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The Princess  
of Convenient  
Plot Devices

Mamecyoro

Illustration by  
Mitsuya Fuji





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YEN  
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# COPYRIGHT

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Illustration by Mitsuya Fuji

Translation by Sarah Moon

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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. Has a strained relationship with Octavia due to the heir dilemma.



### Sil Burks

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

### Hugh Roberts

One of Sirius's most trusted bodyguards. He is Octavia's temporary bodyguard in Klifford's place.

### Rust Byrne

The eldest son of Viscount Byrne. Octavia doesn't like him very much.

### Derek Nightfellow

Duke Nightfellow's son and Sirius's friend.

### Nathan Holden

Like Hugh, he is one of Sirius's most trusted bodyguards.

### Guy Peutz

A rookie soldier. At Octavia's request, he is currently on bodyguard duty.



### Klifford Alderton

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

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

### Octavia

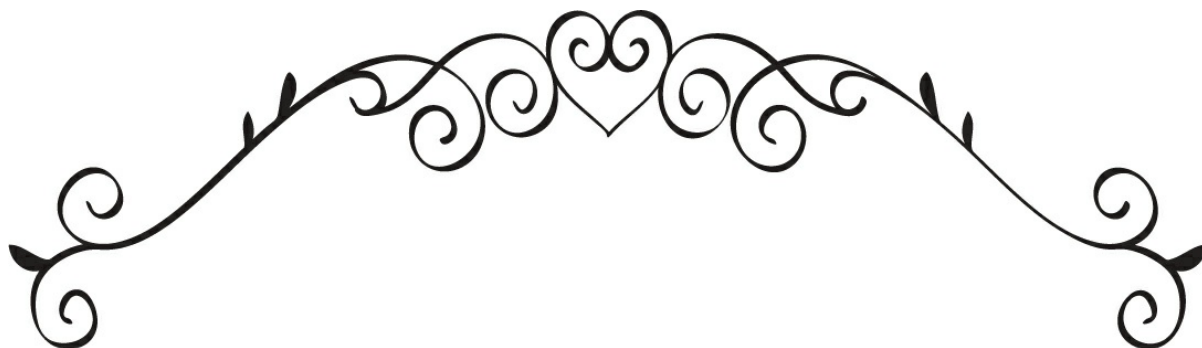
A former high schooler (and *fujoshi*) who was reincarnated into the world of BL novel *The Noble King*. She's the princess of Esfia, fighting to thwart the arranged marriage in her future!



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*Ooh, there's Esfia Bridge.*

As I sat opposite my brother in the horse-drawn carriage, the stone bridge came into view from the window. Since I always had to cross it when I went out, the bridge was like a familiar old friend.

It had the most traffic because it was the widest preferred path connecting the lands around the castle to the castle town. It was a modern reconstruction of the former bridge from King Eus's reign, and one of its modern upgrades was its mobile girders. As it was an aesthetically pleasing, large-scale drawbridge, it was one of Esfia's most beloved destinations for sightseeing.

And once we crossed it, the castle town was only a stone's throw away.

*Now let's review the plan for today's survey one more time! The main objective is, of course, to clear Klifford's name. Gotta crush this survey for his sake as well!*

I set Blackfeather on my lap and pulled my handwritten notes out of my dress pocket. Since there were no tiny notebooks in this world, I had made my own out of scraps of paper I'd cut. I never went on official business without it!

I'd write down ceremonial procedures and schedules and the like in my DIY notebook and hide it in my pocket so I wouldn't make an ass of myself!

What's this? Why don't I just memorize everything, you ask?

Hah!

Sometimes the mind goes blank, despite your best efforts to memorize something! So you always, *always* need a backup! I didn't bother to bring my cheat sheet to the junior ball, but today I'm out on official business, and it's no ordinary survey. One can never be too prepared!

And to that end, the cream-colored dress I'm wearing today is equipped with concealed pockets that fold delicately into the skirt. Just perfect for stashing *and* extracting!

The feeling of stashing little things in my dress is quite awesome indeed.

It might be cool to sew some big pockets for Blackfeather inside my everyday dresses, too. Or maybe I could carry a little purse with me? Ever since I discovered people were wary of the sight of my black wren feather fan, I thought something to conceal it might be good to have.

But let's forget about that for now—

I pulled out my notebook, visualizing the survey in my mind as my eyes darted over the details on the page. Of course, I'd written it in Japanese! That way, if I lost my notebook or wrote something embarrassing in there, nobody but me would be able to understand it!

From his hinting glances, it was clear Sirius wanted to say something to me, but I stuck to my positive visualization exercises.

*First, we carry out the survey's original concept: experiencing daily life!*

*This consists of the Three Ds:*

First was Dress. We would visit the finest of the commoners' shops to appraise the goods, try them on, and purchase them. I needed to feel and see firsthand what was and wasn't in style—oh, what a tragedy for a princess's fashion sense to be outdated!

Buying all one's finery from royal dressmakers made life easy and fitted the bill, as everything was all above the necessary threshold of quality, but I needed to periodically step outside the castle walls to see the current fashion with my own eyes. Sixteen years of experience as a princess taught me that.

The second was Dining, where we ate at restaurants in the capital! It was

kinda like, The Princess Samples the Food of the People.

*Ooh, that takes me back... I begged reaaally hard to add this to the survey itinerary. The whole 'putting food from outside the castle in my mouth' part was the biggest hurdle.*

When I take my meals at the castle, we have a handpicked kitchen staff who meticulously select their ingredients and bring us our meals personally to ensure there's no tampering. So the guards were like, "How do you expect us to re-create that level of security at a frickin' pub?"

I was hoping to at least get permission to eat some street food on the go, but they nipped that in the bud without mercy. In my defense, it was canon! In the books, Octavia and Sirius sneaked out into the castle town and ate sweets! If it's good enough for Sister-dearest, why not me? Also, I just really wanted to know how food outside the castle was different.

And yeah, I could have people describe it to me...but I *had* to taste it for myself! I made an impassioned plea and succeeded in adding Dining to the survey! Victory was mine.

Then, the third D: Dwelling. Originally, I thought that meant we could do a one-night homestay with a family in the capital...but try as I might, the idea was vetoed.

Instead, we compromised with a stroll through the castle town. Today we were to walk along a path lined with kallum trees. It was a location that had been proposed for the survey many times...and today, it had finally been forced upon me. I had avoided it all this time...

I closed my eyes and thought for a minute. *Seeing rows of blooming sakura shouldn't trigger me anymore, should it? I'll be okay, right?*

I tried picturing the trees in my mind to test myself.

*Huh...? Why did that happen?*

For some reason, I pictured a kallum tree in full bloom under a night sky. And here I was trying to picture rows of sakura in the daylight.

It was true that I had seen a kallum tree in full bloom one night in my dark

past, so it made sense for my brain to recall that image, but it wasn't exactly a *good* memory...

*And yet, I feel...warm, for some reason? Like I want to cry...but I feel safe. Did I have this feeling before...?*

But I didn't have an answer to that. The mystery only deepened.

*Hey, Octavia, you decided not to cry over little things anymore—! Oops, wait, didn't I wake up crying yesterday? Urk... Well, I was sleep-deprived and couldn't control myself, so that one didn't count! But I won't cry when I'm lucid! Got it?!*

*Anyway...I guess kallum trees are safe for me to look at now? Yeah! At the very least, I won't fall to pieces like I did when I was a kid!*

My eyes shot open. I was almost at the end of my notes, at the part where I was supposed to visit the shop I'd gone to on the last survey.

*That's the shop where I bought Blackfeather.* After everything that had happened, I was curious to see if their reputation had been tarnished. The last time I went there—in other words, the time I found Sil's guardian ring—it didn't *seem* like business was hurting. But still...

So, to apologize for any bad press—and because Blackfeather made me trust the quality of their products—I had placed an order with them through Sasha. I would pick up my order today, and then— “What's that?”

I looked up to find Sirius staring intently at me. *He's asking about my notebook, isn't he?*

“I was merely reviewing the day's itinerary.”

*Come to think of it, I've never seen Sirius using a notebook... Brains—it's all in the wiring!*

“Since this is no ordinary survey, I was giving myself a final review. Would you care to have a look?”

“...Could I?” Sirius looked surprised.

“Of course.”

I handed my notebook to Sirius, who still looked dubious. I didn't mind



showing it to him, since even if it weren't in Japanese, it was all stuff that was okay for him to see. He knew our survey schedule. I just couldn't let, like, say, a spy posing as a guard see it while we were on the job.

When Sirius took the notebook from me and saw the Japanese script on it, he frowned. "I know this script... I saw it in your room."

*He probably saw my diary when he came to my sickbed.*

But as his eyes ran over the characters, the look in his eyes changed. "*First... we carry out the survey's original...concept?*"

"...!" *No freakin' way.*

*He just...straight up spoke Japanese!*

Sirius pressed a hand to his temple and fiercely shook his head. He crumbled the paper in his fist, as if it were the source of his pain, and shoved it into my hands.

"" ..... ""

The notebook was back in my hands, but I didn't even notice. I was staring at my brother in a daze.

I mean...*how* did he say that?

How did he say a line straight out of my notebook *in Japanese*?!

*First, we carry out the survey's original concept: Experiencing daily life!*

*Did he...did he just crack my super-safe secret code?!*

*Nonono, wrong question—HOW could he do that?*

Sirius sighed. "Forgive me. It really was the day's itinerary after all."

*What did you think it was, dude? Wait, wrong question!*

"Brother...can you read this?"

*That's the question!*

"Yeah... Not everything, though."

*Sayeth what?!*

“But...*how*...?” I murmured in a daze.

“I...” He paused, piecing his thoughts together. “I saw you...use that script all the time.” He pressed a hand to his forehead again. “So, I tried to learn it... I used to...study it...?” He cut off there. Then he shook his head vigorously and sighed. “Anyway, I can read it.”

“Oh...I see...”

My fingers crushed the notebook, creasing it in my hand.

*Er... Yeah, I think it's safe to say Sirius's memory is damaged.*

It hit me first when we had tea earlier, but I was feeling waves of guilt over how I'd treated Sirius in the past. I'd been so coldhearted even though he had tried to connect with me—he'd even tried to learn Japanese! I mean, I do remember him eyeing my DIY Esfia-Japanese dictionary with interest...but I totally didn't think anything of it! And yet, just from that, he taught himself to read Japanese?! Is this because he's one of the main characters? Beware the OP romantic lead!

But still, superhuman perfection aside, there's no way he should have been able to teach himself a mysterious language like that. That's a fact I know all too well.

“Forgive me, Brother...”

“Hm? Why are you apologizing?”

*Good question.*

I could only smile awkwardly in reply. “Just because.”

There was probably no meaning to it.

There was no point in me apologizing to my brother because *he* forgot his past...but the words just poured out. My emotions had finally caught up with me.

*It's the same with Derek... I can't help but think I could have handled things in our past with much more grace...*

*No, it was complicated... In some ways, I made the most of my fate, but in*

*other ways, I couldn't. I also had to worry about what happened in the source material.*

*Yeah, but...*

As I sat there, stewing in my own guilt, Sirius cleared his throat. "That script..."

".....?"

"If I saw it a few days ago...I wouldn't have been able to read it."

"Oh? Were you able to read it when you visited me in my bedchamber?"

"It's likely *that* was the key."

In other words, the key that unlocked his memories?

"Octavia...there are discrepancies in my memory. I can't deny it anymore."

"....."

*I'm shook. Straight from the horse's mouth...*

"I was first made aware of this seven days ago...by Derek."

*Yeah, Derek asked me about it at the junior ball.*

"When he first confronted me, I thought it was impossible. I told him he was imagining things." After a silent, "*however*," Sirius began his self-analysis. "When you think about it, it's absurd that I would make light of any abnormal behavior from myself, no matter how trivial. It's...it's just so unlike me. And yet even now, as I talk to you about it, a part of me is tempted to write the whole thing off as *imaginary*."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because the discrepancies in my memory all have to do with *you*, Octavia. The other reason I'm telling you is...there's no guarantee my damaged memory *won't* jeopardize today's survey in some way. I figured I should let you know... Reading your notes just now made me change my mind."

*My notes "changed his mind." ...Translation: He wasn't originally planning on telling me any of this. But did seeing my Japanese handwriting—and noticing he could read it—really change his mind?*

I scrutinized my brother's face. Perhaps under his true memories' influence, it was easier for him to speak openly with me now. Or at least, it felt that way.

"There's something I wish to ask you..."

He didn't answer, but his eyes said, *Fire away.*

"Do you...have any idea how this happened?"

"How it happened...? The cause, you mean."

Sirius crossed his legs and rested his chin in his hand. He was searching his memory, but showed no signs of pain. Cool as a cucumber, I guess? It's just... there was discomfort on his face.

"Somebody must be behind it... Has to be. I just don't know who. It would have to be someone close to me who I wouldn't distrust. Though there's no proof that the ability to tamper with memories even exists in the first place..."

"Aren't *you* proof of that, Brother?"

From the way he was talking, it sounded like our guy wasn't a creeper who sneaked under the radar and cast a spell on him. *It was someone close... Maybe even someone I know? Yeah, right...* I shook my head and laughed to myself. I couldn't picture anyone that fit that description.

Which leaves one other unknown—

"Brother...have you never felt there was anything wrong with your memory up until now?"

"That's right."

"Then it's quite odd that this would suddenly change in the past few days."

Aside from Derek questioning his memories, maybe there was some other catalyst to unlocking Sirius's memories? If a person was behind all of this, was it a person who arrived at or departed from the castle recently?

*Among the circle of people I know, Alec is the only one who fits that description. But he can't have anything to do with this...*

*Yeah, we can't ignore the whole Derek theory. After all, Derek wasn't a character in the source material. Does that have something to do with it?*



*Wouldn't an outsider be the most likely candidate for having the superhuman ability to manipulate a person's memories? Actually, the first person that comes to mind in that case is the mysterious young man...*

*"I will not meddle with their hearts...with their feelings of love for each other. Hearts are fussy little things, after all."*

*Yeah, he gave me his "oath."*

Then again, memories and feelings are different. I wonder if that meant he might have tampered with other aspects of the main characters. I'd just figured he would keep his word.

Even if you assume that mysterious man was behind it—if you force yourself down the “mysterious man did it” rabbit hole—wouldn't it make the most sense for his doppelgänger, Rust, to have actually done the deed? But that would have to mean Rust made contact with Sirius at some point, and Rust was never close to either me or my brother from our childhood up until recently.

My gaze fell onto the crumpled notes in my hand.

*Focus on what I can do right now...*

I pulled a miniature capped pencil—another of my creations—out of my concealed skirt pocket. It was a short pencil, not the one I used to write in my diary.

*...which is: add to my notes.*

*Beware of Sirius's memory! Safety first!*

I felt it was unlikely that Sirius's tampered memories would cause problems for us today, though. (Totally just going off vibes, by the way!) Then, I reread everything, from the first line to the last.

*No matter how many times I read this, it looks perfectly fine. Just a normal survey... Totally okay.*

But when you consider that part of the plan is us being bait and luring out traitors—it seemed lacking.

I glanced at Sirius. He was looking out the carriage window. Maki would have squealed her head off over his gorgeous profile.

I followed his gaze. Esfia Bridge was long behind us now, so we would arrive at our destination in just a few minutes. Our carriage always took the same route to our surveys. All the paths were paved (ergo, safe). There were no other carriages approaching us. Since the royal carriage was in transit, the road was temporarily blocked—all other carriages were told they could not pass!

There were technically other bridges that connected the castle to the castle town, but I heard they were also closed. All these measures were to limit the movement of traitors as much as possible.

Tightening security in hopes that the traitors would screw up was probably one of Sirius's ideas.

How! Ever!

"Brother—"

"...?" He turned his gaze from the window back to me.

"There's just one thing I want to double-check with you."

"And what is that?"

"This survey...is no ordinary survey. We each have our own agenda."

Sirius's eyes sharpened a little.

Yeah, that's right. Even though we're on the same team, Sirius and I are still enemies in one regard!

"Also, you and I are both decoys to lure the traitors...correct?"

"Well, yes... It's the royal family the traitors are after."

"Yes, but isn't their true target *me* and *only* me?" I pressed my bandaged, gloved hand to my chest. "After all, they devised their plot around *my* scheduled survey."

According to intel from Hugh, they were after the princess! Logically...it follows that they would go after the one who's easier to attack. I mean, it's between me and *Sirius*: a girl with no combat experience and a guy with quite a lot. Real talk, if I were the traitors and I had to choose between me and my brother, I would choose *me*, hands down! I would steer clear of the OP

superhuman!

“To that end, I would like to be the best bait I can possibly be.”

Sirius blinked at me in confusion.

I pressed him further. “Is our security flawless today?”

“Of course it is. We wouldn’t be on this survey otherwise.”

It was a prompt answer.

*Good! Just the answer I was hoping for.*

“Well then, no matter what happens, I *do* trust you will personally see to it that I am unharmed?”

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When we arrived in the castle town, Sirius was the first to exit the carriage. He would greet the masses, then call me out to do the same.

But first...

I shot a glance outside. Our first stop on the survey was the giant castle town square. It was bustling, with a fountain in the center and all sorts of market stalls. It was a daily meeting place for the locals.

Today, the stalls were moved over to the corner and the town square was quite crowded with people.

*I hope the shop I wanted to go to today is open... Found it! Okay, next order of business...*

“Kliff—”

I almost shouted, “Klifford!” out the carriage window, but I caught myself just in time. *It’s not “Klifford,” dum-dum!*

The subconscious is a terrifying beast! I reverted to my habits and almost called out to Klifford for assistance like I’d grown accustomed to over the past week... *Ooh! But I think Klifford happened to look at me from his horse when I thought his name? No, no, no, Octavia, that would be way too convenient...*

I took a quiet, deep breath in and out.

Then I beckoned to the closest man outside the carriage: Hugh, a man of a certain level of influence and my ally for the time being.

Hugh ceremoniously approached me. “Do you need anything, Your Highness?”

“Yes, and listen carefully, okay? It’s about the kallum hairpiece...” I proceeded to brief Hugh on the ceremony that was to follow.

“But, Princess—”

“I’ve received my brother’s permission, I assure you,” I snapped over his protests.

Hugh’s hesitation lasted only a moment. He quickly bowed to me, said, “As you command,” and left the procession.

*Guess I’ll watch him go. Ooh, he’s talking to Guy and Heller. Guy yelped, “What?!” and Heller hissed, “Shut up, stupid!” and clamped a hand over Guy’s mouth. Huh... Are Heller and Guy actually pretty tight?*

I sat and watched for a while until it was my turn to address the crowds.

“Octavia—” Sirius called my name.

A cheer filled the square. Sirius returned to the carriage door and extended his arm. I took his hand, and with a smile, I stepped out of the carriage. As we walked side by side, we were met with a chorus of applause.

We were headed toward a stone stage where peasants would put on plays and musical performances during festivals—though I’d never seen any of these myself. In no time at all, the town square had become a grand theater. The stage was ornately decorated in our honor.

Sirius and I stood on the stage and smiled at the masses. Ordinarily, one of these people would ascend to the stage and hand me a bouquet of flowers, but this time, they would put a decoration of kallum blossoms in my hair.

I didn’t know who it would be, but if it was anything like former surveys, they’d have to be a royal capital citizen and come from an upstanding family. It was proper, as a safety measure.



It was proper...but too proper for me!

I looked up at Sirius, who was sporting his best Prince Smile, and said, “That promise we exchanged in the carriage...I trust you haven’t forgotten it.”

Before he could ask any questions, I released his hand and took a few steps forward. “Greetings and salutations to you all.”

*Urrrg. I’m sweating bullets here. Okay, this is a Blackfeather moment!*

I opened Blackfeather in my right hand and held it up with a flourish. And as the crowd murmured, I heard one of the voices exclaim, “Is that...the infamous wreven feather fan?”

“A craftsman in west castle town bragged that the princess special ordered it from him. He’s been selling fans like it for a month now...”

“Wait, so he was telling the truth? I reckoned that touching them wreven feathers drove him mad...”

“Princess! Oh, *Princess!*”

*And we have a sighting!*

A little girl was sitting on the shoulders of a man who was probably her father, waving a fan of black feathers! *I’m not seeing things, right? Is that a wreven feather fan?!* I waved Blackfeather back at the girl so she’d know I saw her.

This is why I love surveys.

“Today, I conduct my first castle town survey with my beloved brother. To that end, we devised a lovely opening ceremony game which everyone in attendance can play.”

When I heard that the Flower Festival had been canceled that year due to the period of mourning over the war with the Saza Church—that’s when I made the call.

I wanted everyone who showed up to feel like they’d gained something special! Though there might be traitors lurking among them, most of these people were innocent.

Since foot traffic was inevitably heavier due to road closures, survey day was

like a festival for castle town. The peasants partied, and the merchants made bank.

“Please wait just a moment while we get things ready.”

Princess Smile at full power!

*And now we wait. Hugh will give me the signal when everything's ready...*  
*Aha?* Guy was making a big circle over his head with his arms.

*Locked and loaded.*

“Esteemed guests, the wait is over at last. Everyone in the town square shall now be showered with blooms from the sky.”

The crowd erupted with excited questions.

“One of these blooms will be red and will have a decorative string tied around its stem. Whoever grabs this bloom shall bring it to me—no matter who they may be.”

It was technically a ribbon, but the Esfian way of putting it was “decorative string.” And the whole “from the sky” part was an exaggeration. There were four stepladders positioned on the outskirts of the square. Four of our guards climbed them, cradling bundles of blooms.

All that remained was for me to say—

“Let it bloom!”

I thrust Blackfeather forward in a point as I gave the command. Immediately after, the sky was blanketed with a spray of colorful flowers.

*Who's gonna get the prize...? Is this what they mean when they say, “nervous, in a good way”?*

And then—

“Octavia.”

A stern voice sounded behind me.

And I knew who it belonged to—my brother, of course!

“What were you thinking?” Sirius hissed in my ear, his smile still regal and

serene.

“Prince Sirius! Your *Highness!*”

But he was Esfia’s eldest prince—he couldn’t forget to wave to his adoring subjects, and he did so with a smile plastered on his face.

“Oh please, Brother. Why conduct the survey as usual when we could shake things up a little?”

And as Esfia’s eldest princess, I couldn’t neglect my fanservice to the crowd, either. I decided to turn up my waving with Blackfeather. It boosted that little girl’s morale, after all!

“...Shake things up?”

“Why, yes.”

I’d written it down in my notes; giving our traitors easy opportunities to strike is Bait 101 stuff. Even though my allies were like, “Wh-what the hell is the princess thinking?! Does she *want* to die?!” I’d argue that, for today’s survey at least, taking this action was quite effective.

“There are two ways to think of it. First, the traitors might not have a specific plan in mind. They’ll follow us and interfere depending on how things proceed. For example, it is possible the traitors will try to catch the prize flower to put in my hair... That sort of thing will rile them up. They’ll have no choice but to take action.”

“Like, for example, your bodyguard?”

*Hah! Hah! Hah! I won’t take that bait, Sirius. I won’t! Deep breaths...*

I looked around, in search of Klifford. Once I saw those dark indigo eyes among the ranks of my brother’s bodyguards nearby, my anxieties were eased.

*Stay calm, stay cool—this is important! You have Klifford, the perfect role model to follow!*

“Please, let me finish. Second, even if they have a plan or knowledge of our schedule, it’s prudent to give the traitors ample opportunity to act. If I give them unforeseen chances to capture me—for example, an excuse to come close—the traitors may make a sudden change of plans.”

In other words—

“I would like to be the best bait I can possibly be, Brother.”

I repeated what I’d said to him back in the carriage. No matter which route the traitors took, the nest would still be poked!

But if I had to choose, I’d prefer the latter situation, so I put a chink in our tight defenses in hopes of enticing the traitors to attack.

“You promised you would keep me safe no matter what happens, didn’t you?”

He technically didn’t say that, but when I had asked him in the carriage if my security was flawless, he did answer, “Of course!”

The key phrase here is, “no matter what happens.” Everything hinged on it. It meant that the action I had just taken now was as good as sanctioned by him. The only issue is, if I had just asked him, he probably would have refused. It’s all a matter of phrasing—get it?

“Do you honestly think my throwing a little wrench in our plans would make our security fall apart?”

“Of course not.”

“Then can’t I continue to shake things up during our survey?”

“You impulsive little...” Sirius muttered tiredly in defeat. I stole a glance at him. He was still smiling at the crowd.

“Do you realize your actions are only putting yourself in further danger? Even if you aren’t hurt physically, you may traumatize yourself more than necessary. If nothing else, the chances of that are dramatically high.”

*Oops... I had to hear the words to finally realize it.*

At the same time, I realized that if Sirius could say something like that to me, he must be incredibly protective of Sil’s mental health daily.

*Trauma... Psychological damage... Pressure...*

He was pointing out that, even if everything worked out in the end, I might not be able to escape the terrors that remain. Like, if the traitors jump out and

attack me with their swords—even if the swords never reach me, they might come close enough to deal some serious psychological damage.

*And if that happens to me... Yeah, I'll admit it. I'm scared.*

But.

“Well, I trust my bodyguards.”

As long as I had faith that the worst wouldn't happen, I could soldier on.

And the source of my faith was Klifford!

I couldn't see him from where I was standing without turning around...but he was standing by behind us—behind my brother, rather.

Sirius gave me a sideways glance and muttered to himself, “I'm having a hard time understanding this...” Then he gave me his answer. “Suit yourself.”

*Hell ye—*

“On one condition.”

*Hm?*

“I'll *shake things up* my own way, too... You okay with that?”

*He'll shake things up? Well, let's not forget the key takeaway here: I almost have his seal of approval. I have to accept his offer!*

And a simple “Yes” won't do—this calls for enthusiastic consent!

“I'm thrilled with that, Brother. Thank you so much.”

And that was how our survey itinerary got a new addition. Lure the poor saps with a gift-wrapped princess. I call it, Operation Princess in the Snare!

*Let's show everybody what a perfect piece of traitor-bait I can be!*

Just for today, I'll rise to the challenge and act completely out of character!

*Okay, that's all settled. Somebody's bound to have found the prize flower by now.*

I took a fresh look around the scene below...and a circle was starting to form in the middle of the crowd—*our winner is probably in there?* Hugh had already returned to my side, but Guy and Heller were in the circle.

“I think we have a winner,” Sirius murmured as he watched the crowd.

*And the winner is—?*

I left the prize flower selection up to Hugh... Or rather, to the florist closest to the carriage. It served both as a makeup Flower Festival and a nest poking, so two hornets with one stone.

The only instruction I gave regarding the flower was that it be red. I chose red because it just seemed like a “winning” color to me. Apparently, the florist decided on a red rose. Yes, there were roses in Esfia—this world, rather. Their name and the season they bloomed in were the same. There were flowers here that existed in my past life, and there were also flowers like Lieche orchids and kallum blossoms that didn’t.

So...there was supposed to be only one winner with a red rose, but for some reason, five people were approaching us. Two of them were Guy and Heller, and the ones following behind— “My Guy, you *toad*! I thought we were friends!”

“I don’t know you. You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Harsh!”

*It’s that redhead I met at the junior ball... His name was on the report, I think... Oh, right! It’s Steyn!*

Guy was giving him the cold shoulder, but from the chummy way Steyn was acting, it looked like they might know each other.

The remaining two were a young man and woman.

*They’re dressed in royal capital fashion...and I know them! Scratch that, they’re my friends!* One of them was quite flustered on the inside—if you knew her like I did, you could tell, but to those not in the know, she was just your typical beauty with an icy-cool exterior: Cissy!

She’s my BL-pen pal! ...Except Cissy isn’t a degenerate like me. Anyway, the guy beside Cissy was her fiancé, Viscount Houghie Winfell!

I had seen them both at the junior ball only a little while ago...and now they were on a date! Since they were engaged and in love, they should be entitled to

all the PDA they wanted...but since Houghie's viscount status made him stand out, they had to be discreet. Cissy wrote about that in one of her letters, and when Houghie sent me a letter thanking me for helping them, he included a life update that had similar complaints.

*Ohh! It must be easier for them to go on a date in the royal capital since nobody knows them here.*

Noticing my gaze, Houghie shot to attention. "Princess Octavia!"

Then Heller raised his hand and explained the situation, "Allow me to explain, Your Highness. This lady and this gentleman both grabbed the rose at the same time. However, the woman let go of it and— Hey, you," he grunted at Steyn.

"Feast your eyes on this, Your Highness!" Steyn smiled and reverently held up a bright red rose. Even before royalty, he was only marginally polite, and his red rose did have a red ribbon tied to it, but...but come on!

*I can already tell what happened. Cissy let her politeness get the better of her—I just know it!*

That was why both had been presented to me. Houghie had accompanied Cissy out of concern, and he could get very stubborn in moments like this, so I could tell he wanted to plead Cissy's case.

"Heller. Guy. Are you absolutely certain that this lady and this gentleman grabbed the rose at the same time?"

"Yes, Princess!"

".....Yes, Princess!"

Heller and Guy both answered in turn (though Guy's hesitation gave me pause...) "Very well, then—" But before I could deliver my verdict, a third party cut in with a "Please, wait!"

*What? What's this? I know that voice...*

A man approached us. Like Cissy and Houghie, he was also dressed in the latest royal capital fashion...and he was also wearing a hooded cloak.

*Um, who approaches royalty in a hood during their survey? Sus! You're incredibly sus, dude!*



I stopped Hugh before he could lunge at the man. I raised my hand at Heller and Guy, who also looked wary. Meanwhile, Sirius signaled to the other guards around us that everything was fine.

*I'm not surprised Sirius recognizes him, too...*

In the source material, the only character who ever approached royalty in a hood was Rust...but this was clearly not him.

The hooded man marched over to Steyn and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. "Apologies for my subordinate's rude behavior. The prize flower belongs to this young lady here." And with that, he whisked the rose out of Steyn's hand.

Cissy's eyes wandered in bewilderment until they met mine. I gave her a smile and a nod, and she smiled hesitantly back. Then she nodded meekly and murmured, "Thank you, sir..."

"It's yours, my lady." The hooded man elegantly handed Cissy the rose. In doing so, he revealed his face just a little. Even though he couldn't be seen fully from behind the hood, he was dripping with ikemen pheromones... This had no effect on Cissy since her heart belonged to Houghie, but several of the ladies in Cissy's vicinity blushed! Not many men were affected, though. It made me appreciate firsthand just how less interested in same-sex romance the peasantry was compared to the nobility.

"Prince, Princess, I offer my humblest apologies for the disturbance we have caused." The hooded man bowed. Steyn followed suit beside him.

*U-um... I guess I should say something?*

I glanced up at Sirius. Silence. His Prince Smile was still plastered on his face. In other words, I had no idea what he was thinking. *Oh, if I must—*

"Not a problem at all, sir. Be on your way."

The hooded man (who was obviously Derek) grabbed Steyn by the arm and turned on his heel.

*Yup. Definitely Derek!*

Unless you knew who he was, his whole entrance and exit did not seem

highborn in the slightest.

*Did Sirius ask him to be an undercover guard? No... Is Derek doing this independently...? Yup, that tracks!*

I watched the two scurry away as I tried to find an answer.

*Oh! Derek's smacking Steyn upside the head! And now Steyn is cowering and covering his head!*

*"But that was my flower, fair and square..."*

*"I don't care, just let it go! We didn't come here for fun!"*

*"Boooo..."*

(At least that's the conversation my brain conjured up.) *I sensed it back at the Sky Chamber too, but...they seem like good friends.*

Then Steyn quickly recovered and waved boisterously at someone. It looked like—people they both knew? Derek and Steyn rendezvoused with another man in a hooded cloak. I could only see them from behind.

And that was when I stopped watching them.

"Princess Octavia!"

"Oh, Princess Octaviaaaa!"

Hearing the masses call my name zapped me back to earth. I beckoned for Cissy to join me on the stage. (With Houghie by her side, of course!) "It would seem that she is whom the Sky has chosen," I addressed the crowd. I really played up the whole Sky (Sky God) angle, since that would score me some points with the peasants!

"Let us wish the princess a safe and uneventful survey with a blessing of fresh blooms."

As long as we spoke sincerely and tied this fake ceremony with a bow, everything would be fine. What's most important was that nobody questioned it!

"Hugh?"

Hugh had the kallum wreath. He nodded and presented it to Cissy. She gave

Hugh her rose in turn, though she looked a little meek, so I murmured, “What’s wrong, Cissy?”

“Princess... These flowers are real...”

“Yes. That’s what I wanted.”

*Yeah, I know, the nobility and royalty don’t usually put real flowers in their hair. But don’t worry, it’s all good. I won’t mess it up!*

“Understood, Your Highness...”

With a determined breath, Cissy held the kallum wreath high. She was taller than me, so I only had to crouch a little to make the job easier for her. She threaded the spray of kallum blooms beside my tiara, but her hands were shaking. When she finished, I took her hands in mine and squeezed softly.

“Thank you.”

“Via...”

Since the winner turned out to be Cissy, I managed to sail through the procedure free of fear. Even though it was my plan, having some stranger put flowers in my hair probably would have scared me. I decided it was my cross to bear in the name of shaking things up. But this was all so sudden for Cissy, so of course she was nervous...

“I am the one who is grateful,” Cissy insisted. And because she had the beauty of a porcelain doll, the smile on her face was the best in the world.

There was a delayed cheer from the crowd. A downward glance revealed that my little ceremony was well-received by everyone in attendance.

*Guess my staged ceremony—Flower Version—was a success?*

“Well, Brother? What do you think of the tiara-kallum combination?” I asked smugly. Since my survey dress came with a cape, I even swished it a little to rub it in. I had already gotten his opinion on my outfit before we left the castle, but now I was in my final form!

His aquamarine eyes looked me up and down. Then he sighed and said, “Not bad...but I think the flowers should be a bit lower.”

Then he reached out. I recoiled for a split second, then I remembered this was my brother and we were out on a survey. I felt him move the flowers a little.

“That’s better.”

I looked up to see not only Cissy and Houghie, but Guy and Heller nodding in approval.

“Forgive me, Via. I was just so nervous...”

“Quite all right. So you’re a friend of Octavia. Thank you for picking the winning flower and sparing us more vigilance than necessary.”

“Oh, I do not deserve such praise...”

*Um. My brother. He figured out Cissy is my friend...!*

Then again, guess that tracks... A duke’s unwanted affections and threats leading Houghie to ask me for a dance out of sheer desperation, and his class-defying romance with Cissy that followed—that whole affair was quite famous. And it was one of the occasions on which I got to wield my Princess Privilege for good.

And as such!

I used my friendship with the couple as an excuse to chat with them a little. In a way that wouldn’t delay our schedule, of course!

I jumped off the stage and asked them all sorts of questions (like what they were doing in the town square). Cissy blushed and answered, confirming that I was right—they were on a date! They came to the town square knowing I would be here for the survey and had meant to watch from a distance...but that’s where the red rose happened to fall.

I had been wanting to talk to Cissy, too, about the Case of the Undelivered Letters. I started by telling her that she should send her letters through Sasha so they would reach me without fail. I had already filled Sasha in, so we were good to go. Even my chief lady-in-waiting Matilda was in on it! I sadly had a lot of spare time to arrange all this, since I was confined to my room for a while... though I did get to see Sasha all the time.

*Ahhh, talking with Cissy always puts me in such a good mood.*

Time flew by. I wished the moment could last just a bit longer... *Maybe I can make that happen?*

The idea invaded my mind. I opened my mouth to add yet another item to the itinerary by asking, "Hey, Cissy, would you like to meet up for lunch after this is over?" but I stopped myself.

*Close call...!*

How should I put it? It was like, the Maki in me and the princess in me were locked in fierce combat! The Maki in me was like, "*Come on, you've gotta live a little! Seize your chance to have lunch with your friends! You don't get many opportunities like this!*" but the princess in me was like, "*Excuse me, but aren't traitors trying to kill you? Are you okay with putting Cissy in danger?*"

The battle was over in an instant and Maki retreated in defeat, the words, "*I never thought of that!*" echoing glumly behind her. The gong of defeat clanged, and the princess side of me won the argument. "*I'd just die if my Cissy got hurt!*"

With tears in my eyes, I bit my tongue...

And yet!

"Viscount Winfell, we are currently on a survey, but we plan on dining in the capital soon. Would you care to join us?"

Hell froze over as my brother asked Houghie out.

"Prince Sirius, I am deeply honored by the offer..." Houghie trailed off awkwardly, signaling his rejection.

Ordinarily, refusing an invitation from Esfia's eldest prince was an outrageous notion. Only Uncle Dearest, another duke, or somebody on friendly terms with Sirius could get away with it.

*Um, Sirius? This is kinda the first time I've ever seen you ask someone out who can't say no!*

"It's not a formal event. If you feel hesitant, the Lady Lewry may join you."

*Now he's inviting Cissy, too?*

I could just feel Sirius's iron will crushing us all. He would not take no for an answer.

"Brother..." I started to reprimand him.

"Isn't this what you wanted? This is my way of *shaking things up*." He whispered the second sentence so only I could hear it...and he exaggerated every single word.

For a moment, my mind went blank. I resisted understanding the implications.

*But...I know what's going on here.*

As far as my brother's concerned...it's possible Viscount Winfell is one of the traitors. Even though both Houghie and Cissy are completely trustworthy to me.

But since they had both shown up for my little last-minute staged ceremony and thrown a wrench in the plan—even though it was entirely by coincidence that they were friends of mine—their appearance was just way too contrived.

So Sirius must have thought to himself, "*Maybe they're spies? Why don't we ask them to lunch to bait them?*"

*That's exactly what's going on here. Implications understood. Loud and clear..... How can you be so untrusting?!*

It took all my willpower to hold my tongue—believe me, it was hard. Looking at it from Sirius's point of view, I could see why he would suspect my friends, even a little. It's not that I didn't understand...

"....."

But I was still furious. All the Likability Points Sirius had gained during his swoon-worthy hair-fixing vanished.

I took a deep breath in, let it out, and answered him, not even bothering to whisper. "Perhaps, then, Dear Brother, you should also be wary of that other man who picked up the rose, as well as the man who called him his 'subordinate.'"

*In other words, Derek and Steyn belong on your watchlist, too!*

".....There's no need for that."

I thought I misheard him.

*What is this? Nepotism? Favoring one side over the other? As in, the thing Sirius never did in the books?*

“Oh? And why is that?”

I didn’t suspect Derek and Steyn, personally. I figured they were doing their own secret mission and that they wouldn’t do anything to threaten the crown.

But that’s beside the point.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

*Ka-shinnng!*

Invisible sparks flew between us.

“Prince Sirius! Princess Octavia!” Houghie mediated. “We would be honored to accept your invitation, Your Highness, so please...”

He didn’t say the rest out loud, but I knew what he meant.

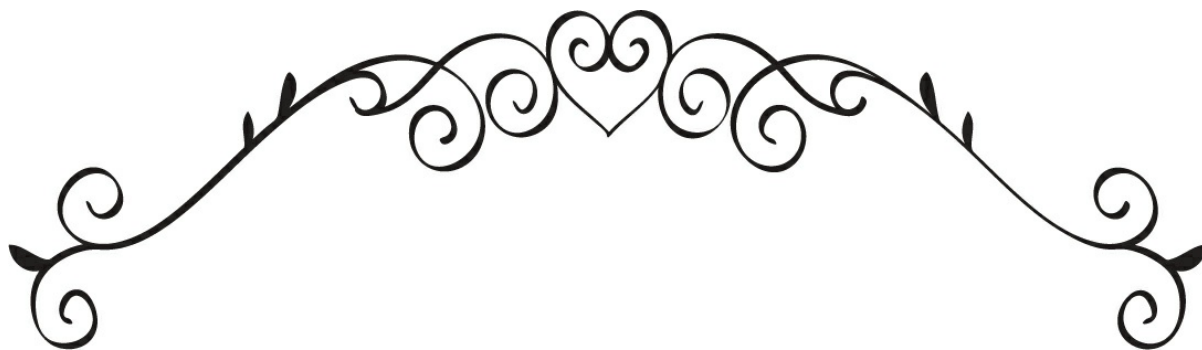
Now was no time for bickering. I should be grateful... Thanks to Houghie, I was a bit calmer now.

“Yes, quite right.”

*He’s right... We really have no choice but to have lunch together now.*

I flashed Houghie and Cissy my best smile and said, “Allow me to extend my invitation as well. I would love for you both to join us.”





## **A Commoner Soldier Possibly Working His Way Up the Social Ladder's Anything-but-Peaceful Bodyguard Assignment**

As I gripped the reins on my horse, a thought flashed through my mind: *I might die today.*

No sooner did I think this than out of the corner of my eye, I spotted something black spreading its wings and soaring toward the castle town.

*What's this? A wreven bird innocently flying through the sky?! An omen? Is that what this is?! Is there a dark shadow of doom hovering over my future?!*

*Whoa! Easy, Guy. Don't lose your head. Nothing's happened to you yet!*

*Argh...*

*I will keep my wits about me—how could I not, in these circumstances?—but I'm still worried.*

*Am I really worthy of such an important assignment? Well, I'd better be worthy, otherwise we've got a problem...*

Only yesterday, I received news that the prince and princess would be conducting the survey together. Then, for some ridiculous reason, Princess Octavia asked that I be her bodyguard, and her brother approved—this was also yesterday. Immediately after, our squad leader summoned Heller Byrne and added him to the assignment—again, this was *yesterday*.

I was stunned when I heard Heller Byrne and I would be on assignment together. I was just as stunned to hear that Princess Octavia had requested it.

*What the hell are you thinking? Heller Byrne's the idiot who threw a sword at you in the training grounds, remember?*

He was pardoned and the incident was written off as an accident, but anybody who saw it happen knew that wasn't quite true.

When Heller was given the assignment, his face drained of color. When he showed up for work this morning, there were dark circles under his eyes. I completely know the feeling.

Truth be told, (perhaps due to Octavia's influence?) in my eyes, Heller Byrne was a devout follower of Prince Alexis and somebody I didn't think I would get along with. Not because he was a nobleman, though.

But I was proven wrong.

I was probably being biased, but he'd seemed like the sort of guy who would stick his nose in the air and walk away if I tried to talk to him...but we talked just fine. We talked a lot, actually.

We were put on assignments together, too. In fact, as it stood now, he was closer to me even than my colleague who wasn't interested in man-on-man romance!

Thinking of my colleague put me in quite a strange mood. When he'd learned of my assignment, he slapped me on the shoulder and said, *"I'll never forget you, buddy. I'll share your story!"*

Then he gave me some special wine. What a stand-up guy...!

But, um, could you please not bury me yet? I'm still here, you know? I'm still alive, okay?

Then he had to go and ruin the sweet gesture by joining in on the fun the other soldiers were having, betting who would mess up first: me or Heller. And he bet on both of us! (With good odds, besides.) *"Listen, Guy, when a surefire bet comes your way, you've gotta take it seriously. Don't lie to yourself..."*

The hell? Way to twist the knife harder by saying something so suave!

Well, setting that aside... While it was all shocking news, having Heller with me made it easier on me psychologically. Of all the soldiers on this assignment, our circumstances were the most alike. We were both selected personally by Princess Octavia, and while Heller was of noble birth, we had the same rank. We were just regular soldiers, and yet we were given assignments well above our rank—we were alike in that way, too.

Octavia's logic never made sense to me to start with, but what confused me most was...

I gulped and stole a glance at my fellow guard.

Now, on paper, Heller Byrne and I were more like Princess Octavia's *provisional* bodyguards. We were mere additions to the platoon of personal guards—wouldn't we just get lost in the crowd?

Of course, I didn't dare voice this concern.

But this is how I really feel about it. (I can't say it out loud, but I can say it in my mind! I can scream to my heart's content!) Princess Octavia—seriously, have you gone mad? Come on, it's *me*. Now, I see myself as an ambitious guy, but I can't climb the social ladder without a ladder.

Oh! One more thing!

Why? For the love of *God*, why is the Emissary of Ongarne no longer your bodyguard?!

According to gossip, he'll be attending the survey with Prince Sirius's bodyguards...

But—and it's a big but—the Emissary of Ongarne will *absolutely* give all his attention to the princess. You know I'm right. I'd bet my life on it!

This changing of the guard... There must be something behind it.

As bad luck would have it, the bodyguards had to ride alongside the carriage transporting the prince and princess. I was on the left side, and the Emissary of Ongarne was on the right. And whenever I looked at the carriage, he was always right in my line of vision!

*Oh, my poor stomach. I'm going to vomit.*

I just prayed that we'd get to the castle town as soon as possible. *I usually travel there on foot. Thankfully, it takes no time to get there by horse. Good... we're on Esfia Bridge now. Just a bit more!* We were almost there—but this was exactly the sort of moment where bad things tended to happen.

I repeated a mantra in my mind, *Ignore the Emissary of Ongarne*, and checked to make sure no suspicious persons were approaching the carriage.

There were no changes to the carriage, but I noticed a subtle yet distinct movement from two men in our ranks. What's more, they were looking in the same direction...

There was a little forest at the foot of the bridge...and while there was a split second of difference between the two of them, they both looked over there.

One of the two men in question was the Emissary of Ongarne...

I turned around to look at the forest, long behind us now. *Huh... Looks fine to me.*

Was it a human presence the Emissary of Ongarne had sensed? Well, not like anyone in the forest posed much of a threat to us, way back there.

I turned my attention to the other man in question, riding his horse in front of me... He used to be one of Prince Sirius's prized bodyguards: Hugh Roberts. My superior, Sir Roberts. He was on the survey with us... Rather, he was assigned as Octavia's personal bodyguard for some reason, right after the junior ball.

But Sir Roberts was known primarily for being Prince Sirius's right-hand man. He was also an eligible bachelor, blessed with statuesque beauty. Since even I know about it, you can be certain he's quite popular! I know a fair number of guys who are heartsick over him.

When I mentioned I was joining the survey bodyguard platoon, other soldiers sighed over how jealous they were. *Um, you guys realize this is just work, right?*

Since our first conversation yesterday all the way to today, he was exactly as the rumors said he was. And what did Sir Roberts have in common with the Emissary of Ongarne? Skill?

It was the Emissary of Ongarne who looked first into the forest, followed by

Sir Roberts, but you could say they'd looked at the same time.

I turned back and looked at the forest we'd passed one more time, just to make sure. *No signs of smoke or commotion... It's probably okay, right? Judging by the way the Emissary of Ongarne is acting, at least the princess isn't in any immediate danger.*

Which then meant a question lingered in my mind... Was someone other than the princess in danger?

*If I'm right, going back to Esfia Bridge alone isn't a realistic proposition.*

Going off Sir Roberts's reaction alone, the bridge was a key point. In a way, Sir Roberts was the general manager of the guard. I couldn't rule out the possibility that he was checking on a top-secret task force that was stationed there. In fact, wasn't that the most likely scenario of all?

I looked ahead and kicked my horse into a gallop, as planned.

The moment the royal carriage safely arrived at its destination—the castle town square—Sir Roberts gave me a peculiar order. What's more, it was from Princess Octavia herself.

When it came to orders, we were only given as much information as was absolutely necessary. On principle, a lowly rookie like me wasn't allowed to ask why or how he was to do something—those were all foolish questions. Truth be told...I can't say I'm used to it yet, especially when Princess Octavia gets involved. When she's there, my head always fills with nothing but stupid questions.

Having said that, I knew there was some reason for the order I was given. I was to buy a bunch of flowers, tie a red decorative string around just one of them, and distribute them to the other soldiers. Then, once the soldiers climbed the ladders with their baskets of flowers, I was supposed to give Princess Octavia a signal or something.

*A signal... Sir Roberts didn't specify what that signal was. Is a circle okay?*

I stood as tall as I could so Octavia could see me and made a circle over my head with my arms.

*Did she get the message?*

With a big smile, the princess proceeded to explain that the red rose would select a winner.

The soldiers scattered their bundles of flowers from atop the ladders, down onto the people in the square below. The flowers danced in the air. The people looked up, reaching for the sky.

The flowers came from the Sky—in other words, from God.

“Yeah, the Flower Festival was canceled this year. I was worried we’d have to wait ’til next year.”

“I’m gonna take these home and put them in a vase.”

“It has to be yellow... I’m taking the golden flowers! Golden flowers mean golden finances!”

*Aha... Now it all makes sense.*

I didn’t get it at first, but the princess must have been trying to simulate the Flower Festival. The royal capital held festivals every year, and one of them was the flower festival in the springtime. Everybody made a ruckus, highborn and lowborn alike. It was a festival to pray for a good harvest, but some people saw it as a festival for budding romances. Naturally, it attracted visitors from outside the royal capital, too.

All of this was information I’d gleaned from my senior officers. Unfortunately, I had never attended that festival.

There was no Flower Festival this year because of the war with the Saza Church. We did have a ceremony to celebrate winning the war, but it also served as a memorial for those who had died, and it was followed by a period of mourning. The period lasted into spring this year, so we had a memorial instead of the Flower Festival. There were a lot of flowers at the memorial, but it just wasn’t the same.

In years past, the royal family distributed flowers in the town square. The people believed the color of their flowers determined their luck for the year—it was a highly anticipated event for many.

And as I watched them now, I saw everyone, young and old, reaching up for the flowers with sparkles in their eyes. *What a nice little off-season gift this is... I wish I could have come here on a lazy day off...*

But I'm on duty today!

I had to see where the red roses were falling. I looked at the soldier who had the basket of roses. He had just released them. *Okay, let's see... Since whoever gets the prize rose will come within close proximity of the princess, I have to be careful—Sir Roberts told me so as well—if it's somebody suspicious...*

My eyes chased the red rose with the red string as it drew an arc in the sky.

*Wow, it got great air. Okay, it's falling now—oh, shit! It's meee?!*

Heller Byrne, who was watching the red rose from a few yards away, ran over to me.

"Peutz. You didn't..." The astonished gasp made my ears bleed.

*The rose... It fell right at me. I couldn't dodge it—it would just hit the ground—so I caught it. But...this's bad.*

*What do I do now?*

My eyes met Heller's. "You've got a pretty face, but only that," he grumbled tiredly. "Throw it back."

*Is that our only option here?*

All the peasants were staring at me in disbelief. Death by a thousand stares.

*If I don't do something soon, we're in trouble.*

"Fear not... We shall consult the Sky again!"

I assumed a rose-throwing stance. I wound back, ready to throw it into the sky—but before I could, a logical thought hit me: Since I already had the rose anyway, why not ensure somebody safe gets it? I should at least avoid throwing it at anybody who looked sketchy.

I held my stance and quickly ran my eyes over the crowd. The flower was light. It wouldn't fly far.

*Okay... Who in the crowd do I want to catch the rose...? Hm? There's a cloaked*



*guy with his face behind a hood. And beside him is—*

*Oh. Shit.*

It was Steyn, the redhead I'd had lunch with the day before. Knowing that, I took another glance at the fine physique protruding from behind the cloak and — *Is that Lord Derek?*

Beside them was another person who seemed to be in their group. He was wearing a hooded cloak just like Derek's, but with the hood down. He was blond and wore an eyepatch... He was pretty—just the way Steyn liked 'em—but he was more than pretty, he was like a perfectly sculpted work of art.

“Hey. Peutz. What're you lookin' at? Just throw the—” But Heller stopped mid-sentence when he saw what I was looking at. “Brother...?” he murmured.

“What?”

We were surely looking in the same direction. Derek was out, as was Steyn. Which only left—that super beauty was his brother?

The man with the eyepatch looked at me and Heller, then said something to Derek and Steyn. Immediately after, he lifted his hood, covered his head, and parted ways with the pair. Was Heller's brother working with Lord Derek...?

“C'mon, Sir Knight, we ain't got all day.”

The frustrated voice reminded me where I was.

*Right, the rose!*

For a split second, a wild thought crossed my mind—*What if I threw the rose at Derek? Wasn't he the safest choice of all? Then again, look how he's dressed... He's not in the town square as Derek Nightfellow.*

I desperately searched for somebody I could entrust the rose to, and then I made my decision.

*Young lady over there, you're the one!*

She was with a man who was likely her lover. Their clothing and general atmosphere was what had clinched it. They were dressed in peasant garb—the sort that I had a deep affinity to—but they had a certain air of nobility or

aristocracy about them. The icing on the cake: While the girl possessed an unapproachable beauty, she turned a bubbling smile of affection toward Princess Octavia, Blackfeather and all.

Eyeing her sideways as best I could, I aimed for the space in her circumference and threw the rose.

*Fly, rose, fly!*

“Cissy! Look!” her lover cried out when he saw the rose.

*What a good man.* From the look of him, he was a local aristocrat. The young lady with him nodded and reached for the rose. *Good girl!*

But just before her fingertips could touch the rose, another hand shot in from the side. The rose was dangerously close to falling not into the girl’s hand, but into his...?!

As I screamed internally, a third person appeared. His hand slapped the usurper, stopping him from grabbing the rose! Just as I planned, the rose was as good as hers now.

*Good job, third person! Hats off to—*

*You?*

The third person—the man who had stopped the other one—had caught the rose at the same time as the girl.

“Oh dear, forgive me...” The girl apologized, releasing the rose.

*...She what now?*

“Huh? Are you sure? Okie-dokie, guess it’s mine nowww.”

There was no way I would misplace such a happy-go-lucky voice.

The redheaded man scratched the back of his head and smiled in a grin so triumphant, I expected him to burst into song any minute.

And in his hand was the red rose, its stem tied with a red string.

*It’s not bloody yours nowww, Steyn!*

*Lord Derek! Where did Lord Derek go?!* I frantically searched, but—he

*disappeared?!*

I quickly intervened. “As far as I could see, *this young lady here* got the rose...!”

*I thought I was a dead man.*

It wasn't until I was standing in the hallway of a clothing shop on my break that I was finally able to catch my breath.

The winning rose had safely wound up in the girl's hand in the end, and thus she was the one to put the kallum blossoms in Princess Octavia's hair.

The only problem was, I wasn't alive enough to appreciate it. Thanks to Heller Byrne not knowing Klifford Alderton's *true* identity, I was forced to stand beside *the Emissary of Ongarne* during the whole ceremony! And I get it... If you ignore the romantic inclinations that he, the princess, and I all likely share, Klifford Alderton was just your common, everyday skilled bodyguard! Most people wouldn't feel the slightest bit terrified going near him...

*Come on, Guy. You could learn something... If you keep a constant vigil on the Emissary of Ongarne's every move, you could get wise to any undetectable auras or phenomena he possesses...*

And yet, no amount of study gave me a single hint of any such thing.

But I was still scared! I didn't detect any bloodlust from him, but he still disturbed me! *Is he an assassin? Is that the Emissary of Ongarne's true profession? I wouldn't be surprised...!*

*Dammit! There's nobody I can share this terror with! What about the princess? Princess Octavia? C'mon, Guy, you know that's impossible!*

It happened so suddenly.

When Prince Sirius tried to adjust the positioning of the blossoms in Octavia's hair, for just an instant, the Emissary of Ongarne was terrifying as hell.

And the flowers were actually a little loose. It was probably because the girl—Cissy, was it?—was nervous when she was putting the flowers in Octavia's hair. She messed it up, and the flowers weren't stuck properly.

The flowers and the tiara were a winning combination, of course, but it did

seem like something was lacking. Prince Sirius was in the right; it was good that he fixed the flowers immediately. When you're of such high status, a little wrinkle in your appearance is an invitation for criticism, but my fellow soldiers and I were in no place to tell the princess her hair decoration was askew.

Who else could have told her but Prince Sirius?

And even if Prince Sirius was trying to ensnare Octavia, I could have feigned ignorance. But I didn't then.

Prince Sirius wasn't doing anything wrong. He was not putting Octavia in any danger either—unless the emissary thought it was a possibility?

For all his crazed rage in that terrifying moment, he gave me a blank look immediately after as if to say, *What's your problem?*

It was probably because I was distressed by how terrifying he was. I'll admit that, Emissary, but it's still *your* fault, dammit! Don't fill the air with murderous rage unless you really wanna kill a guy!

—That's what I would have told him, if I were allowed. Thankfully, my fear forced me to keep a vigilant watch on my surroundings and not neglect my bodyguard duties, but I could only faintly remember what the prince and princess had been talking about.

*I still have a lot of growing up to do.*

I took a deep breath in and let it out.

*Ahhh, the air tastes so good out here.*

*It's such a wonderful feeling, being away from the Emissary of Ongarne! It's like night and day for my nerves...*

But I guess I didn't deserve the moment of relief.

I quickly learned that I had forgotten something terribly important: The Emissary of Ongarne wasn't the only one I should be nervous about.

I learned this lesson when I was summoned to the room where Princess Octavia was taking a break...and when the princess asked me a question via a slip of paper...

After making sure I had a basic level of literacy, she scribbled something on the paper in neat little letters. It hit me immediately what was going on—she was doing this so she could deliver a message to my eyes only.

It was a secret question.

And then...she showed it to me.

She wrote it neatly enough for me to read it easily. And I could indeed read it...but, for my sake, it might've been better if I couldn't.

What the note said—that was the real issue.

It said:

*Hey, want to be my fake boyfriend?*

"...!" My lungs—and this is no exaggeration—collapsed for a moment.

As the princess smiled and waited for my answer, her crystal-blue eyes were beautiful like a clear lake—and they were eager with anticipation...?

*Aha.*

*Today really is my last day on earth.*

*Ha-ha-ha.*

*Is it okay if I pass out now?*

## 62

I took a long, deep breath.

We had temporarily parted ways with Cissy and Houghie to carry out the *Dress* part of our survey. Since trying on clothes left us vulnerable for long periods of time, the store was closed to the public for our sole use.

I was lounging on a chaise, alone, in an area with a fitting room attached. There was a little furnace with a fire that made the room just the right amount of cozy.

There was a big fluffy teddy bear on the chaise. Perhaps it was one of the

accessories they sold with the furniture?

It was soft to the touch. I had seen many a giant teddy bear in my past life, but this was the first time I'd seen one in Esfia. While porcelain dolls were common, stuffed animals themselves were rather rare.

*In a perfect world, I would surrender to my desires and give it a good cuddle... but I must restrain myself. I mean, Hugh is watching me! If only it were Klifford, then I could hug it without a care in the world...!*

Esfia's castle town was split into four quadrants: north, south, east, and west. Each quadrant had its own gate, but roughly separated, the castle town actually had two sections: The nobility and the wealthy lived and conducted most of their business in the northern quadrant closest to the castle, and everyone else lived in the south. The shops changed with the current of mainstream trends. (Incidentally, the town square where we held the flower ceremony was smack-dab in the middle of the capital.) The clothing shop we were currently in was in the southern area of the eastern quadrant. It was likely chosen since it was frequented by the nobility and peasants alike. The shop had opened only last spring, and I'd heard about it through the Handmaid Grapevine, but it was in a rather bad location. Since it was more south than north, not many nobles paid it a visit. But when one of my handmaids showed me a dress she had bought there and I saw what fine quality it was, I had it on my radar for our survey.

The shopkeeper was a woman—which was quite rare—named Melina. She was in her thirties, I think. During the pre-survey inspection, we learned she had made the emerald-green dress that Rosa Reddington had worn at the junior ball. But technically, Melina was just an “assistant”—her name wasn't made public.

Though she had her own shop, she was also a subcontractor for the higher-class dressmakers in the north sector. I imagined just how difficult it must have been to run her own clothing shop, no matter how talented she was—even more so as a woman in Esfia.

*I'm torn... I was planning on acting as Princess in the Snare here, too, but I don't want to cause trouble for Melina...*

The first thought that came to mind was: I try on a peasant dress, then

attempt to escape... It was easy to be alone in a dressing room. Case in point, I was alone right now. Most importantly, there was a window affixed with a lattice that was purely ornamental—not that it would be easy to remove, of course!

The door from the fitting room that led into the hallway was the sole exit—an additional obstacle...

Hugh, Guy, and Heller were fully visible from the open door. And if I could see them, they could see me.

*Guess I'll have to retire Princess in the Snare for now...*

I would have to drop that idea for the time being, at least while I was in this shop. It was physically impossible, for one, and even if I did succeed, Melina would have to pay the price. Not even in the name of shaking things up would it be appropriate to harm the subjects of my survey while on said survey! It's a survey foul!

So, before trying on some clothes, I'd asked for a little break to buy myself some time to think...but no snare schemes were coming to mind...

Giving the traitors an opportunity to strike while not inconveniencing the locals was a tall order!

And I wasn't seeing anyone who looked remotely like our traitors in question, besides. As things currently stood, according to my keen senses, this survey would end uneventfully.

In a way, that would be super awesome, but since I had come all this way... even if Princess in the Snare couldn't have her fun...I still wanted to make use of this time!

Part of my reason for this was because Sirius had been summoned away for a bit. He had received a messenger bird from the castle.

Apparently, they'd set things up so he would receive updates from the castle during the survey. And since messenger birds flew only to designated stations in the castle town, it would be easy to send messages directly to him.

Since I was inside a shop and it was amply secured, Sirius had slipped out to



read the message from the messenger bird. And so I thought to myself: *Isn't there something I could do that can only be done when Sirius is gone...?*

I flipped Blackfeather open, letting its familiar floof comfort me as I looked around the room...and my eyes fell on the trio of men.

*Aha! Heller and Guy both flinched.* Hugh didn't seem fazed by my staring, though.

*Hmmm...?*

I stared at the trio for several seconds. Nothing was coming to mind—*Ooh! Would you look at that white wedding dress hanging behind Guy. Aww, I want a wedding dress...* It was custom in Esfia to hold weddings in chapels, much like in Japan. It was like they stole just that custom and transplanted it here. You put wedding rings on your left ring fingers and the bride wore a white wedding dress.....

I had a sudden impulse to bury my face in the big fluffy teddy bear and scream.

But since I couldn't, I brought Blackfeather even closer to my face.

*Good luck getting married, Octavia. You can't even get a boyfriend...*

I was struggling enough as it is just to get a *fake* boyfriend...!

*I might as well say screw it and use my Princess Privilege...*

A dark thought wafted into my mind.

*But who...?*

I appraised the three men again.

*Aren't those three rather good targets, standing right there?*

I snapped Blackfeather shut.

"Guy. Heller," I called out to the open door. "I wish to assess how the survey is going... To get a jump on that, I deem it necessary to speak with each of you individually. After all, I was the one who chose you."

*Okay, that was a passable excuse. Now—*

“Guy—I wish to start with you. I trust you have no objections? Don’t worry, Hugh, I’ll keep the door open.”

*Hugh bowed his head... Good. That means he has no objections.*

But Guy was looking at Hugh with an expression that said, *Whaaat?! A-are you sure this is okay, sir?! It was the right call not to voice it out loud.*

But Hugh was merciless. “Obey the princess.”

“Yes, sir!” With a little bow and a “Pardon me...” Guy entered the fitting room.

“Have a seat.”

“Yes, Princess!”

Guy awkwardly lowered himself onto the chaise. He looked incredibly uncomfortable, but there was a proposal I simply had to run by him.

The only problem was that it was a proposal I didn’t want anyone overhearing...

*The only way I can think of asking him is...whispering?*

Ideally, we would write notes back and forth... Esfian soldiers did receive a basic level of education, so Guy should have at least been trained in rudimentary reading and writing. But since he was a rookie soldier...I couldn’t be too sure.

“Guy. Can you read and write?”

A color of suspicion filled Guy’s anxious face—then his tense shoulders relaxed a little.

“Oh, um...I am currently learning, my lady. I can read simple books meant for children. And I can write my name and military terminology...”

“Very well.”

*We’re good to go!*

Guy could read simple script! That meant I could just pass him a note!

I set Blackfeather down for a moment and pulled an empty notebook and

pencil out of my skirt pocket. I removed the pencil cap and held the notepaper clumsily in my gloved left hand as I quickly scribbled my solicitation.

*Hey, want to be my fake boyfriend?*

That'll do it!

I wrote it in simple enough language that even somebody who was still learning to read and write (and even somebody like me, who once struggled with Esfian) could easily read it. *I think this'll work!*

"Be a dear and read this. It's a question I wish you to answer. *For your eyes only.*"

"Aha....."

"This isn't directly related to this survey...but it is a very important matter."

Then I handed him the paper, face up.

Guy's eyes practically popped out of his head.

"Give me a *yes* or *no* answer."

I set the notebook and pencil down on the table.

*I did it...* I was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

My search for a fake boyfriend had hit a roadblock. But when I saw the three men standing in the hallway, Guy caught my eye.

His full name was Guy Peutz. Despite being a rookie soldier, he was somebody Alexis—my angel of a baby brother—trusted enough to deliver a message to me when he was suddenly sent away on a secret mission. That was good enough to give him high marks in my book! The fact that he wasn't a character in the source material gave him bonus points.

Also, he wasn't bad to look at! His facial structure was reminiscent of a Japanese person's. His black eyes and hair really made me feel a sort of kinship with him! And as I was a former teen girl, his normie demeanor and friendly atmosphere also gave him lots of brownie points! As much as I loved hotties, when you were surrounded by them constantly, someone like Guy ranked a lot higher on the Likability scale!

Lastly, he was a soldier. To be brutally honest, be he highborn or lowborn, he was the sort of person I could use to wield my Princess Privilege with wild and reckless abandon!

That's right. I decided to choose a fake boyfriend by *abuse of power*!

All hail the Dark Side!

Then again, I couldn't completely ignore Guy's wishes, so I gave him a choice! My proposition was sudden and nonsensical, I'll give you that, but regardless of the time or the place, the contents of my proposition would have remained the same.

*Now. What will his answer be?!*

"....."

Guy hung his head and remained silent.

"....."

He balled his hands into fists on his lap and was still silent.

I held my breath and sat at the edge of my seat. If Guy became my fake boyfriend, the whole Meet-the-Parents dilemma would be resolved in one go! It would be a fixed-term contract, and once things had settled down, we would say that I broke off the engagement...

*Abuse of power aside, I would basically be asking him to do another job, so I'll have to compensate him. I wonder what Guy wants? Guess I'll give him any convenience fee he asks for.*

"Princess Octavia—" Guy looked up suddenly. "I would answer...except it's difficult to do so, given the vagueness of your question...!"

*Dude has a point. However—*

"I cannot give you further details until you have answered yes."

Only *then* could I bare my soul and reveal all! You must agree to become my partner in crime, first!

"No."

*Huh?*

“Sorry...what did you just say?” I lifted Blackfeather and opened it to hide my embarrassment.

“I said...no, my lady.”

He...he *rejected* me?!

*Okay, Octavia...take the L. You know, I really underestimated Guy. I mean, come on, I'm the princess! And I look like the adorable Sister-dearest! I guess I just valued myself too highly there...! Is it my personality? Are we just too different on the inside?*

*Urk! Rejection... Didn't see that coming... Now I know firsthand what "pride comes before a fall" means.*

*Um, my-Guy? Are you sure you're supposed to reject me? Your princess hath beseeched thee! Damn my Princess Privilege...! I should've just forced him—I shouldn't've given him a choice!*

Guy firmly shook his head no. “A lowly man such as myself is not worthy of such an important task...! I fear I wouldn't meet your expectations, Princess...!”

*No, you'd totally meet them!*

“And besides!” A look both somber and earnest filled Guy's eyes as he firmly beseeched me. “I know there must be someone better suited to solve your problem than me!”

He was doubling down.

*A person more suitable than Guy? Does such a person exist? Is it somebody we both know?*

“And who might you mean...?”

“L-like one of your bodyguards, Your Highness! Er—but not Sir Roberts...!”

*One of my bodyguards... Which one of my bodyguards could Guy mean...?*

*There's only one applicable answer...huh?*

“Is it...Klifford?”

Guy eagerly nodded his head.

*Ask Klifford...to be my fake boyfriend?*

I shook my head. "I can't." The words came out of my mouth louder than intended.

I'll admit, Klifford was the best candidate for a person of the opposite gender I could ask to be my fake boyfriend. There was the added bonus that as Adjutant and Sovereign, I could trust him fully.

And yet, the words "I can't" had slipped immediately out of my mouth.

Without hesitation...in a way that baffled even me.

And with it came a question.

*.....Why not?*

Was it because Klifford was my bodyguard? Was it because I was scared that he might leave me, like all the other bodyguards I developed feelings for? But that was why we had forged the Sovereign-Adjutant covenant in the first place. And if I asked him as a work-related request...*that* would be the most ideal scenario of all...

Then my eyes opened, and I saw the light.

*That's why.*

I don't want that.

Because it would be a *command*— If I asked Klifford to be my fake boyfriend, it might turn into a command...and I would hate that. I don't want him to be my fake boyfriend because I *commanded* him to.

*Yeah. That's it.*

But—does that make me a hypocrite for being cool with using my Princess Privilege to force Guy into the fake boyfriend role?

*Why does the thought of that command repulse me?*

"Princess Octavia...?" Guy asked timidly, cutting off my train of thought.

*That's right, he's wondering why I denied his question so quickly.*

"I just—it just can't be my bodyguard," I said the first words that came to

mind. By making my reasons vague, I could sweep it under the rug.

“Is that so...? Bodyguard, eh...? Hearing the words out loud, I suppose that’s a valid point...? It certainly isn’t correct...”

From the way Guy was muttering, he seemed to accept my excuse—so, all’s well that ends well?

Guy’s head tilted in a big nod. “In other words, my choice of words was uncouth. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Good...”

*I feel like we’re talking past each other... Well, if we rehash the topic, he might wind up asking me why Klifford wasn’t suitable.*

*Hmm...yeah. Anyway, I won’t command Klifford to be my fake boyfriend.*

*I don’t want to do that.*

*Then again, Guy is pretty perceptive. So I might as well—*

“Aside from my bodyguards, whom do you suggest might be suitable?”

*Advice, please!*

“Aside from your bodyguards...you say? Er, well, I’m not sure I’m qualified to —”

“Just tell me the first person that comes to mind.”

This isn’t exactly the most polite thing to say about a person, but he looked like he’d crack under pressure...so I went in for the kill.

*Guy has the answer inside of him... (At least I think he does!)*

“In that case...it’s gotta be O—” But he clamped a hand over his mouth before the name could slip out.

*Sus AF. But did he have the answer I was seeking?*

“Forgive me, Princess! But it is a name I cannot say aloud here!”

“Oh”...? Hmmm... I searched my memory. *I have a feeling Guy gave me the exact same reaction a while ago... Oh, I know! It was in the practice room back at the castle! When I was practicing my dancing with Klifford!*

*"I come with a message from Prince Alexis! I heard that Princess Octavia was here, so I—eep?! Oh!"*

*Oh... Or maybe it's just the letter O?*

*O, as in, Octavia? As in...me? But that explanation only explains what he said back in the practice room.*

*"—O?"*

*What comes after that?* I was about to ask as much, but Guy stammered, "Er, what I mean to say is, I—"

*Is he trying to say he doesn't want to tell me?*

*Fine, then...*

*"All right, why don't you write the rest down?"*

I gestured alluringly to my DIY notebook and special pencil on the table. Guy swallowed hard. His eyes met mine, so I gave him an encouraging smile.

*"You...want me to write the letters that come after O?"*

*"Yes."*

Guy gripped the pencil and quickly scribbled the letters beneath my handwritten question: *Hey—want to be my fake boyfriend?*

*"Here! I wrote it down, Princess."*

I took the folded slip of paper from him.

*Mystery O-name acquired!*

I noticed Guy's teeth were chattering something fierce. Well, he did just shoot down a request from his princess, of course he's freaking out. But is it just me, or does he look even more nervous now that he's written down the O-name? Either way, I tried to abuse my Princess Privilege, so it's tit for tat. I'd better throw him a bone.

*"Guy?"*

*"Yes, Princess!"*

*"The question to which you answered no... Please forget it."*



“Yes, Princess! I shall take it to heart!”

“And I must clarify, of course, that you won’t suffer any retribution just because you answered no.”

And I won’t treat you any differently, either!

“You may leave now.”

“Yes, Princess! Excuse me.” With a deep bow, Guy retreated to the hallway.

*Now, then, lemme see...* I whipped out Guy’s note straight away and opened it. *Based off how things have gone so far, Guy wrote down the name of his nomination for the most suitable fake boyfriend for me... He even qualified it with the words, “It’s gotta be” when he blurted it out, so it must be quite a name...!*

When I opened the paper, I beheld fifteen letters.

Fifteen thick, dark letters.

***Omqarmez Enizary.***

That’s what it said.

“.....?”

I shot a glance at Guy, who had returned to his post in the hallway. He didn’t meet my gaze.

I looked at the paper again. It was clear that he had gripped the pencil tight and used a lot of pressure to write the letters, but it was unmistakably Esfian script.

*Omqarmez Enizary...*

*Hmmm... That sounds more like an ancient chant than a person’s name. The only letter that matches is O. And even the letter O is pure conjecture, based on the fact that I already know the name begins with O... The only other part of the name I’m pretty confident about is the “mez”? I’m pretty sure I’m reading the “O” and “mez” parts right!*

*Assuming this isn’t some prank or bit—Guy is a noob writer—did that, and the high pressure he was under, cause him to write it so quickly it got messed up? I*

*have firsthand experience with this, so I know the feeling... You're just trying your best! Yeah, he's totes a noob. Guy's probably the only person who can even read this.*

*It's just...I can't exactly call him back and ask him to read it to me. Could I ask him to not write it like a toddler? No, no, that just sounds like I'm making fun of him! And it's even more awkward since he just rejected me!*

*I'm...just gonna let this go.*

I stood up. I had to at least dispose of the evidence, so I threw my *Hey, want to be my fake boyfriend?* note into the furnace.

And all traces of my failed fake romance were buried in a puff of smoke!

*Okay, next!*

I turned back to the door.

*My next target is—*

*“Heller Byrne, you may enter.”*

As for my aims here, they didn't involve asking Heller to be my fake boyfriend. I may have decided to make full use of my Princess Privilege, but I still had my standards. And I chose Guy because he met a number of requirements...

I gestured for Heller to sit on the chaise, and he did so. You could tell a lot about a person from the way they sat. To look at him, it was clear that Heller hailed from a house of viscounts—you could just sense his noble upbringing. Good manners were pounded into growing nobles, whether they liked it or not. Then again, the longer you trained with the royal guard and the higher you climbed in the ranks, the more that world would influence you.

I fluttered Blackfeather to shake off any remaining psychological damage from my botched seduction.

*“Has your brother entrusted you with anything?”*

I only wanted one thing from Heller: intel on Rust's actions! Since he had already sent a message that we would meet again, it wouldn't be out of the question for him to send more.

Also, Rust's existence and his involvement in aiding Lady Rosa's side at the junior ball was already declassified, so I could speak freely! And if Heller got suspicious, I was confident I could easily throw him off the scent!

Heller's eyes shot open.

*Bingo!*

"My brother... Was he in the town square by your command...?"

*Wait, Rust was in the town square?*

*With a face like his, I definitely would've noticed—actually, no, he might've kept his face hidden. After all, he was usually a hooded character in the source material.*

*Meanwhile, it sounds like Heller is misunderstanding some things...but if I deny it, I won't be able to drag the information I want out of him, will I...?*

The trauma from my botched Guy seduction resurfaced.

"It's likely he is involved with this survey...", I said cryptically, concealing my lips behind Blackfeather in a charming act of subterfuge!

"My brother gave this to me..."

Heller pulled a folded slip of paper from his uniform pocket. I took it from him with my gloved left hand, in part because Blackfeather was in my right hand, but also because his hand was bare.

*What's this—origami?* It was folded in a special way so you could tell at a glance if it had been opened. And there were no signs of that.

"When did he give this to you?"

"Just before we brought the people to you after the little ruckus over who picked the winning rose."

"And you're certain it was Rust?"

"Yes, Princess."

*I guess Heller would never mistake his elder brother, especially with a face like that. Okay, let's open this baby!*

I snapped Blackfeather shut and set it down beside me, taking the folded paper in both hands. I'd envisioned myself opening it easily, but...*er...huh, this's kinda hard... Between my left hand being wounded and gloved, it's hard to get a grip...*

Then I suddenly remembered—I'm the kind of person who just rips letters open! I remember my mom would always scold me saying, "*Open it neatly, Maki!*" and my big sister was a neat letter-opener, so I never got much experience..... If I knew I was gonna get this letter, I'd just whip out a pair of scissors and get it over with.

*I guess even with reincarnation, some things never change...*

It was still a shortcoming of mine, so I gallantly gave up.

"Heller—open it."

Well, better to have someone else do it. It's also known as delegating!

"You want...me to open it? Are you sure that's all right, Princess?"

I nodded solemnly. And within a couple seconds, I knew passing the buck was the right call. Heller's deft fingers quickly unraveled the origami. Seconds later, it was now a tiny, creased piece of paper. *Huh...has he done this before? Like, did he and Rust exchange letters a lot when they were kids?*

Even though he was Rust's younger brother and wouldn't have been in the wrong for seeing the contents of the letter, Heller opened it in such a way that he wouldn't be able to read it.

"Here you go..."

"Thank you."

Heller placed the letter in my gloved hand.

*Okay, what did he say—*

*I am working with the son of Duke Nightfellow. No matter what should happen, Princess, don't suspect the son of the duke.*

It looked like the letter was scribbled in haste, rather than written leisurely on a desk. It was also written in the same hand that wrote the letter given to me at

the junior ball via Houghie Winfell.

*Rust is working with Derek?* An image of the hooded man with Derek in the town square flashed in my mind. *So that was Rust? Yeah, that tracks. He wore a hood in the books.*

Uncle Dearest had temporarily employed Rust once before, so it was entirely feasible that he was working with Derek right now. And since he had infiltrated the traitors who attacked at the junior ball, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for him to know something about their planned attack during the survey today.

*So that's why he's working with Derek... Oh, but wait a minute. Why isn't Derek acting more out in the open? If he's trying to catch the traitors, he could have joined our survey as a Nightfellow.*

*And for that matter, does Sirius know about any of this?*

It was hard to imagine Derek and Sirius *not* collaborating...

*Hmmm... Based on everything that's happened so far, I was operating under the assumption that Derek and Sirius had to be working together. But I've changed my mind a little. From the way Derek relates to Sil to the deep friendship he shares with Sirius, I wouldn't be surprised if Derek was doing his own thing in secret.*

*Anyway—basically this letter is saying Derek is going to do something very sus, but I should still trust him. Right?*

And it was Rust telling me all this—that part was very odd. After all, he was an anti-royalist traitor in the source material.

*Anti-royalist, huh...?*

If Rust was an anti-royalist in the books, what would that make his little brother?

"Heller—"

"Yes?"

"Do you love Alec?"

"Pardon?" Heller's voice cracked.

The whole reason Heller and I were acquainted in the first place was the epic sword slipup shenanigans in the training ground—where his sword flew out of his hand when he pulled it out of its sheath. Whether that was accidental or intentional, either way, the cause was likely out of affection for Alec. In the case of the former, he was spacing out staring longingly at Alec. And in the case of the latter, it was out of jealousy for my close relationship with Alec.

“L-love him—don’t be so absurd! I respect him deeply!”

*Aha.....so he’s a fan. And a rabid Alec fan at that. A devout worshipper? Yes, I definitely do see respect in his blue eyes... But they’re also swelling with a slight twinge of romantic essence...?*

Anyway, one thing was quite clear: He loved Alec.

If he was an anti-royalist, like Rust in the books, then he ought to have hostile vibes toward the entire royal family...so it felt a bit off that he would make an exception for Alec. Did this mean Rust had sent him into our army as a spy for the anti-royalists?

I decided to push him a little harder.

“What do you respect about him?”

Heller was hesitant to answer, but I gave him my best Princess Smile and pretended not to notice. In time, he finally answered, “There was a time where I was a wretch...and Prince Alexis saved me. Also...”

“Also—what?”

“Please forgive me for being so intrusive, Your Highness, but—how do you feel about Prince Alexis?”

*I was expecting a crazy question when you apologized for being intrusive...so what’s with the softball? It’s so easy I could answer without thinking.*

“I love him. He’s my baby brother.”

*Just how much do I love Alec? I could easily gush about that subject for hours! Wait, does that make me a devout worshipper? Well, I don’t want Heller to show me up!*

Heller looked stunned, devastated, confused—it was a complicated mix of

emotions. Then he leaned forward and said, “Then I’ll tell you...according to whispers from one sector of the platoon—”

“That’s enough.”

A stern voice boomed through the room. It was Hugh, who had slipped into the room a few beats earlier.

“I don’t care that you have the princess’s permission—show some discretion, Heller Byrne.” Then Hugh looked at me and bowed his head. “Forgive me for entering without permission, Your Highness, but I cannot allow one of my men to show you such disrespect.”

I was hoping to hear what the sector of the platoon was whispering about... but I guess it couldn’t be anything favorable. It was something bad enough for Hugh to interrupt him, and for Guy to nod in understanding out in the hallway.

*I guess break time is over, then—*

“No matter, Hugh, you were right. I should be more wary around Heller, of course. Heller, this conversation is over. Focus on your assignment for the rest of the day. And...I’ll dispose of this.”

By “this,” I meant the opened letter.

“Yes, Princess!” With a quick bow, Heller retreated.

*Now, let’s just toss this note into the furnace like the last—oops, somebody grabbed my wrist.*

“Hugh?”

Yes, the wrist-grabber was Hugh. *Yeah, I see through your fake-apologetic gaze.*

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Won’t you let me see the paper Heller Byrne gave you? According to protocol, he should have let me see it first.”

*Aha. So he can’t let one of his subordinates get away with giving me a sketchy piece of paper?*

“Ah yes, protocol... But I gave Heller an order. I commanded that he hand me

the paper directly.”

Okay, that’s a lie! But it was only natural for me to cover for Heller in those circumstances.

“Was the message somehow related to this survey, Your Highness?”

I sighed long and hard. “If you truly are my bodyguard—then release me.”

“—Yes, Princess.”

And though he wasn’t exactly restraining me, I was freed from his restraint. My now free hand tossed the letter into the furnace. *Kick-ass! Evidence buried! All’s well that ends well!*

However.

“The letter stated that Lord Derek was our ally.”

I would at least share the biggest detail with him.

Hugh’s black eyes scrutinized me. “Princess...do you believe that to be true?”

Plot twist. I wasn’t expecting a question like that from Hugh.

But I set that aside and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

The note coming from Rust still gave me pause, but after what happened at the junior ball, Derek’s standing shifted a little in my mind. I trusted him, and not just because he was Uncle Dearest’s son.

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

*Huh...?*

Hugh smiled at me.

Yet another plot twist. Hugh was *smiling*. His smile was unrestrained, like he was genuinely happy that I trusted Derek.

“Well...thank you for telling me, Your Highness.” And with a perfect bow, Hugh left my side.

*Geez...way to throw a girl off her game.*

“We’ve rested quite long enough, I think. Let’s appraise the merchandise, shall we?”



*Tee-hee-hee! Oh, this is fun.*

Sirius frowned and scolded me. “Octavia—I thought we came here to pick out *your* clothes.”

“Oh, I’ve already selected my apparel, dear Brother. I tried them on and purchased them, too. Isn’t that right, shopkeeper?”

Melina looked up from the new design she was furiously drawing in feverish inspiration for her prized customer and nodded vehemently—just like me, the shop had become like a fashion show to her.

“Oh, yes, Your Highness! Princess Octavia tried on three dresses before you arrived—all of which she purchased.”

“Only three...?” Sirius cut in, aghast.

“I selected those three dresses in advance and tried them on, too. That’s why there were only three.”

Just, please don’t misinterpret! I know three dresses isn’t much, but I chose those three dresses after much careful consideration!

The first dress was in autumnal hues. With an accent of orange lace on the bodice, it would serve as a very practical dress. It was fashionable, yet comfortable, and it was a riff on a dress my handmaid back at the castle had shown me. Since it was a dress with a personal connection, I just couldn’t say no!

The second dress wasn’t a dress—it was a two-piece pantsuit! It was the first time I’d seen anything like that in this world, so I went rabid when I saw it. In Esfia, all women, highborn and lowborn, wore dresses or blouse-skirt combinations. Only men wore pants. That was the way.

But ohhh my god, when I spotted them and dragged them out of a corner of the shop and found out they were *ladies’* trousers...I felt like I’d struck gold! They were a light green, accented with embroidery. They had a very feminine design. In fact, they were a prototype, not for sale, but I made Melina sell them to me!

The third would serve as another everyday dress for me. It was colored

similarly to the one I wore to the junior ball—in black and red. I'd chosen it because I thought it could be nice to add something like that to my daily rotation. I'd always stuck to my favorite pastel colors in my everyday dresses up until then.

The second and third selections needed some alterations, so they would be delivered later, but the first dress fit perfectly, so I was able to take it with me!

So, just as we were finishing the transaction, Sirius came back to the shop. We still had plenty of time before the next item on our itinerary. Luckily, Melina's shop also catered to men. That's when I got my brilliant idea: We'd have the men try on some clothes, too!

My first suggestion was Hugh...but he said no. He was like, *"But I'm on duty."* Couldn't even get a word in edgewise. He was like, *"What if somebody attacks us while I'm changing clothes?"*

But then I was like, *"Wait a minute, sir? What about the bodyguard that entered the shop with Sirius? As in, Klifford?"*

The moment I saw Klifford, the thing Guy told me earlier popped into my head and I wanted to forget it—that was part of it. But I also thought I could seize the opportunity to clear the accusations against Klifford...so I waited until the moment was right to ask him—which was right now.

But when those deep indigo eyes met mine—and they definitely met! I'm one hundred percent sure of it! And I'm sure he picked up on my intentions (somehow) and I didn't get any hesitant, what-should-I-do vibes from him—he *ignored me!*

*Curse you, Klifford...!*

So I threw the offer at my brother instead. "While you're here, there's no harm in trying on some suits. Is there anything here that sparks your interest?"

"My interest, you say...?" Sirius was understandably stern.

"Wouldn't it only be proper? You know, as part of the survey."

That's right, the survey! We're here on business! So I pushed that angle on my brother.

After we got him to agree, Melina and I made a fierce duo. I selected the outfits I thought Sirius would rock, Melina's head would explode with artistic inspiration at the sight of him—rinse and repeat.

*But dang...Sirius rocks anything he puts on. I know that's a good thing, but I kinda hate him for it.*

The beautiful instrument that was Sirius's physique amplified the beauty Melina's clothes already held. It was a synergy of suit and stud.

The clothing shop turned into a fashion show. What a pity he had such a small audience!

Also, for all his grumbling, Sirius did give them all an honest try. I'll never forget the comments he made about the outfits, either: "Isn't this a little lacking in strength for business wear?" or, "This is too plain for a nobleman. It needs decorations—nothing too over the top, though." He was a devil when it came to giving advice. He was also dead accurate.

*To get introspective...y-yeah, I think I g-gave quite the l-logical criticisms regarding the pantsuit...?*

"The next one's the last."

"Then, please try this."

Knowing the next outfit would be the last, I handed a very special suit to my brother. He slung it over his arm and disappeared into the changing room. With each new outfit, his changing time had gotten faster and faster. Dude's a quick learner!

Because of that, he returned promptly. And when I saw the new outfit on him — "Oh, that suit would look much nicer on Lord Sil."

—the blunt truth slipped out of me.

The final fit was one I'd chosen not with Sirius, but Sil in mind! I was in search of a suit that Sirius couldn't pull off!

And in the end, he did pull it off, but there was something a little off about it.

Sirius frowned and fell silent. He gave no feedback on the suit, but I wouldn't let him win.

“Don’t you agree, Brother? Why don’t we gift this to Lord Sil?”

I clapped my hands as if it was a spur-of-the-moment idea I’d just had. My wounded hand tingled, but I pushed through the pain.

In the books, Sil and Octavia had ventured into the castle town together and found his guardian ring in a shop. In that arc, Sil and Sister-dearest had bought some new clothes and changed into them before going back into town. Instead of paying for their own clothes, they had bought each other’s as a gift. But now...that arc never existed.

I was just hoping I could recreate at least a part of that missing plot arc. And since Sil would reject a direct gift from me, I figured I could choose the suit and Sirius could give it to him! How ’bout that?!

*A brilliant idea if I do say so myself—* I stopped there, my eyes popping open. Hugh was standing right in front of me. Then, with a dull thud, one of Sirius’s bodyguards fell to the floor. It was a perfect picture: Criminal Gets Restrained. And the man pointing a sword at him was—*Klifford?!*

“Klifford Alderton—” Sirius didn’t shout, but the name shot out of him like bullets.

“What are you *doing?!* ” the guard on the floor protested, his blond locks flying as he turned just his head to glare at Klifford.

Klifford smiled coldly and spat, “What am I doing?”

“Alderton. Explain yourself,” Sirius barked again.

Klifford raised his head. “He tried to attack Princess Octavia, so I neutralized him. Just doing my job as a bodyguard.”

“Hmph! A groundless claim!” the prone blond knight continued to protest. “I felt my sword was loose, so I touched it—that’s all! I swear I never—!”

“Klifford. Do you believe he was the one who tampered with Sil’s carriage?”

If he was our guy, did that mean he was also allied with the traitors? And he tried to attack us just now?

“That...I do not know.” Klifford shook his head. “However, he did attempt to draw his sword. That’s a fact.”

“To attack Octavia?”

“Yes.”

Sirius sighed heavily. Then he looked at his other bodyguards. “Did anyone else perceive an impending attack as Alderton did?”

None of Sirius’s bodyguards came forward. However— “I did.”

“S-so did I.”

—bodyguards on *my* side did. It was Hugh, standing in front of me, and Guy.

“I can’t confirm whether or not he meant to attack Princess Octavia, but I did see him reach for his sword.”

The blond bodyguard glared up at Hugh in shock with a look that said, *You ratted me out!*

“I also saw him touch his sword, Your Highness. Er, that is, I mean—” Guy continued, steadying his voice and declaring with confidence, “As soon as that bodyguard began to draw his sword, Sir Alderton restrained him.”

*So that’s why Guy is standing so close to me...*

He was against the wall during the fashion show, yet now he was just inches away from me. Heller was still closer to the wall. Guy’s actions further corroborated his testimony.

“Well—it appears to be true that this man touched his sword, Brother. Not only Klifford, but Hugh and Guy witnessed it as well.”

*In other words, he’s not lying.*

“Bodyguards sometimes touch their swords in the line of duty.”

“Indeed. He may have had no malicious intent. Klifford—lower your sword. Help him up.”

“.....As you wish.” Klifford lowered his sword and helped the bodyguard up with his other hand.

“That being said, this guard did behave suspiciously, Brother. Remove him from the survey. That is a bare minimum necessity.”

“Understood... Take him away.”

At his command, two other bodyguards appeared on either side of the blond knight. This finally got Klifford to release the man and take a step back.

As the three men left the shop, Hugh added a command to the two on either side, “Put him under surveillance, just in case.”

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*Okay...to review, I got Rust’s message via Heller that we would see each other again soon. I also know Rust was in the castle town square.*

But I was speechless.

Here we were, sitting before a feast of foods quite different from our castle fare—it was much closer to the food in my Maki memories—and yet, I couldn’t enjoy the *atmosphere*. It was a real bummer.

“Princess Octavia, are you in an unpleasant mood? I do hope I’m not imposing...” A lovely voice tickled my ear.

Sitting with us at the big, round, food-filled table was a man wearing an eyepatch. It was probably there to hide the scar he was born with, though it was conveniently helpful to me as well.

After all—his face belonged to *that mysterious young man* from my shitty, haunting memories. The fact that the partial obstruction of his face allowed me to think of him as a different person was the one silver lining.

“Why, no, I am in a great mood. I am on a survey with my brother. Besides, a friend of Houghie’s is a friend of mine.”

I smiled sweetly at him, held up my lemon-flavored sparkling water in a sort of toast, then took a sip.

“Rust, mind your manners in front of the princess...,” Houghie scolded. But Rust only shrugged his shoulders.

That’s right. *Rust*.

We were now in the *Dining* phase of the survey. Sirius had invited Cissy and

Houghie at first, then I wound up inviting them in turn. Cissy was sitting directly across from me with Houghie to her right—which was to be expected, just as my brother was seated to my right.

The issue was...the man seated to my *left*!

This guy tended to pop up in the most random places—the source material made that painfully obvious.

But why'd he have to pop up next to *me*?!

Rust was sitting in the seat next to me, a shrewd smile on his face.

And how did all this happen, you might ask?

Well, this was a shocking plot twist that I learned about at the junior ball, but Rust and Houghie were longtime friends. While Houghie and Cissy were waiting for us to arrive for lunch, they happened to meet up with Rust just before we got here.

I think you get the idea?

*“You’re a friend of Viscount Winfell?”* Sirius had asked. *“Byrne... Ah, that’s a viscount house as well. Your lands are close, I recall.”*

Even though I’m sure Sirius read about him in the junior ball debriefing and knew exactly what role he had played there, he had never breathed a word of it to me.

Then Sirius had glanced at Rust and said, *“As you’re the elder brother of my sister’s bodyguard and Viscount Winfell’s friend, would you care to join us for lunch?”*

*“I would be honored, Your Highness.”*

My brother had the gall to ask Rust to lunch!

*Grrr. Now that Rust is here, I have to be hypervigilant, don’t I?*

*His face... It’s all his damn face’s fault!*

The only difference this time was, based off the note he sent me through Heller, he was working with Derek. So he wasn’t a big steaming pile of suspicion this time.

Rust joining us for lunch might not have been a bad thing. Though I had no proof of this, his presence might have shaken things up for the traitors still in hiding.

I mean, the traitors would be like, *“Who the hell is this rando?”* For real, tho.

Just as this thought crossed my mind, our order arrived at the table.

“Thank you.”

*Oh, how I’ve been waiting for this moment!*

After Sirius suspended that guard, he changed back into his old clothes, and we left Melina’s shop in the southeastern side of town and traveled by carriage to the west side.

And to whom it may concern, I secretly bought that outfit for Sil. Since I would need to have him try it on for alterations, I figured I’d take it home for starters, and I would devise the ideal moment to make him accept my gift!

We were now at the next destination. The top-ranked eating establishment among Esfia’s royal capital’s citizens!

It was a two-story building. The lower floor was a restaurant for the common folk, and the upper was a luxury dining hall. The lower floor was my first choice, but they’d bought out the entire upper floor, and just the five of us sat at a table while bodyguards shadowed us—that was to be our dining experience.

But I could still get a taste of what eating on the lower floor was like. From my seat on the upper floor, I could see the lively scene of the floor below down the wooden stairs. It was packed with customers.

I scanned the room for Steyn and Derek, thinking that since Rust was here, they might also be, but I couldn’t see them anywhere.

Rust’s order was brought to the table last. Instead of thanking the chef, we gave thanks to the Sky God—and dug in.

I ordered...(drumroll)...a rice dish! Rice was a staple of Khangenan cuisine, so that’s where Esfia imported their rice from. It was quite affordable, too. But Esfia favored bread. We ate it every day at the castle.

For royalty and the upper nobility, bread was king. Rice was faintly



stigmatized as peasant food... I learned that from my correspondence with Cissy. It made sense, as Esfia was a big wheat producer. Meanwhile, Khangena's main export was rice. It was a prime example of how neighboring countries' food and history went hand in hand.

Just once, I asked the castle chef to make me a rice dish. The only problem was, it oozed luxury... It was good, it just wasn't what I was craving... I mean, of course it wasn't.

So that's why I ordered the rice dish here. I was hoping it would give me a little taste of home!

With butterflies in my stomach, I put a spoonful of rice in my mouth.

"...!" My eyes shot open.

*It's fried rice! Well, Chinese style, not Japanese style, but still! It totally reminds me of the shrimp fried rice Mom used to make!*

It was a sauteed rice dish with vegetables, egg, and the sea's bounty!

It was so delicious that I just kept eating in reverent silence. To be honest, the fact that we were on a survey got crammed all the way back to the deep recesses of my brain...!

The best seasoning for your meal is good conversation—that was Esfia's motto. It wasn't until I was halfway finished with my fried rice that I finally remembered that.

*Oh, shit...!*

Castle dining experiences aside, I was going to try to be the conversation starter today! But I think the boys have been doing most of the talking... To make matters worse, I was so engrossed in my fried rice that I didn't hear a word of it.

*But it's not too late... I can salvage this!*

I set down my spoon for a moment.

*Let's start with Cissy.*

"I see you've ordered a rice dish as well, Cissy."

As I looked over everyone's main dishes on the circular table, I noticed that only Cissy's and mine were rice dishes. Mine was fried rice and Cissy's was... what you'd call a paella? There were a bunch of goodies on top of the rice. Sirius and Houghie were eating meat dishes, and Rust was eating seafood—each of those dishes was served with bread.

“Um...” Cissy murmured quietly in reply. “Was that...improper of me? Should I order some bread?”

She looked surprisingly grim about the whole thing. *No, Cissy, you've got it all wrong!*

“Oh, I only wanted to know what kind of rice dish you had ordered. You've traveled the world and experienced other cultures, yes? I remember you telling me in one of your letters about the rice dishes you ate.”

When I replied to that letter, if food had been the main focus, I would have asked for more info. But that was right around the time when I was reading one of the novels Cissy had translated—a Cinderella story of two perfectly matched men of different classes—and my mind was preoccupied with degenerate fantasies and the searing question, *is this enemies-to-lovers?! Is it an enemies-to-lovers story?!*

“I was wondering if, perhaps, the dish you were eating used strong spices.”

More to the point, I wanted to know about *curry*. Did curry exist in this world?!

Cissy hit me with a blank stare. “Strong spices, you say...?”

“You have them in your food, too, don't you, Cissy? Just wondering what they're like.”

“I believe the dish I ordered is primarily seasoned with a spice called saffron. It used to be incredibly expensive, but since they bred saffron to produce a bigger yield, it can now be imported at little expense.”

“Saffron is one of Khangena's most lucrative resources... You seem quite the expert, Lady Lewry.”

“Oh, Cissy's a genius, Brother.”

I couldn't be prouder. If I weren't sitting down, I'd put my hands on my hips, puff out my chest, and be like, *My friend rocks! Keep those compliments comin'!*

"Yes, but, Princess Octavia, are you entirely certain that this strong, spicy rice dish of which you speak even exists?"

*Another challenger enters the ring—Rust!*

So I gave him a little more information. "I do believe it's a spicy food, yes... And you serve it with bread pounded thin and grilled and a side of rice."

"Hmm. How oddly specific of you."

"I read about it in a book long ago. I forgot which book, though..."

Naturally, it wasn't a book, but my past life's memories.

"A book..... In a book....." Cissy fell deep into thought. "I remember reading about a dish called kari—it was in a book in the Valjean territory. Apparently, it uses a wide variety of spices. Perhaps you read the same book, Via?"

*Yes.....! I found youuu!*

"Yes, that must be it."

Yes, Valjean! Of all places to have curry, Valjean would definitely be on the list! After all, they're the country that had *matcha shiratama* ice cream!

Valjean was a mercantile nation to the southwest, sandwiching Khangena with Esfia. It was small in size, but rather powerful. Since it had no natural resources, it had acquired its power and influence through trade—that's what I had learned in my royal studies.

According to the history books, when Esfia and Khangena were at war, Esfia imported its goods from Valjean. Meanwhile, Valjean was also selling all sorts of supplies to Khangena as well.

"Thanks, Cissy—you're a lifesaver."

*That's my Cissy!*

*And we're supposed to have a visitor from Valjean after the Council of Feudal Lords is over! I'll have to remember to pick their brain about curry...*

Sirius eyed Rust as he swirled his drink. "By the way—is it true that House

Byrne is a distant relation of House Nightfellow?”

I was right in the middle of a bite of fried rice, so I forced it down my throat before I could make an embarrassment of myself. Then I carefully washed it down with some sparkling water. *Phew... Close call.*

“As far as I know, Your Highness, my family is of no blood relation to the Nightfellows.”

“Yes...that’s how I remember it as well.” Sirius scrutinized Rust, as if something had struck him. “However, your face says otherwise...”

Did he notice something in particular about Rust’s face?

“If I remove this eyepatch, I fear I may cause great discomfort to everyone here.”

“No, you don’t need to remove it—are you certain you aren’t connected with House Nightfellow?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I am certain. I’d feel sorry for my own viscount house if I were an outsider.”

Sirius knit his brows together in thought. Then he pressed a hand to his temple and lightly shook his head.

*Oh... Doesn’t he do that when his memory gets wonky? But...did Rust do that to him? Was that the cause of my brother’s faulty memories? Was Rust one of the masterminds...? Hmmm... No, the way he acts around Rust isn’t exactly the way a person would act around someone he suspects of foul play...*

“If you still have your doubts, Your Highness, then perhaps you should ask the son of Duke Nightfellow. I hear you and he are friends.”

“But Derek...” Sirius sighed, then continued. “Good idea. I’ll talk to Derek.”

After that, our lunch was uneventful.

I got to talk Cissy’s ear off, and she even gave me some good shop recs. At the end of our survey, we would have some personal free time and I could visit whichever places I pleased...in theory!

In actuality, there were all sorts of restrictions placed on me, but I really

wanted to go to this one shop Cissy told me about! It was a store of miscellaneous sundries, and it sounded like a certified hole-in-the-wall. She said she and Houghie happened upon it when they were strolling through the capital. She even gave me the prize intel that it contained many books relevant to my interests.

Even though I was traitor bait, I enjoyed my lunch a *little* too much. After my fried rice, I sampled a variety of simple dishes, then I ordered dessert—I was stuffed by the end of it. My dessert was a pastry called eba—it had a flour pastry base and a hard candy top; it looked kind of like cheese. There were many different variants of it, none of which were considered standard. Until I became Octavia, I'd never eaten anything like it, and if you asked me what Esfia's specialty sweet was, I would say eba! Cissy and I ordered all the variations the restaurant had and shared them until it was time to bid our lunchtime farewell!

*My compliments to the chef.*

"It's no wonder you two correspond so frequently..." Sirius sighed, seemingly annoyed by the overtly chummy way in which Cissy and I were acting. This caused a smug desire to brag about my friend to swell inside me and— .....?

Cissy and I were indeed corresponding, but in secret. Not a word of it was made public. I didn't even tell Alec about it—that's just how hush-hush it was.

And yet, Sirius somehow knew that Cissy and I were pen pals...and what's more, the frequency of our exchanges.

*Actually, yeah, that tracks. Sirius can get a handle on just about anything that's happening at the castle if he puts his mind to it...*

"Thank you so much for the kind invitation," Houghie said, zapping me back to the present. "This is a mere trifle, but..." With a clap of his hands, a few waiters appeared, carrying trays lined with many cups. "I've bought drinks for the whole table—these are from me and the restaurant—in gratitude of the prince and princess for taking care of us all. And if I may be so humble as to present the gift to you myself—"

Houghie stood briefly from his seat and gave a textbook noble bow.

Then a cup was set before each of us at the table. They were, however, empty. As the wait staff poured liquid from the jugs into the cups, the rich fragrance of coffee filled the air.

*Ooh, after-lunch coffee! With my favorite accompaniments—milk and sugar!*

It said on the menu that coffee was this restaurant's specialty, but they were sold out—which came as no surprise to me—so we hadn't ordered any. *Today's my lucky day!*

"With all due respect—"

But somebody put up a roadblock.

"—we cannot ensure that this is safe for us to drink. We may need to accept your gift in ceremony only—unless someone is willing to test the drinks for us."

It was Hugh, standing behind me, arms crossed.

"You're saying...you want someone to test for poison?"

"Yes."

I could see what Hugh was getting at. His observation was extremely logical, too. But I didn't want to be a wet blanket when Houghie and the restaurant staff were so kind to us.

I stared longingly at the jug of coffee in the waiter's hand.

*I mean, I think it's safe to drink... I just need to err on the side of extreme caution, given my status...*

Caught between my sense of personal duty and royal duty, I shot Houghie a sideways glance—*HALP, plz!*

Then, with an understanding nod, Houghie rose from his seat. "Sir Roberts is quite right—we should test this for poison. Allow me to do the deed. Once the drink has been determined safe, we shall have some poured for the Royal Highnesses from the same jug." He finished his little speech with a sweet smile for flair.

*You're the man, Houghie! Cissy's a lucky gal!*

*Huh, I just realized this, but aren't the names Hugh and Houghie really similar?*

*Must be annoying to tell them apart in the books... Oh, never mind, Hugh is the only one who was in the source material, so I guess that's not an issue...*

The waiter poured the black liquid into Houghie's cup. The coffee's wonderful fragrance hit my nose even harder. Houghie stayed standing as he sipped the coffee, probably so we all could get a good look at him. He looked perfectly normal after he drank the liquid. That should be enough to convince Hugh.

"Well, I suppose it's my turn now," I said.

With that, the waiter who poured Houghie's coffee came to my seat. I watched as my cup filled with the black liquid. I had the waiter follow it up with some milk and sugar, then I lifted my cup.

"Thank you for the kind gift."

"Octavia—wait."

"What's the problem?"

This time it was Sirius. *C'mon, Houghie risked his life to prove the coffee wasn't poisoned. You'd better not tell me I can't drink it.*

I started to shoot him a worried frown—

"I'd like to drink mine with her."

—but my worries were in vain!

He wanted to drink the coffee with me at the same time, as a show of our appreciation—now *that*, I endorse!

Sirius and I brought our cups up and lightly tapped them together. Then we sipped.

*Mmm, yeah*—if I had to choose, I preferred tea over coffee. I loved milk tea even more. But nothing beats a cup of coffee after a meal!

*I'm sure my smile says everything my heart's feeling right now!*

"Well—as my friend tested it for poison himself and both Their Royal Highnesses have safely partaken, I shall have some as well."

Rust was the next to drink, and he took his coffee black. *Oh, Sirius took his black, too. And so did Houghie—!* I froze in terror. *Cissy, you're taking it black,*

*too? Am I the only one here with a child's palate?!*

“Feel free to join us, gentlemen,” Houghie called out to the guards around us with a big smile—and not only to the main bodyguards, but to the common soldiers as well.

“Sorry, my lord, but we’re on duty...”

Hugh Roberts just had to be a buzzkill.

“My, but Princess Octavia’s bodyguard sure is strict today. Unless you still aren’t entirely convinced the drink isn’t poisoned?” Rust jeered.

*Okay, I’ve gotta back up Hugh here!*

“That was uncalled for. Hugh is devoted to his job, and of course he wouldn’t still suspect the coffee. For one thing, the princess—I—and my brother drank it and are perfectly fine. Why would anyone bother poisoning our bodyguards and not us?”

If that were the case, the bodyguards would be targeted first, not us. But why would anybody even need to do that in the first place?

They wouldn’t. Nope.

Rust chuckled. “Indeed, Princess, your words are cogent. They wouldn’t bother to do such a thing. Meaning, your bodyguards can drink the coffee without a problem. Even so—don’t they still need your permission to drink?”

*Oh, dude has a point. So I should just give him permission?*

“Hugh, drink.”

“.....Yes, Princess.”

*Since Sirius isn’t saying anything, he must agree with me.*

The waiters began to distribute cups and pour coffee for the bodyguards and soldiers.

Then I looked up with a start. *Wait, what about Klifford? I mean, I have a distinct memory of asking him to sit with me for tea once and being flatly rejected! So he probably won’t drink it, but if he doesn’t, that’ll only make Sirius suspect him even more!*



I stared Klifford in the eye. I wasn't sure if he'd get the message, but I willed the words, *Drink the coffee!* into his brain.

Klifford's gaze fell to his cup...then he drank the coffee.

*Th-thank goodness! He's drinking it...*

*Or is he?*

*Did he just...have some strange reaction? His eyes narrowed to slits...didn't they? But he drank without a word right after, so maybe he's just not much of a coffee drinker?*

For reference, Hugh, Guy, Heller, and all of my brother's bodyguards and soldiers had their coffee by now, and they were drinking it normally. Nobody was spitting it out or writhing in agony or suppressing a desire to do so. In fact, Guy's eyes were practically singing, *Yummy! More please!* ...Okay, that's a lie. "More please!" was my embellishment.

"Well, royal bodyguard, how was the coffee from my friend?" Rust's voice sailed over the table. He was addressing Hugh.

"It had...an extraordinary flavor." Hugh shot Rust a sharp glance while he praised the coffee—I guess Rust had offended him.

But Rust showed not a bit of self-awareness. "I'm honored to hear it."

*"Rust..."* Hugh growled as if to say, *Listen, asshole...*

And Hugh was right! Houghie and the restaurant staff were the ones who gifted the coffee in the first place! Where do you get off taking credit for it, Rust?!

Then Rust straightened his posture to help Houghie save face and said, "Thank you for a fine and enjoyable lunch. Prince Sirius, Princess Octavia, I offer my sincerest gratitude for an experience that I shall cherish always."

*Oh—are we done now?*

And thus, our lunch party was disbanded.

*I.....have no idea what Rust was here for. Nope. He just crashed our lunch party for no reason. At first, I thought it was to get closer to me, but he said his*

*goodbyes and left with Cissy and Houghie, so it couldn't be that.*

After a little chat with the restaurant owner, we also descended the stairs from the upper floor to the lower floor. Guards were posted at the top and bottom of the stairs so that nobody could use them. They stepped aside and made a path for us through the first floor all the way to the exit.

*Hm... Is it just me, or did a hooded man just slip out the back exit out of the corner of my eye...? I had a flashback of the town square earlier. Was that... Derek?*

Feeling a twinge of discontent in my brain, I arrived at the carriage.

“Princess Octavia, Prince Sirius.”

I stopped and turned around at the sound of Hugh's voice.

“There will be a changing of the guard, to enhance security.”

“But didn't you just change posts a little while ago?”

My brother was right. They had already shuffled the deck after suspending the knight Klifford had pinned with his sword.

“Security can never be too strong,” Hugh said, his expression the epitome of solemnity as he shook his head. “I worry that we may yet encounter a significant disturbance.”

There was no room for my brother nor I to argue when faced with such earnestness, so we gave Hugh permission to rearrange our guards' positions, with himself at the center.

But this gave me an idea to shake things up. Why don't we change the survey order?

The next item on our itinerary was *Dwelling*—a stroll beneath the kallum trees. Why don't we instead visit a shop I'd patronized on a previous trip into town?!

As I'd anticipated, Hugh frowned when I suggested it. A change of itinerary meant a hole in security. That would be the sort of chink in our defenses the traitors would love.

Sirius was about to say something, but he held his tongue. He probably realized this was my way of shaking things up.

*For today, I am Princess in the Snare! So turn a blind eye to the hole in our security! Sorryyy!*

“Do take the change of itinerary into account while amping up our security, Hugh.”

It was a command. He couldn't say no.

I'm sure there were a number of things Hugh was dying to say to me, but he swallowed them all and answered with a simple, “Yes, Princess.”

So—

“Oh, are you changing the formation of my brother's bodyguards as well?”

I was waiting inside the carriage. Hugh and I were checking over the formation changes before they were implemented. Our security wasn't exactly enhanced...rather, it was shifted away from Sirius? Klifford was still by his side, though.

Then again, Klifford had demonstrated more than once that he was the equivalent of several soldiers in combat prowess.

“We've narrowed Prince Sirius's personal guard to an elite few and scattered the other platoon outside the perimeter. We anticipate a ranged attack is possible.”

*A ranged attack... So like, bows and arrows...?*

“Meanwhile, we've increased the number of soldiers surrounding both of you.”

Because of that, this new formation of bodyguards and soldiers made for a rather showy procession.

Sirius was writing yet another letter to send via messenger bird. He released the bird with the note tied around its foot into the sky and walked over to me.

“How are things at the castle, Brother?”

“All is well.”

*Guess that means the bodyguards without alibis are behaving themselves in the dungeon.*

Sirius got in the carriage with me. He sat and crossed his arms. I let my gaze fall to Blackfeather in my lap.

“Our next stop is—the shop where you bought that fan.”

I snapped Blackfeather open. “Is that all right?”

His aquamarine eyes stared into mine. And I don’t think I was sensing any discomfort over the wreven feathers?

“It’s agonizing...trying to make sense of it all.” He sighed long and hard. “Sil... he called your fan *magnificent*.”

*He did? Well, now I know why Sil was always okay around Blackfeather! Can I add him to the cult? Should I order another wreven feather tassel?*

“How did Sil—” Sirius murmured. He sounded neither cross nor vexed. After a long pause, he started a new question. “Why does Sil trust you?”

*Um... Don’t ask me, buddy! If I had to say, maybe it was the guardian ring? Or maybe the sense of kinship we formed at the junior ball?*

Sirius leaned against the backrest of the carriage, his head pressed to it as he said, “You confuse me, too... I always thought you hated Sil.”

“I never hated him,” I firmly refuted the claim. *I just...hate that because of him, my fate is predetermined.*

“I think Sil is quite fond of you...,” Sirius whispered bitterly.

“Oh...!”

*Sil, you dog, you! Well, I know he didn’t mean it in a romantic way. But of course I’m happy that my fave loves me back. Oh, Sil, as my fave, I hope that you become an even greater man years from now...*

Then it suddenly hit me.

Time had stopped for the Sil I knew in the books, but now I could watch the real Sil mature before my very eyes! Double the pleasure!

*Whoa, easy, Octavia. Don’t let that pleasure show unless you want another*

*death glare of jealousy...!*

I braced myself for it—but I got the cold shoulder instead.

Sirius said nothing more to me on the matter.



## Derek Nightfellow's Secret Mission

Derek sighed. *Oh, what a bother.*

He knew there was scheming afoot, but the schemers wouldn't show themselves. They had taken complete control over public opinion as well.

He had spotted one suspicious person reaching for the rose, but he couldn't confirm whether he was one of the traitors or not. Whoever he was, though, he seemed wary of Derek.

"Aww, phooey! I wanted to put the flowers in Her Highness's hair."

*How many times have I heard that line now?*

"And since you refused to lose gracefully, you forced me to drag you off."

"Hey, if I hadn't grabbed that rose, one of the weaker but slightly scary baddies would've gotten it. Even best-case scenario, it would've been the slightly scary baddie kneeling before Her Highness alongside the bumbling beauty."

Steyn hovered off his seat across from Derek to lean forward. Derek grumbled back, "Her name is Cissy Lewry—and you could have just let her have it."

"But I still had a *claim* to it!"

For all his griping, Steyn finally seemed to grow tired.

"I hope the divine Lord Rust is doing well in there!"

Derek cast a glance out the window of the pub they were currently in—to the restaurant next door where Sirius and Octavia were dining during their survey.

“...Why the ‘divine’ Lord Rust?”

Royalty and nobles who associated with House Nightfellow deserved honorifics, of course, but Steyn was not the sort of person who would call anybody “the divine” just because they were a noble.

“Come on, have you seen that *face*?! A godly face like his deserves a title of divinity!”

“Aha. His *face*...,” Derek muttered, crossing his arms. He had to admit, Rust was abnormally attractive. He had learned Rust’s name and face for the first time at the junior ball, and after a little digging, Derek learned his backstory, too.

There was no falsehood in his testimony. He was Rust Byrne, the eldest son of Viscount Byrne. He was also friends with the young Viscount Houghie Winfell, and he was in Countess Reddington’s employ at the junior ball, though you couldn’t exactly call him one of her *subordinates*...

In his mind, Derek went over what had transpired in the Sky Chamber—when Rust Byrne had removed his mask.

The way Derek’s father, Leif Nightfellow, had reacted.

“There was...nothing.”

“Huhhh? What’s nothing, my lord?”

Derek did not answer.

“Lord Derek, I find it particularly atrocious how you ignore me so naturally! Your arrogance reeks of the upper nobility.”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, m’lorrrd!”

Derek scrutinized Steyn. If he was going to suspect his own father, he should suspect his redheaded subordinate as well. With a sigh, Derek scratched his head through his hood.

Derek hadn't known—well, technically, he had *forgotten*. It was a memory deeply sleeping in his past. He had completely forgotten about the portrait he and Sirius had unearthed that one day when they were looking around the house.

It was an appropriate item to find hanging in the Nightfellow villa in the royal capital. It was a portrait of a young Duke Rufus Kihlgren, former head of the Nightfellow family. There was no way his father wouldn't know about it, no way he would have forgotten about it.

In other words—despite the kind of man his father was, he should have shown some reaction. Because Rust Byrne bore such an uncanny resemblance to Duke Kihlgren that anyone would believe he was his grandson. Actually, he looked like more than just a grandson.

And yet, his father had shown no reaction.

There was only one conclusion Derek could draw: Leif had deliberately concealed his reaction. But what was there to lose in showing a reaction?

Here's a better question—why was that painting covered in dust and put away to begin with? Why was it that when Derek went to the room where he'd found the painting to see it once more, it was gone?

Derek shot to his feet when he sensed somebody approaching from the pub entrance. From the angle at which they were seated, he was walking directly toward them. Without needing to signal, Steyn had stood from his seat at about the same time.

*No combat prowess, my foot*, Derek scoffed. Steyn had an abnormally keen sense of people, and he was a fast runner. He was also good at both blending in and standing out in a crowd—that was the kind of man Steyn was.

It was also hard to swallow that when his father gave Steyn his first assignment, Derek thought it was a trap... But when Steyn did fall into a predicament, he'd been impossibly weak. If *that* was all an act, Steyn deserved high praise for it.

They slipped out the back, and at about a ten-second delay, the man who looked exactly like his ancestor in that painting—eyepatch notwithstanding—



Rust Byrne made his appearance.

*Guess it ends here—*

Rust's face...and any suspicions Derek had regarding it, were not his top priority. He had different fish to fry today.

"Is it done?"

"Without a hitch."

"Did everyone drink it?"

*Everyone* in this case meant the bodyguards and soldiers watching over the prince and princess on their survey.

"Yes. Princess Octavia gave us the perfect push to get over the edge." Rust smirked, remembering the scene. "The way she acted...they had no choice but to drink." He held up a finger. "The effects, however, remain doubtful."

Derek nodded his head knowingly. "It wasn't as powerful a dose as I've taken. Any stronger than that, and they'll taste it. The mentally fit will probably get a bit more truthful, though if they're aware of what they drank, they can resist it somewhat."

"You're too kind."

Rust's sarcasm irked him—because Derek was self-aware. Derek wanted to catch the traitors and stop them, yet here he was, making tepid excuses for the measures he was taking. His enemy was partly to blame for not slipping up in the slightest—but the main reason Derek had gone to these lengths was because he wanted everything to end without bloodshed.

He hoped that it was all a big misunderstanding on his part.

Or he hoped that if it wasn't a misunderstanding, that the mastermind would have a change of heart.

"Viscount Winfell... Did he notice?"

"Not sure. I didn't say anything to him. All I did was plant the suggestion to treat everyone to drinks, as you ordered. But even if he did notice, he would turn a blind eye to it as long as he knew no harm would come to the prince and

princess. I sense he is genuinely loyal to you. He might prove useful to us.”

“I see...”

Still, in a perfect world, he would remain completely oblivious.

“However—I only hope that your kindness doesn’t backfire on you this time.”

“Lord Rust, could you not be so hard on Lord Derek? Pretty please and thank you? I tend to be forgiving of pretty faces, but even I have my limits.”

“Does this apply to anyone? Even a murderer?” Rust questioned Steyn.

“Huh? Er, well, is this murderer handsome?”

“I can’t help but feel sorry for you, son of Duke Nightfellow—your servant’s sense of ethics is warped.”

“Whoa, Lord Rust, way to call the kettle black. From where I’m standing, you’re plenty warped yourself. One more thing, I don’t care *how* pretty you are, anybody who picks on Lord Derek is my sworn enemy!”

“Oh, how lucky you are, son of Duke Nightfellow. He seems to be your ally after all.”

Derek sighed heavily. “The drug was only an additional precaution. I didn’t put much hope in it to begin with.”

*Though a part of me had put a lot of hope in it...* The crushing pain of hypocrisy tugged on Derek’s heart.

“Back to business...how’s the other plan going?”

“In the end, we got him to sing, no problem. However, there was no proof. We tried to get his testimony, but he never knew who the *somebody* giving the order was. Then again, if I were to make contact with his employer, I’d blow my cover as a spy.”

When the suspicions he had regarding a certain person became clear, Derek immediately thought of Rust Byrne as the right person for the job, and he happened to be at the villa—for interrogation. So Derek took custody of him, under the caveat that Rust would aid him in a mission.

Rust Byrne had connections with the traitors who had crashed the junior ball.

Derek could make use of Rust's knowledge and experience from having infiltrated their ranks as a spy.

Rust Byrne also had knowledge of the plot to assault the princess during her survey.

...A plot that was supposed to have hit a snag.

"Somebody had a hand in reviving the plot to assault the princess—that much is clear. And the assailants are well apprised of the survey itinerary. So, what are we going to do about it?"

"About what?"

"I'm asking whether we hinder the attack outright or not. I know where and when it's planned."

"Where, and when?"

"When Octavia walks beneath the kallum trees."

"Kallum..."

*It's just one hateful thing after another, isn't it...?*

Derek remembered the little girl who refused to cry under the kallum tree, but he extinguished the image.

"Arresting only some of the attackers is meaningless. We need to strike down their ringleader."

"Your point?"

Rust knew full well what his point was. He was surely pressing Derek deliberately.

"We won't stop the attack under the kallum trees."

Right after, the mastermind's identity would become clear, and they would take action toward their true aim.

—Their ultimate target and motive.

But try as he might, Derek could not begin to imagine what their motive might be.

“Lord Derek, are you sure you’re all right with that?” Steyn pressed him, defying his usually obedient disposition when it came to orders. “I meannn, Lord Derek... Emotionally speaking, you don’t want to put Princess Octavia in danger, do you? I just kinnnda think it’s important to listen to your heart in matters like this—so sayeth your humble servant Steyn!”

“Personally, I don’t care either way.”

“Nobody asked *you*, Lord Rust!”

“I won’t stop the attack, but I won’t sit back passively and watch it happen, either,” Derek answered.

“Sooo...what you *really* mean to say is—?”

“I’ll join the survey as Derek Nightfellow.”

Rust Byrne was the first to question the idea, and in the most hurtful way. “Is that...even possible? Are you still on good terms with Prince Sirius?”

*“Then that makes even you a suspect.”*

Remembering the words his friend had muttered under his breath the last time they spoke, Derek closed his eyes for a moment before he said, “I hope we’re on good terms.”

After all, Sirius hadn’t pursued Derek when he recognized him in the castle town square from beneath his hood.

Even though he had refused Derek’s advice—

“If Sirius protests, then I’ll ask Princess Octavia. Besides, your presence will serve as a great diversion.”

*For the ringleader.*

“You think I’ll discourage the traitors from acting out? That’s awfully optimistic of you.”

*Seriously...this guy really is a thorn in my side.*

Derek removed his hood and changed into his proper suit coat—and with that, Derek, son of Duke Nightfellow, was ready to go.

Due to circumstances beyond his purview, the survey itinerary had been

changed. Their stroll beside the kallum trees was postponed. However, news of these changes had already reached her attackers—the traitors.

And besides—

“I think the drug may have worked a little.”

The guards surrounding Sirius had changed. Derek’s person of interest shouldn’t know exactly what was inside the drink, but had he removed a certain “comrade” who was an element of concern just in case?

“.....”

Derek laughed in self-deprecation. He was laughing because he realized then that he hoped this moment would prove his suspicions wrong.

A light pink flower petal tickled his cheek. He picked it off. It was a piece of a blossom blown from the kallum trees.

“Guess I’m just being superficially kind again...”

He opened his hand, letting the flower petal lose itself in a gust of wind. He followed it with his gaze to find Octavia and Sirius about to step out of the carriage.

He waited a few seconds, then he began to walk—then he stopped in his tracks and frowned.

*That guy can’t be human—*

He was so far away that any normal man couldn’t have noticed him...but Klifford Alderton had. However, Klifford showed no signs of drawing his sword like he had at the junior ball. Having said that, Derek was certain Klifford didn’t like him in the slightest.

If Derek showed even a hint of suspicious behavior, Klifford would pounce on him in the blink of an eye.

When he spoke with Sil earlier, Sil had told him Sir Alderton’s talents were wasted as a bodyguard.

But even that was an understatement. In the Sky Chamber, from the way he overpowered an Adjutant in combat, it was clear he was too powerful.

Problematically so.

This was just how dangerous the man was...but at the very least, he was not Derek's enemy at the moment. That was the one silver lining.

"If the worst happens, carry out the plan," he whispered to Steyn, who was in hiding nearby.

Then Derek resumed walking.

## 64

"Welcome to our establishment, Your Royal Highnesses!" The portly shopkeeper—and to me, a sight for sore eyes—welcomed us into his shop.

I was worried Blackfeather might have hurt his business, but, in a word, his shop had powered up.

...In a bad way.

Since the last time I paid a visit, his storefront had changed a little—scratch that—a *lot*. Fundamentally, it was a jewelry and accessories shop. But now, fans modeled after my Blackfeather were hanging all over the storefront in great quantity! It was more than just a little weird. *Ah, Guy just yelped in terror.*

It's a turnoff... It's a major turnoff! You're scaring off the normies, good sir!

"When I heard you were coming to visit, Princess, I rearranged my product display to feature you!"

As the shopkeeper smiled and rubbed his hands together, I could just hear the words, *Please praise me!* in his sparkling eyes.

*Ass-kissing... This is textbook ass-kissing!*

"Shopkeeper..."

"Yes, Princess?!"

"I'll ask your name some other time..."

"Yes, Princess..." The stout shopkeeper's shoulders drooped.

*Hey, Shopkeeper, you were the one who declined to give your name in the first place. Remember?*

It happened the first time I came to him and ordered Blackfeather. I asked for his name then, as one does.

And this is what he'd said to me: *"Your Highness...I am but a lowly merchant, a novice at my craft. Once I've grown as an artist, then I would like you to learn my name."*

Well, at the time, I'd thought, *Wow, what an ambitious and humble man he is.*

He liked Blackfeather, so I paid him a visit during my last survey. I mean, he's the reason I was able to find Sil's jewelry box and guardian ring. But looking back on that day, I remember he was giving me major "Er, not more wreven feather products, I hope? Have mercy!" vibes.

So maybe he had only made me Blackfeather because he couldn't say no to a princess. Maybe he thought he'd gotten the short end of the stick and wouldn't give me his name because he couldn't stand the thought of being known as "the guy who made Blackfeather."

But he was a salesman, after all.

And as such, when he realized that wreven feather goods might sell, he plastered his shop with them—that was the vibe I was getting. It was a perfect flip-flop.

"Now that you've been carrying Blackfeather with you on the daily, Your Highness, there are signs that black fans might become popular. Ah, I am indeed humbled by your keen eye for trends, Princess. Now, please, do come in!"

Since we were only planning on stopping by for a quick look, we hadn't made him close shop for the day. As I stepped over the threshold, I worried that there may be no customers inside, what with the glaringly gaudy shop façade...

*Whoa!*

But his shop looked normal on the inside! No change from before. In fact, he had a better display of products this time. And the customers...were present.

There was a black-haired man with two companions, both of whom had their arms full of goodies. A color of suspicion tinted Hugh's eyes.

Seeing us, the man gave a reverent bow.

"I see you've come all the way from Khangena..., " I said. "Welcome to Esfia."

I had to be kind to foreigners and be a good ambassador for Esfia!

"You have a keen eye, Princess, to recognize me as Khangenan." The man looked up from his bow at me—*no, at Hugh? And he looks...startled?*

"Well, you are wearing earrings." The ceremonial Khangenan type, that is.

"Ha-ha-ha! People in the motherland complain about how old and out of style they are, but since they've given me the honor of speaking with Your Highness, I suppose I should thank these earrings."

"By the way, did my bodyguard frighten you?"

The man shook his head. "Oh, heavens no! As you can see, I'm a meek man. Seeing so many esteemed knights at once makes me nervous, I'm ashamed to say..."

"Are you in Esfia on holiday?"

"No, Princess. I have a shop in the capital."

"So that means you're..."

"A merchant, yes. I was born in Khangena, but I'm trying to put down roots in Esfia. Of course, my main shop is in Khangena, though."

"So you spend time in both kingdoms?"

"Yes. I was invited to the junior ball—which Your Highness also attended—and I've been in the capital for the past two weeks. However, unfortunately, there was that terrible riot at the junior ball... It truly caused me great strife. It happened just after I had spoken with Lord Burks and thought things were looking up for me... Oh, that's right, Your Highness, did Lord Burks ask you for a dance?"

"Since you were there, you should know that it wasn't exactly the time or place for dancing."



“Ah... Yes, quite right. Forgive me, speaking with Your Highness has gotten me quite flustered.”

The man slapped a hand to his forehead, cursing himself for the epic fail. Sirius had entered the shop as well, and though he wasn't involved in our conversation, his ears did perk up when Sil was mentioned. (Still, he didn't join in.) *A Khangenan with pierced ears...* When I heard he was at the junior ball, I did start to find him a little suspicious. Especially when he brought up Sil in conversation while Sirius was in earshot. *But if he was at the junior ball with the traitors, he would have been arrested with the rest of them. I think I'll try talking to him a little more.*

“Did you come here to shop?” I asked.

“I've been visiting all sorts of shops to check out my competition. And as you can see, it's got me into quite a fix.” With a chuckle, he gestured with his eyes at his two companions and all the merch they were carrying. *Ooh! Upon closer examination, I see a black fan protruding from the mass! It's one of the fans from this shop's window display!*

“Naturally, we decided to buy one of the readymade fans resembling Blackfeather.”

“And how much longer will you be staying in Esfia?”

“Originally I was planning on staying with a merchant association in the capital, but we will make preparations to return to the motherland after we leave this shop... I remembered a pressing matter I needed to tend to.”

“I see... Well, I hope you'll come to Esfia again sometime.”

*If he's a traitor...I don't think he'd skip town today.*

With a bow, the man left the shop. Then Sirius left my side, summoned a soldier, and gave him an order. I couldn't hear what it was, but I'm sure he was trying to confirm if that man was telling the truth. The soldier nodded and ran outside.

The shopkeeper had stepped aside while the Khangenan man and I were talking. He approached me now with a curious glance cast to the side. He was watching the man and his two companions.

“When he and I were shooting the breeze earlier, he didn’t say a word about a pressing matter he needed to tend to. I don’t understand that man...”

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“His shop really took off over the past few years. His way of doing business is, well...a bit uncouth...but he always honors his contracts and pays his bills on time, so he’s safe enough, as long as you keep him at arm’s length.” He nodded knowingly.

*D-dang... Merchants are all so cynical... Though the nobility offers some stiff competition.*

“That’s right! Don’t you dare bother learning that wretch’s name! Not before mine!”

With a quick nod to humor him, I decided to cut to the chase. Seeing if Blackfeather had been bad for business was only part of the reason I had come here— “Now, Shopkeeper, is my order ready?”

I left the shop with a warm smile on my face. I wanted to carry the item personally, so I’d had him wrap it in paper. That parcel was now sitting snugly in the skirt pocket of my survey-day dress.

It was the sword tassel made of wreven feathers, of course!

Tassels were usually made of thread or ribbon, so I was a tad worried it wouldn’t turn out, but the shopkeeper—the *craftsman*, rather—had an eye for invention, just as he had demonstrated with Blackfeather. The sword tassel was also made quite well.

*Is it beautiful? Check! Is it durable? Check!*

As long as the user is okay with wreven feathers, we’re good to go!

We still had more survey to do, and even though I’d made next to zero gains as traitor-bait, I felt a grand sense of accomplishment.

*Okay, next—*

I got in the carriage and took a deep breath in and let it out.

It was the stroll under the kallum trees—the *Dwelling* part of the survey.

“Are you nervous?”

I’d finally gotten used to seeing my brother sitting across from me in the carriage. It was probably his way of telling me the traitors were on the move and were likely going to attack at our next stop.

*And yeah, most people would draw that conclusion.*

But my nervousness came from a source other than the attackers. I was worried that despite all my emotional conditioning, I would make an utter fool of myself under the kallum trees.

And not in the shaking things up sort of way, more like the dragging my team into danger way.

*When I see the blossoms that remind me of sakura, will I fall to pieces like I did in the past?*

At least part of the reason why the stroll under the kallum trees was delayed until the end of the survey was because I had wanted to avoid it.

But there was no way I could confide in my brother about that, so I asked him a different question instead. “Any chance you’re coming around to trusting Klifford?”

Sirius suspected Klifford of tampering with Sil’s carriage and of being one of the traitors, but had his assessment of Klifford...changed in any way? At least from where I was standing, Klifford didn’t act in any way suspicious today.

“.....No.”

“Then I suppose you’ll change your tune any minute now.” I mean, if this keeps up much longer, it will be quite clear Sirius doesn’t have a leg to stand on!

“You’re free to believe that if you want.” Then he looked out the carriage window and announced, “I see kallum trees.”

A moment after, the carriage stopped, but I didn’t look out the window. I shielded my eyes with Blackfeather as much as possible and stepped outside.

We went over how the kallum walk would proceed: We would each have a bodyguard stationed right beside us—Hugh on my side, and Klifford on Sirius’s.

Behind them would be Guy and Heller, followed by the other bodyguards. Soldiers would be stationed at several points along the walk, from one end to the other.

It was by Sirius's request that Klifford be his closest bodyguard, but it wasn't because he trusted Klifford with his life—it was likely the opposite.

An autumn breeze rustled my hair. The ground by my feet was carpeted with pink flower petals which danced with each gust of wind.

The sight of it stirred up old happy memories that slept deep inside me.

*"Ooh, Big Sis, look! It's snowing sakura. How pretty!"*

*"Let's take a picture!"*

*"Ooh, let's!"*

It was just an ordinary sort of activity anybody would do on an ordinary spring day.

"Princess Octavia?" Hugh peered curiously at me as I stood there, staring blankly at the ground.

*Ack, bad Octavia, bad.*

"It's been awhile since I've walked down a street. Well...shall we go?"

While I did walk the castle grounds daily to get around, it had been several months since I had taken a stroll through the capital. The citizens of the capital were not restricted here, so there were people walking beneath the kallum trees as they normally would, but there were even more people here today to catch a glimpse of the royal procession.

And we had barely taken our first step when—

"My, fancy meeting you here."

—a man appeared before us. He had somehow burst through our wall of security and was innocently approaching, a smile on his handsome face.

*Derek Nightfellow.*

"I was in town on business, and when I found out you both would be here for your survey, I came to pay my respects." Derek gave a proper bow with all the

elegance an elite nobleman should have.

But ruining all his regal grace was the longsword dangling at his hip.

*When he was hooded in the town square, I assume he wanted to be discreet, but now he's just brazenly open carrying?*

I shot him a dubious glance, and Derek smiled smoothly back at me. *Urk! Curse your hotness...!* I know that hotties weren't always innocent, but having a pretty face did give you some leeway. Even I, someone who's surrounded by hotties on the daily, was not immune to its charms!

"Oh, please don't punish the soldiers who let me through. They couldn't contest an order from House Nightfellow."

Translation: "I brazenly abused my authority!"

*So, um, there's one thing that concerns me. Sirius...why haven't you said a single word since he showed up?! And Derek, the way you're talking to us both...you're making it sound like you're here by coincidence, but we all know it's anything but.*

Derek arranged to meet us here by the kallum trees, and not to chat. He didn't belong in the Survey Arc. But at least he's on our side.

"Well, since you're here—"

So I decided to make him join us! If the worst happened and a fight broke out, Derek was definitely good with a sword. He would at least know what to do.

"Lord Derek, would you care to join us on our stroll?"

His brown eyes widened for a second, like he wasn't expecting me to invite him to join us, but he quickly smiled and said, "I would love to."

Taking personal feelings into account as well, asking Derek to join us was the right call. Having somebody to talk to let me walk beside the kallum trees without obsessing over them. And I remembered that I had business with Derek anyway!

"Lord Derek, once the survey is over, I wish to pay the Nightfellows a visit—would that be all right?"

“You want to visit our home...? As in, Nightfellow Manor?”

*Wow, Nightfellow Manor... It's more like a castle than a manor. Would I get some more detailed information if I went to Nightfellow Manor on Nightfellow lands instead of their villa at the capital? But wait a minute, isn't it a bit weird visiting their main house out of nowhere? Even when I was Uncle Dearest's little baby girl in the past, I could count on one hand the number of times I went to the main house...*

“I wish to thank Unc—Duke Nightfellow.”

“That'll be the villa, then. He's going to be in the capital for a while.”

“Then, could you invite me in his place?”

“I wouldn't mind...though you don't need to thank him. I doubt my father cares.”

*Well, he'd better care, otherwise I'll lose my excuse to visit him!*

“Is he busy?”

“No, and even if he were, he would make time for your visit, Princess.”

“Well, I want to do more than thank him. There's something I wish to ask him as well.”

*Oh, wait a minute, saying that out loud made me realize something: The perfect person to answer my question is already standing right here!*

I looked up at Derek beside me. “Lord Derek...have you heard of Duke Kihlgren?”

Derek's eyes immediately shot to me. So intensely that I almost jumped.

“Do you mean...the Duke Nightfellow from a couple generations ago?”

“Yes. He would be like a great-great uncle to me.”

He was also the younger brother of the former king. When he was young, he looked exactly like Rust. And in turn, he looked exactly like *that mysterious young man*.

Derek turned his eyes forward again and said, “In that case—you might not get much out of my father. I'm sorry...you were asking me first, weren't you?”

And no, aside from portraits of Duke Kihlgren in his later years, I don't know anything about him. We have portraits of him in both our manors."

*Portraits from his later years? Well, that's not the version of him I want to know about, so—*

"Any portraits of a *young* Kihlgren?"

Derek's eyes shot to me again. They stared hard, searching me. *Well, that makes two of us, buddy. For a guy who doesn't know anything about Kihlgren, that was quite the big reaction.*

Derek exhaled sharply. "Yes...there was one."

"What do you mean, 'was'?"

"I remember finding a portrait of a young Kihlgren long ago...but it's gone now. I've been planning to track it down it, actually—once the other matters are settled."

"I would love to see this portrait."

*Since he saw the portrait of a young Duke Kihlgren—does that mean Derek noticed Rust looks just like him? Wait..... I'm missing something... That's right, Uncle Dearest must also have also noticed that Rust is Duke Kihlgren's doppelgänger. He must have noticed, right?*

Derek and I both stared, searching for answers in each other's eyes. I did consider Derek an ally, but whether I could tell him about my past life... Well, that was another story.

"I trust I'm invited to the villa, then?"

"Understood—I'll invite you for now. Come anytime. I'll let our people know you're coming."

Barely after I sighed in relief, a gust of wind howled—and I made the mistake of looking up. A curtain of rosy blossoms fell from the kallum trees, dancing before my eyes.

I saw it... I didn't mean to, but I saw it. I was trying so hard to focus on talking to Derek and not look at the kallum trees, but with every gust of wind, the rosy kallum blossoms fluttered before my eyes.

It had actually been many years since I last saw a kallum tree in bloom.

*Ahh...it's sakura.*

Even after all these years, I had the same reaction.

On their own, my feet wandered toward the rows of kallum trees.

*I remember... The first time I saw a kallum tree, it was when I was just starting to feel empty and defeated. So when I saw it, I was excited to see sakura.*

At first, I was so excited, so happy... I felt like I was in Japan again.

If I lifted my gaze just a little so that only the tree was in my line of vision, I could imagine it was the same sakura I'd see on my way home from school.

I knew that no matter how many times I tried to make it happen, my reality wouldn't change...but I couldn't help but want to try anyway.

I was a little mistaken. Now that I've faced my shitty, haunting memories—I know I'll be okay. And it's right for me to be okay. I know I'm Octavia. I know I can't ever go back. But even if I live to be a granny...I doubt these feelings will ever change.

I imagine that, every time I look at a kallum tree, I'll try to see if I can trick myself into thinking I'm back in Japan again.

".....Princess Octavia?" Derek called out to me.

"It's so beautiful. I want to see it up close." But I didn't stop walking toward that kallum tree.

I touched its trunk.

I looked up into its boughs.

All I could see were the snowing flower petals and the kallum branches in the sky.

*Beautiful...*

I was feeling very, very homesick—

*I wonder why I smiled. I don't feel even slightly happy.*

I felt just as empty as I did that day...



*"Of course you're not sakura,"* I muttered the words, knowing them to be true.

But I still couldn't help but try.

I'll close my eyes—

Letting the darkness shroud me.

And when I open my eyes—

I'll be surrounded by sakura, their petals dancing in Japan's breeze. For just a moment, I embraced that hope. I had already given up. But maybe...just maybe that brought me back to my old world?

*That mysterious young man, everything...everything that happened to me was all just a bad dream. I have to get home!*

And when I opened my eyes and saw that the trees weren't sakura and heard the sounds around me—my hope crumbled away.

It was the buildings. They looked nothing like the ones in Japan.

It was the clothes. Nobody in Maki's life wore anything like them.

It was the sounds. The speech that sounded nothing like Japanese.

*But if I closed my eyes and opened them again...*

All I would find was a world just like the one that existed before I closed my eyes. A world that resembled *The Noble King*.

*I know—I know, but still.*

Though I was heartbroken...the heartbreak didn't feel as bad as it felt when I was a child.

I don't think I could ever stop myself from closing my eyes at a kallum tree—but even if I didn't get the results I wanted...even if I was heartbroken...it wouldn't hurt as badly anymore.

How strange...

I feel relieved...just like you do after a good cry.

*"Your Highness—my Sovereign."*

A hazy scene entered my mind.

I'm little...Octavia...with a grown-up Klifford.

*"You have no need to hold in your tears. This is a dream."*

*What...? Is this a memory?*

*I've never met Klifford beneath a kallum tree.*

"Princess Octavia!"

I turned around when I heard somebody yell my name. Derek's brown eyes were filled with worry.

*But I'm okay—I was just looking at the kallum tree.*

Derek slowly retracted his outstretched hand. Then he quietly asked, "Are you okay, Princess?"

*I don't know why...but I feel like he was seeing into my mind. Funny, Derek doesn't know what kallum trees mean to me.*

"Yes...I'm fine."

And I was telling the truth. If I'd said the same thing in the past, it would have been a big lie, though.

Derek clenched his fist. Then he chuckled softly. "All right...as long as you're okay."

His smile concerned me—it looked forced. "Der—"

I was about to call his name, but then I heard a noise. I reflexively shut my eyes. It was a dull booming noise. Metallic. I forced myself to open my eyes, in case I was in danger.

And Klifford's back was right in front of my nose. He had repelled the arrow with his sword.

*An arrow...? Was that the first noise?* I looked at the kallum tree trunk...and saw there was another arrow impaled in it.

Derek yanked it out and counterattacked.

*It's an ambush...!*

The traitors were attacking—by sword in close combat, and by bow and arrow from a distance.

But hold on a sec! They were wearing royal bodyguard uniforms, and they had golden tassels on their sword hilts... Several of my brother's own bodyguards—men who had sworn to protect us—were turning their swords on us.

The men Derek and Hugh were fighting included men who were supposed to be their allies. There were moles among Sirius's ranks...! And this proved it!

"Klifford, take them alive!"

"Yes, Princess."

"And don't get wounded!"

Trust me, this wasn't an unreasonable request for Klifford!

".....Yes, Princess."

In the few seconds that I saw Klifford's face from an angle, a faint smile flickered on it.

*Okay, my job right now is...staying calm and letting them protect me!*

*What else is there...? Right! Where's Sirius?!*

I spotted Guy and Heller first. They were fighting their way toward me. They were also helping the townspeople evacuate. *Okay, we're good on that end now.*

As someone with Alec's seal of approval, it was no wonder Guy could hold his own. From first impressions, I wasn't expecting much out of Heller in combat, but as Rust's little brother, he was pretty good.

Then I spotted my brother. He was by himself, a bit away from the rest of us.

*Did he get separated in all the fighting?*

"Brother!"

This was my first time seeing my brother in battle. He was fighting conservatively, but unfortunately, due to the traitors among us, he was up against more opponents than everyone else.

“Klifford—my brother!” I shouted to Klifford’s back as he shielded me.

“No need to worry over the prince’s life,” his ultra-cool voice hurled back at me. As it was, Klifford had his sword in his right hand. That meant he was relaxed.

*Er, you may not be worried about his life, Klifford, but that doesn’t matter!*

*“I command it!”*

Desperate times called for snappy measures. My secret weapon: A Sovereign’s command!

*“If you command it—”*

As Klifford kicked an enemy away, he disarmed him and threw the weapon at the traitor who was aiming for Sirius’s back. If Klifford wanted to, he probably could have dealt some serious damage.

For a second, Sirius’s gaze shot over to us. Thanks to the assist from Klifford, Sirius toppled his enemies in a flash.

The battle lasted for a few minutes in total. And before we knew it, the attackers were quelled...including Sirius’s men.

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*“Are there any more of you?”* Sirius’s voice boomed.

The kallum boulevard was closed off and the captured traitors were all bound and gathered in one place.

The issue at hand were our moles: three of Sirius’s bodyguards. One was the knight whom Klifford had pinned down at Melina’s shop. The other two were knights Hugh had moved into the formation after lunch.

All three of them were silent. Unfortunately, I didn’t even slightly recognize their names or faces...but Sirius was another matter entirely. He was keeping a cool head, but he was clearly experiencing a mixture of shock and hurt —*because* he knew who they were.

*“I doubt any of you are the ringleader. The same goes for all the other traitors*

over there.”

By “the other traitors over there,” Sirius meant the other assailants besides our trio of moles.

This piece of information confused me as well. There was a certain level of... skill?...one would expect, yet everyone there was below that level. And while they had a decent-sized army, they had no leadership—that’s right, there was no leader among them like the Adjutant who called the shots in the Sky Chamber raid. It seemed like an off-the-rails, anarchic attack...

And what’s more, though we were definitely attacked just now...something about it felt off. It ended with no casualties, which itself was a great thing. And yet, while that fact could be attributed to the high skill of our allies, I still got the sense that this was just all too easy.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

The three moles just sat there with their heads hung in silence.

“Perhaps the answer is written here—”

Sirius was unable to check the messenger bird due to the attack, so he had passed the torch onto Hugh. He returned now with a white messenger bird under his arm. He untied the note around its foot and handed it to Sirius.

“It’s...urgent?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

I didn’t understand the system, but Sirius and Hugh coded the letters in such a way that you could tell at a glance if they were standard communication or not.

Sirius opened the letter and read it...and the color drained from his face. “Hugh...” With a pained look in his eyes, he handed Hugh the letter. A grim look quickly filled the guard’s expression.

“My God...”

“Brother, what does it say?”

Sirius walked over to me in silence and handed me the letter. My eyes fell to the words on the page. “Oh no...”

This is the gist of what the letter said: “Sir Holden has captured Lord Sil and is MIA somewhere in the castle. The castle is now on lockdown, with full security at the gate.”

No matter how many times I read the letter, it sounded like Nathan was a traitor.

*But...how could he be?*

I couldn't believe it.

Both in the books and IRL, Nathan was Sirius's right-hand man. How could he be a traitor?

I just couldn't see it.

“Please—Prince Sirius, won't you let me go?” Hugh pleaded in earnest. “There might be some misunderstanding. It might also be the traitors' *true* trap. I need to go verify it for myself. Considering the other possibilities, it would be unwise to end the survey here. Prince, Princess, I ask that you continue with the survey.”

If Nathan turned out to be innocent, that would be a good idea. But if that wasn't the case—and if word leaked that the survey was canceled and Sirius had returned to the castle, there's no telling what Nathan might do.

That must be what Hugh was trying to tell us...and since I could follow the logic, I'm sure Sirius could, too.

“Sirius—” Derek, the man who had gotten caught up in the fighting and stayed behind to observe the aftermath, raised his hand to put the brakes on us. He ignored the chorus of scrutinizing stares and finished, “I'll go.”

Looking Hugh right in the eye, Derek continued, “Don't you think it would raise less suspicion if I returned to the castle instead of somebody who is supposed to be included in the survey? It would surely lower Nathan's guard as well.”

After he made his case, he then turned to me and said, “Don't you agree,

Princess Octavia?”

“Well, I...” I looked back and forth between Derek and Hugh. Which one of them would I choose to send back to the castle? “...I do think it’s best that Lord Derek go.”

It would be incredibly unusual for Hugh to leave the royal security detail if the survey is supposed to be proceeding without a hitch. It didn’t matter how elaborate an excuse was conjured up. Thus, we should send someone who can move about freely—Derek!

Hugh silently waited for Sirius’s final judgment. My brother was about to open his mouth to answer when— “Sir Roberts! Look!”

One of the soldiers who was searching the captured traitors ran over to Hugh. The soldier handed him a crumpled piece of paper. Something was written on it.

Hugh ran his eyes over the message, frowned, then held it up so we could see it. And the note contained a message that reinforced the note from the messenger bird.

It was orders.

*Conduct the attack during the survey. Meanwhile, Nathan will kidnap Sil back at the castle. Immediately after—Derek will rendezvous with them.*

“Was that part of the plan all along? That you would go back to the castle instead of me?” Hugh asked icily.

Meanwhile, all emotion vanished from Derek’s face. “No. You shouldn’t suspect me on the grounds of a piece of paper anybody could have scribbled in haste.”

“A piece of paper? Are you asking us to ignore the evidence we found in the traitors’ personal belongings?”

“What if the soldier who brought it is in league with the traitors? All he had to do was pipe up as if he’d made a discovery—couldn’t *that* be part of the plan?”

“—Enough,” Sirius barked sternly. Then, after a quick shake of the head, he turned to Hugh and nodded. “Hugh, return to the castle. I’ll give you command

there. Once you've determined the situation, send a messenger bird."

"Yes, Your Highness." Hugh swiftly bowed—then posed his next question. "What shall we do with Lord Derek?"

A few seconds of silence passed.

"Until all suspicions are cleared...tie him up."

In a flash, Derek was surrounded by soldiers.

Derek showed no signs of resistance. But for just a moment, he smirked...both in self-deprecation and in sadness.

There were grounds to suspect Derek—Sirius had made the right call. Hugh was under no suspicion while Derek was named as a traitor in the mysterious orders. Even if Derek was telling the truth when he said he was framed, there was no way of actually proving that.

This was exactly like the scene in the books, when Sirius gave the order to tie up Hugh.

*But y'know...I just can't help but wonder...*

I mean, I don't always have to be impartial, do I?

In times like these, isn't it best for me to pick a side, even if it means openly showing favoritism?

This is what we call standing your ground!

"Then put Lord Derek in my care."

I rejected Sirius's decision head-on.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at me.

"I will keep close watch on him, and he shall accompany us on the rest of the survey. Keep your friends close; keep your enemies closer—isn't that how the proverb goes?"

Sirius's hostile stare screamed, *What the hell are you thinking?!* but I blocked it with Blackfeather.

"And one more thing: I suggest that you return Klifford to me while Hugh is



gone. The idea of losing my bodyguard scares me.”

I’ll take advantage of every opportunity that comes my way.

“Are you...asking this in earnest?” The sheer intensity in Sirius’s aquamarine eyes was threatening to crush me. But I won’t falter!

I smiled sweetly and said, “I mean every word, Brother. This is my way of *shaking things up*.”

Keeping sus-Derek by my side is a classic Princess in the Snare move!

Several seconds passed...which felt like hours.

Then, with a wave of Sirius’s hand, the soldiers restraining Derek on either side slipped away.

“I will send Hugh back to the castle. In his absence, Klifford Alderton will be my sister’s bodyguard.” After his declaration, Sirius turned to me. “Satisfied?”

He didn’t say a word about Derek, but not tying him up was answer enough.

“Quite satisfied.”

I was satisfied that Derek was in my care and I had Klifford back for the time being. It’s just—I still felt that this whole mystery had us backed into a corner.

*Nathan, the mastermind... Is that even possible?*

Looking back on everything that transpired between the start of the survey this morning and the attack under the kallum trees this afternoon, I was starting to mistakenly believe that my relationship with Sirius had improved.

Now...we were plunged into a cold war.

I mean, we exchanged basic communication, of course. Like, when he asked me where I was going next on the survey, I answered. But when he heard my answer, he got a strange look on his face and the conversation died there.

And even though we had chatted now and then during the day whenever we were in the carriage, we were both silent now. The air was so tense you could cut it with a knife.

All that was left of the survey was our own free time. We were basically scheduled to go wherever I wanted to go, but Sirius was going to deal with the

captured traitors while I did my sightseeing. So I guess we would be partially parting ways? Like, we would be together, but only until we reached our destination.

And thus, the carriage arrived at the final stop.

*Did Hugh make it back to the castle by now? Nah, I don't think that's possible. He left on horseback right after Sirius gave the order, though. If he went via Esfia Bridge and galloped all the way, could he make it?*

*Let's say Nathan is a traitor and he really did kidnap Sil... There's still no way he would ever hurt—nope, that's just what I want to be true.*

After fretting long and hard over it, I reached the conclusion that the best thing for me to do right now was continue with the survey as if nothing had happened.

I snapped Blackfeather shut and descended the carriage steps.

We had arrived at the store of sundries in the southern castle town that Cissy had recommended.

Some soldiers had run over to Sirius for orders. He paused for a moment to say to me, "You go ahead."

"Well, you heard my brother, Lord Derek. Let's go."

Derek had ridden alongside us by horseback, but was already on standby. Even though it was partly for show, I did have to take charge of Derek since he was in my care. All that remained now were Klifford, Guy, and Heller...

"Guy?"

Klifford had already resumed his role as my bodyguard. His—what would you call it—way of guarding? Stance? Anyway, it was all back to normal.

The only problem was Guy—his complexion had turned a foul shade of green since Klifford was reinstated. Heller didn't seem fazed by it, though...

"Yes?! D-do you need me, Princess?!"

"Hang in there... It won't be much longer."

*He looks like he's doing okay, but he must feel terribly burdened right now,*

*especially since I propositioned him... Don't worry, Guy! I promise I'll make it up to you later!*

"Yes, Princess!" Guy snapped to attention.

I answered with a smile, then entered the shop. It was a two-story establishment with a rustic softness to it, and its shelves were lined with reasonably priced goods. It had several books Cissy would like...which meant I liked them, too.

While we did send notice to the store that we were coming—since the destination for one's free time during a survey was decided the day of—it was always a last-minute thing. Having said that, a princess couldn't just barge in without displacing a bunch of customers...

And as expected, this shop was unprepared. Meanwhile, the shops in the north of town were used to royal visits. But the royalty and nobility avoided setting foot in the southern establishments, since they'd stick out like sore thumbs. If they had to shop in the south, they usually went incognito.

As I nervously glanced to and fro, Derek suddenly said, "Thank you for covering for me, Princess Octavia. You really saved my hide."

*Oh...*

I could tell his gratitude was heartfelt from the vulnerable smile on his face.

"Are you...angry with my brother?"

This time, Derek smirked cynically. "No. He was very true to form, and it was my fault for not proving my innocence then and there."

*Phew! What a relief. If Derek turned his back on Sirius, wouldn't my brother kinda run out of friends?* I knew Derek wasn't in the books, but he was special enough to Sirius that he could easily be called his best friend. I couldn't help but root for the friendship they had now.

"How exactly *could* you have proved your innocence?"

"By unmasking the ringleader—I suppose that's the only way?"

Something felt off. There was a twinge of sadness in Derek when he smiled at me... It was the same smile he made under the kallum trees when Sirius chose

Hugh over him. I assumed it was because Sirius didn't believe him, and I'm still sure that was part of it.

*But was there something else...?*

*It's almost like...he knows who the ringleader is...and that's what made him sad?*

"When the time comes, I hope you'll help me, Princess Octavia."

".....Of course I will."

I answered Derek's casual tone with a somber one. With a brief, soft smile, Derek changed the subject. "By the way, this shop certainly hides all ties it has with the royal family. Did you choose it for the survey tour anyway since it's Lord Edgar's parents' house?"

...!

It was a shocking proclamation. *Is that why Sirius acted so weird when I mentioned the place?*

Edgar was a former merchant, but marrying my father had given him a major support network. Though Edgar didn't work openly as a merchant, he had close ties to a merchant association and had several shops both at Paradise in the Sky and in the royal capital. I had been to the main branch myself, and it had a grand painting displayed of Edgar with my father, as if the God of Merchants Himself had blessed them. It was hyping up their royal connections, of course.

*So this is Lord Edgar's parents' house?*

It didn't look like it. Like, *at all*. There wasn't a hint of flaunting the royal ties like there was at the main branch.

"No, that wasn't it at all. This had nothing to do with Lord Ed—"

Then my gaze landed on a corner of the store.

*It's...a Lieche orchid.*

There was a small table against the wall by the staircase with a lone Lieche orchid in a vase. I approached and found there was a painting hanging directly above it.

*That's...a family portrait.*

It was a father, a mother, a boy, and a girl, standing in a row and smiling. They looked so happy together. The children were in their teens, and they looked a lot alike. They were probably siblings.

And the boy was...

"He has quite a different aura, but—that's Lord Edgar, isn't it?" Derek murmured.

Yeah, the Edgar in the painting was giving major snot-nosed brat vibes. He was worlds apart from the gentle, quiet Edgar I knew. If anything, the girl in the painting seemed a lot more like Edgar.

"But...I don't remember him having any siblings..." Derek mused, chin in hand.

I knew that, according to public knowledge, Edgar was an only child. When Edgar married the king and his family was introduced and added to the royal records—only his parents were included.

However...

*"Once you give your heart to someone, you'll only want the gesture from him. No substitutes. Besides, it's a real disappointment having my big brother put flowers in my hair! That's what she said on the day of her engagement—"*

I remembered what Edgar had blurted out that night in the castle garden. It had made me think that maybe he used to have a little sister. Maybe the sense I'd had that night was being corroborated now. I had felt a clear fondness and love in his words.

In a daze, I reached for the painting. But before I could touch it— "Welcome to our shop!"

The words were welcoming, but I could swear I heard *"Don't touch that!"* in his tone.

"It isn't all that suitable for royalty or the nobility to grace a lowly southern shop such as ours..."

*He looks...like Edgar. Like the middle-aged man in the painting, too. When he*

*was in his fifties or sixties...I think.*

It probably was Edgar's father, whom I had never met in person before, but I hesitated to ask him outright to confirm it.

I knew Edgar personally and I knew about the merchant association with which Edgar had ties, so I did have connections. But Edgar's parents—my other grandfather and grandmother—were completely disconnected from me and the royal family.

The formation of Esfia's royal family itself was unique for one, and my father and Edgar's relationship to his parents was just as detached from the norm. I had accepted it as just a fact of life...

But in reality, I just never made an attempt to understand the truth.

And because of that, I wasn't a girl talking to her grandfather, but a princess on survey talking to a shopkeeper.

"Are you the owner of this establishment, sir?"

"The owner rarely comes around. I just take care of things here."

I could just sense his helplessness. I saw a wall of defense in front of him...so I wasn't sure what to do. But still, I looked at the painting a second time and finally found the words.

*I shouldn't pull away—I should learn the truth.*

"I wish to learn more...about this painting. About the girl..."

".....Why?"

All the false politeness melted off the man's face, and his wall of defense morphed into a wall of hostility. Klifford twitched, but I stopped him with a shake of my head.

"I thought a promise was made with Edgar. That you would never bother us again. That no royal would ever set foot in here. Are you suggesting that promise applied only to His Majesty the King?" The man hung his head, exerting all his will to contain his rage.

*My father...made a promise with Edgar?*

At the very least, my father never mentioned any such promise to me.

*No, wait...the whole reason I'm here today was because Cissy recommended the place. It's just an innocent coincidence. This shop wasn't on the original survey itinerary, besides.*

Otherwise, I would have never broken this promise my father supposedly had made. I didn't know who Edgar's parents were or where their shop was, either.

*But...let's say my father did get an idea that I was coming to Edgar's parents' house today... Would he have stopped me?*

"Well, I..." Words came out, but I had no idea what I should tell him.

The man looked up, and with a dark sneer in his eyes, he said, "If you really want to know that badly, then I'll tell you." His eyes fell on the family portrait. "Irene... That was her name."

*There it is again.* When he said the name Irene, his voice had the same tenderness as Edgar's when he'd spoken of his sister.

The man opened his mouth again—then he closed it. The words that he blurted out soon after were probably not what he had really wanted to say. "Throw me into the dungeon for treason if you wish."

"But, sir...I would never do such a thing."

How could I? He's Edgar's father.

"Just...don't touch that painting," he said, bowing his head and ducking toward the entrance. He probably wanted to get as far away from us as possible.

A customer entered just as he left and stood awkwardly at the shop entrance. But instead of leaving, he walked into the store and slipped past Derek.

*Wait... Huh? His hair color's different, but is that...Steyn?*

I think I was right.

Derek glanced at something in his hand, then he closed his eyes in thought. With a glance at me, he said, "Princess Octavia...to avoid the worst-case scenario, will you help me? In secret."

The last two words were whispered.

*In secret...*

“It’s...important, I take it?”

“Yes. Extremely.”

I was sitting across from my grandfather-in-name-only in a room in Edgar’s family shop. I never would have dreamed after the hostile exchange we’d just had that I would be asking him for help...

I sensed not a mite of goodwill from Edgar’s father. His hostility had gotten even worse.

*Well...I don’t blame him.*

I sort of forced him to let us have a room on the second floor closed to business—that was a real rotten way to use my Princess Privilege.

But judging by the sensitive nature of what Derek had to tell me, we needed a place where we could speak in private.

Standing behind Edgar was a woman who was in the room when we got here—I assumed she was Edgar’s mother—and she was staring at us. I didn’t sense any overt hostility in her demeanor. Except, when she looked at me, her eyes seemed...sad, maybe.

“Now, Your Royal Highness, I have obeyed your orders. You don’t need anything further from us, I hope?” the man asked, as if he were spitting at us.

“Grandfather... Grandmother...”

His face twisted in absolute disgust.

It was a tactic even I hated to use, but I felt I needed to get Edgar’s parents in as our coconspirators, even if it meant pulling the granddaughter card on them. I really wish I hadn’t chosen this shop as the final stop on our survey.

“First, I need you to listen to what I and Lord Derek...Duke Nightfellow’s son have to say.”

In the room were myself, Derek, Klifford as my bodyguard, and Edgar’s parents. Guy and Heller were stationed in the public area of the second floor to



alert us if anybody (like my brother) showed up.

“I’m...not allowed to refuse, I take it?” Edgar’s father spat, abandoning all pretense of civility.

“Sadly, no,” I nodded. “Lord Derek?”

“All right, I’ll explain.”

In a calm tone, Derek explained the situation. During the survey, messenger birds were supposed to deliver periodic updates from the castle to Sirius, and Derek was employing the same method of communication. However, Derek’s messages came from Nathan Holden. That meant Derek could stay apprised of the goings on of the castle while he was in the castle town during the survey.

The man who had crossed paths with Derek in the shop earlier was Steyn in a wig—the most recent communication from Nathan in hand.

And the message from Nathan had read: “All is well.” It was the exact opposite of the communication from Sirius’s messenger bird.

This meant Nathan had not kidnapped Sil and gone MIA. He was obeying orders and observing Sil—guarding him, rather.

“Why were you communicating with Nathan like that? Because there was a person you wanted to keep a close eye on...correct?” I said.

A sad, bittersweet smile filled Derek’s face. “And the icing on the cake: He’s a shrewd one, and somebody Sirius trusts deeply. He also knows Sirius quite well. He’s more knowledgeable than anyone about the guard formations during the survey, and he has full rights to mobilize them.”

*That can only mean...*

With that much said, even I gathered who he was talking about.

I gritted my teeth. “Hugh...”

There was only one person it could be.

It was Hugh Roberts. In my head, I knew it had to be him, but my heart was in turmoil. I just couldn’t help but deny it... I thought Hugh and Nathan could both be ruled out.

“Hugh started taking actions that cast a shadow of doubt on Nathan. That’s why I suspected both of them at first. But then I discovered Nathan was investigating Hugh as well. Though, unfortunately, Hugh got wind of it...”

“Nathan is rather perceptive, isn’t he...?”

He must have instinctively noticed a change in Hugh.

*Even though I don’t want to even consider the possibility...if Hugh is one of the bad guys, then that must mean...*

“Was Hugh the one who tampered with Sil’s carriage...?”

“I don’t think it was Hugh personally. It’s likely he had somebody else do the deed for him.”

*Hold up—*

*If Hugh tampered with Sil’s carriage, and he’s also the ringleader behind today’s attack—does that mean he’s trying to kill Sil? I mean, if Sil’s luck had been off, that runaway carriage could have been a big tragedy.*

If only Hugh loved Sil so much he couldn’t let anyone else have him—if that were his reason, it would have made more sense to me. There was at least a *little* space for that to be a possibility.

*But the evidence is so great, I can’t fool myself. Is Hugh trying to kill Sil?*

And with a detailed plan, what’s more. The attack during the survey was just a distraction. Usually, Sirius always kept a watchful eye on Sil. So Hugh isolated Sil...so he could end him by his own hand?

*Sil thinks of Hugh as a friend.*

*And Hugh feels the same...*

*Hugh does...too? Does Hugh care for Sil?*

*Can I say that with conviction?*

*I don’t know. In the books, Hugh was in love with Sil. But I don’t know how he feels in real life.*

*But...his cut off golden tassel...*

*The question: Whose order should he obey?*

*And that smile he gave when he asked if I thought Derek was loyal—and I said yes.*

*I have a feeling it's all connected.*

*Like it all means something.*

"I ask you, Princess Octavia, do you believe I'm telling the truth? Just as Hugh used that crumpled piece of paper to frame me as one of the traitors, I might be using the same tactic against him right now."

His brown eyes were filled with sincerity. For starters, anybody who talks like this isn't lying, right? Well, scratch that, if this were Rust talking, I would be filled with doubt right now. Guess it depends on the person.

If this had all happened before the junior ball...I might have been lost for an answer.

"You're right, Lord Derek, I do have reason to doubt you. But I will believe what I want to."

In other words:

"I believe you."

".....You have my humble thanks." Derek's face broke into a big smile.

I've chosen my path.

And I've made my decision, too.

I looked over my shoulder. "Klifford. I will return to the castle in secret. We're going to stop Hugh. Be ready for that."

"—Yes, Princess." He answered my command with a bow.

"Please, wait just a moment, Princess Octavia," Derek stopped me.

"We need to reach Hugh as quickly as possible, yes? I will convince my brother that you are innocent and that Hugh is our culprit. I'm sure he'll side with you, Lord Derek."

I mean, if both Derek and Nathan noticed Hugh was sus, it's really hard to

imagine my brother not thinking something strange was afoot.

Derek did not answer immediately. He seemed torn. “Well...that would be ideal, of course.”

When he finally did answer, his tone was rather weak. *Is Derek feeling insecure?*

“Well, if I can’t convince my brother you’re innocent, it’s *your* job to do something about it!”

So I pushed him with a chipper smile. *You’ve got this, Derek! I believe in you!*

Real talk: Practically speaking, the one who’s most equipped to convince Sirius of anything is Derek, even if he’s under suspicion.

He was indeed the man for the job.

“Well...I guess I’ll just have to try.” His lips were twisted in a cynical smile, but his eyes were now filled with sincerity and determination—then he frowned and added, “But you know this will take time, don’t you?”

Not even Derek could change Sirius’s mind in a matter of seconds. I saw a real harsh debate ahead of him.

“Of course I know. That’s why I’m going to the castle ahead of you. Back at the castle, I have the authority to command everyone—except anyone under Hugh’s control, that is.”

My Princess Privilege is unparalleled! *This* is the way to wield it.

“Lord Derek. I need you to promise me you will return with my brother as soon as possible.”

Derek’s eyes widened a little. There was a fierce light shining in his brown eyes. “Understood. I promise.”

Derek bowed at the waist, the proper way a vassal would for royalty.

Derek would do the task only he was able to accomplish.

And I would do what I needed to do.

“You were listening, I take it? Then you should have grasped the situation by now. There’s trouble afoot.”

I figuratively splashed water on the faces of the two outsiders in the room—Edgar’s parents. In order to carry out my task, I decided I would need to rope them into it with me.

“Side with me. I need your full support in every action I take after we leave this shop.”

“I didn’t even want to hear about any of this scandal in the first place... Besides, we have no way of knowing which of you is in the right—you or your brother.”

I may have believed what Derek had to say, but Edgar’s father? Well, it was to be expected that he couldn’t take a side.

“There’s no need for you to believe me.” I opened Blackfeather and gave him my best royal smile.

There was a very thin thread connecting us. He was sort of technically my grandfather. I knew demanding that he take my side when he was already putting up a firm resistance was a tall order. After all, he was every bit Sirius’s grandfather, too.

“Let me guess: My brother and I are both the same to you—mere royalty.”

There was no reply. I was certain something had happened in the past between Edgar’s parents and the crown—my father. And that it had something do with Irene...their daughter.

“Or, put another way, the issue of which one of us you’ll help—myself or my brother—is rather trivial.”

Because his real thought was surely: *I don’t want to help either of them.*

“So what if I offered to help *you*?”

Edgar’s father gave me a dubious look.

“Let’s make a deal, Grandfather, Grandmother: As princess, I will grant your requests—only insofar as I’m capable, of course. Is there anything in particular you want?”

If that didn’t work, I’d have to drop Edgar’s name and imply that something bad might happen, so I hoped they had a wish I could grant!

“If we—” Edgar’s mother’s voice was frail, but it echoed through the room. “If we were to help you, Princess...would you really grant our wish?”

Edgar’s mother stepped forward, out of her husband’s shadow. Getting a better look, I saw she was slender. If Edgar were a woman, she would look like him—actually, she looked like Irene in the painting.

“I take it you have a wish?”

“It’s Edgar—”

“Don’t be silly. You really trust royalty? After what happened to Irene?!”

She answered her husband’s pleading with another question. “Our son... Edgar...he never spoke ill of the prince or princess, remember?”

“But that’s...!”

*Oh... That’s right... So Edgar... Edgar has been helping me out, too, behind the scenes.*

Edgar’s mother faced me directly, taking all of me in. Contrasting her slender frame was a stout fierceness. Her hands were clasped before her breast.

“If in the future—if our boy...if Edgar ever does anything treasonous...please save him.”

*Huh...?*

The way she phrased it struck me. It almost sounded like she was certain Edgar was going to do something wrong in the future.

“Do you mean...that I should save Lord Edgar, even if he’s in the wrong?”

I was totally cool with the basic premise of helping Edgar, but I couldn’t guarantee I could help him in all circumstances.

Edgar’s mother slowly shook her head. “No, Your Highness. Only if his actions were just in your eyes and if you want to help him.”

*Well, in that case—*

“Very well. I shall grant your request.”

I had no reason to refuse, so I nodded firmly.

Though Edgar's father looked conflicted, Edgar's mother met my eyes. Then she exhaled loudly instead of objecting. Then, in a tone that sounded like she not only understood, but had come to terms with her fate, she said, "You'll stand out in those clothes... Wear our departed angel's...Irene's old clothes."

When I heard the words, I swallowed a lump that swelled in my throat.

*So...what I was dreading is true. Edgar's sister is dead. This room...*

"Yes...quite right," I replied.

With a soft smile on her face, Edgar's mother walked over to a wardrobe and opened the door.

*The unused room on the second floor...it used to be Irene's room.* I suddenly felt sick for barging in here like I did.

After living in a castle as Princess Octavia all these years, the room felt small. But as Maki, it was the very sort of girl's room that got me excited. It was frozen in time—it looked like Irene was still using it.

Edgar's mother pulled a few dresses out of the wardrobe. "Knowing her, she would have been glad to help. And Edgar, too...if he's anything like he used to be... No, I'm sure he still would now."

"The past is gone. We can never go back." Edgar's father sighed long and hard. The core of what he was saying—and the significance those words had on me—made my heart ache.

Because though he tried to deny it, I could tell there was a part of him that hadn't completely come to terms with his fate yet. And even though the source of our regret was different, I shared his feeling.

Edgar's father looked at us and spoke in a straightforward manner. "I am, after all, a salesman at heart. I will not break a contract. As long as you're granting my wife's request, I will assist you. If there is anything else Your Highness shall require, please don't hesitate to ask."

I drew my lips into a tight line.

*Don't let your feelings drag you down, Octavia.*

"Then, I'll take you up on that offer..." I smiled, big and confident.

*It's for the best that I act this way.*

*.....Right?*

## 66

The plan was simple!

Step One: Change from my princess dress into one of Irene's—a typical city girl dress. Someone else would wear my Princess Octavia dress and be a decoy. Using a body double would also buy me some time to escape!

Step Two: Casually exit through the back and mount a borrowed horse with Klifford! I curse my princess schooling for omitting horseback riding from the curriculum. That would have made Klifford's job much easier, but alas.

Anyway, Step Three: Cross Esfia Bridge and arrive at the castle. When we arrive, I wield my Princess Privilege to the fullest and order Hugh's arrest! Then I rescue Sil!

End of Presentation.

"Princess...I see you're able to dress yourself."

I was already changing clothes.

I'd sent the men away, but Edgar's mother insisted on staying behind since I would "be in over my head" with the task. And she was right, it was generally easier to change into period dresses like this with a helper, but it's not like I was incapable of dressing myself.

I removed my cream-colored dress, tiara, and flowers. *Also...I'll have to ditch this.* I removed the glove from my left hand.

"Here's the dress, Your Highness."

Edgar's mother handed me an apron dress of white and diluted red. It was one she had produced from the wardrobe. I tried it on, and it fit perfectly.

*Oh—that's right. Can't forget that.* I retrieved the sword tassel wrapped in paper, the notebook, and the pencil from my survey dress pocket and transferred them to my apron pocket.



After a little skirt-straightening, I was ready to go. The dress wasn't too snug or too loose. When Edgar's mother saw me in it, her eyes watered a little.

*I'm sure I remind her of the girl in the painting... Even though I don't look like her, maybe she was my age when she died.*

The look in her eyes made me think that.

*So this is how it must feel to lose a family member. Does that mean...my mom, dad, and big sister hurt just as bad?*

*Did they leave my room just as it was on the day Maki died?*

*If they did...that makes me both happy and sad.*

A part of me wanted them to forget me and move on with their lives... I didn't want them to be sad, but another part of me wanted them to remember me forever... But even I'm not sure what I really wanted them to feel.

*I've lived sixteen years as Octavia now...and yet, in all that time, I still hadn't faced my death as Maki.*

"Is...something the matter?" I asked Edgar's mother. While my gaze was downcast, I noticed she was eyeing my tiara—or wait, she was eyeing what was next to it...?

"Flowers... You were wearing them in your hair."

"Even royalty likes to wear flowers in their hair now and then."

"So the rumor about the Lieche orchid—that you arrived at the junior ball with one in your hair—is it true?"

*Wow, the news traveled all the way out here? Actually, wait, they probably know because there were a lot of merchants at the junior ball.*

Still, the rumor was a bit lacking in accuracy.

"Yes, except I added the orchids *after* my arrival."

"I didn't believe it was true... But I suppose rumors do hold some truth sometimes." Edgar's mother narrowed her eyes and looked at me again. "I apologize for my husband's rudeness, Your Highness."

“...Your cooperation more than makes up for any transgressions.”

They made it very clear that they don't like royalty... That they don't like my father.

“Not all royalty is alike—my husband knows this...and I know it, too.”

But I understood that it was difficult to make that distinction. It was much easier to write off one group as a monolith. This was likely with groups of people you liked, but when it came to people you hated... I wasn't sure how possible it would be for them to remain unbiased.

There was a knock at the door.

I shot to attention.

“Princess Octavia, are you decent?”

“Yes...wait just a minute,” I answered Derek.

I added the hooded cloak to my borrowed ensemble. There were surely many people out there that, as of today's survey, recognized the face of Esfia's princess.

“I'm ready.”

The door opened, but it was Guy and Heller who stepped inside. They both had the exact same reaction: A confused grunt and buggy eyes. And yeah, I get it. Their princess had just transformed into a peasant, and they hadn't been appraised of our plan.

Derek had deemed it best for them not to know, and not because we couldn't trust them, but because it would be easier on them. It was best for them to just follow orders. They didn't need to know why they were obeying—according to Derek.

“You two, stand there for a moment.”

I needed a body double—and there were a limited supply of people who could fill that role. Based on physique and the roles they would need to play later, Derek and Klifford were already out of the running.

Which meant, by necessity, our candidates for the task were my two

temporary bodyguards: Guy and Heller.

*Even these two are pushing it, physique-wise... My dress'll burst at the seams if they try to wear it. Maybe we could hide that with a cape? But capes don't cover everything... We'll have to just cover them up with fabric and a cloak the same color as my dress and hope for the best...*

I eyed them thoroughly, head to toe.

““.....!”” They both stared back at me in horror.

*Hmmm... Height-wise, it's Guy. Physique-wise, it's Heller...*

*I have no time to mull it over. Okay, I choose you!*

“Heller.”

“Yes, Princess!”

“Change into my dress.” Without saying another word, I shoved my cream-colored dress into his arms.

“Er—come again?” Heller's voice cracked.

“Help him, Guy.”

Let Operation Drag Princess Heller commence!

At Edgar's mother's suggestion, we cut the skirt and bodice apart. We tied the skirt around his waist and ripped the bodice, pinning extra cream-colored fabric where it wouldn't close. Since the dress would hide Heller's shoes, he kept his old ones on.

Then we needed a silvery wig to cover Heller's blond locks, and since this was a store of miscellaneous goods and sundries, it was easy to find. We topped that with my tiara and the flowers. We had to stretch the fabric like crazy, but the glove fit on his left hand, too.

In his right hand, I placed Blackfeather...so he could hide his face with it.

“Heller! Don't hold the fan that way,” I scolded him.

*That's an F-for you!*

“B-but Princess...wreven feathers...”

In my dress, Heller could pull off the disguise from a distance. But if somebody got too close... Well, he could still pass if it was from behind.

The only problem was the way he held Blackfeather—it was just all wrong. The more I tried to coach him, the more his score sank into the negatives. Heller seemed to have the same aversion to the wreven feathers as the general public. He was already in tears.

That was my fatal blind spot... His reaction is completely normal, too. I'll have to compromise...

"If you simply can't touch it, give it to Guy."

"Peutz! Save me."

Heller immediately passed Blackfeather to Guy as if it were a snake. *Um, rude? That's my baby you're tossing around! Blackfeather is a very good thing, I'll have you know!*

"Huh?! Whoa—" Guy stammered in protest (but he caught it all the same).

*Hmmm...*

"You're fine with touching it, Guy?"

"Yes, but I feel the same aversion as Byrne!"

*But he is still holding it just fine... Guess instead of forcing Heller to carry it, Guy's my guy!*

"Very well, Guy. Open Blackfeather and hide Heller's face. It's not uncommon for a lady of the nobility to have a companion hold her fan."

*Now all of this is giving, "What the hell's this thing? A princess?" vibes, but we'll work with what we've got!*

"All right, you two, listen up. You are to continue the survey in my place. Lord Derek shall assist you with that. I need you to be diligent so that mine and Klifford's absence won't be discovered."

The two exchanged glances, then they both looked at me about the same time and said, "Yes, Princess!"

"I'm counting on you."

Guy opened the door, and he and Heller left the room.

Derek turned just his head to give me a glance, which I answered with a nod. All that remained was for us to perform our respective roles!

And with that, the door slowly closed.

*Okay—*

I approached a window and lifted the shutter. I looked out below to see Klifford standing outside. If I jumped from this window, I would land just behind the shop.

I slapped my cheeks to psych myself up. Then I put on my hood and took one final look behind me. “I’m going—thank you, Madam, mother of Lord Edgar.”

Since we were parting ways, I wanted to at least call her what I wanted to call her. And this expressed my sentiments much better than calling her “Grandmother.”

*Now, here goes nothing...*

*Aim for Klifford—and dive!*

I stood on the windowsill, bent my knees, and kicked off with all my might!

“Godspeed...”

I heard a quiet voice behind me.

“.....!”

Since I had jumped from the second floor, I hit Klifford’s arms with quite an impact. But he didn’t even flinch. He just spread his arms and caught me. As I wrapped my arms around his neck, he exhaled sharply—either in relief or annoyance.

“You reckless little...,” he muttered, with a hint of discontent.

“Oh, come on, Klifford, we both know you’d never drop me.”

“.....True.”

But as I looked into his indigo eyes up close, I could tell he was still upset. *Ack—our faces are so close! It’s like he just full-on hugged me.*

“I apologize for pushing this on you with a command. Now, the horse...”

“Understood.”

*H-he’s not putting me down...* Klifford carried me all the way over to where the horse was tied up. I reached out and he hoisted me atop the horse’s back, then he deftly jumped on behind me, despite the lack of stirrups.

*When it comes to athletics, he and I are galaxies apart...!*

*W-well, of course we are... Yeah, I mean, I can’t ride a horse on my own. I’m especially hopeless without any reins to hold.*

Since Klifford’s horse for the survey—and royal horses in general—were trained for battle, they were ideal for a fast gallop, but if we had taken even just one horse, we would have been caught immediately.

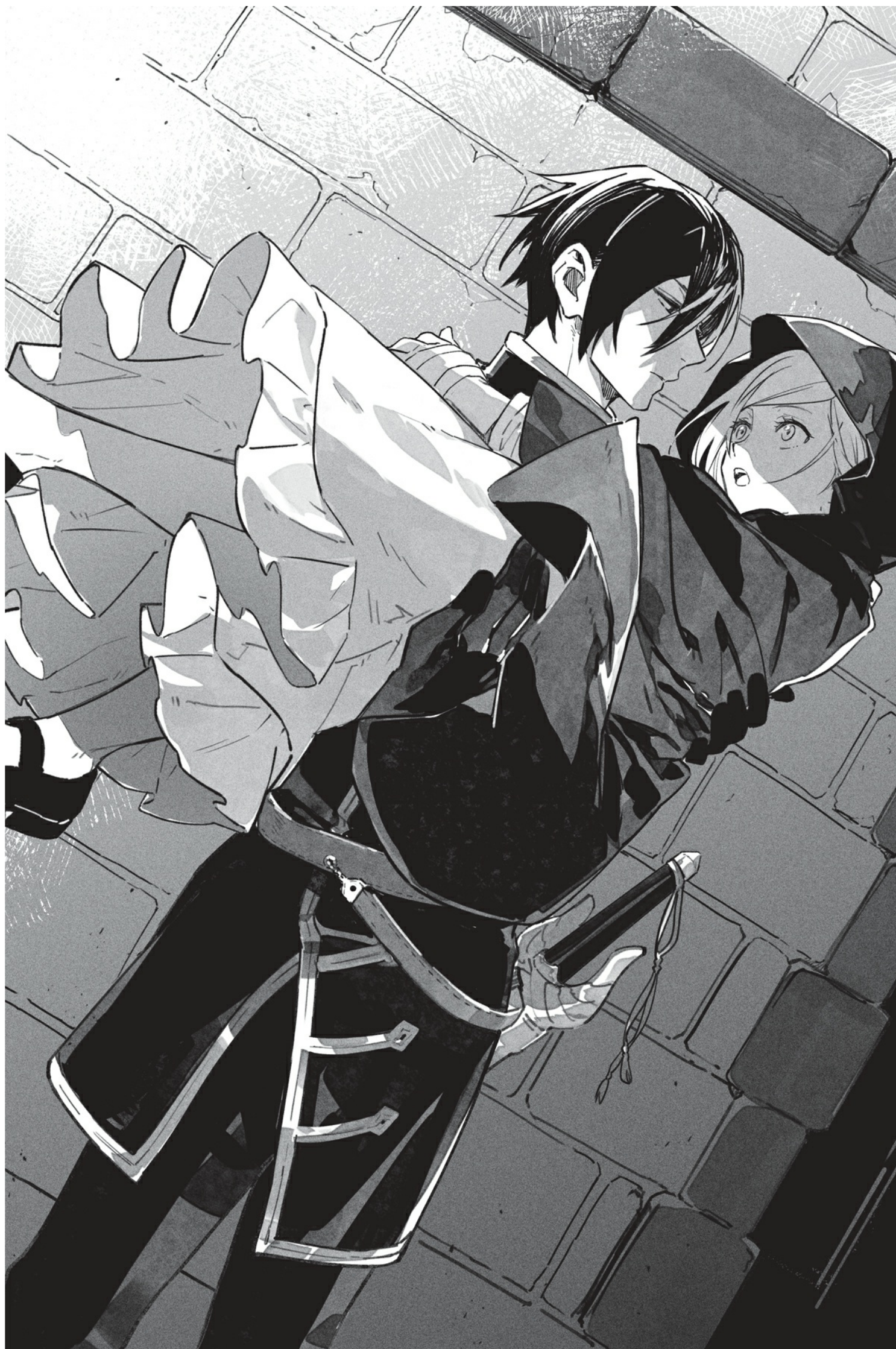
So we asked Edgar’s father to loan us his fastest horse that would fit two, and this was the horse he had given us: a sturdy, chestnut beauty. I gave its mane a little pat. “Thanks in advance...”

*And we’re off! Oh, but before that—*

I was going to ride behind Klifford, but I almost fell off, so Klifford was supporting me with a hand around the waist. *Phew, that’s a big help... Now I get to sit facing forward— Wait a minute, wh-what do I hold onto?!*









*The mane? But I don't wanna pull it when the horse runs—that's horse abuse! Also, riding a horse is, like, hard! But I want to let Klifford take it to a full gallop.*

"Klifford...is it all right with you if I hold onto your midsection with a grip of death?"

"Not a problem."

*Sweet!*

Wait, Octavia, he wasn't finished.

"But doesn't it still hurt?"

I followed Klifford's gaze... *Oh, my left hand?* Now that my glove was off, you could see the bandage around it. I tried opening and closing it... *Okay, I can move it just fine. And as for the pain...I'll just let my adrenaline cover that!*

"Not a problem," I answered.

*Now that I can grab onto something for dear life, there's nothing to fear!*

Since Klifford still looked like he had a thing or two to say about that, I sat sideways to reassure him I was fine. And as promised, I leaned against his back and wrapped my arms around him, clinging to his midsection for dear life.

"There, see? Just like I told you."

"Right."

Our bodies pressed together. *Urk. His warm, hard abs are almost in direct contact... My heart's jumping out of my ribcage. Hey, whoa, get your head out of the gutter, Octavia! Th-this is your lifeline you're talking about!*

I took a deep breath and gave the order. "Take me to the castle, now!"

"As you wish, Your Highness." Klifford gripped the reins and kicked the horse's sides.

*Hyaaaaah!*

When the horse took off, all my impure thoughts flew away. I dared not open my eyes as I clung to my lifeline with every fiber of my being. Klifford had also wrapped an arm around my waist, as he held the reins with his other hand.

Even with all that, it took me a while to get comfortable enough with the speed to peek.

I watched the scenery whiz past us through my half-open eyes. A big gate was in sight ahead. It was the north gate: the shortest way to get from both the castle and from Esfia Bridge. Since it was a security hazard to let just anybody pass through castle town this way, we knew we would be searched here.

We were hoping that Klifford's royal bodyguard uniform would be enough to give us a pass.

"Halt!"

But the gatekeeper raised both arms, shook them, and shouted at us as we torpedoed toward him. But Klifford did not lower his speed. *A-are we just breaking through?!* I grabbed Klifford's uniform with my right hand and yanked hard.

Klifford looked down at me as if to say, *There a problem?*

"We can't cause a stir. Let's be discreet about this."

Then he lowered the horse's speed a level.

We approached the north gate and the soldier veered beside our horse.

"The royal party is currently away on a survey. You must submit to a search, even though you are with the royal guard. And as for the identity of your passenger—"

*Here goes nothing.*

I lifted my hood a little so the soldier could recognize me.

".....!"

"It's an emergency. Can we go through?" Klifford asked.

The soldier nodded dumbly, fell back, and waved us through. "Go ahead, sir."

*Phew. My royal face got us through.*

Our horse resumed its gallop.

I felt Klifford's hand rest on my head as he adjusted my hood. Then the

horse's gallop slowed, and the scenery changed dizzyingly.

And then Esfia Bridge came into sight in the distance. It was still the size of a bean, but we were as good as there!

I could feel my own face glowing, but I heard a clicking tongue overhead.

*Did...Klifford just curse under his breath?* Of course, there was nobody else it could have been.

"My apologies, Your Highness."

*Huh? Why's he apologizing? For cursing?*

I looked up from my hunched position...and his indigo eyes were filled with remorse. "I should have disposed of them this morning."

*Disposed of— Um, that's a bit morbid! What the hell are you talking ab—*

Then there was a swoosh.

*That's my second time hearing that sound today. Was that an arrow...?*

While holding the reins and somehow managing to secure me with one hand, Klifford quickly drew his sword and slashed the arrow away with the other. Then he held his sword at the ready in his left hand.

*An ambush... But where from?*

From ahead. From Esfia Bridge. Men were standing there, blocking our path. Some of them were on horseback. They looked like soldiers guarding transport...but they weren't?

Five soldiers charged at us on horseback. They were a mix of elite knights and common soldiers, but from their uniforms, they were undeniably Esfian.

I removed my hood. The momentum from the horse sent my hair sailing into my face, but I shook it off boldly.

*This has to work...!*

"I am Octavia! Princess of Esfia. Stand aside!" I yelled with all my might.

From the shocked look on their faces, I knew they recognized me, but—their volley of arrows increased?!

*It didn't work!*

To add insult to injury, one of the knights closest to us drew his sword and charged.

*I actually made things worse...!*

Were these guys (Hugh's buddies?) a contingency plan to stop anybody who found him out?

Klifford repelled our assailant's sword with his own. Then Klifford struck back, knocking the knight off his horse.

*Yikes...*

One of the other knights, unable to keep up with Klifford's superior horsemanship, fell off his horse. The other three knights had been neutralized before they even had a chance to attack at close range. The riderless horses scattered away on unrailed gallops.

The archers were still shooting arrows at us, but Klifford skillfully guided the horse to dodge them or knocked them away with his sword. I didn't even hear a whisper of them coming close to hitting me.

If Klifford tells me he'll create a protective barrier, I believe him. It's like how, in action movies, the hero gets pelted with bullets and comes out of it completely unscathed. Klifford was making that trope a reality.

Unperturbed by my iron grip around his waist, Klifford was swinging his sword like it was a living thing. (And I wondered now, after the fact, if it was because he was using his *left* hand.) *The arrows...have they stopped flying at us?*

*Good! If we keep going, all the way to the bridge, we're free...!*

Esfia Bridge was no longer the size of a small bean—we were quite close to it now.

*We're gonna make it!*

No sooner did I think this than Esfia Bridge began to move. It could be raised or lowered to completely cut off transport to and from the castle. The bridge split in the middle and raised like a mountain peak, and once it completed its movement, the bridge's horizontal slope became two edges.

If the bridge opened like that, we wouldn't be able to cross it.

And as if that weren't bad enough, this bridge moved abnormally fast. It was kinda like somebody flipped a switch and in a matter of seconds, the bridge was split. It was so impossibly high tech that I wanted to yell at the author for writing something so period-inappropriate into the books—but by the time I had that thought, the bridge was already a mountain peak with a gap in the middle!

Our enemy had changed tactics: Instead of defeating us, they were going to make it so we couldn't cross the bridge!

"Klifford!"

He knew exactly what I meant. "Hold on tight."

Now that the enemies were off our back, Klifford adjusted me more securely in his arms. I pressed my head against his chest and squeezed. Our horse raced toward the sloping bridge.

"Hurry!"

An enemy knight yelled behind him as we passed by. The bridge was now a very steep slope—which we climbed up!

Under Klifford's guidance, the horse kicked its way up the sloped bridge. Then jumped. Then floated.

And a few seconds later, the impact of our landing shot through my entire body. My vision blurred. I felt the horse dashing down the slope of the bridge. I opened my eyes and turned around just in time to see one of the enemy soldiers who was pursuing us start to fall through the opening in the bridge.

The only problem was—there were more knights and soldiers waiting for us on the castle side of Esfia Bridge. A fair number of them, too.

*Welp. Let's ignore that!*

"Don't engage them, Klifford!"

Part of it was, I didn't want Klifford to wear himself out fighting them. But also, even if they managed to catch up to us, victory was as good as ours once we made it to the castle. Klifford made his horse run faster, shaking the knights

and soldiers off as they attacked us.

And after we galloped for a while— *Urrrg. I don't think I've ever been happier to see the castle gate.*

I looked straight ahead so that the gatekeepers could see my face. I also leaned forward, for good measure. (Since Klifford was holding me from behind, I'd probably be okay!) I took in a deep breath, then screamed from my diaphragm at the closed castle gate, "Open the gate at once!"



## Hugh Roberts's Remorseless Decision

Tugging the reins, Hugh stopped his horse at the foot of Esfia Bridge. He dismounted and approached the soldiers guarding the bridge entrance for inspection.

"Hugh Roberts—I wish to cross the bridge."

"Aye, sir! My apologies, but we must first check your permit."

Though the soldiers knew Hugh, nobody was allowed to break protocol unless they were royalty. Hugh handed them his knight's permit, and as the soldier bent over to examine the permit, Hugh sank his fist into his side. As the soldier crumpled like a piece of paper and lost consciousness, Hugh slipped past him.

"Thank you for your service."

Before the soldier's companion could register what had happened and react accordingly, he was also unconscious. Then Hugh turned to the trees at the foot of the bridge and raised a hand.

"Move the real guards and hide them...don't kill them. I'm about to return to the castle. After I cross the bridge, see to it nobody else does."

Then his comrades who were standing by that morning emerged from the shadows of the trees. They were a mix of castle soldiers and dogmatic anti-royalists—all of whom obeyed Hugh's orders without question.

Hugh was consumed with the sudden urge to laugh. They were technically his

comrades and he referred to them as such, but the lofty resolutions he had proselytized in order to gain their cooperation were nothing he even slightly believed in.

Then again, it was *because* he didn't believe that he was able to give a convincing performance. He could disguise treason as reverent justice. Additionally, his words carried even more weight as somebody who had moved up the ranks a fair amount.

They were the words of the right-hand man of Sirius, the eldest prince of Esfia. His confidant. His most trusted bodyguard—Hugh Roberts.

That was how Hugh had gained so many comrades in his cause, from the inside as well as the outside.

*Why—?* A question directed at his comrades swelled inside of Hugh. *Why did you betray Prince Sirius?*

He knew he wasn't exactly in a position to ask that question. Hugh might have simply not understood that idealism was the easiest way to sway someone.

He nipped this thought in the bud—it would not serve him.

He looked back toward the castle town. Nobody was following him...for the time being. If he was aiming for certainty, he should just raise the bridge now, but he quickly changed his mind. Esfia Bridge was configured such that the castle was notified when it was raised. It was a mechanism that was put in place during King Eus's reign. Hugh didn't understand how it worked, but he did know he couldn't stop the message from being sent to the castle.

So he got back on his horse and gave the order to his comrades again: "If a breach is imminent, raise the bridge."

"Aye, sir!"

"It's in your hands now." With a nod back, Hugh kicked his horse's sides.

After he crossed Esfia Bridge, the castle came into view. His objective was Sil Burks—and the young man's removal.

It was all in the pursuit of obeying his master's orders.

The memory was still vivid. It was unforgettable—it had embedded deeply



into the recesses of his mind. It was a memory that lay dormant until Sirius fell in love with Sil Burks—until misgivings he once had about his master came to light.

*“What my father said... It weighs heavily on my mind.”*

*“His Majesty? What did he say?”*

*“Something happened...between the time he was the crown prince and the king...”* Prince Sirius stared at the ceiling and murmured. *“There’s a nest festering in Esfia...but what’s inside it?”*

The prince closed his eyes...then he turned back to look at Hugh and gave an order. *“Hugh. If I should ever change, put me on the correct path.”*

*“.....?”* At the time, he hadn’t understood what the prince meant. *“Are you telling me you’re going to stray, Your Highness? But I don’t see that happening to you—”*

*“Believe me, I hope I’m wrong. I...I want to have faith in my future self. But Hugh, can you say with confidence that I won’t turn out like my father?”*

The answer to that question was beyond Hugh.

*“Whenever I look at my father...I become less and less confident in myself.”* The prince clenched his fist and murmured. *“I want...to tear down Esfia’s system. I’m fine with men marrying men, but with that right comes responsibilities. It isn’t fair for anyone to benefit from their authority while abandoning the responsibility that comes with it—especially if you’re the king. And if the king sets a bad example, we can’t even hope to achieve this.”*

Then he declared, in a way that seemed to question himself: *“This whole institution of kings marrying other men—does it really need to persist in such a warped way? If anything, it’s a wonder the system has lasted as long as it has. When I’m king...I’m going to put an end to it.”* He continued, saying, *“Hugh—if I show signs of going back on this promise, I want you to stop me.”*

*“You shouldn’t ask someone like me, Your Highness...”*

He should ask Derek Nightfellow—the face of the prince’s best friend was the first to materialize in Hugh’s mind.

*“I can’t ask Derek.”*

At the time, Hugh didn’t understand why that was, but now, he had a feeling he knew. His Highness’s best friend, Derek Nightfellow, was too softhearted. He had not inherited the bold iciness of his father, Duke Nightfellow.

And that’s why Hugh had gotten the message many times: *Call it off*. Derek never told him so directly, but it was clear that Derek was trying to give him a way out.

And Princess Octavia would likely try to give him a way out, too— Back at the restaurant, he tried to avoid drinking the truth serum (which he discovered later was a weak dosage). It was starkly weaker than the serum he used at the junior ball, even though he could have easily used the same amount. But thanks to Derek’s softheartedness, it was easy for Hugh to keep his comrades in line.

*Call it off, huh...?*

*Ridiculous.*

*“I’m in too deep... There’s no way I can call it off now.”*

He had many opportunities to abort the mission. He could have called it off after the castle town survey attack plot was foiled. He could have called it off after the carriage sabotage failed. He could have called it off before the survey, during the survey— He could call it off now.

*“Well, I would choose the order I wanted to obey!”*

Hugh nodded to himself and agreed. *Well said, Princess Octavia.*

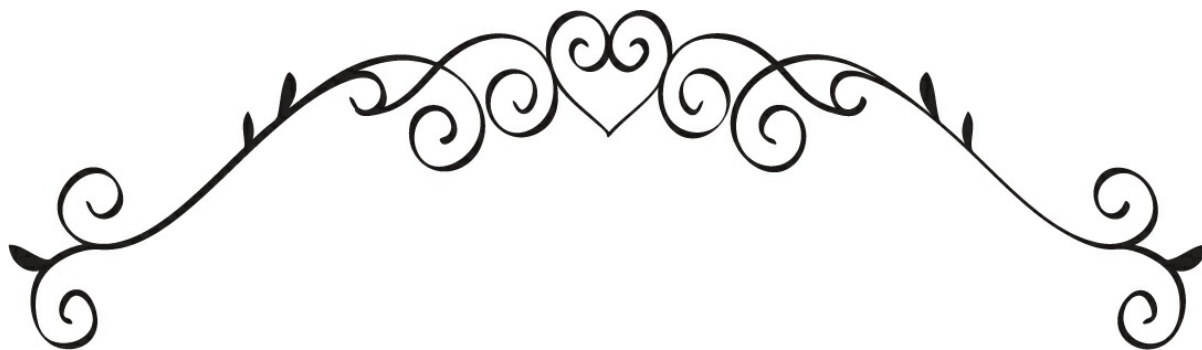
*“I will also choose the order I want to obey.”*

He would choose the order he wanted to obey and bring about the results he wanted.

That was what he had decided.

And he had no regrets.

Whether the plan itself succeeded or failed, his own goal would be met regardless.



## Sirius and Derek

“Princess Octavia is going to have a look around the shop with Lord Derek for a while longer, Your Highness.”

“Understood. Return to the shop.”

“Aye, sir!”

As I watched the soldier return to his post—by the shop entrance—another stab of pain raced through my temples.

I shook my head. The shop Octavia had chosen for her final stop of the survey was a store of sundries in southern castle town. It was not the sort of establishment that royalty or the nobility would openly patronize. Its location in the south dictated that. And yet, Octavia had chosen to visit—and I could only think of one reason why.

It was where Edgar, husband of the king, had been raised. It was where our father and Edgar had met—though publicly, the location had been changed to a merchant association affiliated with Edgar in north castle town.

*Why did Octavia come here? Taking Derek—a suspect—under her wing was strange enough as it is. What is she scheming?*

But when we were ambushed under the kallum trees, the Emissary of Ongarne just protected Octavia. It was from my own retinue that the traitors had emerged.

My mind was mostly preoccupied by the news I'd received via messenger bird: Nathan had kidnapped Sil. I hated that my only recourse was to wait to hear from Hugh. Worry and helplessness were closing in on me.

I sighed sharply, letting go of my own worthlessness, and stared up at the sky. Then I began to walk toward the shop, to go inside—and when I reached a certain proximity, the pain surged through my temples even stronger, and my face twisted in discomfort.

I looked at the shop entrance from where I stood. A fierce sense of déjà vu consumed me.

*I've never been here before.*

And yet—

*"Have I been here before...?"*

I couldn't remember.

*"Stay away."*

Instead, an unfamiliar memory appeared in my brain.

*"What's wrong with me visiting my grandparents?"*

*"You know nothing."*

*Who was giving that warning...? My father? And who was that protesting...? Me?*

If that memory was real, why did my father give me that warning? Where did he want me to "stay away" from?

The only thing I could think of was—

*"This shop..."*

Ignoring the pain in my temples, I tried to get a grasp of the blurry scene in my memory.

*My father warned me not to go to Edgar's birth home. And then I—*

*I went to this shop. No, I went near the shop entrance—where I'm standing right now. But I couldn't go any further, so...I never wound up going inside.*

“.....”

Instinctively...I knew that was what happened. Whether I couldn't go inside because I didn't want to, or because some barrier prevented me? That part was a mystery.

*But...I just don't understand. Why did I try to meet my grandparents? We have no blood relation. Unless it had something to do with Octavia?*

I entered the shop. I did not see Octavia's party on the first floor. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, except that there were more guards than customers.

And as I walked around the shop, I didn't feel any pain in my temples, or any sense of doubt.

If the memory of my father's warning was real, then I was setting foot on forbidden land...and it was an incredibly anticlimactic shop of sundries for the common man. However, you could say it was a cozy place. Whether that was a good or bad thing depended on one's class.

There was one thing, however, that struck me as unusual in the shop— “A Lieche orchid...”

There was a lone white flower—a Lieche orchid—in a vase on a small table by the staircase. Lieche orchids were usually seen in the castle garden or in other buildings associated with royalty, but not in houses of the common man. *That's right... Octavia was wearing one in her hair back at the castle. Maybe Edgar was the one who had put it there.*

Then I noticed a discoloration on the wall... A painting had been there. In a harmoniously decorated shop like this, the missing picture stuck out like a sore thumb. *It must have been hanging here for a very long time, and taken down only recently...*

That was the only anomaly I could find on the first floor.

Then I looked at the staircase. That was where Octavia's party must be—where Derek must be. Just as I was about to walk up the stairs, a man came down and stopped in front of me. It was the man I was just thinking about.

“Derek—”

“Hey there, Sirius.”

“Where’s Octavia?”

“I think you know the answer—she’s upstairs.”

“I want to speak with her.”

But when I tried to walk up the stairs, Derek did not budge.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“If you want to speak with someone, how about me?”

“About what? Can you prove your innocence now?”

Derek was named on the paper written by the traitors. I couldn’t ignore that piece of evidence.

“Remember the advice I gave you yesterday?”

Of course I remembered.

*“Suspecting Octavia is a mistake. There are others you should suspect instead.”*

That’s what Derek had told me last night when he came down the secret passageway to visit me.

*“Again with that? Okay, who should I suspect if not Octavia nor Alderton?”*

*“.....I can’t tell you yet. I don’t have proof.”*

*“Derek, this is getting us nowhere. Why won’t you name names?”*

*“Alderton—I hear you got his testimony? If you want suspects...start with your allies.”*

*My allies? In that case—*

*“Then that makes even you a suspect.”*

*“.....”* Derek was silent.

*“Do you realize the implications of your words and actions? You defend Alderton—one of the suspects—you refuse to name names, and you demand I*

*suspect my allies. Your actions seem to have the sole intention of stirring internal discord.”*

*“Well...point taken. I didn’t tell you earlier because...well, I’m not sure. Anyway, that’s my advice—take it or leave it. Just know that I’m going to work solo tomorrow to try to find the evidence I need.”*

And it all led to this moment.

“Lord Derek!”

Derek turned around when somebody called to him from the top of the stairs on the second floor. A subtle look of relief washed over his face. I could only see it because I’ve known him all his life. That was the look he got when his plan had succeeded.

*Who was that calling Derek...? One of Octavia’s bodyguards?*

I ascended the stairs, following my hunch. “Octa—”

But my relief over seeing my sister was short-lived. A soldier stood in front of her, hiding her with Blackfeather. And behind him was...a tuft of silvery hair and the dress Octavia was wearing. But it wasn’t her. It was...probably her other bodyguard.

Octavia wasn’t here and neither was *that man*, Klifford Alderton—the Emissary of Ongarne.

I opened the door to the room on the second floor. Inside was a lone woman. From her age and her facial features, she looked like— “Are you...”

*Edgar’s mother?*

I shook my head, willing the searing pain in my temples to stay at bay. I needed to prioritize Octavia now.

“What’s going—”

I heard footsteps slowly ascending the staircase—Derek.

“You saw it yourself. Princess Octavia is not here.”

I turned my back on the room and asked Derek, “Why the decoy? Where did she go?”

“To the castle.”

*To see Sil? No, was it to rendezvous with Nathan?*

“Whoa, not so fast, Sirius. It’s not what you’re imagining. You’re way off.”

I swallowed the rage in my voice and asked, “How so?”

“See for yourself.” Derek tossed a piece of paper at me.

I froze. *Is this...?*

“It arrived immediately after Octavia entered this shop. As part of my solo operations for today, I had Nathan send me periodic reports from the castle, just like you got your messenger birds.”

“Why did Nathan send you messages directly?”

“Maybe because we were worried somebody might crumple them up and throw them away before you could see them?”

The words on the paper were in Nathan’s handwriting. It was clear he wrote them. His hand was steady when he wrote. So if I was to believe this letter and Derek’s assertions, at the very least, when Nathan wrote that letter...all was well at the castle.

—It was the complete opposite of the message Hugh had just received by messenger bird.

My mouth was dry.

“In other words—the name you didn’t give me last night...it was Hugh?”

*It can’t be.*

The ubiquitous words swirled in a vortex in my mind.

*I can’t believe it.*

At the same time, the thought, *But what if it is true?* swirled up from deep inside my heart.

*Can you honestly say with confidence that during the past few months, you never thought Hugh’s words or actions were amiss?*

I squeezed my eyes shut.



"I wish I was wrong...I really do," Derek said.

And then...everything clicked into place.

*It's not that Derek didn't tell me... He couldn't tell me.*

"You should have showed me this immediately."

Derek shook his head. "I had to make an escape plan, didn't I? If you didn't believe me, it would be game over then and there. Assuming Hugh was our culprit, that would mean everything would go according to his plan."

"Octavia... Did she believe you?"

"She's not here—does that answer your question? Hugh can be stopped, even if you don't take action."

*"Even if I don't take action" ... He really had the nerve to say that?*

"This puts Hugh and I on equal footing. We're both equally suspected of foul play. Now that you have that information, Sirius—what's your move?"

"You're asking who I trust?"

"Yeah."

I already knew the answer. "I don't trust either of you."

My heart was another story. I wanted to trust both of them.

But as long as there was reason to suspect them—then that put Derek and Hugh both into the same boat. And there was only one way to quickly determine the truth.

"I'm going to see for myself. Derek, you're still under surveillance."

"Yeah... Figured you'd say that," Derek chuckled in relief.

"What?"

"Nothing... Just glad my worries were in vain."

"You're not making sense..."

*You haven't regained my trust, you know.*

"As honored as I would be for you to trust me in these circumstances, it

would just contradict your personality. The only person you'd make an exception for—if anybody—is Sil."

"....."

"I figured this is how things would go if you had to choose between me and Hugh, and both of us were suspicious. It's just that I wasn't able to get over my fear that you'd take Hugh's side. You tend to get irrational when Octavia is involved."

I had no idea I was like this... Or at least I didn't, until a few days ago.

The pain in my temples. Once I became conscious that there were discrepancies in my memory, I started to become aware of many things about myself. And this awareness only got stronger the closer I got to Octavia.

It's how I was able to realize something was amiss with Hugh—no, that was really just a mistake on my part. I always had a nebulous sort of trust for Hugh, for reasons even I couldn't explain. And strangely enough...I still had that trust now. I always thought it was because of all the years I'd spent with him. But maybe— "*Hugh...please.*"

*Did I—ask something of Hugh in the past?*

I violently shook my head side to side. I couldn't remember, and I didn't have time to rack my brain trying to.

"The survey is canceled. We're going back to the castle, full speed. Tell all the men—"

But I cut myself off there—because I caught a glimpse of the soldier dressed as Octavia, and the other soldier holding Blackfeather.

On the surface, the survey was to continue, as scheduled. And if possible, that would be for the best. Even if I returned to the castle, as long as there were still people here completing the royal survey in our places, we could manipulate the public information later to a degree.

Follow a suggestion of Octavia's? If I were in this situation a little while ago, I would never have even considered it.

"Heller Byrne. Guy Peutz."

“Aye, sir!” They both saluted back.

“Keep playing the part of Octavia and her bodyguard—and get me a decoy as well. Finish the survey, and ride back to the castle in the carriage in disguise.”

## 67

The castle was my home sweet home. As such, my face gave me free reign of the place!

We swiftly slipped past the gate, gave word of the ambush near Esfia Bridge, and I gave the order to arrest the traitors who attacked us. (Though technically, the soldiers had already opened an investigation since the bridge had moved without communication.) Hugh should have returned long ago—but even though he ought to be scouring the castle alone to find Sil, who had been “kidnapped by Nathan”...it was business as usual at the castle.

According to the gatekeepers, Hugh had explained that he had returned by order of Prince Sirius. This showed off just how ingenious Hugh was; his explanation was technically not a lie. He had slipped back into the castle, and nobody we had asked knew his whereabouts.

But I had an idea of where Hugh was headed.

After giving some soldiers the order to find and arrest Hugh, I headed for a destination of interest—Sirius’s study!

It was a place only a select few could enter, and while Sirius and I were on away on our survey, it was the place where Nathan was to keep watch over Sil.

Keeping quiet and waiting for a report was the princess’s best move, but this was my home turf—I knew it like the back of my hand. What’s more, I had Klifford on my side. Moreover, Klifford and I had an Adjutant-Sovereign bond, so you could say I had all of Klifford’s strength in my hands!

Even barging in and restraining Hugh was on the table! As luck would have it, Klifford did have experience after sparring with my brother’s bodyguards at the training grounds that one time. It was a mock battle, but even if it had been real, Klifford would have shown he was leagues above the others.

*We might get lucky and take care of everything peacefully...*

I just had to find the shortcut to Sirius's study— *Awaken! O, latent memories of Castle Explorations with Alec!*

"This way," I said, pushing the mechanism that opened to the nobles' first-floor corridor. This castle was a treasure trove of traps. Secret passageways for days! If you weren't careful where you stepped, you could get seriously hurt. But in case of emergency, all exits from each individual room fed into this corridor and led to the final exit. And if I needed to take the secret passage to Alec's room, I knew it by heart.

Anyway, to get to Sirius's room, I just had to take a right turn at the branch that led to Alexis's room!

I took Klifford with me into the secret corridor. The door closed behind us with a heavy clunk. It was pitch-black. After a little while, my eyes adjusted enough that I could walk—even though there was no light, the path was lit with glowing stones. The corridor was just wide enough for the two of us to walk side by side.

Just as I was about to psych myself up to walk the rest of the way, Klifford spoke up.

"Your Highness, do you want to give me an order in advance? I sense someone up ahead."

And with that, he stepped in front of me.

*Really?*

All I could hear was the sound of mine and Klifford's footsteps...but if he sensed someone up ahead...did that mean somebody besides us was using this corridor?

*Are they with Hugh? Yeah, they'd have to be. Thinking back to the incidents at the kallum tree and Esfia Bridge, he must have some allies in the castle, too. Some of the soldiers without alibis being held in the dungeon right now might be on Team Hugh.*

*Wait a minute! Before we got in this passageway, I should've ordered some*

*soldiers to check the dungeon and its surrounding areas...! Well, hindsight's twenty-twenty.*

*We'd better hurry.*

I nodded at Klifford. "Understood. Let me know if you notice anything else."

We kept going, with Klifford in the lead. I guided him with short directions like "go straight" or "turn right." For a while, all I heard was my own voice echoing in the corridor.

"Take the middle path up ahead."

We came upon a three-pronged fork in the road. The left was also a viable option, but it was the long way around, so the middle path was our fastest bet!

But Klifford looked hesitant.

"Klifford?"

"There appears to be a battle taking place to the left—what do you think?"

I strained my ears.

*..... Silence. I can't hear a damn thing.*

But if Klifford sensed it, the battle must be real...and I couldn't overlook it.

"Let's change paths."

We took the left-hand path... *Aha, now even I'm starting to hear something besides our own footsteps. Yeah, it's high-pitched metal noises...and running feet.*

Klifford's right hand unsheathed his sword.

Then somebody came running toward us—

"Lord Sil?!"

Sil was out of breath, sword in hand, his face stern, and his hazel eyes open wide. But we didn't have time for a heartwarming reunion. There was somebody behind him. He was raising his sword, aiming to attack Sil.

With a grunt, Sil blocked the attack with his sword—but a second enemy wasn't far behind!

“Shall I aid him?” Klifford calmly asked as he stood in front of the tense scene.

“Of course!”

And barely after I yelled the command—the battle was over in a literal instant. (Or so I assume. I couldn’t see anything.) Just when I was starting to think, *Aha, Klifford’s gotten close to the enemy*, both of them were on the ground. *Their sword tassels...are gold. Were they the men in the dungeon? I didn’t think all of them could be bad guys, but I really should have warned the soldiers guarding them! Why did it take me so long to remember...?!*

“I knocked them unconscious for a start...”

*Should I kill them?* He finished silently.

I shook my head. “No. But...thanks.”

It was hard to put my thoughts into words, but—it was wild realizing that Klifford’s true fighting style was likely a lot more merciless, and that he was doing a favor by not killing them.

“Are there any other pursuers?” I asked.

“I do sense some other presences...but Lord Burks likely incapacitated them.”

“Oh! Yes, there were two other men...,” Sil explained.

I guess that means Sil defeated his own fair share of goons before we got here...

*Welp, we’re safe for now. How’s Sil...? Let’s give you a good looking-over! His hair’s messed up and his face and clothes are dirty, but that must be from the fighting and running away. Good, no sign of any serious wounds!*

“Lord Sil—have you grasped the situation we’re in?”

My question seemed to flip a switch in Sil. His eyes shot open. “Princess Octavia, Nathan is in trouble! After he let me escape, he ran off all on his own...!”

“Is Nathan in my brother’s study?”

“Yes!”

*Guess I’d better ask Sil the most pressing question.* “Hugh Roberts. He’s a

traitor, right?”

Sil’s lips quivered, like he didn’t want to accept the truth, but he nodded firmly and squeezed out the word. “Yes.”

Sil joined our party in the march through the secret corridor to Sirius’s study. We could have either taken Sil with us or had him escape someplace safe. Both options had their pros and cons.

The former was more dangerous for Sil since it meant taking him to where Hugh likely was, but it was safer because Klifford was with us. And the latter seemed safer at a glance, but assuming Hugh had spies lurking anywhere in the castle, it was hard determining where it was safe for Sil to be. Going to my father or Edgar would be the best bet, but getting to them posed its own problems.

At present, I wasn’t in any imminent danger, so I did think it might make sense for me to hide in the secret corridor while Klifford whisked Sil away to safety, but Sil protested. “But you mustn’t! There’s no guarantee you won’t find yourself in danger, Princess Octavia!”

Having said that, the idea of leaving Sil on his own worried and scared me, so we wound up going with the first option.

We backtracked a little to take the shortcut. I switched on a mechanism in the corridor to close the door and block the path behind us. We couldn’t just leave the unconscious men who attacked us, so this was our alternative to tying them up.

*Looks like all those past castle explorations with Alec are getting a second life today! All those times I accidentally triggered the trap doors weren’t in vain after all.*

Klifford took the lead while Sil and I walked side by side—quickly, of course!

“Lord Sil, could you describe to me in as much detail as possible how Hugh was acting when he returned to the castle?”

I needed to gather intel before we burst onto the scene!

“Hugh came into the study with some other bodyguards—some of them had

been in the dungeon earlier. He said he had returned on Sirius's orders and that it was dangerous for me to be there, so he was going to take me someplace safe. Then Nathan told me to run."

"And you followed Nathan's advice instead of Hugh's, I take it."

"Hugh looked...not himself. And he drew his sword when I showed signs of running."

I sensed Sil was about to say something contradictory.

"But?" I prompted him.

Sil thought for a moment, trying to find the right words. "He seemed...to be after something else... I didn't sense intent to harm. I know, that's strange, isn't it—in fact, it's probably just wishful thinking on my part. He drew his weapon. He was going to attack me..."

"Were you and Hugh close?"

After a moment's thought, Sil dropped a bomb on me. "We were...somewhat friendly."

*"Somewhat friendly"...? So my assumption that Sil and Hugh were good friends like they were in the books...was wrong?*

"I don't think we have a bad relationship. Maybe it was only because Sirius ordered him, but he was always kind to me. It's just...he was only kind up to a certain point. I sensed a wall between us."

*So...that must mean...*

"Has Hugh ever shown you his sword tassel?"

"You mean, the one Sirius gifts his bodyguards?"

*Judging by his reaction—the episode with Sil and Hugh's tassel that should have happened long ago hasn't happened at all?*

Sil was different—rather, Hugh was different. His actions were completely different from the source material, and those actions brought us to where we were in this moment.

*Why?*



I was so confused. There were plenty of events—like Sil’s guardian ring—that I thought changed because I had gotten involved. I’d always assumed that characters from the source material like Hugh would be the same as they were...but it turns out they weren’t?

*Is Hugh’s loyalty for Sirius in the source material completely different now?*

No... I answered my own question.

During the time I spent with Hugh while Klifford was in confinement, at the very least, I did sense he was loyal to my brother.

“Your Highness.” Klifford turned to me and pointed at the path ahead. After the fork in the hall, a series of right turns would take us to Sirius’s study. The door was now in sight.

*He’s asking for confirmation: “Do you really want to burst in?”*

“Rescue Nathan and capture Hugh—those are our two objectives.”

“Understood.”

“Lord Sil...are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“It’s you Hugh is after, Sil. Don’t forget that.”

“Yes...I know.”

By the time we burst into Sirius’s study from the secret corridor, Nathan was barely able to stand. And there was only one other person standing in the room with him: Hugh.

Besides them, there were a few traitors that had probably come in with Hugh, but they were unable to move. That was probably Nathan’s handiwork.

A longsword clanged as it rolled along the ground. Its tassel shook with each roll.

As Nathan braced himself against the wall, Hugh raised his sword to strike him—and promptly lost the ability to attack.

Thanks to the dagger Klifford threw.

Hugh slowly lowered his hand...but not to pick up his sword. He just stood still, motionless. As he stood there in his bodyguard uniform, he looked like his usual self—it was so surreal.

He calmly looked over the new arrivals, his eyes landing on Sil.

“Looks like luck was on your side, Lord Burks.”

“Don’t resist arrest,” I told him.

“I won’t.”

*This...is just too anticlimactic.*

*I guess he kinda has no other recourse, but...is he really just gonna give up?*

When I shot him a look of disbelief, Hugh smiled cynically. “Your arrival signals my defeat, Princess. Isn’t that right?”

Sil ran over to Nathan. Slinging Nathan’s arm around his shoulder, he helped him get away from Hugh. The true entrance to the study was tightly secured from the inside. *Did Hugh and his men do that? So they did secure the room...so nobody could interfere.* Irregular pounding noises echoed from the other side of the door. Somebody was trying to break in from the other side.

“So...you admit it?”

“Admit what, Princess?” Hugh asked calmly.

“That you—”

The words caught in my throat. I had come to get a confession out of him. I knew it was an open-and-shut case. In my head, I knew it...but my heart still couldn’t believe it.

As I sat there, fumbling, Hugh picked up where I left off. “That I tampered with Lord Burks’s carriage? I suppose that’s what you mean. I did not do it personally, but I did give the order. I did not anticipate having a witness, however.”

He just confessed to being the mastermind without blinking an eye. He spoke fluidly, without even a tremor in his voice.

“So...this is your approach?” Nathan demanded.

“My...approach?”

For the first time since our intrusion, there was a glimmer of emotion on Hugh’s face. And Nathan, the man who had gotten it out of him, was quite wounded. His uniform was drenched in blood and ripped in places. His right arm was hanging lifelessly—probably broken—but his eyes were still sharp and fierce.

“People don’t always take the right path. Sometimes they are forced to walk a path of thorns, even if they know it’s wrong. All the more so when they’re royalty. And as for me...even if I know a path is the wrong one to take, if my master wills it, I should endure any slander that comes my way and silently follow him. I thought that was my role to fill; that it was not my place to advise him against it.”

In the books, Nathan would sometimes go against Sirius’s orders, but never outside the scope of an order itself.

“I always thought...advising the prince against making mistakes was *your* role,” Nathan said.

“My role?”

In contrast, Hugh was the type of character who would always give Sirius advice if he was about to go astray, even if it meant defying a direct order.

“Me, dissuade Prince Sirius? How presumptuous.”

“Then why did you commit such treachery?! Give a reason!” Nathan shouted.

All signs pointed to Hugh being the culprit. Hugh even admitted as much, but it just didn’t make sense.

“Nathan is quite right. What was your reason?” I asked.

Hugh fell silent.

“I attempted to murder Sil Burks. I am the culprit—isn’t that all that matters?”

“So you won’t tell us?”

“I’m remaining silent.”

*So he doesn’t want to reveal his motive?*

*“Because you’re the culprit, that claim won’t work,”* I told him.

“.....Is that so?” Hugh murmured, narrowing his eyes. He pulled something from his pocket and threw it. He was aiming for Sil, but since Sil’s hands were full with Nathan, there was no guarantee he could dodge it— “Klifford! To Sil!”

He knew my command to protect Sil without my needing to say it. But Klifford’s immediate response only brought temporary relief. Hugh raised his sword and kicked off the floor.

Then he flew like a gale—but not at Sil.

He was flying straight at me. His jet-black eyes were clear as ever—and a prickling sensation assaulted my skin.

But not from Hugh. From Klifford, repelling Hugh’s attempted attack on me. From the malicious look in his eye. From his clear intent to kill.

Yet Hugh had a satisfied smile on his face.

And in the blurry blink of an eye that the attempted murder took place, my head was oddly clear, and rage boiled up from deep inside my gut.

Because I knew why Hugh was trying to kill me.

*Oh... So that’s why.*

“Klifford! Stop!”

I desperately threw my arms around him from behind. Klifford grunted in confusion as I grabbed his sword hand with both of mine. He swiftly changed sword hands, parrying Hugh’s attack. But he stopped short of killing Hugh...just like I’d wanted.

“Please, don’t be so reckless.”

Klifford looked back at me, his indigo eyes deep with confusion and rage.

“Don’t kill Hugh.”

Klifford’s brows knitted together.

*Oh dear... I gave him the wrong idea.*

I hadn’t stopped him out of the kindness of my heart.

*But now I need to focus on Hugh—*

“Princess Octavia, I see that you value even the life of a criminal like me.”

Hugh had the wrong idea, too.

I turned to look at him and snapped, “No, you’re wrong.”

*That’s not why I spared you.*

“Klifford, if Hugh behaves suspiciously, stop him. But under no circumstances are you to kill him.”

“—Yes, Princess.”

I released Klifford’s arm and marched over to Hugh. I faced him head-on, with my hands on my hips.

Hugh was confused. “What are you doing—?”

I slapped him hard, letting my vortex of messy emotions guide me.

“Hugh... You were prepared to die, weren’t you?”

“.....”

“You attacked me on purpose, knowing that Klifford would protect me. You were trying to get Klifford to kill you. You were...trying to make a pawn of my bodyguard.”

To aid in his own death.

“Did you think your death would resolve everything?”

I was fuming. With every fiber of my being.

“Well, I forbid you from ending your own life like this—don’t you ever forget that.”

*I don’t care if you think I’m arrogant for doing this. Maybe you think a man should be free to die if he wants to? Well, even if he wants to die, I won’t let him.*

“At the very least, I won’t let it happen in my presence. You have my word.”

Because *I* didn’t want him to die.

*Please...I'm begging you...don't throw your life away while I'm standing right here.*

“My goodness...those are some harsh words, Princess,” Hugh murmured weakly, with a glance at the entrance. The slamming on the door had gotten even harder; the vibrations were shaking through my body.

And the study door was broken down.

The first person to burst through the broken door was Sirius. Derek followed immediately behind. And behind them was a crowd of soldiers, piling into the room.

*Oh, good... Derek convinced him!*

But I was concerned by what condition Sirius might be in. Not even my levelheaded brother could stay cool at a time like this.

For just a moment, his face twisted with emotion. Immediately after he set foot into his study, he had grasped the situation: a battered Nathan in Sil's arms; unconscious soldiers on the floor; Hugh standing before us, unarmed; me, and Klifford standing protectively in front of me.

And in that moment, Sirius knew—everything Derek had told him was true.

“Hugh Roberts,” Sirius called his bodyguard. He was emotionless, as if he was dead inside.

Up until now, Hugh would have responded with a proper bow as a bodyguard should...but he just stood there, staring.

“Give me your motive... Why did you do this?”

Hugh looked around the study. Then he slowly answered, “Prince Sirius... Are you aware that not everyone blesses your union with Lord Burks? And did you know...that I am one of those people?”

*What...is this feeling?*

Hugh was giving off the same impression he had when he explained how his tassel was cut.

“Are you saying...my partnership with Sil gives you pause?”

“You two love each other very much. But as a citizen of Esfia, I couldn’t overlook the practice of my king taking only a partner of the same sex.”

“And...that’s why you pointed your sword at Sil?”

“Well, I could hardly point my sword at the prince, could I?” Hugh snorted cynically.

For the first time, Sirius was flustered. “Th-then why?! Why didn’t you confide in me first?!” he shrieked in anguish.

And Hugh just smirked. “In your heart, do you believe that would have resolved the matter?”

It was a question that didn’t demand an answer.

“Well, I don’t,” Hugh said coldly. “Talking can’t solve every problem... This isn’t a fairy tale.”

“No—you just gave up hope from the very start. You could have always gone with Plan B, but you didn’t even *try* to talk to me.”

As Sirius shook with distress, Hugh’s cold sneer changed to a smile... A smile that almost felt gentle.

“You’re right... I didn’t even try to talk to you. But even if talking to you could patch things up between us, I wouldn’t seek out such a conversation—not with you, not with anybody. I think it’s all futile.”

“Don’t you...regret any of this?”

Hugh slowly shook his head. “No. Not a bit.”

“Your plan ended in failure...and you still regret nothing?!”

“Indeed. Whether my plan succeeded or failed, it was what I truly wanted.”

As he talked with Sirius, Hugh was calm and cool all the while. It was hard to believe he was the mastermind of a plan that had just failed.

If anything, he looked like a man whose plan had just succeeded.

“Hugh—Isn’t there anything else you want to tell me?” Sirius pleaded in the end. His feelings for Hugh probably moved him to do it.

Even though the mastermind was there before Sirius, confessing to his own crimes—even though there wasn't a shred of doubt that he was guilty—a part of Sirius still wanted to believe in Hugh. He wanted Hugh to say something. Even a flimsy excuse would do. Anything that he could use to defend Hugh.

But even with that question from Sirius, Hugh did not change.

“No.”

He said nothing more.

Sirius's eyes clenched shut. “Take Hugh Roberts—”

In the source material, an anguished Sirius had to give the order to put Hugh in the dungeon, even though he believed his friend was innocent. And while some of the details were different, what was happening now was incredibly similar.

Sirius gave the order to his soldiers on standby at the entrance to his study. “Take Hugh Roberts to the dungeon.”

His voice shook, ever so faintly.

## 68

*Is this how it has to be?*

The thought consumed me.

*I just...can't accept this. No matter how many times I think it over.*

I was at a door I passed through every day—but I couldn't bring myself to go through. Hugh freely named his accomplices, so a castle-wide sweep for spies began—a full-scale arrest under Sirius's command.

Nathan's injuries were being treated, and Sil was seen by a physician too, just in case.

And as for me—well, I guess everything was back to normal. Meaning, I got Klifford back. He was officially my bodyguard again.

I was encouraged to rest, so I had Klifford escort me to my quarters. And I was



standing at my door right now.

At first, I entertained notions of doing as I was told and taking a load off. In the end, the mastermind was caught, and the case was closed with no major casualties.

But I couldn't bring myself to rest peacefully in my room.

I turned around. "Klifford."

"Yes?"

I looked up to see myself reflected in his deep blue eyes. "I'm going to see Hugh. Take me to the dungeon."

Klifford just stared blankly back at me. He tilted his head as if he was going to ask me something. "As you wish."

We hurried to the training grounds, below which the dungeon lay. Along the way, we ran into many an obstacle—soldiers here, yelling traitors in the middle of an arrest there—but thanks to Klifford's expert guidance and my Princess Privilege, we arrived safely.

We descended from the training grounds to the dungeon. There were three guards stationed at the entrance. When they saw it was me, they fumbled to attention.

I asked one of them, "Which cell is Hugh Roberts in?"

"On the ground floor, Your Highness! Furthest in the back."

"Thank you. Don't let anybody come through for a while. And one more thing —"

I added a request—scratch that, an order. I didn't know if *he* would respond accordingly, but I had seen him giving instructions nearby. If he wanted to, he could come here at a moment's notice.

Once I got the guard's firm nod of assent, I proceeded down the stairs. Klifford took the lead, lit torch in hand.

*Was it...Hugh who explained this to me? That cells were arranged according to the severity of the crime.*

Anyway, these cells made Klifford's cell seem...nice, by comparison. The corridor I walked down to visit Klifford in his cell was downright cute. As we walked down this corridor, my nose was assaulted by a putrid stench. The corridor itself was given a basic amount of cleaning, but the cell interiors were all in very bad shape.

And in the holding block furthest in the back—nobody was being held prisoner except Hugh. This isolated him even more.

Klifford stopped in his tracks and illuminated the cell at the end of the row with his torch. And there was Hugh—in his bodyguard's uniform minus the jacket—squinting at us.

He rose from his cot that was covered in blood...or some sort of stain. With each movement, the chains around his wrists and ankles rattled.

*He's being polite?*

Hugh bowed to me. It was only two days prior that I had come to this dungeon with Sirius, Sil, Hugh, and Nathan to visit Klifford.

And now, Hugh was in a cell.

I opened my mouth and slowly spoke, "Your golden tassel...why did you cut it?"

Hugh's eyes widened in surprise. "You came all the way down here just to ask me that? It's such a trivial question."

"No...I think it's a very important question. Did you cut it yourself?"

Hugh must have had his own reasons. That's how I felt about it, after the fact. I also thought that it might have something to do with the *real* reason he committed that act of treason.

"Nobody else is here besides myself and Klifford, so you have no reason to lie anymore."

"Are you suggesting I've lied about something?"

"Your reason—your motive behind your act of treason."

"My motive..." Hugh murmured.

“The reason you gave...it doesn’t mesh at all with the loyalty I know you have for my brother.”

“It doesn’t...mesh, you say? But wasn’t the reason I gave fortuitous for you? I thought it was something you could agree with.”

His method was one thing I couldn’t agree with. But I did object to the idea of a king marrying another man and still being forced to produce an heir—I objected to Esfia’s monarchy as it existed.

“Was this—truly your line of thinking?”

I just didn’t have closure. The fact that Hugh was the bad guy and the motive he gave was just so inconsistent. Even if Hugh personally did object to Esfia’s monarchy as it existed now, the actions born from such a belief were just too extreme.

And it was so unlike Hugh to act in a way that would hurt Sirius so deeply.

*Think, Octavia...*

*Yes... It would be easier to believe if he—*

“If you told me you were acting under somebody else’s orders, this would all be easier to believe.”

*Silence... A dead end, eh?*

*Okay, what if I command him? As long as Hugh still considers himself a bodyguard...*

“Hugh, my brother never released you from my service as bodyguard. And you were given the position officially in writing. It needs to be nullified in writing as well.”

“.....?”

“Just as you served my brother, now you must serve me. You are still obligated to obey my commands.”

Hugh smirked. “Your logic is twisted.”

“So what if it is? I am Esfia’s eldest princess, and I say it’s so: You are still my bodyguard.”

*And he's also still Sirius's bodyguard.*

I repeated my first question. "Why did you cut your golden tassel?"

"It was partly because...I felt it was what I deserved." It sounded more like a monologue than an answer to me.

"You asked me once whom I would obey if I was given two conflicting orders. Is that somehow related?"

What if Hugh was given two conflicting orders? In that case, the pertinent question would be, *whose* orders?

*If somebody gave Hugh an order...it had to be Sirius, right? Or, in terms of authority, my father or Edgar. Does that include me and Alexis as well?*

The lantern light shook a little. I glanced at Klifford. He was trying to show me something in the hall...

I glanced discreetly where his lantern light had moved. And I saw the faint outline of a man's silhouette in the distance. He was almost invisible, unless you squinted your eyes. I had given the guard a command, but all I could do was hope *he* would catch my unconventionally delivered message.

*He actually came...*

But the man was showing no sign of emerging from the shadows.

"I chose to obey the order I wanted to obey. If I was to obey only one of the two orders I was given—then I was unworthy of affixing Sirius's golden tassel to my sword in its proper form."

"Then what about today? Wouldn't it be more proper...to not wear the tassel from my brother, just as you did earlier?"

Only half—

.....*Oh.*

*Er..... I just thought of a really crazy theory, but...*

I decided to say it out loud anyway. "Did both orders come...from my brother?"

*Were those the two conflicting orders Hugh had received? No, wait, Sirius*

*would never order anybody to get rid of Sil!*

But the moment I asked the question, Hugh's breath caught.

*He...reacted?*

"Answer me," I demanded.

And after a faint moment of silence, Hugh sighed. He looked at me, his eyes filled with grief. And then he answered, "I received two orders—both from Prince Sirius. He gave me the second order after he met Lord Burks. It was to protect the young man with my life."

Knowing Hugh, he surely carried out that order devoutly.

Then Hugh told me the other order. "The first order came from the former Prince Sirius."

*From Sirius...in the past?*

"His order was, if he should marry another man and get an heir from his sister—if he were to take the same path that the kings before him had taken—that I should stop him. And that I should do so in such a way that nobody—not even he—could detect. That was his strict order."

*Sirius...ordered him to do that?*

"Didn't you feel at all...hesitant to obey his order?"

"Personally, you mean? We knights of the royal guard never put our personal feelings first. If our masters command it, we protect those we hate the most, and we kill those we love the most."

*But, Hugh...you put up a wall between you and Sil so that you wouldn't get too close to him.*

"I don't hate Lord Burks as a person, but his presence here went in direct opposition to the former Prince Sirius's order."

"So that's why you tried to get rid of him?"

"Wouldn't that be the most pertinent?"

"Were you seriously going to go through with killing him?"

Hugh's gaze cast downward onto the dungeon floor. "I reasoned...that my success or failure was out of my hands."

So...he didn't care if he failed? No...he *wanted* to fail?

*When given two opposing commands, Hugh chose the one he wanted to choose... I think he was telling the truth when he said that, but I'm just not sure if I can take his words at face value.*

*...Something just doesn't add up.*

*What if I were Hugh...? Yeah, let's go with that. If I were Hugh, and Sirius gave me an order, I would do everything in my power to succeed at following it. It would be strange if I didn't. It was a strict order.*

*And yet, when he set out to eliminate Sil, he didn't seem to care if he succeeded or not... Why was that?*

*In other words, he was trying to carry out the order in such a way that it wouldn't matter if he succeeded or failed... But why?*

Sil survived—but only barely. And sure, you could pass that off as coincidence or luck, but in the end, you could say that our constant state of fear that Sil really was going to die came from Hugh's convincing performance. He also clearly left openings for Sil to be rescued.

Is that...where Hugh's true feelings lay?

Did he not care whether he succeeded or failed...because of what came afterward?

Did Hugh have a goal—completely separate from the command?

"Hugh...what was *your* goal?"

Just a hunch...but maybe he was doing this for Sirius.

"If I succeeded, I would have successfully obeyed the order Prince Sirius gave me in the past. And if I failed—the future would still change. My betrayal might make Prince Sirius have doubts about himself."

*But—* "But you didn't want to tell my brother *now* what he ordered you to do in the *past*. Isn't that right?"

Probably because if Sirius knew this was all because of a command he gave, it would break him.

“That’s because...he forgot he gave the order.” Hugh continued, “Do the personal feelings of a criminal even matter? My actions say everything.”

“Hugh—” An epiphany was starting to form in my mind. “Tell me the truth: Whether you failed or succeeded, you planned to end it with your death, correct?”

He tried to get Klifford to kill him without telling anyone his reasons. Which is why when he was pressed to give his reasons, he’d given half-truths in public, surrounded by soldiers, so that his half-truths would become the truth.

The only reason he was telling the truth now was because he thought we were the only ones there to hear it—that the truth would be buried in this dark dungeon.

“With the death sentence of the ringleader, you will be able to determine which of your own men are potential traitors. What else could I wish for?”

And that was Hugh’s perfect ending—an ending he stopped short of getting.

“But...you are missing from my brother’s side now.”

“He doesn’t need me. Nathan and Lord Derek can take care of him.”

“Are you saying that’s what you truly wish for?”

“Yes.”

*But Hugh...*

I turned around and called out to the man in the shadows. “Brother—”

With a start, Hugh looked in his direction, his iron chains rattling.

The sound of booted footsteps got closer.

“Did you hear our conversation?” I asked.

“.....Yeah.”

Sirius appeared, dyed amber by the lantern light. He stood before Hugh’s cell. He was alone, unguarded, and not out of thoughtlessness, but purposefully.

“Hugh—” In a voice that could not by any means be described as bold, Sirius quietly called his bodyguard’s name.

Hugh closed his eyes in silent resignation.

And in time, Hugh knelt before his Prince, my brother.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?” Siris repeated the question he had posed back in his study.

Hugh looked up. “My loyalty to you is steadfast. However—” He paused and slowly lowered his head. “Please, give your traitor the punishment he deserves.”

When I returned to my bedchamber, it was nighttime.

I left the dungeon immediately after Sirius’s arrival, so I don’t know what they talked about after I left.

I sat on a chair.

*...I don’t know why, but it feels cold in here.*

Reluctant to return to my room, I tried to carry out all sorts of minute tasks: I met up with Heller and Guy, who had returned from their decoy assignment; changed out of Irene’s dress and back into my own; got scolded by Klifford for the blood on my bandaged hand; and had the doctor rewrap my wound in a fresh bandage. But I couldn’t wander around the castle halls all night.

Ordinarily, Sasha would be there if I needed her—*but no. I can’t call for Sasha.*

I had asked her to take care of the dress Heller had worn. Sasha’s scream when he and Guy returned to the castle was epic.

Remembering the ruckus cheered me up a little, but the moment the spacious walls of my room confronted me, I fell into a daze. I shouldn’t feel so blue. I had the beautiful, luxurious room of a princess.







*I don't wanna be alone right now...*

"Klifford?"

Without thinking, I called out for him, even though he had already politely bowed and was about to leave for the night. He stopped in his tracks, his face colored with confusion.

*What do I do now? I didn't think of anything to say. What's a task I can order him to do...?*

Then I spotted the teapot Sasha had left me for when I returned to my room.

"Would you care to join me for a cup of tea? Have a seat. I'll make the tea—though I can't guarantee it will taste any good."

As soon as I finished saying the words, I realized something.

When I became his Sovereign—when I called Klifford into my room then—in a roundabout way, he refused to sit down and have a cup of tea.

*Hmmm, what do I do...?*

"Don't worry, it's not poisoned."

I figured I'd at least assure him the tea wouldn't hurt him.

"A certain amount of poison is not a problem. If you command me, I'll drink it. A little truth serum has no effect on me, either."

*Um, please don't drink poison!*

"Er...there's no truth serum in it, either."

"I wouldn't mind... I would notice anyway, if it was spiked."

*Um, Klifford! Why do you assume there's something in the tea?!*

"Listen, Klifford, you have my word that I will never add any foreign substances to your tea. This promise is valid as long as we are Sovereign and Adjutant."

I mean, I wouldn't spike his drink even if we weren't Sovereign-Adjutant, I just figured Klifford would have an easier time accepting it if I worded it that way.

Since Sasha had gotten everything ready before we arrived, I was able to



brew us some tea in no time at all. I set a cup in front of the spot where Klifford was to sit.

It was my tough love way of saying, *I've poured your tea, so you're drinking it, right? You'd better drink it!*

When Klifford just stood there, still looking hesitant, I pressed him with some words: "Sit."

".....All right."

And Klifford sat in the chair I'd gestured to.

*I win!* I cheered silently, pumping my fist mentally.

Now that Klifford was seated, I had to get my own tea. Klifford took his tea straight, but I wanted milk tea.

I took a sip, then set my cup down... As it soothed my heart, the day's fatigue pushed in on me all at once.

"Thank you..." Klifford said, properly holding up his cup before taking a sip.

I propped my chin on my hand and watched him for a while before I blurted out, "You'd never do what Hugh did, would you?"

Silence.

"You would tell me first. No matter what your reasons were."

If there was something about me that displeased him, I could attempt to fix it. And if I couldn't, then I could be straight with him and say so.

Klifford stared back at me with pensive eyes, the sort of eyes that masked all emotion. Then he leaned back slightly and gave a delayed answer. "..... Understood."

"Thank you." I tried to smile, but I could tell I failed miserably.

"Why—" Klifford suddenly began. "Why are you hurting?"

"Oh, my left hand doesn't hurt—the doctor changed my bandage—and I wasn't wounded in the—"

But Klifford shook his head halfway through my speech. "That's not what I

meant.”

“Huh...?”

I stopped there. Because I knew what Klifford had meant to ask: Why had Hugh’s betrayal shaken me up so much?

“If there’s ever anything you need to talk about, Your Highness...I want you to come to me.”

I looked up with a start. A pair of calm, indigo eyes was looking down at me.

*Well...I can’t exactly bare my entire soul to him, but...*

He was right. Hugh’s betrayal had broken me. An image of Hugh kneeling before Sirius in the dungeon flashed in my brain. Compared to my brother, my pain was nothing. But still— “I think I feel guilty...like I was partially responsible for Hugh’s betrayal... I keep wondering if there was something I could have done.”

I mean, this is completely different from the source material. Sirius and Hugh’s relationship was shattered to pieces in real life, and no matter how hard Sirius wished it not to be true, Hugh had committed treason, his true motive never to be made public.

Only Hugh’s public confession would go down in history as the truth, even though he was just as loyal to Sirius as he ever was. I couldn’t help but wonder: What if I had taken different actions in the past? What if I had been friendly with Hugh like Sister-dearest was in the books? What if I’d been closer to Sirius?

I always thought that I would be okay as long as I was wary of Sirius and Sil. My mind was full, trying to figure out a way to become Octavia, convenient problem-solver of the Heir Dilemma from the books... I had been thinking only of myself.

I mean, there was fighting in the books, but none of the main characters had falling-outs, and nobody died. A happy ending between the main characters— Sirius and Sil—was promised to me, so I never even considered how the fates of the side characters might change.

I thought that even in reality, while there might be some differences, every

character affiliated with Sirius and Sil would be happy and prosperous forever. Hugh and Nathan were Sirius and Sil's ride-or-die allies—I thought that was an unshakable truth.

But I was wrong...

The only thing that mysterious young man promised me was that Sirius and Sil would be together and that they would be happy. A happy ending for the happy couple.

But even if Sil and Sirius were guaranteed a happy ending in the books...there was no guarantee that the other characters in this world—a world with me in it—would have the same endings they were promised. The fates of everyone besides the two main characters were malleable, just like Hugh.

"No matter what circumstances we find ourselves in...in the end, we make our own choices. Nobody else can intervene."

".....Hee-hee!" It was such a classically *Klifford* answer, I just had to laugh. "But Klifford, I still can't get over it."

Being Octavia had already changed things for the worse. Anyone would say Hugh made his own choices, but in the end, the actions I take or don't take will change the fates of the other characters in this series for better or worse.

That didn't mean I'd stand still and do nothing, but...

"So...are you going to carry that pain with you forever?"

I was about to answer, *Of course not*, but then a question popped into my mind. *What am I supposed to do?*

When I was Maki, the answer came clearly: I would vent all my frustrations to my big sister and she'd console me and hug me... I'd get all the love and pity I needed, and when I woke up the next morning, I'd feel better.

Even if my problems weren't exactly solved, I still had a place to vent. I had people to console me.

But now that I'm Octavia...

What happens when I wake up in the morning now...? When I was a kid, I would squeeze Alec tight...then he'd look up at me innocently, ask, "Sister?

Whassrong?” and give me a confused hug back. But it wasn’t the same... because I felt like I had to take care of Alec...

“Your Highness?”

*Okay, a lie. I need a good lie—*

Then I realized I was wrong for jumping to that thought. Klifford just told me he wanted me to share my troubles with him, and here I was trying to figure out how to deceive him because feelings are *hard*. What a garbage person thing to do.

*Hmm... But ya knowww... How should I even begin to say...?*

“Whenever I’m hurting inside...”

My past life was the only thing I had to go off of, so I had to conveniently leave out some details.

“...I’d hug somebody...and they’d hug me back. Then they’d pat my head and tell me everything was going to be okay. So—”

I was about to tell him, *So I’m not going to carry my pain with me forever—* but then I saw Klifford stand up.

And the next thing I knew, I was in his arms... Er, well, this sort of thing did happen once before, but that was so I could get over that shitty haunting memory—I commanded him to do it! Wait, *did* I command him to do that?

“Is there a problem with this, Your Highness?”

My mind went blank. It took a while to get the gears of my brain moving again.

*Is there a problem with what...? My hand wound? As in, will my hand get hurt from this?*

*Is it because I told him I’d have somebody hug me? Um, but good sir, I don’t recall the other party ever initiating the aforementioned hug. I always hugged first!*

But—

The warmth from Klifford’s arms was so soothing.

*I don't want him to leave.*

My feelings betrayed my thoughts.

*Maybe it's okay to let him comfort me for a little while. My wound is not a big deal. So—*

*“Just for a little while—”*

With Klifford draped over me as I sat in my chair, I wrapped my arms around his back.

*“We can stay like this.”*

*I wonder if he's gonna pat my head, too?*

And just like that one day, Klifford's big hand rested on my head. His movements were clumsy, but gentle—it reminded me of that boy in my dream.

In that sick, twisted dream I had. A dream that would never happen in real life—but whenever I remembered that pacifistic boy who was forced to hold a sword to survive, I couldn't help but think of Klifford.

I grabbed the fabric of Klifford's uniform and squeezed tight.

*“I had...a strange dream.”*

*“A dream...you say?”*

*“Yes. It was about a boy...”*

Then I whispered the rest of my dream to Klifford.

He kept his mouth shut and listened through my whole dream. Then he ran his fingers through my hair and said, “That was just a dream—that boy doesn't exist.”

Not anywhere.

Klifford did exactly as I told him... Actually, he obeyed a little too well. I was starting to feel less like a princess and more like Maki...

*He's spoiling me...and more than a little! I-I'm going to forget how to adult...!*

I mean, it's the way Klifford's hugging me—that's what's to blame! It makes me feel nervous...but also really relaxed at the same time!



And because of that, the room no longer felt cold and empty, but the instant I regained my senses, I was consumed with embarrassment. Klifford was not even slightly to blame. *I* was the one who had asked him to stay for tea...and now I wanted to chase him out of my room!

I activated the Self Control Magic I had acquired during my years as a princess. Pushing away from Klifford, I cleared my throat and said, “Do forgive me... I’m not usually like this.”

No, hold up—do I always let myself go to pieces like this in front of *Klifford*?

“You’re seeing a pathetic side of me, yes? I’m starting to worry what you think of me now.”

*Aren’t I just the most pathetic Sovereign ever? I always envisioned Sovereigns as cool and majestic. They’ve got their shit together...*

“What I think of you...” For some reason, Klifford gave it a serious mulling over.

*Um, it’s okay, buddy, don’t think about it!*

“What you are to me...”

Klifford’s thinking time lasted much longer than I expected.

But after a good minute, he finally tilted his head to the side and murmured, “A weapon...maybe?”

*Er—a weapon? Like, that longsword at his waist?*

*But—oh! A weapon!*

*That’s right, I had something to give to him! Perfect timing.* I rummaged in my skirt pocket. Good thing I’d transferred it there when I changed back into my own clothes.

My fingers felt... *Notepaper, no. Pencil—no. A paper package... There you are!*

I took it out and unwrapped it, revealing a custom-made item of fluffy feathers and black luster. It was the sword tassel made of wreven feathers!

“Klifford.” I rose from my chair and presented it to Klifford with both hands. “This is the gift I promised you earlier. Will you affix it to your sword?”

“With pleasure.”

With a reverent bow, Klifford took the wreven feather tassel. He removed the golden tassel that had adorned his sword hilt for the day and replaced it with the feather tassel.

He pulled the sword partly from its sheath and clinked it back in place.

“Don’t you want to pull it out to see what it looks like?”

“As you wish—”

Klifford pulled out his sword and gave it a twirl. The black feathers danced in perfect harmony to the impeccable movements of his sword. From where I was standing, it didn’t seem like the tassel would get in the way when he used the sword for fighting. In fact, the tassel he had before didn’t hold a candle to it!

“I will cherish it always.”

And he wasn’t just saying that to be polite as my bodyguard or my Adjutant—he really did seem to like it.

*Urg. I’m not sure why, but I feel lightheaded.*

I mean, you know, doesn’t it make you happy to see someone use or wear a present you got them? It’s a giddy-embarrassed sort of feeling.

*I guess I need to calm down a little!*

“Do you like it?”

I could imagine Klifford promptly answering yes. But it would definitely be a casual yes— “Yes.” A gentle smile filled Klifford’s eyes as he stared at the wreven feather tassel. He reminded me again of the boy in my dream, even though he had denied any connection. “I love it...”

The boy who hated fighting...

I stood on my toes and reached for Klifford’s head. I rested my palm on his black hair and gave his head a pat.

“Your Highness?” *What are you doing?* the look in his indigo eyes finished.

I stopped patting his head. But for some reason, I didn’t want to pull my hand away.

Why?

*I've become so weak...*

*I don't know why... It's a mystery, even to myself.*

It was an impulse...or a sudden urge.

"You patted my head...remember? Just returning the favor."

I moved my hand again.

And since Klifford obediently stood still, I kept patting his head.

Because it's what I wanted to do.

I wanted to comfort him.

Of course, later, when I regained my sanity, I would scream silently and roll around in my bed awake all night.



## The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: 7

As Klifford walked the Great Corridor, he ruminated.

What did Octavia mean to him...?

She was the Sovereign to his Adjutant. She was the eldest princess whom he served as her bodyguard. But, as a man, how did he feel about her?

When she asked him, he had answered: *"A weapon...maybe?"*

He felt like he had found his answer. To him, Octavia was like a weapon.

"Like this—"

He felt for her the same way he felt about the longsword he kept on his waist.

He felt upset whenever anyone besides him touched it.

He felt a need to care for its blade when it was tarnished.

He felt uneasy, unless it was with him.

Back in the dungeon, when discomfort had led him to fix the flowers in Octavia's hair—the same discomfort he felt when the eldest prince fixed the flowers in her hair in the town square—it was because somebody other than him had done the gesture.

Whenever Octavia was hurt, he was angry.

Whenever she was away, he felt uneasy.

What he felt for her—it was incredibly similar to what he felt for his weapons.

Ever since the first time he used a dagger to take a life and save his own, weapons were the one thing he could depend on.

In silence, he rested his hand on his head briefly...then removed it.

He felt nothing, which was to be expected.

But when Octavia had touched his head...

It was, in contrast, not at all discomfoting to him.

If anything, just the opposite...

Perhaps this was the sort of feeling an Adjutant was supposed to have for a Sovereign. When Octavia, his Sovereign who he cherished like his weapon, gifted him a new tassel for his sword—perhaps that was why he had liked the gift so much.

He served Octavia, the Princess Blackfeather, and he had a wreven feather ornament to match. He had considered the concept itself deeply intriguing. However— “Klifford Alderton.”

Klifford stopped when he recognized who called his name. He was standing in the center of the Great Corridor before Klifford had arrived. It was just like that night long ago, but that night, it had been the younger prince Alexis, looking up at the painting on the ceiling.

“Have you ever wanted to kill yourself?”

“No,” Klifford answered curtly.

Not once had Klifford ever wanted to die. He would sooner kill someone else.

“I see. I’ve never wanted to kill myself as much as I do right now. I’m afraid—that tomorrow, I’ll forget my true desires, Octavia, everything.”

It was the eldest prince, Sirius. He looked no different than he had back in the dungeon. Rather, he was certainly the same man...but something clicked inside Klifford at the sight of him. Sirius had said so himself: memories. If memories were what made a personality, the man standing before him now was the true

eldest prince of Esfia.

Either man was the eldest prince of Esfia, but the one before him now seemed more troubled.

“When tomorrow comes, I’ll likely be wary of you again.”

“Aren’t you wary of me *now*?”

“Wary? Of you? Because you’re the Emissary of Ongarne? Well, at the very least, when tomorrow comes, I’ll be stuck on the theory that Octavia has trained you as her dog to steal the crown and take Sil away from me.” He punctuated the thought with a deep sigh. “I’m still not completely free—and I struggle to know why. Why must my sister have that burden forced on her?”

“.....” Klifford didn’t answer.

“I would never be wary of you—unless you’re using Octavia and mean to betray her. If anything, Klifford Alderton, I think you’re a valuable asset.”

“Your words honor me...” His tone was passive aggressive, but Sirius didn’t seem to notice or care.

“I want to employ you as my own bodyguard.”

“Is that why you sent me to the dungeon?”

“Erm... Sorry about that. I’ll probably take back everything I just said tomorrow anyway... But what’s your answer?”

“I decline the offer.”

“Yeah... I assumed as much.” Sirius crossed his arms and gave a gracious nod.

“What do you want with me?”

Klifford was in no mood to play games. Sirius had come to the Great Corridor to wait for Klifford, anticipating his arrival.

“You surely want something. Otherwise, wouldn’t you be talking to Hugh Roberts instead?”

For just a moment, the prince’s face twisted with anguish. “After Octavia left, I stayed behind in the dungeon. You know that. Hugh and I...we talked. He talked with me—and with the other *me*, too. But our conversation is none of

your business. I doubt it interests you anyway.”

He was right. Klifford had not a mite of interest in Hugh Roberts’s betrayal and the reason behind it. Even if he could understand it logically, he could not empathize in the slightest.

That’s why it was incomprehensible.

It was incomprehensible that Hugh Roberts’s actions would hurt Octavia, and not physically. Physically speaking, Octavia had not received any new wounds since the fight at the junior ball.

But her heart was wounded.

And even the wounds of her heart enraged Klifford.

He was enraged that something so trivial had hurt her, too.

*Am I also angry at Octavia? For letting something so trivial hurt her?*

The sudden question gave him pause.

*Is this the sort of feeling an Adjutant is supposed to have for a Sovereign?*

Sirius walked forward a few paces. He stood directly beneath the center of the painting which adorned the ceiling of the Great Corridor.

*“I came to the Great Corridor...so I could remember.”*

He looked up at the creation myth painting, searching for something, but Klifford didn’t even glance upward. The image would upset him.

*“It was in here...that I lost a portion of my memory. But who did it to me? That, I can’t remember. It’s in a haze.”*

That was understandable. Most people wouldn’t be able to remember such a thing. It was stranger that he *was* able to remember any of it at all. It wasn’t a feat that could be achieved by pure will alone. Thinking of it that way, you could say Sirius was putting up an abnormally powerful resistance.

*“But only a small number of people are permitted in the Great Corridor. As such, I’ve been at least somewhat cautious around those people.”*

Esfia’s eldest prince looked up at the painting on the ceiling, taking in the Sky God’s mercy and wrath as he murmured, “The first person I can think of is—”

Releasing his gaze from the ceiling, he spoke the name. “Alexis.” Then he repeated the name. “Alexis. Be wary of him.”

He didn’t have to tell Klifford that twice.

“You don’t look at all surprised.”

Klifford just responded with a question of his own. “Why did you tell me this?”

“Octavia...she trusts you. Octavia is the one person Alexis can’t hurt. But if she were to lose you, Octavia’s heart would break.”

*Would her heart really break...?*

Klifford’s brows furrowed at the thought. A strange emotion welled up inside of him, but he did not know what to call it.

*“You’d never do what Hugh did, would you?”*

He remembered the question Octavia asked him just a little while ago. When she’d asked it, a question had formed in his mind.

If he did betray Octavia like Hugh betrayed Sirius...what would *Octavia* do?

As his gaze fell to the floor, the black feathers of his sword tassel reflected in his eyes.

—*Fin.*



# Afterword

Thank you for reading *The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices*, Volume 5! Mamecyoro here.

If you think of Volume 4 as “Part 1” of an arc, Volume 5 is the concluding Part 2. *To clear Klifford of all suspicion, Octavia embarks on her survey in Esfia’s castle town with her brother, Sirius, when unexpectedly...* —That kind of story.

Speaking of Volume 5, Volume 5 of the manga version came out earlier in December, so definitely read that if you missed it! It ties up the Junior Ball Arc, so you get to see all those scenes in manga form! After you finish reading it, I guarantee you’ll become a devout worshipper of Yoneda.

Anyway, let’s talk a little about what it was like writing Volume 5.

In the afterword for Volume 4, I mentioned that I was having doubts about Klifford being a good romcom character, but in this volume I had the same question about Octavia.

——*Um, Octavia... Isn’t it, like, kinda hard to get you onto the right path for your romantic arc...?*

At the start, it’s easy getting her to become friends with a love interest, so you *think* there’s a wide range of hitboxes to attack...when in reality, the true hitbox that will move you along the Romance Route is an extremely small target. And it’s rigged with booby traps, too...!

So your attack won’t land unless you aim at a very specific point, and if you screw up the timing, it’s instant death, too. Your Romance Flags will snap in half, and these little buggers are set up so that even if you hit the target, it won’t work unless you’ve met all the requirements first. *Huh? You mean, I can’t just hit the target and be good to go?* Nope. You can’t.

And the icing on the cake: In addition to the small target, your target is

dressed in camo, hiding in a dense grove of trees, so you can barely see it. Your psyche is just way too complicated, Octavia. It's like, do you even *want* to fall in love? That's just how hardcore a challenge this is.

Still, I wrote Octavia with the idea that she is ready for love at any time. That was the plan, at least.

But she's just so ill-tempered!

And accident-prone!

But then...I had an epiphany.

Eureka...! If this is going to be a romance (romantic comedy...?), our heroine needs to contribute to that!

If you consider the male hero of this story to be the main character, getting him onto the Romance Route with the heroine, romcom style, is no easy task... but I arrived at the conclusion: *Whatever. I'll make it work.*

As always, I gave my editor a lot of headaches with this volume. And I'm going to sound like a broken record here, but thank you Fuji for the wonderful illustrations. Thank you to my proofreader and my designer, and to everyone else who had their hands in this book.

Lastly, to everyone who's read this far in the series (and to the people out there who, after reading Volume 4 were like, "Volume 5...truly...?"), thank you so much for being so patient!

I narrowly escaped becoming the boy who cried wolf.

May we meet again in Volume 6!

*Mamecyoro*

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