what Derek was talking about just now when he brought up the rowdy brawl

with my big brother. I think what started the whole thing was Derek pushing me. Now, I was *supposed* to elegantly dodge him... And then I was *supposed* to run away...

But I kinda scraped one of my knees.

That was the first and last time Derek had ever actually caused me any physical harm. And even though it was a little scrape, it was still technically a wound. So dear Uncle Nightfellow—who was watching over me—thunderously yelled at Derek. And Derek never bullied me since. While Sirius and Uncle Dearest bore witness, Derek apologized, and a truce was made.

And now I've lost my mental age advantage. Derek is...about twenty, I think? But my mental age is still eighteen, like it always was.

I wonder if my soul will finally start to age once I turn nineteen as Octavia... Sometimes I can't help but wonder. What if I'd grown up, gotten married, had kids, and *then* died and been reincarnated as Octavia? A part of me thinks I'd have been more mature. And as such, I would have handled things much better.

"However...I do regret taking Uncle Dearest from you." I sighed, the words naturally spilling from my mouth.

This was one of the things I wished I could have done better. My fathers... Well, my relationship with them being what it was, I couldn't help but latch onto Uncle Nightfellow more than I should have. I just had such warm, fuzzy feelings about him from the moment we first met... And being a duke, Uncle Dearest couldn't reject the affections of a princess...

And even though I wasn't a child on the inside and should have known better, I didn't even stop to consider how my actions were making Uncle Dearest's real child—Derek—feel. I suspect that's part of the reason why I have a mysterious aversion to Derek.

"Uncle Dearest...?" Derek's astonished voice interrupted my apology.

I lifted my depressed, worried eyes...to see that Derek looked like he was about to burst out laughing. *What is the meaning of this?*

"Princess Octavia...do you call my father Uncle Dearest?"

Oh! Shit! I only call him Uncle Dearest when it's just him, his wife, or me—or when I'm having an internal monologue! But...that's his takeaway? That's the thing he's gonna address first?

“Uncle Dearest...” Derek sounded like he was trying his best not to snicker.

Oh! I sense astonishment and relief from the people watching us who believe in the whole dancing-with-Octavia theory! I can tell who among them are hoping for Derek's destruction and those hoping for his glory! Beware The Theory! The noble world freaks me out!

And then there's Derek! He's still trying not to laugh!

My tender sentiments of regret disappeared into the ether...and I was starting to feel a little miffed. *Oh, come on! What's wrong with calling him Uncle Dearest?!*

“I call him Uncle because that is who he is to me. It is an expression of familiarity.”

I mean, if I don't call my dearest uncle Dearest, what'm I supposed to call him?!

“Even if it is an expression of familiarity, such a sophisticated form of address hardly seems to suit my father... Uncle Dearest, eh?”

He thinks it's funny. He's clearly laughing it up!

As I stared daggers at him, Derek recovered from suppressing his fit of laughter and finally said, “Forgive me. So you regret how you treated me, eh?”

“Yes...I do.” I sighed.

“Well, my father doted on you of his own free will, Princess Octavia. You are not at fault. And any disappointment I'd felt was my own doing—I was immature to torment you out of jealousy. I could have handled my feelings differently, yet I chose violence.”

“Yes, but...I put my brother at a distance even though he took great pains to become friends with me—surely you didn't like that, Derek?”

I almost admired my brother for how patient he'd been with me whenever I'd said something hateful or pulled away from him. As he grew up, he started to

pull away, too... And now our relationship was quite strained. It's just that, from Derek's perspective, I was his best friend's bratty little sister. He must have been annoyed with me. After all, Derek and Sirius had been friends since early childhood.

Yes... Derek and Sirius were always friends. The truth is: Something has been secretly nagging at my conscience.

The music climbed up from a valley to a mountain—the steepest mountain of the *Danse Noble*, in fact. I needed to focus on Derek's movements and match them perfectly. Even an expert wouldn't have any brainpower left for talking now. Needless to say, I was silent. So was Derek. If either of us talked, we'd chomp on our tongues. The dancing made our bodies move closer together, and out of necessity, I looked up at his face—which was quite close.

I stared critically into his eyes. Derek's exquisitely chiseled face tensed up a little. He was still a hottie. And this superfine specimen was bound to hook up with some frickin' guy in no time...

No, that's not what's been nagging at my conscience. I mean, it's Derek's place in this world... There's something strange about it... I couldn't help tilting my head in confusion.

In *The Noble King* series...there was no such character as Derek Nightfellow.

In the original story, Sirius had a circle of friends. Some of them were in this world, and others were not. Derek just might have fallen into the latter camp purely by coincidence. Maybe he was a nameless side character in the books. But judging by how close a friend Derek was to my brother now...he really should have been a named character in *The Noble King*. His *absence* in the original series was what felt amiss to me.

I hadn't felt this sense of wrongness in the past since I hadn't interacted with Derek much, but now I was confronted with it. *But as wrong as all this feels...I can't figure out why...*

I nipped that thought in the bud. I had more pressing matters to attend to. I had to conquer the hardest part of the *Danse Noble*! I couldn't let myself ruin the opening dance of the junior ball.

...And my devotion paid off—I cleared the hard part of the dance with a flawless victory! I’m a rock star!

But as soon as we were safely back in the valley, Derek finally answered my question from earlier. “There was one other reason why I tormented you, Princess Octavia... You’re right. I didn’t like you. But now, it’s very clear to me that our memories match up. Sirius’s and my memories...” He paused, his voice filling with bitterness. “There’re discrepancies between them.”

“There’re...discrepancies?”

“Remember how he gave me a good thrashing because I tormented you? And how he doted on you relentlessly, trying to win you over? Well...Sirius remembers none of that.”

“Well, it’s quite normal for people to forget things from their childhood. Memories can grow hazy over time.”

Derek sighed sharply and shook his head. “If only it were that... But no, it’s almost as if that one aspect of his memory was erased and rewritten. And I don’t mean his childhood memories... It’s his memories of *you*, Princess Octavia.”

“His memories of...me?” I blinked.

“Yes. What’s more, he isn’t aware of it. Not many people knew the nature of your relationship with him when you were children. But today, everyone thinks that the first prince and first princess of Esfia had a distant and stormy relationship since childhood. Now, if that were true, I wouldn’t bother to tell you any of this. But Sirius—the man it happened to—forgot the past. If you had forgotten it, too, Princess Octavia, then—”

“I’m fine, I assure you.” If anything, I *wish* I could forget the past. Especially that shitty, haunting memory of mine. “But it sounds like you’re suggesting someone has tampered with Sirius’s memories... Is that even possible?”

If magic or sorcery existed in this world, memory tampering would be a simple feat. But aside from Adjutants, nobody in this world had any sort of magic powers. Realistically speaking, the only thing that might have caused memory loss was...hypnosis?

“It might be possible. I’m convinced what happened to Sirius was not a natural phenomenon. It’s hard to imagine that Sirius would have subconsciously suppressed the memory himself,” Derek muttered, more to himself. He seemed to have a reason for that belief.

“What makes you believe that? He may have wanted to forget that memory, if it was a painful one for him.”

“No... I remember what Sirius was like back then. I remember the dreams he held dear. And everything disappeared...along with those memories. It was a devastating blow to me.”

Derek was much closer to Sirius than I was. And according to Derek, someone or something had erased a part of Sirius’s memory. Erased the part of his memory...that involved me...

But if all of that was true...then *who* did it? And *why*?

Not even Maki Tazawa’s memories of what she’d read of *The Noble King* gave me any clues on who the culprit might be. *The Noble King* never mentioned Sirius having his memory manipulated in the past. I got lost in thought, trying to find answers.

Derek’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts. “Are you worried about Sirius?”

I looked up. “Well, yes. He’s my brother.”

Sure, you couldn’t call our relationship good by any means, but even though sparks would sometimes fly between us, I didn’t hate him. I just had a lot of conflicting emotions about him since The Heir Dilemma was causing me all sorts of grief.

“I’m relieved to hear that.” Derek smiled—and I think he really meant it.

What was it Derek was trying to find out? My reaction? “I merely assumed that my brother’s devotees saw me as an enemy.” *Including you, Derek.*

Ever since his bullying was put to a stop, Derek never once confronted me—aside from the confrontation on the dance floor today. I could pass that off as we just never really got near each other all those years, but in short, the reason Derek was finally talking to me today was for my brother’s well-being. If you

asked Derek if he liked or disliked me, I doubt he'd say he *disliked* me.

The smile on Derek's face morphed into a smirk. "Well, that's not an assumption—that's just a fact."

There, see?!

"Whoa, easy there. I don't think of you as my enemy... Though I don't think of you as my ally, either," he added in an effort to soothe my ruffled feathers.

"Even though you're my brother's friend? Then why did you come to Sil's aid at this junior ball? Wouldn't my brother consider that a betrayal?"

"Being friends doesn't mean keeping silent and going along with your friend when you think he's wrong. Isn't it a friend's duty to *defy* his friend sometimes?"

"Then, what do you think of my friendly relationship with Sil?"

"I don't see a problem with it."

Didn't even hesitate. Shallow. You're so shallow, Derek!

"I say this as Derek, an ordinary man. Sil seemed like he'd been wanting to talk to you for quite some time. He's a free man, for that matter—nobody should restrict his personal relationships. It's just, not even I could have imagined him being your escort to this junior ball, Princess Octavia."

"Well, Duke Derek, have you not forgotten that Klifford was originally my escort?"

"Oh...right. I'd forgotten about Alderton. Sirius has a very bad impression of that man, which adds another bothersome layer to the matter." A troubled look filled Derek's face.

Sirius has a bad impression of Klifford? Hmm... That's news to me. If anything, my brother—who values merit—would want to scout someone like Klifford to work for him.

The music grew softer and softer. While we were talking, we'd safely scaled the remaining mountains and were coming to the end of the *Danse Noble*. The music was thin now, its notes leaving a lingering afterglow in the room. I became aware of the eyes of everyone watching us dance in the great hall.

Derek took my hand and twirled me around. Then he let go of my hand as the music came to a stop. At this point, the couples of men and men, and women and men, were usually invited to dance...but the overly ridiculous Theory associated with my dancing zapped itself into my brain then.

Aha, I think I just had a stroke of inspiration.

Yeah... I've got to say something. It's now or never!

Before everyone came out to dance, I took one step forward and announced to the crowd, "I wish to take this opportunity to make an announcement to everyone here."

Eep...yikes. Why's the hall suddenly dead silent?

No, wait, that's a good thing. It means they're gonna listen to me!

Just spit it out, girl!

"The majority of the people who dance with me fall to their destruction—that is what you all believe, yes?"

A large number of people had been invited to this junior ball. So I had more eyes on me than ever—more than I could count. I could just feel them boring into me like claws!

Times like this, I could *really* use my fan...

I wanted to hide half my face behind my fan, blocking their probing eyes. Oh, fan! My greatest ally! But I gave it to Klifford for safekeeping... Safekeeping...

And yet a thought came to me. Since Klifford was in this very hall with me, couldn't I have him bring it back to me? I could tell everyone that not only was The Theory bunk, but Blackfeather was perfectly fine to touch! Two birds with one stone, baby! And if I had my fan in hand, my heart would also be put at ease!

I quickly scanned the crowd for Klifford. Where're the seats reserved for royalty...? There was Countess Rosa, her eyes sparkling, and sitting beside her was Uncle Dearest—who hadn't been there when we'd started dancing.

I spotted Klifford quickly. I met his indigo gaze.

“Klifford. Bring me my fan.” I extended my right hand. I was sweating bullets, but I put on my best royal smile. My dress made me feel calm and collected... Well, not really, but at least I *looked* that way!

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“Aye, Your Highness,” Klifford answered, sending all the gazes that were previously on me into quite a schism. He walked my fan...Blackfeather...out to the dance floor. The clunk of Klifford’s shoes echoed harshly in the eerily silent ballroom. And as the distance between Klifford and me shrank, the scattered stares all found their way back to me.

Klifford approached my extended right hand and dropped to one knee.

Um...what?

From where he kneeled, he presented Blackfeather to me ceremoniously, closed in both of his hands.

No mistaking it... This is exactly what it looks like!

This was definitely the posture a vassal took when formally presenting his lord with an item! Regrettably, it was quite pretentious. Most people simplified the gesture...and I really wished he had.

No, wait, Klifford’s a traditionalist. This sort of thing is very much his MO...

And sure enough, I could hear a slight gasp from somewhere in the ballroom. I don’t blame ya, pal! I’m with you; I wish he’d handed it to me just a *little* more casually!

“Klifford...,” I whispered meaningfully to him.

Klifford matched my volume and answered, “Your Highness, in a moment like this, I cannot handle Blackfeather in vain—especially when I am returning it to you.”

Since Klifford was so tall, looking down on him like this was a novel experience. Klifford looked up at me to speak more...and for just a moment, his lips twitched.

“Let us take this opportunity to announce that / alone am worthy to serve you...”

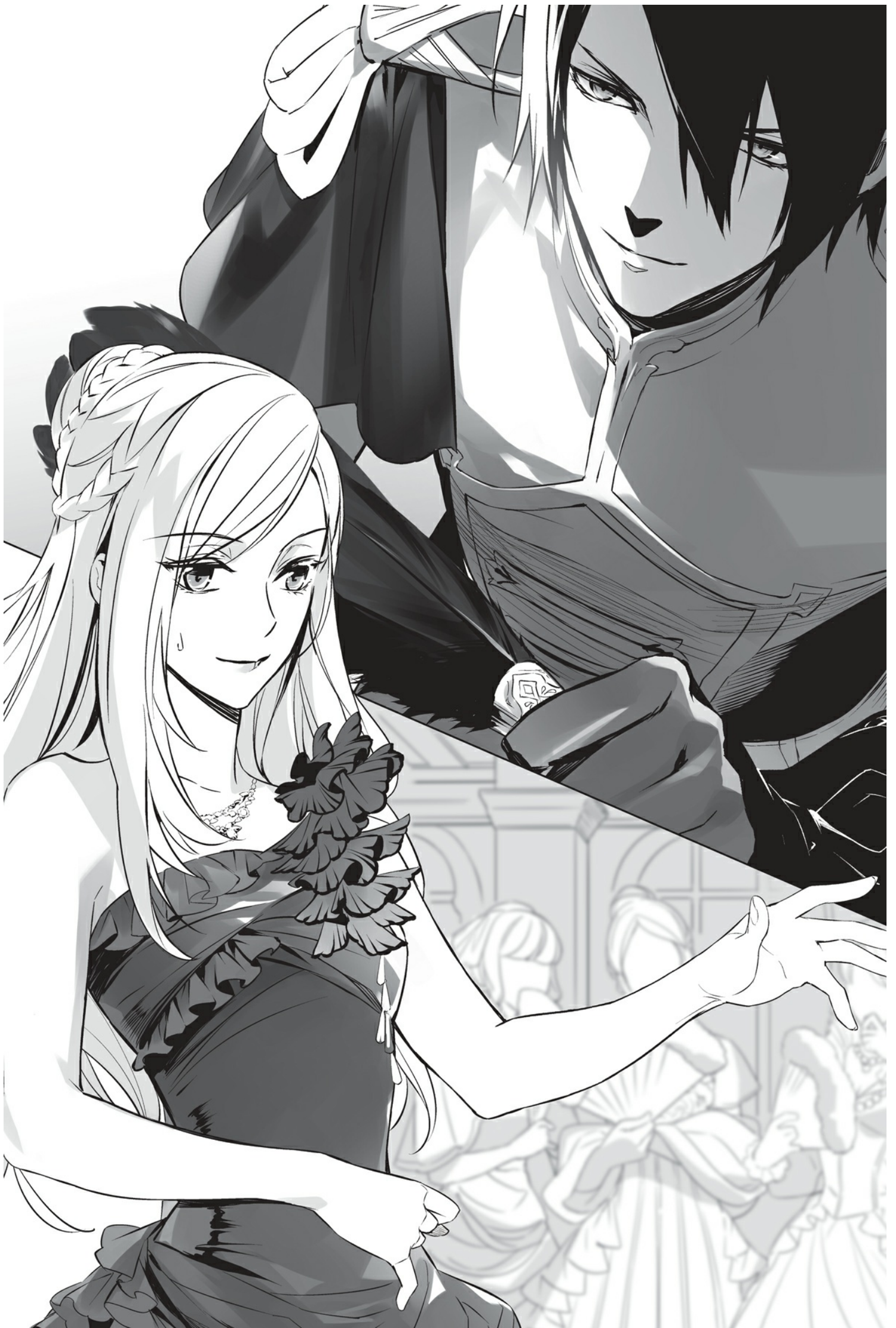
Announce? Does he mean, announce that he’s gonna be my bodyguard for a long time? Yeah...it would be a good idea to announce that to everyone.

That aside...

Something Klifford said struck me, so I repeated it. “You alone are *worthy* to serve me?”

“Yes.”

Klifford alone is worthy to serve me... Well, he probably meant because I’m his Sovereign and he’s my Adjutant! Still, that’s the sort of phrase that’ll really tickle a girl’s heart! I mean, *you* know why. He’s basically re-creating the handsome-knight-kneeling-and-presenting-a-gift trope.



“It’s almost as if...you wish to let everyone know that you belong to me.” My mental gymnastics helped me somehow forget where I was and blurt out such an excessively self-conscious and cringey line without thinking.

I quickly snapped out of it, though.

D-Derek’s close enough that...h-he might’ve heard that, even though I was whispering, and I don’t think many other people could hear what we were saying...right?

They’d better not have, or I’d die with shame!

“Yes, Your Highness. It is just as you say.”

And since the kneeling man himself just had to stare up at me and confirm it, my embarrassment shot through the frickin’ roof!

Oh, but I saw it, Klifford! I saw you smirk at my “you belong to me” line! So he was kinda half teasing me there... I think. Okay, let’s grab that fan back and hide my cheeks before they turn bright red!

I took the fan out of Klifford’s solemnly outstretched hands. I could just feel all the eyes in the hall focus on that one point between our hands. I opened Blackfeather with a flourish and brought it in front of my face.

Phew... The fluffy feathers are calming me down. Wreven birds, you versatile wonders. I don’t care that you’ve got a cringey nickname like Blackfeather—you hide my red face and protect me from the harsh gazes of the masses. I cannot think of an item more valuable than you, my fan!

Okay, I’ve got my fan, so let’s get back on track! “Thank you. You may stand now, Klifford.” When Klifford complied, I addressed him again. “Stay by my side until I’ve finished speaking.”

I partly wanted him there for moral support while I debunked The Theory about my dancing and the misconceptions about Blackfeather, but I also figured the whole Blackfeather matter would be easier to explain with Klifford standing next to me.

I turned back to face the crowd—the original people I was talking to. “Thank you for your patience, ladies and gentlemen. And also...I must apologize. I need

Blackfeather to calm my nerves.”

I gave my fan a little flutter. I felt bold, using the word *Blackfeather* myself. All eyes were still on me, but at least I had the emotional space to smile now.

Yeah, that’s the spirit. I should say all of this cheerfully anyway.

“Let me be frank... Dancing with me does *not* destroy lives. This includes Lord Derek, of course.” I glanced at Derek. “Lord Derek, do you feel as though your life’s destruction is imminent?”

“At present, I have no intention of that happening,” Derek said, smiling brightly.

“See?” I asked, covering my mouth with my fan and giving my best royal smile to the crowd.

I mean, for starters—aside from my first royal ball and all the times I danced with Alec—I don’t even remember most of the people I’ve danced with!

Urk...yeah, I was a bad princess.

But I had a good reason, believe me. I mean, people don’t introduce themselves when they dance, right? I always wished people would exchange business cards or something! It’s not enough to just remember a name or a face. Remembering both is an arduous task, indeed.

I can cram the particulars of all the most important people into my brain... But those people never ask me to dance! Meanwhile, all the people who I’ve barely exchanged hellos with come in droves...

Of course, if it’s someone I already knew beforehand, I wouldn’t forget him. But no acquaintances my age ever asked me to dance... Also, anyone who danced with me more than once would be firmly lodged in my memory.

But. However. Nobody ever asked me for a second dance! So not remembering many of my dance partners is only natural... I hope! Anyway, the whole everyone-I-dance-with-either-has-glory-or-destruction thing is just *weird*, you know! I mean, it could always just be fantasy or confirmation bias!

For that matter, as long as you don’t die...life goes on, right? Of course you’re gonna have some ups and downs! Some people rise up from rock bottom, while

others tumble down from cloud nine. So nothing! Is! Absolute!

“I would hope that I not cause you all needless worry... Why would the act of dancing with me lead to someone’s destruction? And why would the opposite effect occur in other cases?”

I was about to say that neither was true, but I reconsidered. According to Derek, dancing with me really had given glory to Houghie’s life...

“Believe me, at the very least, I was never directly involved in the destruction of anyone’s life.”

This was an unquestionable truth!

The faces of the crowd, stiff with worries of factions and social standing, began to exchange glances with those nearest to them. Their air of disbelief cut me like a knife...

Will a simple denial be insufficient to dispel the rumors?

Urk! But it’s about me! My denial should count for something... The Theory... thou art a formidable foe!

Okay then, how about this?!

I added to my statement. “If you need more to be convinced, then you should dance with me. I await your invitation with open arms. See the results for yourself.”

See that there are *no* results, that is! *There. Now maybe my slump’ll end, and I’ll start getting offers to dance again...! I mean, I’m here to get a boyfriend (albeit, a fake one) so there’s no such thing as too many chance encounters!*

“However...” I mustn’t forget to make this part clear! “As the first princess of Esfia, I shan’t dance with just anybody. Surely, you wouldn’t want your feet stepped on, no?”

Disgracing a princess is a big no-no! Only a good dance partner will do! So keep that in mind when you apply, good sirs!—Truth be told, that’s how I wanted to deliver the message, but it really sucks that using euphemisms is what’s considered kosher in high society.

I put my special princess smile on full display. The ballroom was buzzing with

the afterglow of the opening dance Derek and I had just performed. And all the people gathered in front of me smiled back at me just as I'd hoped. I was starting to see some results.

Good. I guess, for now, the whole theory regarding my dancing is under control. That leaves...one more thing.

"Now...I must also tell you all about Blackfeather..." I took a breath and closed my fan. "It has come to my attention that my fan is known as Blackfeather and that I am called Princess Blackfeather in turn... This is all because my fan is made of black wreven feathers. I suppose some of you are surprised to see it for the first time with your own eyes, yes?"

I pressed my closed fan to my chest. *Dang, I sure feel exposed when it's closed and everyone's looking at me...*

"Wreven birds are seen as inauspicious birds—as omens of death. However, observe me. I carry Blackfeather, yet I am alive and well. In fact, Blackfeather has kept me well protected."

It's even protecting me right now! I opened my fan. And all the sharp stares of the crowd were unmistakably neutralized.

"My continued well-being will make it very clear that my fan brings me no harm. Let my life be proof of that."

As long as I didn't get sick or meet an untimely accident, I wasn't going to die anytime soon...at least I hoped not. So the longer and stronger I lived, the more I could eliminate people's superstitions around wrens.

Okay, and one more for good measure! "And if my well-being alone is insufficient, then look to my bodyguard. See whether *he* befalls an untimely death—and pass judgment then."

I pointed at Klifford with my fan. *That* was partly why I'd kept him standing there.

"This is the person to whom I entrusted Blackfeather just now. If wreven birds were harbingers of death, then he, too, would be doomed. What's more, he is also my bodyguard. If the superstition were true, he would be the most susceptible to misfortune, after me."

Two was better than one. A larger sample size was always a good thing when passing judgment. *And Princess Blackfeather herself doesn't give a rat's ass about your silly superstition! That part's important! Don't worry, Klifford, I'll apologize later for roping you into this!*

"Do forgive me for butting in, Your Highness..." Countess Rosa stepped in. "But unlike you, who has carried Blackfeather for quite some time now, Sir Alderton has only had contact with Blackfeather for a short time. Compared to Your Highness, wouldn't you think the effects might be somewhat limited?"

She was schooling me—including Klifford in my sample was a weak argument...

Oh, but wait.

I slowly fluttered my fan in front of my face. These fluffy feathers had more uses than mere fan making!

"On the contrary, Countess... I plan on giving him a tassel of wreven feathers for the hilt of his sword. Meaning, he and I both shall be adorned with wreven feathers."

Rosa smiled softly and nodded as if to exclaim, *"Oh my, you don't say!"*

I nodded back. And went in for the kill. "It is my sincere hope that the fear Esfia's people hold for wreven birds diminishes greatly."

I mobilized all those years of elocution and decorum I learned from my tutors and curtsied. Then I signaled to the orchestra, letting them know it was time to resume their playing that I had cut off earlier with my speech. Without skipping a beat, the orchestra played their court dance music. And the party guests finally took each other's hands and filled the ballroom with dance.

—And fast-forward to the present.

As couples of men and women, and men and men, danced closely with one another, I sat in the royal seating area, responding to the incessant barrage of party guests coming to pay their respects. Except usually, not nearly this many people would show up. I assumed most of them were either emerging nobles or influential people who weren't of the nobility. The only ones who could be considered A-listers were Uncle Dearest and Derek. And I guess Sil—the

exception to the rule.

And this wasn't because I didn't remember them, I swear! It's because people I'd never seen before were occupying the majority. Plus, there was an unspoken rule that when paying your respects to people of higher status with whom you wished to establish a rapport, those of lower status were given priority. I guess it was a rather logical approach?

Because of this, the hostess Countess Rosa, Duke Nightfellow, and his son Derek were surrounded by a swarm of people. And while Sil didn't exactly fit into that social class, being Sirius's lover had raised his social standing such that he was given the same treatment as a high-ranking nobleman.

And as the junior ball wore on, those of higher status would disregard faction and pay their respects to each other. Though of course there were also people who basically didn't care about any of this.

Meanwhile...among the people who came to meet and greet me, there was no sign of any nobleman who might be Rust Byrne.

And as for suitors asking me to dance...there were none!

Since I'd put it out there that I was ready and willing to dance, I was expecting a deluge of requests... Well, that illusion sure didn't last long. Maybe threatening to step on their feet was a bad move?

I just pushed back my sense of despair, raised my fan as a shield, plastered on a smile, and dealt with the torrent of aggressive greetings...and nothing else.

In time, the waves of party guests subsided. *Ooh! Gorgeous gentlemen making out at nine o'clock!* My fujoshi radar perked up—but I immediately cooled off and averted my eyes. I was here on a mission: to find a (fake) boyfriend. Ignore the potential hottie couples! Less swooning, more wooing!

Besides, when it came to BL, I was into two dimensions, not three. Manufactured men were the supreme source of self-delusion! Oh, I miss BL novels so much! No, wait, as long as I admire them from afar, even three-dimensional hotties are plenty swoon-worthy. Then again, once you've spent over a decade of your life surrounded by an overabundance of BL...you just can't help but get used to it, y'know! Besides, it's not like I was in an

environment where I could just enjoy it innocently! Just because I'm a fujoshi, that doesn't mean I could glom on to all the hotties at will. You can't just let three-dimensional BL manipulate you like that! So please forgive me for developing such a weakness for two-dimensional BL!

But that aside... Even though the party hall was simply teeming with eligible gentlemen...where oh where was my potential romantic encounter?

After facing the reality that all the greetings I'd received thus far were businesslike at best, I decided to stop waiting. I couldn't afford to be a wallflower. I had to put myself out there! I had to go find Rust—or someone who wasn't Rust, maybe—and get myself a potential fake boyfriend!

Just when I'd psyched myself up to go, a familiar voice reached my ear. "Princess Via!"

"Oh my... Cissy?"

There stood a girl my age, wearing a cream-colored dress. She had a "cool beauty" look with lustrous black hair and eyes an even deeper green than Alec's. I hated to admit it, but if it hadn't been for The Theory associated with my dancing, I'd have never met her. It was my good friend Cissy Lewry in the flesh.

Wait—if Cissy is here, that means...

"Cissy, you shouldn't approach Her Highness without warning. Even though you're her friend, it's still rude."

Just as I thought, her fiancée, Houghie Winfell, was also here.

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"Neither of you have changed a bit."

Cissy was the quiet, bookish type—completely the opposite of what you'd imagine just by looking at her. The Lewrys were scholars who had lived on Viscount Winfell's land for generations. They were rather well-known among academics.

Their field of study was flora and fauna. Wherever there were unusual plants or animals, Cissy's father would take her there. And even though she was the same age as me, she'd traveled to the neighboring kingdom of Khangena and various other places.

Cissy loved to read novels—she was especially well versed in foreign books! She was a brainiac who could speak several languages. It was Cissy who'd introduced me to Khangena's epics with juicy man-on-man scenes containing gems like, *"Dying for you would be a wish come true"* and *"I can no longer tell the difference... Is this love or hatred?"* My fujoshi heart got all the wonderful things it could ever hope for—all thanks to Cissy!

Late at night by candlelight, I'd pour over the books Cissy had translated. Oh, I couldn't count the number of times I'd pounded my pillow, intoxicated by the aroma of boys' love permeating every line and action!

So *that's* where I could find a steady source of two-dimensional boys' romance: in foreign lands!

From Khangena's POV, Esfia was the bad guy in the war, so it was understandable that you wouldn't find any Khangenan literature in the castle library.

But from a fujoshi's POV, it was hard to decide which was better: King Eus's historical accounts or Khangena's epics! Five stars for both of them!

And the letters Cissy and I exchanged were filled with passionate analyses of the stories. Unlike degenerate little me, Cissy had purer interpretations of the stories...but that was good in its own way!

Whenever Cissy and I got to actually see each other in person, we'd get so giddy we'd forget about everyone else around us...and that's where her fiancée, Houghie, would step in and chide her. Then I would snap out of it and pull myself sharply back into Demure Princess Mode.

"Thank you, Your Highness. It pleases me to see you are looking so well," Houghie said politely with a bow. Cissy curtsied in turn beside him.

"Princess Via... I am truly sorry. I was so excited to see you that I started to act how I do in our letter correspondence..."

“No need to apologize. I, too, am pleased to see you, Cissy.” I closed my fan and beamed radiantly. *So pleased that I could just grab your hands and jump for joy!*

Ah yes, Cissy was in the Blackfeather camp. I’d met her right around the time I’d first gotten Blackfeather, and her attitude didn’t change around me in the slightest. Maybe it was because her father studied animals—she probably inherited an allyship with wreven birds.

The last time I saw Cissy in person was five months ago when she’d come to deliver something to the castle... And the last letter I’d received was one month ago. I’d written back, but Cissy was uncharacteristically slow to respond. I was actually just about to give up and send her another letter.

“So...what brings you two to this junior ball?” As happy as I was to see them, I had questions.

Houghie had become viscount and spent most of his time on his lands. And ever since becoming engaged to him, Cissy spent her days on Winfell’s lands, studying to become a proper wife to a viscount and member of House Winfell.

It would take at least five days by a fast carriage to get from Winfell’s lands to the royal capital. Ordinarily, that is. However, since an important bridge was closed for construction at the moment, their main route to the royal capital was cut off. This meant taking a detour through the mountains. If I had to guess, I’d say it would take about four times as long. It would cost a lot more, too, of course.

It was just too much of a hassle to travel all that way for one day at a junior ball. What’s more, in addition to Sil, I hadn’t seen Cissy’s name anywhere on the guest list in my father’s study. Nope. I’m sure of it. If Cissy’s name had been on that list, I *definitely* would have noticed!

Houghie answered my question. “I’m in the royal capital for the Council of Feudal Lords. The council will be held a month from now, but we arrived in the capital early so we would absolutely not be late.”

“The Council of Feudal Lords...”

That was a big meeting of all the nobles who owned land in Esfia. They held a

council to discuss various issues over the span of six days. It was the one time where nobles from all of Esfia's territories would stay at the royal capital. Though you could abstain, for a fee.

The royal family would decide whenever the council was to be held. But usually it was held once a year in conjunction with the royal ball. However, as the royal ball was months away, this year's Council of Feudal Lords was being held off-season.

In *The Noble King*, the Council of Feudal Lords was where the issue of Sirius and Sil's heir was brought up. Was *that* why this particular council was being held? I'd thought it was still pretty far in the future—was it actually right around the corner?

Esfia's princess didn't have a hand in governance. Even though the councils were held at the castle, I'd always keep to my usual daily schedule... But if The Heir Dilemma was going to come up, this council was something I couldn't ignore.

I had just a month to deal with the Council of Feudal Lords. And memory issues!

"Since House Winfell has spent many generations confined to its lands, we never built a manor in the royal capital for visits such as this... So we've left our lands in the care of some people we trust so that we could make the necessary arrangements. Then, when we heard you would attend the junior ball, Your Highness, we decided to attend, too...at Cissy's request."

Houghie shot a smile at Cissy. It was pure and uncalculated. It was clear that Houghie had gone to great lengths to make his beloved's wish come true. A bold, romantic gesture, indeed!

Houghie quickly added, suddenly remembering, "We weren't the only ones, Your Highness. Many nobles asked Countess Reddington for last-minute invitations when they heard you would attend the junior ball."

"I see..." I nodded. Then I tried Cissy. "Then tell me, Cissy, why did you not inform me by letter? I was waiting for your reply." *I thought we were friends, girl!*

“You...didn’t receive my letter?” The look in her eyes added, *Just as I’d feared*. “I see... So it didn’t reach you.”

That look in her eyes... I sense a story coming?

Cissy explained that she had sent me a letter informing me that they would be traveling to the capital. Then, after they arrived, she’d sent another letter. But I hadn’t received either letter... Cissy had also been a little confused when she didn’t receive any replies from me.

And this was *after* we’d gone through the trouble of setting up an underground way of getting our letters to each other. I’d used the same underground letter delivery method to get the letter to Rust through Heller. Some people weren’t happy that Cissy and I were friends—a fact that I’d kept a secret from her—but was someone trying to get in our way again?

Those who disapproved of our friendship did so because as Cissy was not of noble blood, she was not suitable as a schoolmate for a princess. I mean, it’s funny they used the term *schoolmate* here since, as she was the same age and gender as me, smart Cissy was more than qualified!

Besides, as I—the princess in question—was fine with someone of her social status befriending me, there should have been no issues with our friendship. Not gonna lie, I should just get my way! That’s Princess Privilege. But...others *weren’t* fine with it.

Anyway, our letters weren’t reaching each other—and that had to be fixed! We needed to save our little book club! Whenever I talked with Cissy, it felt like the days when I would hang out with my friends in high school. It made me feel like my old self again... I always had so much fun.

“I’m so sorry, Cissy. I think someone made a mistake in the chain somewhere. I promise I’ll make it so that it never happens again.”

“Princess Via... I understand that, due to your position, there’s a lot you can’t tell me. But if there’s anything I can do to help you, don’t hesitate to ask. Houghie’s here for you, too, of course.”

“Houghie, too?”

“Houghie and I both would do anything for you, Princess Via.”

Cissy's words had just given me an idea. *That's it... Why don't I ask Houghie for help?*

I needed to find a fake boyfriend. But I didn't know any unattached noblemen who would be willing to go along with it. But if I expanded my parameters to include men with fiancées...Houghie was not only someone I knew, but someone with whom I was friendly. I was even on first-name terms with him, through my friendship with Cissy.

Then again, I'd eliminated Houghie from the running from the very start—as my fake boyfriend, he was simply out of the question. He'd just become a viscount, after becoming happily engaged. But here he was, in the capital for an extended stay to set some roots and to attend the Council of Feudal Lords. Even though Houghie himself was off the table, couldn't I just have him introduce me to his friends? Surely men network, too!

If Houghie was able to score Cissy, the love of his life, then certainly he could find me a love connection with a nobleman from a faction I didn't know about...!

But ya know...

I watched Houghie as he lovingly looked at Cissy. While Houghie did seem like he felt indebted to me, he wasn't as, well...*open* with me as Cissy was. He was polite, but I always felt like there was a little wall between us. I don't think he *disliked* me...but still...

Houghie Winfell was a genuinely good person who was always up for helping someone in need. He was an honest man and much worse than I was at mind games. In *that* way, we were two peas in a pod!

But it's *because* he was such a good person that the nervousness I sensed whenever I was near him was all the more apparent. Though having Cissy by his side sure loosened him up quite a bit!

So the question was: *Should* I ask him to introduce a friend to me? Or should I not...?

As I stood there, musing over this, Houghie actually took the initiative. "Your Highness...may I ask a question?" His gaze meandered through the crowd and

landed on Derek...then back to me. He continued, a bit uncomfortably, “Is it true? Will Duke Derek...truly *not* be destroyed?”

He’s asking about the dance? But now there’s an even more pressing question.
“Houghie...are you and he well acquainted?”

“The day I decided to ask you for a dance and first came to the royal capital and was feeling lost and alone, Duke Derek was very kind to me. That was how we met. He is an incredibly helpful person, for such an important nobleman.”

So. Derek and Houghie had an unexpected connection.

“When I danced with Duke Derek...did that surprise you?”

“I know you denied that The Theory is true, Your Highness...but I truly believe I attained glory from dancing with you. So I cannot think of Duke Derek as an exception to the rule. I’m living proof—my environment changed drastically for the better. So much so...that I believe my reputation is grossly overrated now.”

That’s right, Derek really spoke highly of Houghie. Though Derek’s seal of approval doesn’t have anything to do with me...

“Houghie...heed what I have to say. A dance with me does not mean anything special at all. It’s just a dance. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But my entire life changed—”

“I won’t deny that I did help bring you and Cissy together. But that was all I did. Your worth and reputation as a viscount are things you built yourself. Believe in yourself, Houghie Winfell. If I ever come to perceive you as a feeble man, then how could I trust you to take care of Cissy? I just might make her leave you.”

“I can’t let that happen,” Houghie answered promptly...then he sighed. “So that it *won’t* happen...I suppose I’ll have to do my best to live up to your expectations.”

“Why, yes. Put in the work for me.”

Even though I’m actually the one who’s got a lot of work to do...starting with this junior ball.

I glanced at Sil and Derek, who were mingling with different groups of people.

Everyone was crowded around the man of the hour. It was a pretty typical, peaceful scene.

But to me...a lot of things in this junior ball were *atypical*. Dancing with Derek was one of those things—including the secret about Sirius’s memory that Derek told me during our dance. Then there was the intel that Sil’s birth parents might be here. That it might all be a trap. Sil’s matter might actually be best left up to Derek to handle, not me.

Then there was the other issue...Derek’s very existence. Once again I was faced with what a mystery it was. Then there was the Case of Cissy’s Undelivered Letters—that was another thing I learned about at this junior ball.

But I am not omnipotent. I had to start with myself. What I could do right here, right now.

“By the way, Houghie?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Would you be so kind as to introduce me to some of your friends? Preferably someone at this junior ball. I wish to make new friends.”

I decided to go with Operation Ask Houghie to Introduce His Friends, which, however, made Houghie visibly upset. That nervous aura I thought he’d overcome was back with a vengeance.

“Your Highness, just how far do your...? Never mind,” Houghie muttered, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and handing it to me. “A friend of mine asked me to give this to you... Whether you accept or decline is up to you.”

A note from Houghie’s friend? I made a snap decision and took the note.

Houghie’s eyes opened wide. “Your High—”

I wasted no time and read the note:

*I am in the pleasaunce hall—I humbly request
your permission to ask for a dance.*

—Rust Byrne

It was a message from Rust Byrne, the very man I'd come to this junior ball hoping to meet!

This party hall had several pleasure halls—only one of them was open at the moment. Was Rust in there?

I folded the note and looked up. "So...you and he are acquainted?"

"Well, we're both viscounts—of the same social standing...and our domains are near each other, so we've long been associates."

"Even after he went into hiding?"

"Yes... He tends to pop up in the most unexpected places...and he told me that if Princess Octavia asked me about him to give this note to you. He appeared before me last night, told me as much, left this note, then vanished. I haven't seen him here yet..."

Uh, my guy, I only said I wanted to meet some of your friends... Was Rust the only "friend" who came to Houghie's mind? And wait a minute, does this mean that if I hadn't asked Houghie to introduce me to his friends, I wouldn't have ever gotten to find Rust? Yikes... Talk about cutting it close!

"So...you intend to meet with him, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I do."

"I tell you this...knowing full well that I am out of line. But...he doesn't think well of the royal family. I consider him a dear friend, but to *you*, Your Highness..."

I can't guarantee he'll treat you well, I finished in my head. Rust was secretly an anti-royalist. He was, after all, the antagonist in Sil and Sirius's love story.

"In that case, wouldn't it have been in your best interest to *not* give me his note?"

"According to Rust...it was *you* who expressed the desire to meet, Your Highness."

"Well, he's right. I was the one who made first contact."

And now that Rust gave me a place to meet him, there's no way I *couldn't* go!

I turned to look at Cissy. She seemed a bit unsettled by the vibe between Houghie and me. She'd been awfully quiet. But she was still warmly watching over us, despite her worries.

"Cissy, I must take my leave now. I wish I could stay—I barely got to see you... This place is so formal and stiff. Could you come visit me in the royal capital while you're in the area?"

"I'd love to. I said so in the letters I sent you, but I brought the latest storybook I translated for you, Princess Via."

"Oh my...!" *I totes wanna read it! What's it like? Ooh, I can't wait to read it!*
"Quite good. I'll send my messenger later." *Mental note for later!*

And as the pair looked at me with contrasting expressions, I left the main dance hall.

The pleasaunce hall had a whole different vibe. Music was playing, and people were dancing—that's what the pleasaunce hall had in common with every room in Paradise in the Sky.

But what made the pleasaunce hall different was that everyone inside was required to wear a mask.

It was a pleasure room, you see!

You could hide your face and, just for a sweet moment, completely let go of anything that restrained your soul. If you were famous, it was pretty obvious who you were by your hairstyle, dress, or physique. But everyone turned a blind eye to social status and just had fun! That was the law of the land here. Besides, in some cases, people really *didn't* know who their partner was.

I took a mask adorned in gold. It was the kind that obscured the upper half of my face. Annnd, mask on!

Klifford, who had been on guard a few paces away from me, came to my side. Just as he was about to enter the pleasaunce hall, however, he was stopped.

"Bodyguards must also wear a mask, please."

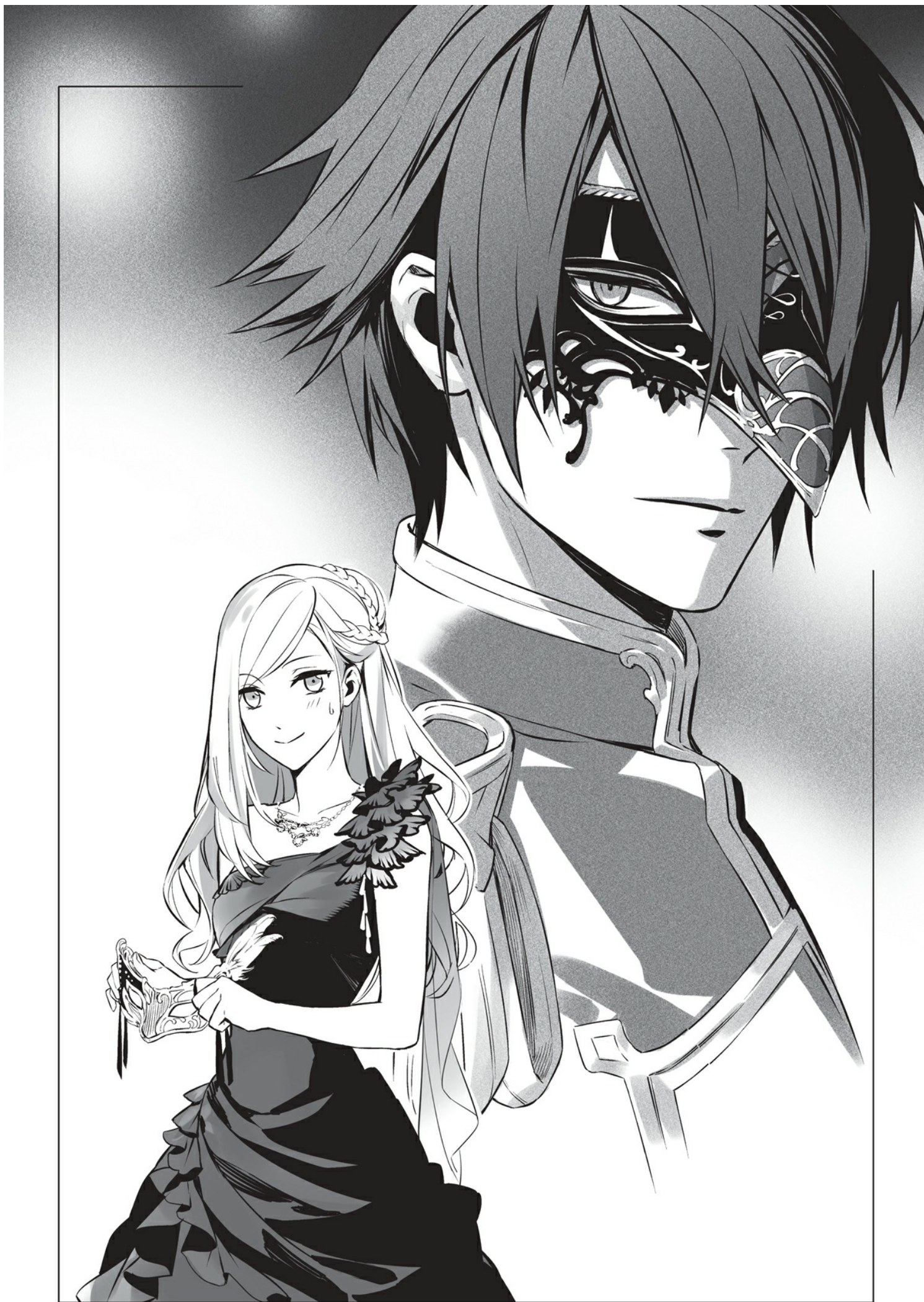
Klifford frowned. A glance inside the pleasaunce hall revealed that not only were the guests masked, the guards and servants were, too. So I guess a

barefaced bodyguard wouldn't fly.

"Klifford. You must obey the rules."

"Understood, Your Highness..."

The young man handing out the masks gave Klifford a jet-black mask. With such a wide variety of colors and designs to choose from, it was clear this guy was a pro. At just a glance, he was able to choose the most suitable masks for everyone who entered the pleasaunce hall.



The jet-black mask oddly suited Klifford. Even with half his face hidden, the mask made the fact that he was a superfine specimen all the clearer. It neutralized the harshness of the knight in him and brought out his wild side, in a way...

And even though he was wearing a mask, his bodyguard's uniform was still a dead giveaway...but something about him was definitely different.

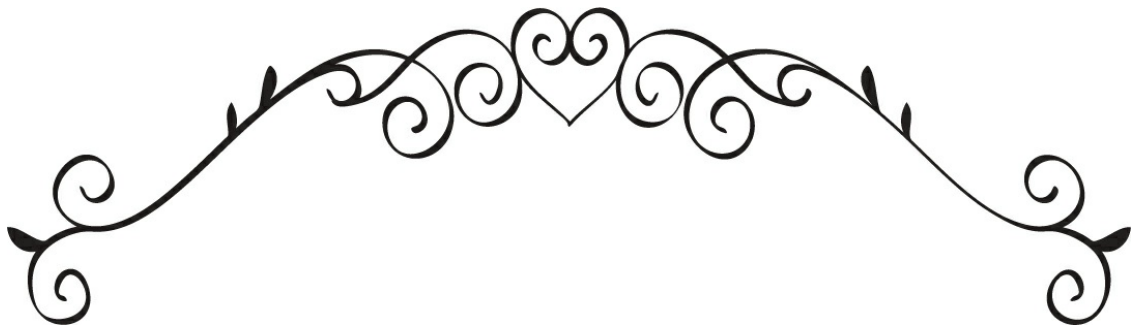
Forget about social rank, eh...

After I'd had a good long stare at him...his deep indigo eyes peeked back into mine from behind his black mask. I'm not sure why, but I looked away. *Is it because our classes are so wildly apart...? Is that why I feel a little embarrassed? Yeah... Let's go with that.*

"Your Highness...?"

"Onward, Klifford," I said, marching in double-time.

Now that we were both masked up, we could make haste to the pleasure hall. And in no time, we blended in with the sea of anonymous party guests.



Sil Burks's Junior Ball Anxieties

Men and women of all ages were adorned in glittering garments. And...my birth parents might be among them.

Thanks in part to a little assistance from Princess Octavia, I'd finally arrived. The junior ball had only just begun. It was still too soon to determine whether the intelligence I'd received regarding my family was legitimate.

Still, I felt so impatient. I currently had no answers whatsoever.

"Lord Burks, I didn't know you were friends with Duke Nightfellow's eldest son... However, it is truly regrettable. I heard whispers that your friendship is believed to be ungentle. Naturally, I do not hold such views."

"Well, I appreciate that. I consider the next Duke Nightfellow a dear friend, as does His Highness Sirius."

"Splendid! So you must indeed be good friends. Although...are you not worried about the future?" The man who'd struck up a conversation with me—a merchant in the prime of his life who'd just opened his own store—turned his gaze to look at a certain someone. It was Princess Octavia, who was chatting chummily with Viscount Winfell and his fiancée.

"*They* were brought to glory—but will the next Duke of Nightfellow meet the same fate?"

His real question was: Will dancing with Octavia doom Derek to destruction?

“Do you doubt the declaration made by none other than Princess Octavia herself?”

“Oh, no. Of course I don’t doubt her sincerity. It’s just, being shortsighted, I can’t help but question it. She said that the dance itself was meaningless—that if you wished to know the authenticity of that statement, you should ask Her Highness for a dance. Put your own body on the line. That’s fine in theory, but don’t you think that’s a bit difficult in practice?”

He was pressing me, hoping I would agree with him. And I couldn’t give him a generic response. He was repeating the same things Countess Reddington had told me during the opening dance.

I answered him with my silence.

The wave of unease I had felt in the VIP lounge the moment that three-sided die was rolled all came crashing back onto me. If the number facing the earth had been two—me—I would have danced with her. What if I—someone Octavia did not accept—had to dance with her?

I had no faith in myself. And sensing my unease, the merchant spoke. “Personally, if I went to ask Her Highness for a dance, I’d freeze on the spot. Besides, Her Highness said so herself: ‘I shan’t dance with just anybody.’ In other words, *she* will determine who deserves to be her dance partner. So even if I did muster up the courage to ask her to dance, just the thought of her stepping on my foot in rejection—oh, the horror. It’s a battle where only the grittiest can survive... But *you*, Lord Burks...”

“Huh?”

“What would you do, Lord Burks? Unlike me, you believe what Her Highness said to be true. Why don’t you ask her for a dance? You are known to be quite a talented dancer. Don’t you think Her Highness would be pleased?”

If you really believe the princess is telling the truth, then dance with her. Now, what’re you going to do? You can’t ask her, and we both know it. Those were the words lurking behind his polite tone and pleasant smile.

He was waiting for my response. But I couldn’t think of an appropriate retort.

“What’s this...?” the merchant muttered, his smile disappearing. For Princess Octavia and her bodyguard Sir Alderton had just walked out of the main hall.

“Her Highness the Princess has gone. What a pity... Unless you consider it a blessing, Lord Burks?” he asked, his smile returning at the last part.

“Yes...” As I answered him, I became painfully aware of how Sirius had borne the brunt of all the antagonism at all the royal balls and junior balls I’d been to. Ever since I arrived at Paradise in the Sky, I’d had this realization countless times.

Princess Octavia had seen it, too.

Up until now, I’d never been on the receiving end of any verbal attacks—not even indirectly. But at this junior ball, I was prodded. Probed. It all became obvious to me today. Painfully so.

And I had to handle everything by myself. This should have been a given, but I’d been relying way too heavily on Sirius. And I was so ashamed of it. But still... running away was not an option.

“Before I ask Princess Octavia for a dance, I must first grow into a better man—it would be rude to Her Highness otherwise.”

“Ah, I see. So humble, aren’t we? So you consider yourself unripe. I’m pulling for you, kid. Well, Lord Burks, if you ever find yourself strolling around the royal capital, be sure to stop by my shop.”

“I will, if I have the time.” The merchant and I exchanged smiles and textbook-perfect bows... Then I slipped away from the crowd for a moment.

I took a deep breath in and out. Then I turned around, sensing a presence behind me. “Oh...it’s just you, Derek.”

“Just me? How cold of you, Sil.”

In the time I’d spent with Sirius, he’d introduced me to many of his friends. And strangely enough, among all of them, the only person who I could speak freely with—even tease a little, from the first moment I met him until now—was the very guy who was the most critical of my relationship with Sirius: Derek.

All the people who had been swarming Derek scattered in all directions.

“So who’s the guy?” Derek asked, pointing at the merchant I was just talking to with his chin. He was now paying his respects to Viscount Winfell and his fiancée—on the surface, it looked like a lively conversation.

“I dunno, some foreign merchant... He did say he was born in Khangena.”

“Is that why he’s dressed like that?”

“Like what?”

The merchant was dressed in typical Esfian formal attire, and his face didn’t particularly bear any of the features one would associate with Khangenans. Though Esfia and Khangena were separate states, ethnically, their peoples were the same. He spoke Esfia’s language flawlessly, too, so I wouldn’t have known he was Khangenan if he hadn’t told me so when he introduced himself.

“Didn’t you see the three circular earrings in his left ear? It’s a piece of jewelry Khangenans use to express their national pride. That shape in particular means *I am a true Khangenan*. I’m not making any special implications here... After all, on the surface, Esfia and Khangena have a good relationship.”

Earrings. I must have seen them, but I hadn’t given them a second thought. Derek really *sees* people better than I do.

“If I had to describe the guests at this junior ball in a word, I would say: *colorful*.” Derek muttered the word more as an insult than praise.

I nodded in agreement. “Let’s call it...a wide array of guests.”

There was no bias in favor of a certain social class or faction. But in exchange, there was a feeling of hatred concentrated on one portion of the crowd.

“It’s probably in part because Princess Octavia decided to attend. Sil...this is important. Be vigilant. And be strong—never let your guard down for a second. Sirius isn’t here.”

“I know.”

I’d told Derek the details of my accident on the way over here. It was pretty clear that Derek didn’t think it *was* an accident.

Sirius and Derek tried to keep me in the dark...but I knew I had a target on my chest. I've probably had a target on me since the day I was born...

Neither Sirius nor Derek ever told me any of the gory details of their work. And likewise, I couldn't bring myself to tell them why I wanted to attend this junior ball so badly. I told no one—aside from Octavia, who'd secretly returned my guardian ring to me.

"Sil...how do you feel about Princess Octavia?" Derek asked out of the blue, staring hard into my eyes.

"How do I...feel about her?" I paused. Derek usually acted so aloof and carefree...yet there was a look of sadness in his eyes. "I like her."

"Dang, that was blunt—wait, you *like* her?" Derek turned sharply to look at me. This confused me in turn.

"Yes, I like her... That's why I want her to accept me. I want her to consider me a friend." Was it strange of me to wish that from a girl younger than me? I know that Octavia is a princess—there is a big gap in social status between us. But even if my feelings were strange...I couldn't deny them, not even to myself.

I've always had a strong intuition, so I'm easily swayed by it. If my first impression of someone is good, they tend to be good. And the opposite is also true. My intuition's judgment is never overturned, either. At times, my intuition gives me the exact opposite impression as those around me... When that happens, I keep my mouth shut.

In the end, it's all just my personal opinion anyway. I can't determine my friends and foes on impressions alone. And sometimes, no matter how good an impression I have of someone, they might still dislike me or become antagonistic toward me due to differences in social status or ideology. And sometimes I've had to befriend those who've made bad impressions on me.

"You say you like her...*not* romantically, I assume? For the love of peace, *please no*. Blood will rain from the sky."

Derek was pressing me—he really wanted to be sure. I smirked. "I like her as a *person*. Surely that was obvious."

"Even though she disapproves of your relationship with Sirius?"

“Is that a good reason to dislike her?” Even I can’t help but wish for Princess Octavia’s blessing. But I don’t know where I came from. And I’m a man, just like Sirius. It’s not at all unusual for Princess Octavia to not be welcoming of me as her big brother’s lover.

“If that’s your reasoning, then that means I should dislike you, too, Derek, since you used to disapprove of me.”

Derek sighed heavily, running his fingers through his hair. “Touché.”

Since we’d reached an impasse, Derek didn’t press me any further. All this time, even without Sirius linking us together, I could still call Derek my friend, and I trusted that he felt the same way.

“To be honest...there was a time where I thought you disliked me because I was your rival in love, Derek.”

Apparently, this was an unthinkable notion for Derek. An impressive number of wrinkles had formed between his eyebrows.

“Of all the things to say... I’m your rival in love? That’s not even funny...”

“Why not? For a while there, I seriously worried that you were in love with Sirius and I was in the way.”

“Don’t even go there. For starters, you’re talking about *other guys*, not me. I can think of quite a few gentlemen just off the top of my head. But *me*? In love with *Sirius*? Gives me the creeps.”

What Derek felt for Sirius was loyalty and respect to him as his prince—and pure friendship for him as an ordinary man. The reason he was opposed to my relationship with Sirius at first was not because of who I am as a person...rather, because I’m a man. That being said, it wasn’t the case that Derek was repulsed by romance between two men, either.

At his core, Derek was not the sort of person to gossip about other people’s romances. This was true of same-gender and opposite-gender couples.

I guess...it’s because it was *Sirius*. It was possible that, if Sirius had taken a woman as his partner, Derek wouldn’t have had any doubts about the relationship.

As I chuckled at Derek, he sighed deeply and continued. “But...maybe a clean comparison between Princess Octavia and me simply can’t be made? You haven’t seen or spoken with her much, Sil. Today was just an exception. Meanwhile, I had several opportunities to approach her—yours and my circumstances are completely different.”

“I *have* heard a lot of hearsay, though,” I argued.

“From those in your inner circle? Then that makes this whole thing all the stranger.”

“Aside from you, Derek...does nobody have positive feelings for Princess Octavia? Not even Sirius...”

Those around me—or Sirius, rather—all were oddly vigilant in her presence. I wasn’t sure why, but I doubted it was because she disapproved of my relationship with Sirius. So was it the rumors associated with the princess, then? Even though every single one of them was nothing more than a rumor?

I simply could not see her in a negative light. It was partly because of my intuition, but a big part of it was because Derek consistently took the middle ground on her.

And there was one more reason. There was somebody in my circle who I felt was potentially dangerous—and it wasn’t Octavia. I had no solid evidence. It was just something I felt. And I’d never shown this person any animosity or malice. After all, my intuition could not determine who was friend and who was foe. And I was probably wrong about this person. Or so I’d thought...

“Sirius has...,” Derek trailed off, biting his lip uncomfortably as if he’d swallowed something bitter.

It was Sirius himself who was wary of his sister. However, he had never once said anything to me that implied he outright renounced her...until two days ago. When Octavia asked us how we would produce an heir. The question I couldn’t answer.

Logically, I knew what I should do. The reason I didn’t answer her was because, if I told her how I really felt, she would do more than reject me. She would despise me.

Maybe that was why...why I longed so hard to learn of my birth origins.

Because I had a feeling...that if I knew where I came from, I would finally have confidence in myself. I would be able to choose the right path.

But Sirius was the crown prince of Esfia. And as long as I couldn't change my gender, simply loving him wouldn't be enough. In order to ensure we could stay together forever, I had to make a choice.

But the way I was now, riddled with insecurities, I couldn't make that choice. I was surrendering to the pressure, cowering under Sirius's protection. There was a danger I might choose the *wrong* path. And Octavia saw right through me.

I strained my ears and heard many excited voices clamoring against the orchestra's music. Every conversation I could hear was about Octavia.

"So what are your thoughts on Her Highness dancing with Duke Nightfellow's eldest son?"

"You mean, regarding Blackfeather? That's a diversion. The real question is: Whose...?"

"Viscount Winfell and Her Highness..."

"Why did Her Highness take a former commoner as her bodyguard anyway? House Alderton's history aside..."

"Speaking of Princess Octavia, don't you think it has to do with her mystery lover, whose existence has now been made quite clear?"

"Her *mystery lover*, eh?" Derek drawled.

"According to your *friend*, Octavia doesn't even have a lover, right?"

"Just out of curiosity, what do *you* think, Sil?"

"I...am not sure." *I think that maybe Sir Alderton is her mystery lover...*, I answered in my head—the exact opposite of what I'd told Derek.

A quiet scream jolted me awake from my light slumber.

At first, I thought the carriage was under attack. But I quickly learned that was not the case.

"No..." *That was Octavia's scream.*

The princess was asleep...and she was having a terrible nightmare. Her fragile, pale hand wandered as if it were looking for something...then it clung tightly onto Klifford's uniform.

Klifford looked just as startled as I was. He glanced at me for a moment, but his attention quickly returned to Octavia.

The princess was still moaning in fear. She showed no signs of waking. Fragments of words escaped from her mouth. The sight of her worried me greatly...because her torment seemed anything but temporary. The sight gave me the sense that Octavia spent all her nights in nightmares like this.

The only Octavia I knew was the stubborn princess who crossed swords with Sirius. I always thought the two resembled each other quite a lot. But not even Sirius was perfect. He had his weak moments... so surely Octavia did, too. And I was witnessing such a weak moment right now.

What should I do? Should I just wake her? As I half stood there, my hips hovering off the seat in a moment of flustered panic, Sir Alderton made the move. He gently caressed the top of Octavia's head. And little by little, the strain in her face softened.

But she was still firmly gripping Alderton's uniform, as if she were afraid he would leave if she let go. Their relationship looked a bit different now than it did back at the castle. Here, Octavia was not an austere princess, but a meek young girl. And Sir Alderton had a look of humanity in his eyes—like he was confused by his own actions.

They were a princess and bodyguard...but they were more than that. There was something else...

I sat back down on the bench and closed my eyes, pretending to sleep until we arrived at Paradise in the Sky. I'd deemed it necessary for me to pretend I hadn't caught Princess Octavia having a nightmare. I was sure Octavia wouldn't want that side of her to be seen.

I looked at Derek beside me. "Derek...how do you feel about Sir Alderton?"

"Payback for what I asked you, eh? Klifford Alderton—Princess Octavia's bodyguard? That's right, you said he saved your life once. Is he on your mind?"

“Well...it turns out I was wrong. Sir Alderton said he never saw me before he came to the castle.” *Though...I don't believe him.*

Klifford may have denied it, but I was still sure he was the one. The spirit I sensed in the man who saved my life was identical to Klifford's.

“Oh, really? Okay, so...how do I feel about Klifford Alderton...?” Derek paused in thought, then answered, “He's quite gifted. Don't you think his talents are wasted as a bodyguard?”

“Yeah...” I felt the same way. I've trained in many of the sword arts, so I'm good enough to be able to tell just how powerful a knight is at a glance by the way he carries himself.

Before I met Sirius, my life plan was to become a soldier or a knight and climb up the ladder. And it wasn't because I was adopted. All boys in Esfia who weren't the firstborn faced the same dilemma. Many of us entered the church. Either we devoted our lives to battle or to God.

In my case, the former suited me better. I don't mind fighting. I sometimes feel like it clears my mind...all the more so when I'm holding a sword and facing off against an opponent.

Though our circumstances were different, Derek's evaluation of Sir Alderton as “quite gifted” was well-informed. Though he was the next duke in line, his skills with a sword far surpassed that of an ordinary nobleman. That was Nightfellow policy. Among the nobility, it was a common way of thinking that the higher up you were in status, the more heavily you would rely on others for protection. Most high nobles never held a sword. If a high-ranking nobleman wished to ensure his safety, he would employ several strong and gifted knights to protect him.

“That reminds me... You're a pretty good fighter, too, Sil. Despite your looks.”

“I could do without the backhanded compliment, Derek.” I made a sour face. I wasn't nearly as manly as Sirius or Derek in outward appearance. I was well aware of that... And I was fine with it, really. I'll just trust that will change with age.

“Hey, it was a *genuine* compliment. You lull your enemies into a false sense of

security. Isn't that the reason why you're such a good dancer? You're just well above average when it comes to athletics? It's like a God-given talent. Like it's in your blood... Or maybe not; I dunno."

Derek's ramblings made my heart jump. The Burks family had deeper ties to the arts and humanities than to swordplay. Fighting was neither in their past nor present. And as an adoptee, I was the black sheep of the family. Ever since I was a little boy, the paintings and music my elder brothers adored so much bored me to tears. Dancing was my one joy, since it was the art of moving the body.

In my blood... If fighting was in my blood, did it come from my birth parents? I shook my head. I needed to nip that thought in the bud for now.

I'd asked Derek about Sir Alderton because I was hoping for a different kind of reaction. But I'd come to a dead end on that front. It wasn't unusual for noblemen to fall in love with other men. If anything, that was the norm. And it was that atmosphere that saved Sirius and me.

But with Derek... I sensed that, due to his position, he was merely going along with social norms. It probably suited his needs. At junior balls and royal balls, most of his dance partners were men.

However... While the exact meaning of it was unclear, Derek *was* interested in Octavia. Ever since I got my guardian ring back, I came to watch Octavia a lot... And in doing so, I couldn't help but notice that Derek was watching her a lot, too.

Derek claimed he didn't like Octavia. And I had heard from others that tensions between the two had begun when they were young, because Derek had teased her so much. I was told that was why he had tormented her...

But I had a different theory. What if Derek's torment of Octavia had nothing to do with Sirius—and he just wanted to get the attention of a girl he liked? What if Octavia was, in a way, Derek's first love?

I might have just been overanalyzing things. And I was always torn on whether I should point it out to him... And then today happened.

Sir Alderton and Princess Octavia, together in the carriage... The scene

reentered my mind. Then, right after the opening dance, when Sir Alderton handed Blackfeather to her. Perhaps having Sir Alderton by her side helped Octavia be more resolute as a princess. And maybe she just waited for the right moment to order her bodyguard to be her lover.

But if I was right, and Derek was in love with Octavia... *No, Sir Alderton being Octavia's secret lover was pure speculation on my part. My fears might all be unfounded.*

I sighed. This was a bad habit of mine, pondering all sorts of theories on my own and worrying over them. It was just like the time I worried myself wondering if Derek was in love with Sirius. And I was wrong then... I really do tend to get in my head too much. Sirius always says I should talk to him about what I'm feeling. But then again, a lot of the things I'm worried about are exactly the things I *can't* tell Sirius about.

"My, what a listless look you have in your eyes... Has my sorry excuse for a son gotten you into a rough spot?"

The moment I heard that deep, calm voice, I stood at attention. Duke Leif Nightfellow himself was standing right in front of me.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Burks."

27

Fan in hand, I watched the couples dance joyfully around me. About twenty minutes had passed since I arrived in the pleasaunce hall by Rust's invitation via Houghie. I had assumed Rust would approach me immediately...and now I was eating a hefty helping of crow.

Still no contact!

And the cherry on top, here I am, wearing a mask, and yet...everyone's, like, steering clear of me? But this is a masked ball! Even if it's painfully obvious who someone is, there's a tacit understanding that you're supposed to forget about it and just party!

Klifford, who had kept his distance from me in the main party hall to avoid the

onslaught of greeters, was keeping close to me now in the pleasaunce hall. I guess that was *one* thing I had going for me—at least I didn't feel like a total loner.

But Rust was in this room. He had to be. I was looking all over at the sea of masked faces to see if I could find anyone who might be him...but the masks made it so all I could really tell about a person was their age and gender.

That is to say, a young man.

Among all the volumes of *The Noble King* published thus far, Rust Byrne had only appeared in back silhouette in the illustrations. Eventually, Rust, who had been a character lurking in the shadows up until then, was finally featured as one of the main characters.

Ah, at long last, I get to gaze upon Rust's glory! Past-life me had giddily flipped through the pages of the book...only to drop my jaw in astonishment. *There's...not a single illustration! The side-by-side color pic of Sil and Sirius on the cover was lovely as always, but where's the black-and-white illustrations?!*

This caused a major uproar among the fans. And now I found myself once again wishing there had been illustrations. Oh, by the way, the black-and-white illustrations returned in the next volume! I guess the illustrator had a lot on their plate or something.

So anyway, that's why I couldn't just go off of past-life knowledge of Rust in the illustrations to seek out three-dimensional Rust now. The only clues I had were the physical descriptions of him within the story text. But not even a hardcore fujoshi like myself had the text memorized word for word. Even when it came to his hair and eye color, my memory was pretty fuzzy...

But even in the bleak situation I found myself in, I still had one way to determine who was and wasn't Rust. So even if I couldn't see his face, I figured I could work it out somehow.

Then again, I wouldn't know I was right unless I actually made contact with someone! *Guess I'll just have to wait.* I sighed quietly.

"I humbly request your permission to ask for a dance."

He probably meant he would come seek me out when he wrote that. Too bad

girls can't ask boys to dance...

Girls *could* sort of put on an air of availability to the masses, then when the guy she likes finally approaches her, she can charm him with some conversation... But just walking up to a guy and saying “Hey, let’s dance!” was a no-no.

And yet...with boy-boy couples, it doesn’t matter who asks whom to dance! In exchange, though, they have to decide which one of them will dance the girl’s part... The guy who asks for the dance doesn’t always get to be the “guy”!

“Excuse me, may I have this dance?”

As I stood there waiting, I suddenly heard a voice! My heart filled with anticipation, I turned to look at the owner of the voice. He was a thin, redheaded man in a dark green mask, probably in his late-twenties...and he was asking Klifford for a dance.

This’s the important part. He was asking Klifford... *Klifford!*

Klifford has more game than me...! Wait, that’s not the takeaway here...yeah. The reason we became Adjutant and Sovereign in the first place was so Klifford wouldn’t quit on me until I could find myself a (fake) boyfriend. After all, he was a superfine specimen, even in a mask. And I suppose since we were in the pleasaunce hall now, it wouldn’t be unheard of for someone to ask the princess’s bodyguard for a dance.

Klifford answered him promptly, “I am here as Princess Octavia’s bodyguard. Please ask someone else to dance.”

Rejected but not ready to accept it, the man turned his pleading gaze...on *me*! His aura was just screaming at me to please give Klifford permission to take a little break from his duties so he could dance...

In actual fact, there was no rule against bodyguards dancing. One of my former bodyguards had actually met The One while dancing at a junior ball. And ten days later, he quit and moved out... What a sad day in history that was.

“Don’t hesitate on my account, Klifford. If you wish to dance, then go dance.”

Just because nobody’s asking *me* to dance, I can’t let myself be a small-

mindful Sovereign! I must be gracious...*gracious!*

"Is that an order, Your Highness?"

"Oh, no, it's not an order per se..."

"Then my answer is still no. I feel no need to dance," Klifford said with a shake of his head.

"Well...if you change your mind, let me know." The man slinked away. But in no time, he was already pouncing on some other masked ikemen. For a skinny guy, he sure was a player.

As I watched him leave, a question popped into my mind...so I decided to ask it. "Klifford...don't you want to dance at all?"

I dunno about *you*, but I'd *love* to experience the thrill of being asked to dance by a variety of gentlemen and feel like a stud magnet! But I don't mean that in a weird way, got it?

"Not particularly. If I danced with someone, that would mean taking my eyes off of you, Your Highness."

"What if I commanded you to dance?"

"I...would obey, but I beg that you not give me such a command, as it would jeopardize your safety."

Even though he'd phrased it as a request, he truly seemed uncomfortable by the idea. I guess even an Adjutant didn't happily obey every command his Sovereign gave.

"I see... Very well." I nodded firmly. He was right, it would be dangerous for me to be out of his line of vision. And he didn't even want to dance anyway.

It made me reflect once again. All the bodyguards I'd had thus far had quit when they met the most important people of their lives. But to Klifford, the most important person in his life, even though it might be just because he's an Adjutant...is me. It was a fact that was very easy for me to believe.

It's been so long since I've had a mutually trusting relationship with a bodyguard...that I'd forgotten what it feels like.

Don't get your hopes up. Don't depend on anyone. Don't fall in love. I'd held these three rules steadfastly in my mind every day. But now...

Oh, the music just changed. Wait, is this...? It was the *Hofballtanze* we'd practiced dancing to just the day before! It was a very popular tune where everyone changed partners as they danced. Up until now, the orchestra in the pleasaunce hall had been playing different tunes.

All the wallflowers seized their moment and marched out to the dance floor. The established couples stayed as they were. Single men and women could also dance alone.

If I go out there...will Rust come to me? It's worth testing that theory...I think.

"Klifford, hold Blackfeather for me."

"Aye..."

I gave my fan to Klifford and went out to try my second dance of the day.

My first partner was an elderly gentleman. We actually had a pretty fun and lively conversation! He even said, "I'll have to brag to Leif that I danced with you." I suppose this gentleman knew Uncle Dearest.

Uncle Dearest's full name was Leif Nightfellow. Now I suddenly wanted to go back into the great hall to say hi. *Suppress the urge, Octavia...*

My second partner was that thin redhead who'd asked Klifford to dance. He'd given me the impression that he always danced the lady's part with other men, but I had to give him a silent apology. He danced the man's part flawlessly. He was a beautiful dancer of either role all along! Classic playboy! I guess that meant he was fine either way... It made me curious to learn more about his origin story.

My third partner was a man around the age of twenty-five. He didn't talk. He didn't look at me. He probably wasn't Rust.

My fourth partner was a man in his fifties. I repeat my last verdict.

My fifth partner was a bearded man. He sucked at dancing. Sorry I stepped on your foot, buddy. I repeat my last verdict.

My sixth partner was a man in his early twenties. I repeat...

After four consecutive awkward dances, I was starting to consider stepping out of line for the rest of the dance. But just when I started to step away...my new partner came around and took my hand.

My seventh partner...

He was a blond-haired young man...who wore a silvery-blue mask of a unique construction. The part of the mask that was supposed to have holes for his eyes was covered with thin slits of glass, so I couldn't tell what color his eyes were.

I began to dance with my seventh partner. *This man...is more built than he looks? But his dancing style is textbook nobleman. There weren't very many brawny noblemen who attended junior balls. So maybe he was a gifted commoner? No...doesn't seem like it.*

As I danced, trying to suss him out, the man smirked and said, "I am in the pleasaunce hall—I humbly request your permission to ask for a dance."

I stopped breathing. Those were the same exact words on the note Houghie had given me.

Is this man...Rust? With great caution, I examined his face. I wanted to see his forehead, but his mask was covering it completely.

"Are you...Rust Byrne? I wish to make certain of this."

"Here I am, in the flesh, and you believe I'm a fake?"

"I know that Rust Byrne has had a scar on his forehead since birth."

I didn't know where exactly on his forehead, but...he had a scar. That much I knew for sure. It was unique—it looked like an old sword wound. In the volume featuring Rust (the one without illustrations) there was a scene where a hooded Rust fought with Sirius. His hood slipped, and that's where we get his first face reveal!

Anyway, in the latter half of the book, it's revealed that he was born with the scar... So since it wasn't something he'd acquired later in life, this Rust must have a scar on his forehead.

"You are indeed knowledgeable, Your Highness." He smiled at me... I think. He was hard to read.

“Could you perhaps remove your mask for me?”

“If you wish it, Your Highness.” Rust’s free hand touched his silvery-blue mask.

If he has a scar, it’s Rust. If he doesn’t, he’s not.

I thought that was all I would see...

Rust took off his mask. It was only for a few seconds. Then he returned the mask to his face. But that one clear glimpse I got of Rust’s face disturbed me intensely.

My hands began to tremble slightly... I couldn’t stop shaking.

Was it because he was hideous? *No. It wasn’t that.*

Was it because he had no scar? *Not that, either. He had a scar, all right. A very unique scar.*

The man standing before me was indeed Rust Byrne.

But...at this rate, I’ll...

I’ll remember.

“You were just unlucky.”

It was something I could never, ever forget. That young man...the way he looked.

His eyes were a mystical amber. His hair was gold.

Even though he had doll-like features, the way he moved and spoke seemed deliberately *human*.

But that man... He was *not* human.

That man didn’t have a scar on his forehead. But aside from the scar...he looked exactly like Rust Byrne.

His golden hair...his eyes obscured by the glass in his mask... It was all the same.

In every way...Rust and that man...were identical.

This can’t be. How?

I never wanted to see him again... I wanted to bury that shitty memory.

I didn't want to face it...

I came to the junior ball to find someone who would pretend to be my boyfriend. That's all.

I didn't come here to look at that face.

My body mechanically kept dancing.

"Did that confirm what you wanted to know?"

Confirm? Confirm what? Whether you're Rust? Unless...

What does all this mean?

Rust's question just wasn't entering my brain. Meanwhile, my eighth partner was about to take over.

"I...", I barely managed to croak.

There was no way I could remain calm when face-to-face with that man. "I...I want to be alone," I snapped quietly, leaving Rust and my place in line.

The fact that I was a princess disappeared from my mind. But in a laughably ironic twist, a little voice in the corner of my brain said *Act like a princess!* and slammed the brakes on my feet. If only I were just Maki, I could have retreated on the spot. But the sixteen years of royal lessons I'd had pounded into me as Octavia had—for better or worse—taken a firm root inside of me.

I took a deep breath and turned on my heel. I marched quickly out of the hall. I heard footsteps following me. Was it Klifford? But I didn't have the peace of mind to turn around.

All I'd done was told Rust the truth: I wanted to be alone. I wanted to go to a place where nobody else was and calm myself.

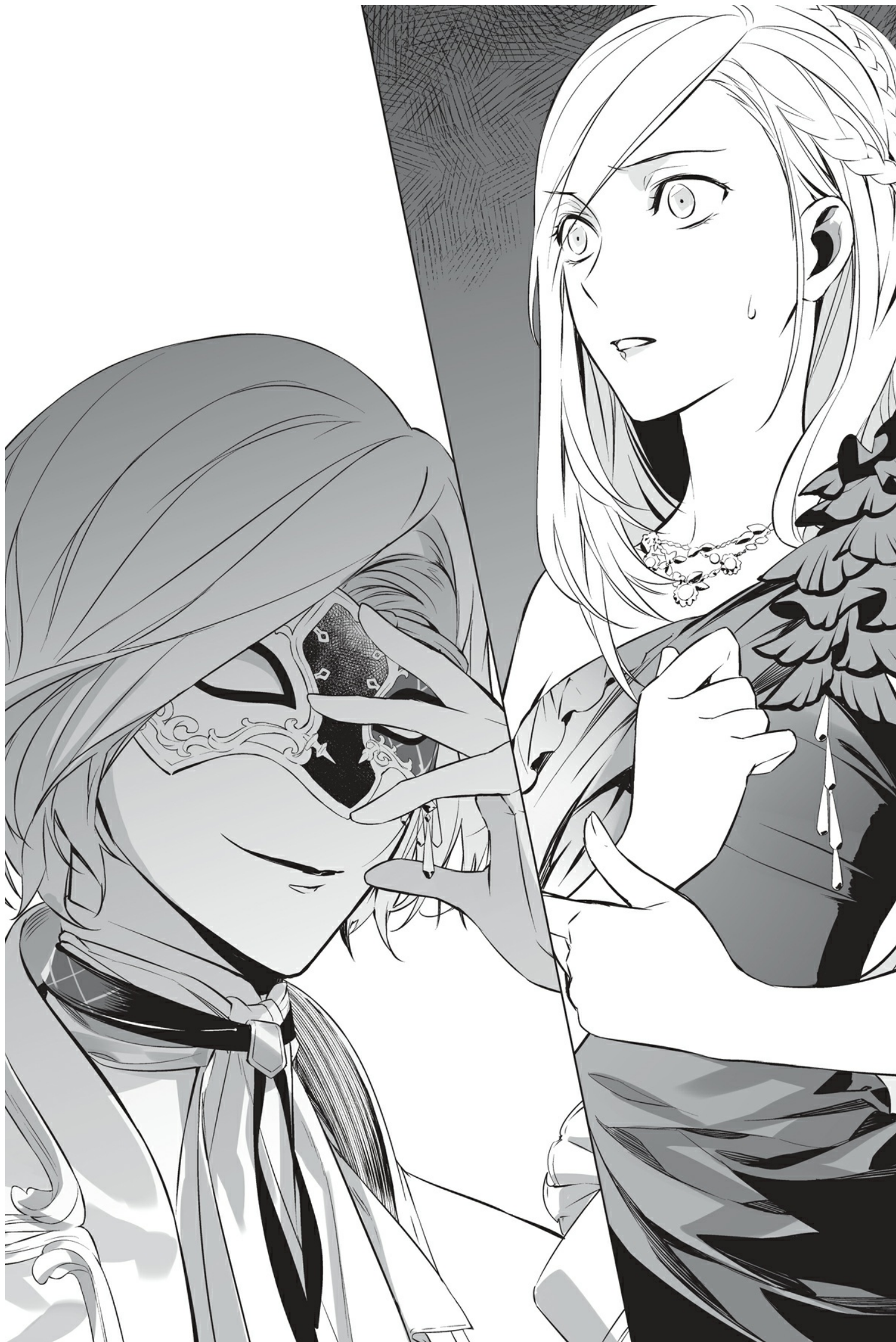
For some reason, something I'd told Uncle Dearest long ago revisited my mind. That was back when Derek had started bullying me, and I'd decided to distance myself from the duke so he wouldn't dote on me too much.

One day, he came to the castle and asked me, "Is something causing you pain, Your Highness? Is there something you'd like to open up about?"

“Something I’d like...to open up about?” I thought it was strange that Uncle Nightfellow would ask me a thing like that.

“Everyone has secrets. But sometimes those secrets can crush us... Like what happened with Duke Kihlgren.”

Right... I’d completely forgotten. That was the name Alec brought up before he left on his assignment... That’s right. Uncle Dearest had mentioned his name once.



“As your vassal, I worry about you, Your Highness... You put up a wall between us. And I wonder if this wall is a secret you’ve burdened yourself with.”

“I don’t put up a wall...” *I don’t.*

“But...do you have a secret?”

Conflicted, I froze. And he smiled kindly at me.

“I needn’t be the one you tell...and it doesn’t have to be now. But someday, I pray that you find someone whom you can open your heart to.”

Someone I can open my heart to...someday...

I looked up at my dear uncle and nodded solemnly.

My secret is my past life... I remember it.

But...there’s no way I can tell you that, my dear uncle.

I mean, how could I tell anyone my secret...? I hadn’t even fully come to terms with it myself.

I stumbled toward the personal chambers deep within Paradise in the Sky. Those rooms were used by couples to satisfy certain urges. Normally, I would never set foot in that place—it was no place for me. But given this area’s purpose, hardly anyone was here.

I found a dark, empty room...and I ran inside.

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I need to calm down.

Alone in the empty room, I felt the energy drain from my body. I took a breath in, then out, over and over. But Rust’s face—the face that so closely resembled that man I’d met only once—stuck fast in my brain.

Whether I liked it or not, it was stirring up the memories I’d kept locked inside all these years. The moments when I was Maki Tazawa...right after my death. Everything. So very clear.

Maki Tazawa. Cause of death: an unfortunate accident.

The latest volume of *The Noble King* was going to be released in a few days, and I was so excited for it. At last, we would get to the core of the Turchen Arc. Of course, I just *had* to buy it the same day it came out!

I was walking home from school, on the same route I always took. I was standing at the intersection, waiting for the light to turn green so I could cross the street. There was only one other person waiting to cross—a college-aged man.

But then this man suddenly clutched his chest, and his face twisted with pain. He stumbled out into the road...then fell down.

And just then, a station wagon came zooming in. Desperate to avoid the fallen man, the driver swerved...right onto the sidewalk.

If only I had been standing just a few inches away.

If only I hadn't been stunned to the spot by what I'd just witnessed.

Unfortunately, I was standing right in the oncoming car's path.

The station wagon sped toward me...and that's where my memories in Japan ended. If that's all it had been, then Maki Tazawa would have died in that accident, never to be reborn with her memories intact.

The reason I exist as Octavia now...lies in the events that happened next.

Because I met *him*.

My next memory begins in an unknown location.

There was a starry sky. And starlike lights twinkled all around me.

The stars were varied—some shone brightly, others faintly.

I couldn't see the ground, yet I wasn't falling.

Where...am I?

Am I alive? Then...I have to go back. If my mom gets a call saying her daughter's been in an accident, she'll be worried sick. I need to tell her I'm okay.

But no matter how much I walked, I didn't go anywhere. In one direction...I

sensed something very dreadful. When I walked away, trying to avoid it, *he*—some person—suddenly appeared before me. He materialized in a way that seemed to defy the laws of physics.

“You... Aha. Now I see.”

He is...a little older than me. Either twenty...or mid-twenties at most. He’s wearing a white uniform... Is it cosplay?

His hair is blindingly gold. He looks at me with amber eyes...and for some reason, it feels like he was expecting me. I don’t recognize him at all, yet he seems to know me. His facial structure looks European—but also like a doll.

He speaks to me in a friendly voice that betrays my impressions of him. “You were just unlucky.”

“Unlucky...?”

“There are some things humans cannot avoid, try as they might. And when that sort of thing happens, you see, something will always intervene. Isn’t that what humans call luck? You say someone was lucky or unlucky. Not even my people can predict which way luck will turn. It’s the reason you’re dead now.”

I’m dead... Truthfully, I already knew it somewhere in the corner of my mind. But hearing the words stunned me. A part of me was still hoping this was all just a bad dream. I mean, how else could I be standing there at that moment, conscious and having a conversation with a mysterious man?

“So because I had bad luck...I died?”

“Technically, you were dragged into it. That’s why you were unlucky.”

“Dragged into it...?”

Does he mean the accident?

The car slamming into me vividly reentered my memory.

Oh. That makes sense... I wouldn’t have survived that.

It’s then that I finally realized it wasn’t a dream. I really was dead.

So where am I? The afterlife?

The shining stars were beautiful—the landscape spread out boundlessly

around me. It was a world with no end in sight.

“That young human male who was the cause of you being struck dead... Do you remember him?”

“I...remember...”

“So it’s like this: That man wasn’t supposed to die. But there was a kink in the plan by... Oh, how should I put this...? I suppose the closest word for him would be...my *comrade*? My comrade killed him. And if he hadn’t killed him, you would have safely crossed the street in one piece. That’s why I say you were unlucky.”

“Your comrade...killed a man?”

Why?

“You might say it was out of curiosity? A desire to unlock a secret. You feel that way sometimes, too, don’t you?”

“I don’t...understand.”

Unlocking secrets...had nothing to do with murder. But the mysterious man just shrugged.

“Don’t humans do all sorts of experiments on rats? To us, humans are just like lab rats, I suppose. You kill rats for your research. We kill humans for our research... I don’t see a difference. Do you?”

“Was I...part of your experiments?”

Is that why I had to die?

“Um, no...” The young man smiled and shook his head. “You weren’t the one I meant to invite here. It was the young man who died just before you. He leeches off his parents—didn’t help out a bit around the house. He was arrogant. Blamed society for his talents not bearing any fruit. He was what you’d call a NEET—Not in Education, Employment, or Training. The sort of human that nobody would mourn if he died. In fact, his parents and little brother were happy when he died.”

“Again! What does that have to do with *me*?!”

“Well, we had a hypothesis—if we changed his environment, might such a human being change? Oh, how should I put this... From our perspective, that sort of human just seems doomed on a spiritual level. But you see... Don’t ya wanna believe in the power of possibility? Don’t ya wanna see if he can overturn our expectations?”

“That type of human being always goes through a phase where they wish they could just start over with a new life. That dead man was no exception. He wanted to escape his current life, go on adventures in another world, level up... That’s what he wished for.”

So, that’s why his comrade is forcefully inviting people.

Even after hearing all this, my mind was still blank. “But I...I never wished for this!”

“I know. You never wished for this, so I shouldn’t have invited you here. Your death will sadden your parents and friends. At the very least, you will be missed. For you were a precious existence to those around you.”

“Then why...?!”

“But your absence will also not be significant enough to give birth to something new in the world. I *am* sorry that you died. As I said at the start, you just had a spell of bad luck.”

“Bad *luck*...?! No, *you’re* the one who’s bad! Bring me back to life!”

This strange guy...and his so-called comrade who killed that man... I have no idea who they are. But this has nothing to do with me. I was just dragged into it, right? So put me back!

“Why...?” the young man asked, tilting his head sharply in confusion. His gesture seemed to say that he felt it was an utterly impossible request.

“Why don’t you be brave and just give up?”

“Because it’s not fair! I was an innocent bystander!”

I did nothing wrong! my soul screamed.

The young man smiled softly and answered my words he shouldn’t have been able to hear. “Yeah. You’re right.” The words that followed clashed sharply with

his smile. “But you see, I don’t really feel the need to go that far. After all, I wasn’t the one who killed Mr. NEET. Which means, I wasn’t the cause of your death, either. Right?”

“I don’t care! You’re a god, aren’t you?!”

“Using your language, I guess I am a god...”

“Well, if *you* didn’t cause all this, then make the other god bring me back!”

“Yeah... I don’t think that’ll work.”

“Why?!”

“Lemme ask you a question, kid. If you step on an insect, do you go, ‘*Ack! What a horrible thing I’ve done! I’d better bring it back to life!*’? Huh, I guess that was a bad example... Humans can’t be brought back to life, you see. ‘*Ack! What a horrible thing I’ve done! I’d better heal the insect!*’ Do you think that?”

Insect...?

“No... I wouldn’t go that far.”

But still!

“The most you’d do is apologize, right? Or think the insect was bad for getting stepped on. I mean, it made your shoe dirty, right? And stepping on it probably grossed you out.”

“Are you saying...I’m an insect to you?”

“If you don’t like that analogy, then think of yourself as a dog or a cat—it’s all the same. Oh, but then again, you’d feel more guilt if you killed a dog or cat, I guess? Some humans do rush small animals to the vet when they hit them with their cars. Yeah... Okay, let me revise my statement.

“If you’d met someone else besides me when you came here...you might have gotten your life back. Some of my kind are much more compassionate than I.”

“Then let me meet *that* god! I’m begging you!”

“Hey, at least you met *me* instead of my comrade who killed the NEET. The other world my comrade sent the NEET to is a very cruel place. Just count your blessings that you didn’t get sent there. See? Over *there*.”

The young man pointed in the direction that filled me with a sense of dread when I first got here.

“A cruel...world?”

Not only was he murdered—he was sent to be reborn in such a place?

“Well, I want to see what latent possibilities lie in humans. It wouldn’t make sense to reincarnate him into a world that was even *more* convenient and kind than the one he was born in, would it? Sad to say, though, we haven’t yet encountered a human whose potential we were able to fully discover.”

The mysterious man said such terrifying things with a straight face.

“Those other humans... What happened to them?”

“You mean the ones we killed and forcibly reincarnated into different worlds?”

I nodded slowly.

“They were unable to fulfill their lives in the other worlds...so we extinguished them.”

“Extinguished...?”

“The humans who led meaningless existences in this world failed to make their mark before they died in the new worlds we reincarnated them into. There would be no point in reviving their souls yet again, right? So we extinguish them—soul and all. Don’t worry. Nobody cares. Those are the sort of humans we choose. But *you*...”

The mysterious man paused his horrifying speech, and his brows drew together.

“Well, you don’t exactly fit within these parameters... And while you don’t deserve to be brought back to life in your old world...since you *are* here talking to me anyway...”

The mysterious man clapped his hands. He just got a great idea.

“That’s it. I *could* reincarnate you. A different person, with Maki Tazawa’s memories and personality intact. This would be an easy feat for me. It’s the

thought of your personality disappearing that angers you, right?”

“Uh... *Excuse* me?”

“However, your world will be that work of fiction you’re so obsessed with... *The Noble King*. You’ve always wanted to meet Sil and the boys for real, right? You were thinking about that book just before you died, too. That should make things easier—it sounds like fun, actually.”

You might’ve asked yourself, “*How did he know about all that?*” But I no longer had the mental capacity to think of such questions.

“But I never thought I’d actually get to meet them for *real*! I mean, yeah, I did want Sirius to become king and to live happily ever after with Sil! But I was only thinking about *The Noble King* because I was excited about the newest volume that was about to come out.”

“Hmmm... That’s the thanks I get for trying to compromise, eh? Well, do you want to go to the cruel world, then? Unless I intervene, you’ll just automatically fall there, regardless of which way you walk. You’re a soul without a home, you know.”

“H-hell no!”

“Figured you say that.”

“So I either go to that...cruel world...or to *The Noble King*. Are those my only options?”

“Yup.”

“In the world of *The Noble King*, would I be a...random peasant or something?”

“I’ll let you decide, free of charge. You can be one of the main characters in the story. You can be any gender... Would you like to be a girl? I could always make you a boy.”

“If I’m one of the main characters...then what happens to the character I replace?”

“Nothing, really? I mean, the world of *The Noble King* doesn’t actually exist yet. Nobody can steal away something from nothing.”

“Wait... You’re not making any sense.”

The young man spoke to me like I was a difficult child. “It’s a book world. Unless I create it, you’ll never find such a world anywhere. Get it?”

Create...a world?

“Wait, I feel like it would be *much* easier to just bring me back to life in my old world...”

“Um, no? Creating a new world from scratch is much easier. Intervening to bring people back to life in a preexisting world is actually way more difficult... even just the life of one puny human. Though killing people is a piece of cake—ironic, when you think about it.”

The guy laughed heartily...with an icy echo.

“Conversely, it’s really easy to create something new from nothingness. Even a world. So don’t worry, kid. You becoming a character won’t kill that character off. Shouldn’t you be happy? Because of you, a new world, new gods of that world, multitudes of new lives...a new *history* will be born. And your soul will be an intricate piece of it all. All of this can be achieved, just by you becoming one of the story’s characters.”

“Th-that doesn’t make me at all happy.”

Why does this all have to be so grandiose?

“Really? Well, that’s too bad... According to our original plan, your soul wasn’t supposed to be lost. You’re just dangling in the wind right now.”

“Th-then...if that’s the case...I don’t need my memories. I just wanna be reborn in Japan!”

But my wish was denied outright.

“Yeah, I wish I could, but you’re out of the cycle. The cycling of souls is meticulously determined. Since you died before your time was up, you can no longer use the maximum number of cycles that was predetermined for your future. Everything’s lost—it’s actually easier to sum it all up as a human being extinguished ahead of schedule.”

“So bringing me back to life in Japan...can’t be done...”

Just as I was about to fall into despair, he said something that made me doubt my ears.

“No... Returning you as your old self...that *can* be done. I could turn back time and make it so that accident never happened. If I had to say one way or another—it *is* a possibility for me,” he answered with an angelic smile.

“What?!”

“It’s just... It’s kinda *really* hard to do. And unless you have this super-resplendent soul that will solve all the world’s problems, yet you died before your time... I just don’t wanna bother putting forth all that effort. But it’s not like you’re a scummy soul who doesn’t deserve to be saved. You’re like...an unremarkable soul? I just don’t wanna put myself through the trouble for an unremarkable soul, that’s all. If you were in my shoes, you’d do the same.”

“No, no, no! If you *can* do it, you have an obligation...!”

“Okay, indulge me on another hypothetical. You’re walking down the street, and you come upon a stray cat that was hit by a car. Except it’s not dead. If you took it to the vet, it could be saved. But the vet bill would be ten million yen. I know just how big a burden that would be for you. And it’s fixed—you can’t negotiate the price. Now. Would you save the stray cat?”

“But that’s way too extreme!”

That’s the worst hypothetical I can imagine. Of course I couldn’t do it. Ten million yen? I couldn’t possibly come up with that much money in time.

But the young man just snickered at my outburst. “But why? Is it because the price is ten million yen? But you see, it’s technically an amount of money you *could* raise, by certain means. You could steal it. Or if you wanted to obtain it legally, you could work... Or you could get a loan to pay it off quickly. Your parents, your relatives, your friends... If you asked everyone you knew, you might be able to work it out, you know? Naturally, you would repay the mountain of debt. It’s a cross you must bear to save the stray cat’s life. I mean, you want to save the cat, don’t you? And that’s a way you could actually do it. See? There *is* a way. It’s not impossible.”

“.....”

“But let me ask you this... Would you really go that far for some stray cat you happened upon? Would you *really* feel like it?”

Probably...I wouldn't be able to do it.

I hung my head in shame.

In his hypothetical, I'm the stray cat, and he's the person who found me.

“Now do you understand? I could bring you back to life in Japan as your former self. But that would be as arduous a task as you putting up ten million yen. That's the way I see it, at least. But I *do* still feel sorry for you.”

“What...do you mean?” I looked up.

“You could always pull the stray cat out of the road so it wouldn't get hit by another car. Or you could feed it water while it died. Or you could give it some tasty treats while it died. That much would be within your means. You could take the stray cat to the vet and pay a smaller fee of ten thousand yen to ease its suffering. That level of kindness is something I, too, could provide.”

The subtext of what he's saying is...that's all I'm worth.

“So anyway, that's what I proposed to you earlier. A compromise to an unremarkable soul—you. I could create the world of *The Noble King* and reincarnate you there. That would be much easier for me to do. And you could keep your memories. That seems to be what you want anyway... Though, if you ask me, I think it would be much easier to *not* live with your past-life memories.”

I shake my head. *I cannot see it that way at all. Forget my eighteen years of life? I can't bear it. My memories of my past life...they're all I have left.*

“Unless...you just want to be extinguished? You could just accept your fate and die—it's not so bad, really. If you just resign yourself to it, you won't need to suffer anymore. And that's beautiful, in its own way. It might be a fitting end for your soul.”

What should I do?

Should I be extinguished? Should I surrender to my fate? No... There's no way I can do that.

I can't give up.

If I can't go back to my old life...then at the very least...I don't want to lose my consciousness as Maki Tazawa.

I want to keep being me.

*"I'll be reborn...into the world of *The Noble King*."*

At least it's familiar to me. Better than some world I don't know at all...

"Your decision has been received. Congratulations. I created a new world just now. It's been entered into history now—it's all out of my hands. Oh, but I was missing some key information I needed to create it, so I kinda filled in the gaps myself."

"You were...missing information?"

"Sirius will become king, and he will be together with Sil and only Sil. That's what you want, right?"

"Well, *The Noble King* is *their* story..."

Wouldn't it be normal for them to live happily ever after? That's what the readers would want. If they broke up, or if Sirius abdicated the throne...that'd be a bad ending.

"Yes, that's true. Good thing I supplemented the world with that. I perused your mind for information on *The Noble King*, but I found a lot of...plot holes? Like, how the royal family continued to survive, or like, the culture?"

"There was a lot of stuff that wasn't written in the books. I mean, take Esfia, that country created just for that world. It seemed like it was written with a history in mind, but if the king was allowed to marry another man without taking a concubine...there must be *something* at play behind the scenes, right?"

"So I had to make that '*something*' normalized. There were probably man-on-man marriages in Esfia's history. Frequent ones, at that. Which means that someone or something would need to be sacrificed in order to make that history work. But Esfia's royal family tree ends with Sirius's father in the books."

"Well, yeah... It's just a story."

“The author probably left all that out on purpose. But even if that sort of thing can just be conveniently left out of a story, you can’t leave plot holes like that in a real world.”

“Yeah, but...if you meddle too much, you’ll make it completely different from the source material...!”

“Hey, it’s all good. All I did was fill in the plot holes the way I thought would work best. By the time you’re born into that world, everything should be pretty much no different from what you know. You have my word. I promise you, it will be a world where *Sirius becomes king and is together with Sil Burks and only Sil Burks.*”

“Wait... You aren’t going to meddle with their relationship, are you? P-please don’t.”

“I guess you misunderstood me? Regarding their romance, I will not meddle with their hearts...with their feelings of love for each other. Hearts are fussy little things, after all. I’ll give you my oath if you want it.”

“Your oath?”

“Yep. My oath. And I keep my promises. Even if the details change a little, as long as the results stay the same, you’ll have no problem with that, right? As long as Esfia is a kingdom where boys are allowed to be in love with each other, you know.

“There’s just one thing, kid... I may have created this world so you could be reborn into it, but that doesn’t mean this world will revolve around *you*. And one more thing... I can’t guarantee you’ll be happy there. You’ll be a side character. It’s a long, hard road.”

I was moving...being pushed somewhere. The stars were becoming so distant...

“Well, a little hardship is worth it if the alternative is going to that cruel world. Compared to what could’ve happened to you, I guess you were lucky to meet me.”

I was lucky? How could you call this lucky...?

“And hey, if you work hard, a path just might open up for you. Naturally, the opposite is also true. I can’t wait to see what possibilities lie within you.”

Have a nice life...

Blackout.

And then...I was reborn as Octavia.

Just like he promised in that void, I was reborn into the world of *The Noble King*...with my memories as Maki Tazawa intact.

Even though I was in a baby’s body, the moment I opened my eyes, my soul was Maki, age eighteen.

These were the memories...the shitty, haunting memories I never wanted to relive.

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I died as Maki...and then a few hours later, I was reborn as Octavia. That’s just what it felt like.

The day I was born sixteen years ago, I was in a daze. It felt like time was moving so slowly. In the first moments after my birth, the only thing I was able to do freely...was think.

And the first thought I had when I got my wits about me was: “My anger...was misdirected.”

At *him*...that mysterious man.

I realized then that the mysterious man I’d met in the void was not like any of the myriad of deities that were familiar to me in Japan. At any rate, from a normal human’s perspective...he was basically a god.

And even though I was panicked over the shock of my own death, I’d treated that god horribly. I mean, that guy had no obligation to save me. Even if he were another human being like me, just because he had the ability to help me, that didn’t mean he *had* to take action to save someone he’d just met. It all came down to a different factor—his goodwill.

I was dragged into someone else's orchestrated murder...and I died before it was my time. And it wasn't that mysterious man's fault, yet I had taken all of my anger out on him instead of the true killer. He just happened to know the true killer...and I had conflated the two.

It was...a textbook misdirection of anger. In spite of which, the young man had agreed to give me a new life in another world, with my past-life memories intact. I should be grateful...not angry.

But more than anything else—I longed to become the old me again. It was all I could think about. Even after I'd made the decision to be reborn into the world of *The Noble King*.

I was desperately clinging onto my old life...because it was right there, within reach. Because I believed that mysterious man could give it back to me.

Because when he said my soul was unremarkable...it broke my heart.

Sometimes I cried. Sometimes I laughed. Sometimes I got angry. I was just an ordinary human being. You couldn't call me extraordinary. But what he said was a complete rejection of my eighteen years as Maki Tazawa. And it wasn't just about me. It was a rejection of my mother and father who cared for me...my entire family...

I felt like everyone I cared about was being mocked...and it really hurt.

It lit a rebellious fire in me. I wanted to prove myself worthy. Even though he was the one saving me.

Maybe that's why he said my soul was unremarkable.

Unlike when I was in that void, my mind was clear. And I somehow managed to laugh at myself for feeling that way.

Now that Maki Tazawa's body was gone and I'd become baby Octavia, I lay there in a daze, going over the conversation I'd had with the mysterious man.

That's right... For just a brief period of time, I didn't see the events that had transpired as a "shitty, haunting memory."

The events that transpired hadn't changed.

But there were some things I should have understood when I was in the

void...but that I'd failed to notice.

"I can't wait to see what possibilities lie within you."

First, those words that mysterious man had said to me. And second...the insufferably pleasant smile he had on his face when he said it.

These were the two things that triggered my epiphany.

It doesn't add up. You wanted to see the possibilities within me? But isn't that what your "comrade" wanted? Why did you say that to me...and why did you smile like that?

But my death was caused by the actions of that strange guy's comrade. The mysterious man himself had nothing to do with it.

His comrade...comrade... What did he mean by comrade?

This comrade was the same type of entity as the mysterious man...so it wasn't human. While I was in the void, I'd just assumed that was how he'd meant *comrade*.

But if it was the actions of his *comrade*...then why was that strange guy so knowledgeable about it? He knew how many humans had been taken to that "cruel world" and why they were taken. He knew that his comrade had killed the man who was trying to cross the street. And he knew that caused a chain reaction that led to my death.

Was it because he was a god? Was he omniscient? Wouldn't that then mean he *thought* the exact same way his comrade did?

He didn't seem opposed to his comrade's experiments on humans. It didn't seem like he was trying to stop them.

And most of all, what he said to me—and that look on his face when he said it... He was genuinely excited to see what would happen to me. That's what I sensed from him...

The answer was so close, but just out of reach... A sense of gloom began to well in my chest. I swam upstream in my fresh memories.

"To us, humans are just like lab rats, I suppose."

Why didn't he say "to my comrade"?

"Well, we had a hypothesis— Don't ya wanna believe in the power of possibility? Don't ya wanna see if he can overturn our expectations?"

Why...why did he keep saying "us," "we," and "our"?

We...us...our... The mysterious man kept speaking in plural.

We...us...our... Meaning: the mysterious man...and his comrade.

Now I get it.

That strange guy was doing experiments right alongside him. *That's* how they were comrades.

He'd alluded to it in everything he'd said. But I was so preoccupied with myself...that I'd completely let it slide.

It just happened to be true that the mysterious man hadn't killed the man in the road...but he *had* created the cause of my death.

It was just a matter of being directly involved...or *indirectly* involved. That was the only difference. And he was the latter...

"After all, I wasn't the one who killed Mr. NEET. Which means, I wasn't the cause of your death, either. Right?"

So *that's* why he phrased it that way... Because he knew I didn't understand? No... It's because he really didn't think anything of it.

Wow... I really am an idiot.

An incomprehensible...indescribable feeling welled up inside of me.

A lady frantically ran into the room where my crib was to check on me. It was because I was wailing like I'd been set on fire.

That mysterious man...inside of me... *He* did this to me.

And in that moment, the events that transpired in that void under the starry sky turned into what I've been calling my shitty, haunting memories.

If I'd grown up a little more before I died and was reborn into this world... maybe I would have done better.

I genuinely believed that thought I had when I was dancing with Derek. It wasn't a lie...but there was another truth buried deep inside of it.

I wish I could have kept living as Maki. If that accident was unavoidable, then maybe I could have at least reconciled that. Then again, I found out that I wasn't even supposed to die anyway.

How are my mom, dad, and big sister doing back in Japan?

My funeral probably already happened by now. Does time pass at the same speed in both worlds? Maybe my sister is even married by now. Maybe my parents are grandparents now.

Whenever my dad yelled at me, I remember I'd snap back at him and sulk a lot. Those weren't good memories...so why do they feel so dear to me now? Why do I wish my dad would yell at me just one more time?

How are my friends doing?

How's BL-hater Kazune doing? We used to compare our mock college entrance exam tests a lot. Strangely enough, ever since that one time I tried to get her into BL, we'd become much closer friends. Knowing Kazune, she must have gotten into her first choice for college... You know, Kazune and Cissy are a lot alike.

I know it's impossible, but...I really want to see her.

My death and everything that transpired afterward made me see the truth: that I'm just a tiny, insignificant pawn in the palm of someone's hand. That's why I tried not to remember it... If I could, I would have forgotten about it completely.

And yet I couldn't forget. If I let myself remember, I would relive everything in my mind vividly, down to the tiniest details. But I didn't want to relive it again.

As a baby, crying and screaming, I locked all those shitty, haunting memories deep inside of my heart. I wouldn't remember it. I wouldn't think about it.

For a good long while, I was in a depressed stupor. I was like an organ donor patient, rejecting my entire body. I couldn't understand a word anyone was saying. I longed to speak Japanese. It was hell trying to fuse my past-life

memories with this new world.

That young man had said it would be easier to be reborn without my past-life memories. Only then did I really understand what he meant.

Homesickness and Maki's eighteen years' worth of memories haunted me. Having those memories made me who I was... But what if I didn't have them?

I would still be me on the inside, so I'm sure I would still have turned out differently from the Octavia in the books... But my life would also probably be much different now.

I didn't truly become Octavia until I'd grown up a little, learned the Esfian language, and gotten better acquainted with this world. I was born into the world of *The Noble King*, literally.

My big brother was Sirius. And not only had my father married a man—all the kings before him had married men. That fantasy world was now real. It was vast, expanding before Octavia's—my—eyes.

So I decided to embrace it.

I chose this life. Moping about it wouldn't change anything!

I wasn't tasked with some sort of important mission in my new life. If I did have a mission, it was to play the part of Octavia in *The Noble King*. Unfortunately, that meant making sure an heir to the throne was born...

But since I had to be here, I might as well live my heart out. My goal was to be bright, strong, and brave! And optimistic!

And since I was severely lacking in the basic stats a princess needed, I got carried away with my part sometimes—like that time I convinced myself I was a good dancer even though I sucked royally—but I always worked so hard to make sure I didn't slip up. And actually, that might have been really good for me in the end.

Nightmares would sometimes haunt me as I slept, but when the sun rose, my day as Octavia would begin. Over time, just hearing the Esfian word for *God* no longer filled me with the raw, visceral sense of dread it used to.

But no amount of embracing my life as Octavia could help me overcome my

worries about Sirius's romance with Sil. When they met and fell in love, I was faced with a dilemma: Should I stay faithful to the source material and help them out...or should I get in their way?

If Sil and Sirius didn't become lovers, maybe I wouldn't need to deal with The Heir Dilemma anymore. What if I just made it so they never met each other in the first place?

All the information I needed to make that happen could be found in *The Noble King*. All the scenes and dialogues I loved had left such an impact on me that I probably remembered them pretty accurately.

I remembered all the main characters...and even some of the side characters. And if you removed all of them, I still had the main story line in my head...but it was terribly rough.

Just how far could I go with uncertain information? When I reached this realization, I started to have doubts. If Sil didn't become Sirius's lover, then who *would* Sirius fall in love with?

And not *who*, but which *gender*?

This *was* a BL world, after all—so wouldn't it always be a guy?

If Sirius fell in love with a guy who wasn't Sil...nothing would change for me. I would still be tasked with the same role. If it had to be a guy, I wanted it to be Sil.

So in the end, I decided not to get in their way—in fact, I'd slip pieces of key information to Sirius to help bring them together. In *The Noble King*, Sil was a highly accident-prone hero of the story. Sirius's rivals in love would make advances on Sil—causing him to get badly wounded. I remember hating those parts of the story, so I made sure they didn't happen.

I just couldn't be happy for their romance. I couldn't be happy for them, but also—hypocritically—I remembered rooting for Sil as a reader. So I just couldn't ditch my favoritism for Sil.

The days and years passed...and brought me to where I am now.

I took a deep breath in and blew it out. I lifted my right hand in front of my

face. It was still shaking.

I tried to stop it...but it wouldn't stop shaking.

All these years I'd declare "*Shitty memories begone!*" and trick myself into thinking I was okay... But I knew the truth. It was all hollow bravado.

I avoided facing the truth all these years...because I didn't want to think about it.

But it just had to come back...all at once...all so suddenly...

Seeing that familiar face triggered me...so badly that I was ashamed of myself.

All the feelings I hadn't dealt with started flowing out of me uncontrollably. All the feelings I'd locked away as "shitty memories" when I was a baby.

An outside hand had forced open the sealed box of memories. That's why I was so terrified.

I was still holding on... In my heart of hearts, I'd never faced the fact that *Maki died*. I didn't want to face it.

My feelings were a splattered mess. Like someone dumped all the paints from a palette onto a canvas. And I hated myself for it. I wished I could go back to acting the way I did before.

My eyes were burning. I felt a stinging sensation in my nose. The tears were welling up to the surface.

Don't cry! Hold it in!

But my scolding was in vain. Fluid seeped out of the corner of my eyes into the center of my golden mask. Once one tear had squeezed its way out, more tears followed, one after another.

As I reached up, fiercely wiping the tears off my cheeks with the palms of my hands...I heard a quiet knock at the door.

My head jerked sideways. I'd only shut the door... I'd forgotten to lock it.

I heard footsteps behind me when I ran out of the pleasure hall... How far did they follow me?

...I'm not sure.

But I don't think anyone saw me enter this room.

So...who could that be?

The mask slipped slightly aside. The amber eyes and striking face behind it. That all-too-familiar face appeared in my memory.

What if it's Rust? Is it just a coincidence that they look alike? Is that even possible? That everything—aside from the scar—looks identical?

I couldn't walk to the distant door. I couldn't call out and ask who was there.

Someone called out to me from the other side of the door. "Princess Octavia... are you in there? May I have permission to enter the room?"

That unique, handsome voice... Even though I couldn't see him, I knew exactly who it was.

"Kliff...ord...?" Relief surged through my heart.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I'm sorry...for running off alone like that."

Do I sound normal? I sure hope so.

If I had to choose...I'd want him to leave me alone. I needed it...just for now.

"You need not apologize to me. However, I wish your permission to enter."

But Klifford, a stickler for duty...would never let that fly.

I ran off. I was the one causing trouble here. If we were in the castle, that would be one thing, but here? In a place where there's no telling what might happen? There was no excuse for my odd behavior.

Klifford was saddled with a duty. To make sure I was really alone. To make sure there were no intruders in the room with me. Driving him away would be a mistake. That fact was painfully clear to me, but I just couldn't bring myself to take action.

It felt like my soul had been split in two.

The Maki in me was screaming, *I don't care! I don't want anyone coming in here!*

But the Octavia in me was saying, *I know you don't want him in here, but you need to consider your position.*

It was so surreal... Both of those voices were mine.

I wiped the tears off my cheeks once more. The room was dimly lit. I was wearing a mask.

It'll be okay, Octavia. He just needs to see that you're safe. You can hold it together for just a minute. He might not even notice you were crying. Or shaking.

"The door isn't locked... You can come in."

Klifford opened the door slightly and stepped into the room. He was no longer wearing his jet-black mask. He took a cautious look around the room, then returned his gaze to me.

His eyes widened for a moment... Did he notice?

I spoke quickly to distract him. "I'm surprised you knew I was in here."

"Well, I am your Adjutant, Your Highness."

An Adjutant can use his Insignia to sense when his Sovereign is in danger.

I looked at the palm of my right hand—it was wet with tears. As naturally as possible, I rested it on top of my left hand. Two days ago, Klifford's Insignia had shone on it. Was that why?

"I see... Well, thank you for coming to my aid. However, I am in no danger. I simply wished to do a little thinking... A sudden thought came to mind."

"You wanted to think...in a place like this?"

"That's right..."

As Klifford approached me, I turned my face away... I scooted back. I wanted to keep my distance. My tears were still flowing. I didn't want him to notice.

I can't...keep this up any longer.

"Would you wait for me outside this room? That's an order..." I raised my voice...hyperaware of how I sounded.

After a beat, Klifford lowered his eyes and bowed. “As you wish...” He turned on his heel to leave.

And as I watched him walk away, the tears I’d somehow managed to force back flowed freely again. I frantically wiped them with my right hand.

It was okay... I’d fooled him... It worked out...

It *would* have worked out.

If only Klifford hadn’t turned around at just the right moment.

This time, I could see it clearly. His indigo eyes opened wide in shock.

I bit my lip and turned my back on him.

It wasn’t supposed to...be like this.

“Mm!” I whimpered. The dam broken, I wiped the freely flowing tears from my eyes.

Pathetic... How could you let someone see you so weak...?

The room echoed with the sound of my weeping. Klifford showed no signs of leaving. Aside from my cries, there was not a sound in the room.

Time wore on relentlessly.

Until the faint sound of voices made my shoulders flinch.

“How about this room? The door’s cracked open. Wanna see what’s in there?”

“What if someone else is already using it?”

“Then we’ll just have to get a nice hard look.”

“Oh, *you...*”

Through the crack in the door, I could hear the friendly voices of two men. I could hear their footsteps from all the way inside this room.

A couple at a junior ball...looking for an empty room, giggling in hushed voices... They were here to use a room for its intended purpose.

“...This room...” “The door’s cracked open...”

Are they going to come in here?

If they do, they're sure to recognize me. They'll know I'm Octavia, first princess of Esfia.

I need to put on my princess face, fast. Now's no time to fall to pieces.

But the harder I tried to stop my tears...the harder they fell. I couldn't explain myself out of this.

The voices got closer and closer. "Wanna make a bet on whether someone's in there? I think...someone's in there."

"I guess I'm betting on empty, then. Whatever you feel like."

"Okay, it's a bet!"

The door began to creak...

It's too late! I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the worst.

But at exactly the same time...I was enveloped by warmth.

A voice whispered in my ear, "Please...be patient and endure this. Punish me later, if you must."

Klifford was holding me from behind.

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Klifford's large, sturdy frame hid me completely from view.

Immediately after, the air in the room stirred. I could tell it was Klifford, looking over his shoulder.

"Halt. What do you want?" A deep, intimidating voice the likes of which I'd never heard before snapped behind me. It was directed at the door.

I heard the two men at the door gasp. "Oh...pardon us. Sorry we barged in on your fun. The door was cracked open, so we... But I didn't imagine..."

"My deepest apologies! We'll seek out another room," one of the men apologized, turning to leave. But the other man sounded confused.



“Aren’t you...Princess Octavia’s bodyguard?”

“Yes. And?” Klifford chuckled softly as if to add, *“You wanna make somethin’ of it?”*

“N-never mind...”

“Was it for gossip? Is that why you wanted to ‘get a nice hard look’ at who was in here?”

“Whoa, don’t put words in my mouth—Sir Knight. I’m sorry; I took that joke too far. The notion is indeed absurd—encounters here are like a lone night’s dream for both people involved. Don’t worry... We’ll both forget we saw you here.”

I heard the door close. The footsteps disappeared into the distance. Hearing this, Klifford’s arms loosened from around me.

I understood his signal. It was all an act. He’d only hugged me from behind so that the intruders wouldn’t see me. So they’d think I was one of the many nameless persons involved in secret rendezvous. Klifford had shifted all the focus onto himself. And I had held back my whimpering so I wouldn’t blow his cover.

Now that the danger had passed, we would return to normal.

And yet...for some reason, I didn’t want his arms to leave me. So I grabbed his hands, pressing them to my stomach so his arms would stay around me. I was well aware of the difference in strength between us. That I had no power to stop him. That he could just ignore my touch.

But Klifford stayed.

And he just held me in silence...as my tears fell onto his hands.

Was I just starved for touch? Like a little child?

Why did his warmth make me feel so safe?

The words just flowed out of me. My voice was wet with tears...but I no longer needed to hold back anymore.

“You hid me...so they wouldn’t see me crying...didn’t you?”

When Klifford and I practiced dancing back at the castle, he'd told me he wanted me to give him a command as his Sovereign. And the command I'd thought of was not at all Sovereign-like. *If I ever cry...then I want you to hide me so nobody can see my tears...* Wow. Ironical I made that request when this sort of scene was nowhere in my imagination.

After a little pause, Klifford answered quietly, "Well...you commanded it." It was subtle, but his voice sounded just a bit gentler than usual.

"Yes, I did command it, didn't I?"

When I'd asked Klifford to promise me, he'd said a promise wasn't necessary. Because he was my Adjutant, and I was giving him a command. But he'd kept the promise all the same.

"My clumsiness was partly to blame," he said.

"Your...clumsiness?"

"Those men were drawn to this room in the first place because I neglected to close the door all the way."

"You were merely performing your duty correctly."

I couldn't call Klifford into this room to be alone with me at my own discretion like I had back at the castle. Still, even if the two of us were alone in this room, as long as he left the door open, he could make a good case to any potential witnesses that there wasn't any funny business going on. And in truth, nothing had happened. We were just together in the same room.

If I had been in my normal state...I would have thought nothing of this whole scene.

"Still, I didn't make the correct judgment call quickly enough," Klifford insisted.

"No, it was my fault... I was entirely useless."

I really do believe that Klifford waited for my command until the last possible moment. But look at me... I'm in such a horrible state...

"I'm a failure as a Sovereign."

“No, Your Highness—you are the Sovereign I chose.”

Silence fell. Klifford filled it. “Who—what made my Sovereign cry?”

“If I tell you, will you kill the bastard?”

“If you command it, gladly.”

I giggled through my tears—it was a complicated laugh. Since we couldn’t see each other’s faces...maybe that’s why we were able to speak so freely with each other now.

“Thanks. That’s very sweet of you... But you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because...it’s someone you could never defeat.”

“But couldn’t I still challenge them?”

“Knowing full well that you would lose?”

“In battle, a soldier must fight even when he knows the war is lost.”

“True... Not all battles *can* be won.” *And even if you know you’re gonna lose... there are some battles you just can’t avoid.* “In that case...if I was faced with a losing battle...I’d love to at least smack him hard in the face once.”

How could I even challenge *that bastard* to a fight? *Could* I even land a single attack?

That bastard... I think I should stop calling him that. It’s proof that my personal feelings are getting in the way. That I can’t be objective.

I could feel Klifford’s heart pounding against my back.

The sound of life. I could feel its warm embrace around me.

His heart was calm. So much calmer than mine.

I need to think about this objectively...

That bastard—that mysterious man, all he did was create this world.

And this world has its own most-worshipped god: the Sky God.

The only way I could even fight that mysterious man is if he intervened directly

in this world, but...

.....Intervene?

The word tugged at something in my conscience.

So wait: Rust—a man who looks exactly like him—why does he exist in this world?

It goes deeper than that.

It had been quite a while since I'd brought those haunting, shitty memories up to the surface... The memories of what led to my reincarnation...

The contents of the conversation I'd had with that mysterious man.

This is the world of *The Noble King*. It's modeled after a BL fantasy series. That's why it's normal for all the kings to marry other men. That was what I'd always believed.

I'd believed that was also why producing heirs and preserving the royal bloodline was left to the kings' sisters—since a man couldn't make a baby with another man. It was a history that could only be described as messed up. It was twisted. But I believed that's just the way things were.

But two days ago, my father had told me something very important.

Esfia has had queens, too.

That the fourth queen, King Eus's elder sister, had angered the Sky God and was assassinated by King Eus.

"The Sky God..." I murmured, unconsciously squeezing Klifford's hand harder.

"All I did was fill in the plot holes the way I thought would work best. By the time you're born into that world, everything should be pretty much no different from what you know. You have my word..."

"Even if the details change a little, as long as the results stay the same, you'll have no problem with that, right? As long as Esfia is a kingdom where boys are allowed to be in love with each other, you know."

As long as the results stay the same...

So this could be *The Noble King* that I knew and loved?

At the beginning of Volume 1, my elder brother, Sirius, Alec, and I were born into Esfia's royal family...and Sil was with House Burks. Sil met Sirius, they fell in love, overcame many obstacles, and received everyone's blessing. The crown prince's devout love to another man was permitted.

So to lay the groundwork for all of this... Wouldn't the enthronement of Esfia's queens need to be suppressed?

Esfia's history was never written about in the light novels. That was one of the plot holes the mystery man had filled.

What if he had...*done* something?

He could have created this world, then watched over it... But he's not that type of guy. He wouldn't bother to do the hard work of intervening on behalf of an *unremarkable soul* such as me. He would create the world, then turn it loose. But...

"And I keep my promises."

But he still might have left something behind...with a trigger set to go off.

That something might have been...the Sky God's anger.

To properly set the stage. In order to—in *his* eyes—fix the mistakes.

Even now...?

I don't have hard evidence...but it *is* logically consistent.

What if Esfia's history was created by that mysterious man...and it had nothing to do with *The Noble King*? What if it wasn't even close to what the author had intended?

None of the published works of *The Noble King* mentioned any historic royal marriages. Just that Esfia was a kingdom where men marrying men was generally accepted, despite some detractors. King Enoch—my father—also appeared in the series as a man married to another man... But that was it.

The main focus of the story was Sil's romance with Sirius and everything that happened to them. So nothing else really mattered to the readers. I'd said as much to the mysterious man.

But if everything became *real*?

“...Someone or something would need to be sacrificed in order to make that history work.”

As a story, it was fine to leave that part redacted.

But in order to make that story real, that mysterious man filled in the blanks. And it's all here...in this world.

It probably deviated greatly from the source material of *The Noble King* series.

But the two worlds had merged...to create this one?

The Octavia in the source material offered to give up her own child to Sirius...*not* because she was forced to do so.

But did she do it because it was a long-established historical norm? No...it didn't feel like that, either.

So *why*?

There was book Octavia...and me.

I was different because I knew how the story would pan out. Because I was a different person inside.

At least I always *thought* that's what made us different.

But...was I wrong?

In the books, Octavia is a kind, warmhearted girl who loved her brother's romance with Sil. That's how her character was written...but there were no dark undertones of the disturbing royal family dynamic, held together by adoptions from close relatives.

Over the generations, princesses had their children taken by their brothers when they became king—at times, they'd even drink concoctions that stunted their ability to conceive again. What if such a sordid history was never even conceptualized in the original books?

If Sister-dearest were a real girl without past-life memories like me, and she had to live in a world with such a history...no matter how kindhearted she was, I doubt she would have loved her big brother so much. It would be quite normal,

in fact, for her to harbor complicated feelings toward Sirius and Sil. But...that's not how she was at all in the books.

Esfia was a kingdom where all throughout history, kings married other men and they used their sisters' children to continue the royal line.

But this history...didn't happen in the light novels.

That's why book Octavia was able to be so steadfastly supportive of Sil and Sirius's romance.

I bit my lip.

Bitter tears of self-loathing spilled out of my eyes.

It happened again. Just like when I was in that void, I'd overlooked something I should have noticed. A vital piece of information that I'd missed just because I kept running away from those haunting, shitty memories.

Only now...sixteen years after the fact, did I finally realize it.

If only I'd faced the truth. Then I might have come to the realization much sooner.

"It will be a world where Sirius becomes king and is together with Sil Burks and only Sil Burks."

I believed he'd used Sister-dearest's solution to The Heir Dilemma as a base for his world building. But there had to have been a different way.

A world based off *The Noble King* designed to give Sil and Sirius a happy ending.

A world that the mysterious man used his imagination to twist and distort in order to make the story happen as planned.

Exactly...what I'd wished for.

The happiness of the two main characters was what I wanted, without question.

But I'd never dreamed that I would become Octavia.

Just because I was the reason this world was created, that didn't mean it would revolve around me. So I assumed maybe I'd be a small character with a

name who showed up in a scene or two.

But nope, I was *Octavia*.

The happy ending Sirius and Sil were promised in the books...and my happy ending as Octavia, a girl with Maki Tazawa's memories...were at odds. That's how the world was built.

"Sirius will become king, and he will be together with Sil and only Sil. That's what you want, right?"

"Well, The Noble King is their story..."

At the time, I'd just answered him impulsively.

But if my reasoning was correct, then even if I get married and have a child—political marriage or no—my child will still be taken by Sirius when he becomes king...because that's the *correct* ending.

The young man had said the details might change a little, but the results would stay the same. Was *this* one of those "details"?

I'm just a pawn...in every way imaginable.

This is...some sick joke.

I'm sure now that the mysterious man had made me Octavia on purpose. What's more, he didn't care what happened to me. He didn't care if my life proceeded as written or not.

He also predicted that I would fulfill my duties as Octavia did in the books, one way or another.

The past is gone... I can't change that.

Then, fine... Let's show him what "latent possibilities" lie within me.

If Sirius can put forth a reasonable proposal to solve The Heir Dilemma, then I'll bless his union with Sil with all my heart.

But if he doesn't...

Then I'll resist it. By any means necessary.

No matter how in love Sil and Sirius were, my brother still might take a

different path than he did in the books. The future has yet to be decided—those are the lies I'd told myself all this time.

I'll admit: Sirius and I don't have a very good relationship. But he's my brother. And I definitely think of him that way.

I didn't want to become his enemy, if I could avoid it. But some disputes can't be solved by a little sibling spat.

I'm going to take a stand.

I will be the princess...who puts an end to all this.

I will put an end to the practice of kings getting heirs from their sisters.

Things shouldn't have to be this way, just because this is a BL world...

And girls shouldn't be burdened with the inconvenient aftermath of someone else's romance.

Even though I held all these beliefs in my heart, I could never speak them publicly.

If Sirius was to take the throne, with Sil as his husband, he would need to get a lady concubine—even if it meant enacting some new law. And if that was something he wasn't willing to do, then he shouldn't have the throne.

This wasn't true of just Sirius. It was true of my father and all the kings before him.

If I—the princess—made this declaration, I doubt the kingdom would even budge off the foundation on which it was built. But depending on how my brother behaves, I might say it anyway. Even if it leads to war.

I'm not going to sugarcoat this. Now that I've become one of the central players in this story, I'll act in my own best interests.

If my hasty answer to that mysterious man was the start of all of this...then it is my responsibility to bring it to an end.

No matter which way the chips fell, my hope was that—at the very least—Esfia would be a better place for whoever comes after me.

It took me way too long to come to this realization...but it's not too late to

start over right now.

My plan is—the same as before. First, I find a (fake) boyfriend. That will be a crucial first step in finding a way out.

And my next step will be to take another good look into Esfia's history. I might find some clues.

Right. Then there's also Sirius's missing childhood memories. How did that happen? Did whatever trigger that mysterious man left behind cause it? Is the wrath of the Sky God a remnant of the trigger the mysterious man left behind? Or is it something else? Or someone else?

The first thing that came to mind was Rust Byrne, the man who looked exactly like the mysterious man in question. I still felt an overwhelming sense of dread just picturing his face.

But I have to talk to Rust, now more than ever. I need to keep my wits about me and determine who exactly he is.

My body shook, betraying my brave thoughts.

And if I'm going to make this happen...I need to give my heart closure.

I loosened my grip on Klifford's hand, signaling him to step back. He complied and stepped back into a bow, his gaze lowered. I removed my golden mask and looked directly at him.

"Your Sovereign has a command for you."

"Aye."

"I won't say why. But I am going to cry very hard for a while now. I need you to hold me, Klifford."

Klifford looked up at me. What was it I saw reflected in his indigo eyes. Bewilderment? Hesitance?

I was well aware of how pathetic I must look to him, daring to give him a command after already embarrassing myself so thoroughly. But I shamelessly turned my tearstained face up to look Klifford in the eye.

Time dragged to a standstill as I stared up at him... Until finally, a faint smile

formed on Klifford's face.

"Go ahead, Your Highness." He spread his arms wide.

I flung myself into Klifford's arms...and I sobbed with all my might. If I cried out everything I'd kept locked inside these past sixteen years, I would have the strength to stand my ground. But crying alone would not be enough. I knew I was putting Klifford in an uncomfortable position... But I didn't care.

And as I cried into his chest, Klifford's hand moved...landing softly on my head. When I felt his hand there, caressing my hair, I flinched. Then his hand moved away.

A tentative, clumsy touch... My mind went back to the jostling carriage. *Was this...the touch I felt in my dream on the way to the junior ball?*

I looked up at Klifford. He was staring down at his right hand, but his gaze quickly returned to me.

"My apologies, Your Highness... I was out of line."

"No, Klifford. It's all right. I was just...a bit startled, that's all." My gaze fell to the floor again.

Back in the carriage...was that you, Klifford? But I couldn't ask him that. So I clung on to him even harder instead.

I need someone I can open up to. Now that Klifford has seen me at my worst... will I be able to tell him everything someday?

For now, it's taking everything in me just to ask him to be with me while I cry.

And as I cried, Klifford's hesitant hand slowly returned to the top of my head. He awkwardly caressed my hair. And this time, I didn't flinch away.

Because I didn't want Klifford to stop.

31

I wasn't sure how much time had passed. I *was* sure that my meticulously applied makeup was a mess, and my eyes were red and puffy. But in one moment, it hit me. The realization that I would be okay now. I could face Rust

without fear.

I released myself from my borrowed embrace. Now self-conscious of all the crying I'd done, I returned my golden mask to my eyes.

I'd just released sixteen years of pent-up grief. Now that I'd cried it all out, I no longer had any reason to pity myself or to run away. I was able to let it go.

I wasn't fake okay anymore. I was genuinely optimistic!

But I couldn't leave an escape route open. Otherwise, there was a chance I might turn a blind eye to reality, just like I'd done with my shitty, haunting memories. So I made a declaration to Klifford.

"I won't cry again. Not until I've achieved my goal. Hold me accountable, Klifford."

The next time I cry, it will be tears of joy. Yup. After all that crying, I need to reclaim my cool.

"Yes, my Sovereign. I promise."

When Klifford said this to me, a genuine smile filled my face. Just like old times.

Okay! I cried it all out, so let's get back out there! We're gonna face Rust Byrne, baby!

...It was a bold sentiment and all, but when I caught my reflection in the mirror, the harsh jolt of reality froze me to the spot.

Now, there's a girl who obviously just cried her eyes out! Yup. The damage was even worse than I thought.

Forget facing Rust—I can't even get back out to the party at this rate. I need to fix my makeup! I need to readjust my battle gear!

If I were back at the castle, I'd ask for Sasha's and Matilda's help...but I was at Paradise in the Sky. Some party guests brought their handmaids along for various reasons, but the majority relied on the party staff.

The junior ball was like a war zone at times. Sometimes, secret battles would escalate to hands slipping, dresses ripping, or drinks splashing in people's faces

or on their clothes. The party staff was used to retouching makeup and removing stains and tears from dresses and such.

What's more, they upheld the three S's: Don't startle, don't scream, and don't snitch. If a staff member leaked a guest's secret, that would be a breach of trust and jeopardize their work prospects. The hall would lose clients. They even risked losing the business of high-ranking nobles. The staff knew that the party host gave the orders holistically, with the expectation that the staff would give their best.

A gathering of female party staff got to work fixing my makeup. They'd seemed pretty freaked out when they heard the order had come from me. And even more freaked out when they discovered I'd been clearly crying. But their faces were drained of color for merely an instant. They then extinguished all personal feelings from their faces and empathetically helped me get battle-ready again.

The only problem was...they were a little *too* empathetic. So empathetic, in fact, that they even gave Klifford a change of clothes. Now, even I am not so crass that I'd blow my nose on a man's uniform... At least I don't think so. I...I sure *hope* not.

O-okay, fine, I *was* snotty! I mean, come on, I'm only human! *Nobody* can cry without making a mess! Still, even if I hadn't gotten snot on his uniform, I had saturated the thick fabric with tears. Anyone who saw it might feel something was amiss. Especially given the fact that looking put together at all times is kind of part of Klifford's job.

And naturally, there's no way the female party staff could overlook it. At a junior ball, impressions were everything. This was true not only of the party guests, but of their servants as well. We might have just dried Klifford's uniform...except this world doesn't have fans or dryers.

At first, Klifford looked concerned that he wouldn't be able to sufficiently perform his bodyguard duties while I had my makeup fixed. But since the female party staff clearly didn't have any weapons hidden, he agreed to the outfit change.

Klifford went to another room to change, and venue guards were temporarily

stationed in front of my room.

I'm sorry, Klifford. Having a shoulder to cry on was nice and all, but I'm really sorry you had to deal with the aftermath.

As I glared at my cowardly self in the mirror, something unexpected happened.

"Forgive me, Your Highness..." the handmaid rebraiding my hair apologized out of the blue.

"What for? I should be the one apologizing—you have nothing to be sorry for."

"It's the hairstyle your castle handmaids created... It's difficult to reproduce. While we are able to braid your hair into something similar, I fear we have altered its shape too much."

Even though my expression barely shifted, my very disappointed face stared back at me through the mirror.

"Yes... I see what you mean."

My puffy red eyes had been the most vital part of my makeover. The staff managed to cool them down and reapply some makeup. But I figured while I had them, I might as well ask them to redo my hair. It made me appreciate how castle staff are on a whole other level. I mean, the staff here are professionals, too, but even pros mess up sometimes!

"Well, no matter. I asked you to do my hair, after all. Just style my hair in the best way you all can."

"Your Highness...yes, of course!" Her relief lasted only a moment—her eyes quickly filled with pensive worry. "I do believe we can style your hair just as nicely as it was before...except for the braided part. I think it would be best to add a little color with a new hair decoration. If you wish it, we could bring Your Highness the finest hair ornaments to choose from..."

My hair decoration... An image popped into my mind, and I went ahead and said it. "How about some flowers?"

"Some...flowers, Your Highness?"

Yup. And I'm well aware it's a crazy idea.

Only commoners wore flowers in their hair. If a lady of the nobility were to do such a thing, it would only be permitted in intimate settings with her inner circle. She would never wear flowers in her hair in public. And if you were a princess, you were expected to wear something very ornate and expensive.

But...when Klifford put the Lieche orchid in my hair the other day, a wave of nostalgia hit me. Putting flowers in the hair... That was something Maki and her friends loved doing. Maki and her big sister would feel all grown-up and stylish whenever they wore matching flowers in their hair.

I longed to relive that joy so much...that when I saw the Lieche orchid in the vase first thing that morning, I almost asked Matilda if I could wear one in my hair. I'd stopped myself because I felt I had to look the part—I had to be a proper princess at the junior ball.

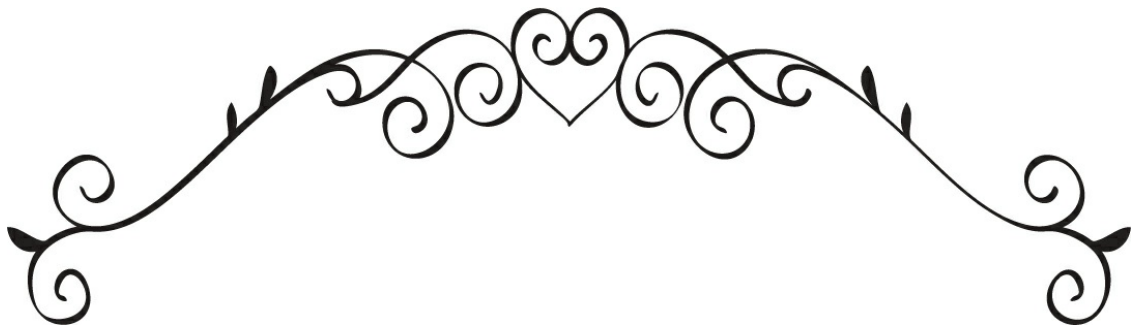
Then what about Blackfeather, you may ask? I still carried that with me, even though it deviated from Esfian norms. So why did I draw the line at the Lieche orchid? Only now did I finally know the reason why.

It was my shitty, haunting memories. It was because I hadn't come to terms with my own death yet.

When it came to things that reminded me of my past life, I couldn't tell the good from the bad. Even I knew the line was blurred, but I still put the concept of flowers in my hair into the "bad" camp.

But I no longer needed to hold myself back. I could say how I felt proudly, without hesitation. Even though I'll never be able to return to that life I miss so much...Maki existed. And because of her, I exist now.

"Why, yes. Some flowers. I've always wanted to wear flowers in my hair. As for the type of flower..." Only that white flower would do. "How about Lieche orchids? I saw many of them blooming in the garden here. Such an elegant bloom could hold its own against even the finest jewels. Do you not agree?"



The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: 4

"Sir Knight, are you certain you do not require assistance?"

"Yes. I can change clothes by myself. If you wish to assist, then go tend to Her Highness."

Klifford took the clean change of clothes from the party maid and sent her away. It was surprising just how accommodating the venue staff was for a royal bodyguard.

Once he was certain the maid was gone, he roughly loosened his collar.

Oh, how bothersome...

In a different environment, what he'd thought was common sense had changed. Now he had to change clothes just because his uniform had gotten a little damp. This was only natural in the world of royalty and nobility. But to Klifford, who until very recently had been in a different world, the difference was so stark he couldn't even laugh about it.

When you're on the battlefield, the stench of maggot-infested corpses on the ground permeating the air... When your sword is drenched in blood and oil... When your uniform is stained with the blood of those you've slain...you don't even have time to realize you're filthy. On the battlefield, any bit of cleanliness

is always soiled. It's best to remain ignorant of it.

And it was more than a different environment that changed norms. Time did it, too. With the passage of time, things changed—to shocking results. This glamorous building was a prime example of that.

The very room Klifford was changing in had been beautified down to every last detail. The bright decorations and carefully selected furnishings had not even a hint of gloominess to them. This explained why Paradise in the Sky was aptly named. It was an elegant, beautiful place where many a junior ball was held.

Originally, Paradise in the Sky stood on royal land. It wasn't until King Eus (knowing his end was near) released it to his vassal that it was later opened to the public many years later. This was the reason why the powerful loved this place: It was a building with a history.

However...this building was the very place that a rebellion had happened. With *King Eus* and Count Alderton at its center. Though all memory of this tragedy had been long forgotten. And of the people alive who did remember... they preferred to turn a blind eye to the past. And to the truth that lay in it as well.

Klifford removed his jacket and cast a glance at the uniform he was given. It was a white uniform with gold buttons and embellishments. It struck him as being very ceremonial—not at all for use in battle. White would never be used for that. For better or worse, it made you overly conspicuous.

And what's more...an *Adjutant* wearing white. The idea was clownish in every way. A sarcastic chuckle filled Klifford's throat.

I hope I'm at least able to move in it...

He quickly changed into the uniform, carefully returning his concealed weapon to its proper place. When the cold weight of the dagger disappeared into his right hand, he brought it in front of his face with a start. The events that had just transpired earlier revisited his mind...and an unsettling sensation assaulted him.

Why did I do that...?

“Because...it was a command,” he murmured.

“If I ever cry...then I want you to hide me so nobody can see my tears...”

As far as Sovereignly commands went, it was mere child’s play. But when Klifford saw that Octavia was crying...he did obey her command.

And yet one couldn’t say he had used the best method possible to do so. That incomprehensible feeling in his heart...the feeling he’d had for quite some time...had influenced his actions.

Just before Octavia commanded him to stand guard outside the room, she’d recoiled a little. That had made him unhappy. He didn’t want her to shut him out.

It did not matter how strange Octavia was acting. He had no need to turn back. He should have left the room as commanded. That way, Klifford’s Sovereign could have cried alone without her Adjutant having to see it.

He stared hard at his right hand. The sensation of her silky golden hair still lingered on his fingertips. Feelings of weakness...unreliability... It was undeniable—Klifford had caressed her hair of his own volition. Yet for some reason...he could not explain why.

The first time this happened was when Octavia was asleep inside the carriage. When he’d noticed she was having a nightmare, instead of waking her, he’d rested his hand on her head. Caressed her hair... until she fell into peaceful slumber again.

He did not understand why she clung onto his sleeve, why she nuzzled against his arm. What sort of emotion she was showing on her face.

Octavia seemed to think that was all a dream. It was best that way. He had no need to correct the record. Because even he could not understand why he’d acted that way.

It was just one time. It wouldn’t happen again. That was how he’d settled the matter.

But it *did* happen again. Suddenly. Just a little while ago.

When Octavia told him she would cry, then flung her arms around him.

That was probably...my subconscious acting out.

When Octavia's tearstained face shot upward, he finally realized what he had done. He released his right hand from her head...the same hand he was staring at right now.

And then, when Octavia hung her head back down to cry, he'd caressed her hair again.

"That was...only because..."

Only because I had the feeling...that's what she wanted?

An Adjutant shadowed his Sovereign. For an Adjutant, obeying a command from a Sovereign was as natural as breathing. But the action *Klifford* had taken had nothing to do with him being an Adjutant. He could not even pretend that it did.

Was this his cross to bear for choosing his Sovereign of his own free will?

He gripped his right hand into a fist. And with that, the final vestiges of the enigmatic afterglow of her touch disappeared completely.

Klifford left the spare room he was given to change in to return to Octavia's side. He relieved the guard stationed outside of the room and stood watch until a maid called him back into the room.

"Excuse me..."

Klifford was greeted with the sight of Octavia in a fresh hairstyle surrounded by a team of proudly beaming maids. The princess with puffy red eyes was nowhere to be found. She was standing as though nothing had happened, with Blackfeather opened in front of her chest. Upon seeing her, nobody would have imagined she had been crying.

Octavia's aqua-blue eyes widened at the sight of Klifford.

"You summoned me, Your Highness?"

"Yes... I'm sorry, Klifford. It's just, I've never seen you wear anything other than the bodyguard's uniform. You're dressed in white, I see."

"Yes. The staff here were kind enough to provide these clothes for me."

A sour expression appeared on Octavia's face. It looked like there was something she wanted to say, but she'd bit her tongue. She smiled instead, taking a step closer to Klifford.

"All that remains is a decoration for my hair. As soon as that's done, I intend to return to the ball...but I wanted your opinion on the matter first, Klifford."

She probably wants to know if I can tell she was crying earlier. "That...should be no problem."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"But a part of you looks displeased."

"I am not at all displeased, though?"

Tearful Octavia and invulnerable Octavia...the latter was her true form. But a part of Klifford hated to see the former disappear. He looked at Octavia, feeling a sense of mystery...but he did not know why.

Then he sensed a presence running over to them. His attention snapped toward that.

Somebody knocked hesitantly on the door from outside. It was a maid. A sweet fragrance filled the room as she walked into it. She was holding a hair ornament made of white flower petals—from the Lieche orchid.

"Your Highness, I've prepared an ornament for your hair."

Octavia smiled. "Thank you."

"However, um...Your Highness, are you sure you wish to wear flowers in your hair?" one of the maids asked with worry. She did not look satisfied like the others.

That was because a highborn lady never wore flowers in her hair in public. And Lieche orchids, besides. A flower blessed both with beauty and poison. A flower said to bloom at the farthest ends of hell.

But there was not a glimmer of hesitation in Octavia's eyes.

"Yes, of course I do. I think Lieche orchids make an excellent hair decoration.

Once I don this flower crown, I will be ready for the ball. If you'll please."

The maid holding the flower decoration nodded. "Sir Knight, you do the honors," she said, offering it to him.

"Oh my... Why Klifford?" Octavia asked, just as confused as he was.

"A flower ornament must be handed to a lady by a man. That way, she will be blessed with good fortune. At least that's what the working class believes... Please forgive me, Your Highness. It was rude of me to treat you as my equal."

"Oh, no. You are quite right. Thank you for educating me. Well...Klifford? May I bestow upon you the task of blessing me with good fortune?"

"I only hope I am capable of blessing you with good fortune."

He took the flower ornament from the maid. It was a pretty decoration, made of two crisp Lieche orchids. He approached Octavia. This time, she did not recoil away from him. Careful not to touch her soft golden hair, he attached the flowers to it.

"What a lovely fragrance..." Octavia beamed, closing her eyes. It was the same heartsick smile she'd worn the day before, in the castle garden. She'd opened Blackfeather, smiling defiantly in victory... But after a little while, her smile faded.

With the Emissary of Ongarne in her service, a black-and-red dress on her slender frame, Lieche orchids in her hair, and Blackfeather in her hand...all traces of fragile tears were gone. She was the embodiment of the Goddess of Death herself...and yet there was a loneliness in her eyes.

Klifford frowned, realizing he had started to reach out to her.

"Well, do you suppose I will be showered with good fortune now?" Octavia kept her eyes open and took a deep breath in and out. "All right. I'm returning to the junior ball," she declared, an emboldened gleam in her eye.

"To which party hall, Your Highness?"

"To the pleasaunce hall," Octavia answered, her voice firm with renewed determination.

The moment the man Octavia was dancing with in the pleasaunce hall

removed his mask, the color had drained from her face. Klifford didn't know why his Sovereign was so distressed. She hadn't told him.

"Would you accompany me?" she added. Her determination had not faltered, but it sounded like she needed him.

Klifford, a bodyguard, served Octavia, a princess.

As an Adjutant, he served his Sovereign, a girl.

It need not be stated that he compartmentalized the two relationships.

However.

"If you wish it, Your Highness, I will not let you ever be alone."

"Promise me," Octavia said, looking up at him.

An Adjutant cannot tell a lie to his Sovereign.

That was what Klifford had told Octavia.

It was the truth. But it was also a lie.

"As you wish...Your Highness." And veiling what truly lay in his heart, Klifford nodded at his Sovereign.

—*Fin.*

Afterword

Hello. I'm Mamecyoro.

Thank you so much for reading *Watashi wa Gotsugou Shugi na Kaiketsu Tantou no Oujo de Aru 2*. I couldn't be happier that we've somehow managed to make it to two volumes.

When the first volume came out, Volume 2's existence was still way up in the air. I owe all my readers a big thank you. If not for you, I wouldn't be writing this afterword right now.

You know, whenever I think about how this was originally going to be a short series, I get a little emotional. It was going to start the exact same way: A girl is reborn as a princess in a BL fantasy world, witnesses a make-out scene between her big brother and another man, then she blurts out a big lie, just like it happened in Volume 1. But if the series was going to be short, she'd have to find the fake boyfriend immediately. And he'd be so on board with the idea that the princess would be like, "What?!" Then, with undertones of true love budding between them, they'd live happily ever after. The end.

But when I imagined how the story was going to unfold, it started to grow. I thought up a different way for her reincarnation to happen, and I was so into it that I started shoving in more elements that I loved. I was like, "Well, if I'm gonna add everything I wanna add, this thing's gotta be a long series, not a short one!" And that's how it evolved into the long story you're holding in your hands.

The characters and story outline deviated pretty drastically from the short version of the story, too. So much so that now it's impossible for poor Octavia

to get her fake boyfriend on the spot. To that end, in Volume 2, we have Octavia venturing to the junior ball to look for a fake boyfriend.

In this book, we see the little back-and-forth between Maki and the mysterious man from the *shitty, haunting memories*. I'd dreamed up that conversation back when I was writing the dinner scene in Volume 1, and I suddenly got the urge to write it so badly that it all just poured out of me then and there.

But since everything that led up to that scene still didn't exist in written form yet, I had to put that scene to bed to ripen until the story was ready for it.

Juicy, plot-significant scenes like that are just so easy to write—my typing speed was on a whole other level there. I wound up editing it a lot afterward, but if only I could somehow unleash that speed all the time...!

And now, onto the cover. Fuji drew me yet another beautiful cover, more amazing than I could ever wish for. When I saw Octavia in her final form of this volume, wearing her junior ball dress and holding Blackfeather, I wanted to scream for joy. *That's my princess!* And with Klifford holding a sword and the mysterious masked man (Rust) in the background, it's just oozing with *vibes*.

Lastly, the scene from Guy's POV where Alexis leaves on his mission had to be cut from Volume 2, but it's still up on the web version, so if you're a fan of this series from the published light novels, check out the web version for extra enjoyment.

Here's hoping we'll meet again in Volume 3.

Mamecyoro

HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. I-II

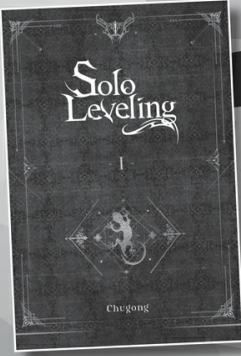
In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the "nonexistent" Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot "unmanned" weapons into battle...

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. I-6

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfiel Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri, who stowed away for the ride!

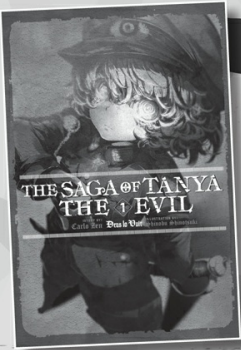
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SOLO LEVELING, VOL. I-7

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

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THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. I-II

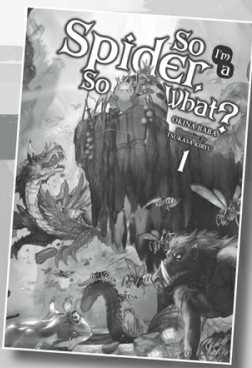
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

Manga adaptation available now!

SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. I-15

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

Manga adaptation available now!



OVERLORD, VOL. I-15

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

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