



The  
*Princess*  
of Convenient  
Plot Devices

Mamecyoro

Illustration by  
Mitsuya Fuji

6







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YEN  
ON

New York

# COPYRIGHT

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Translation by Sarah Moon

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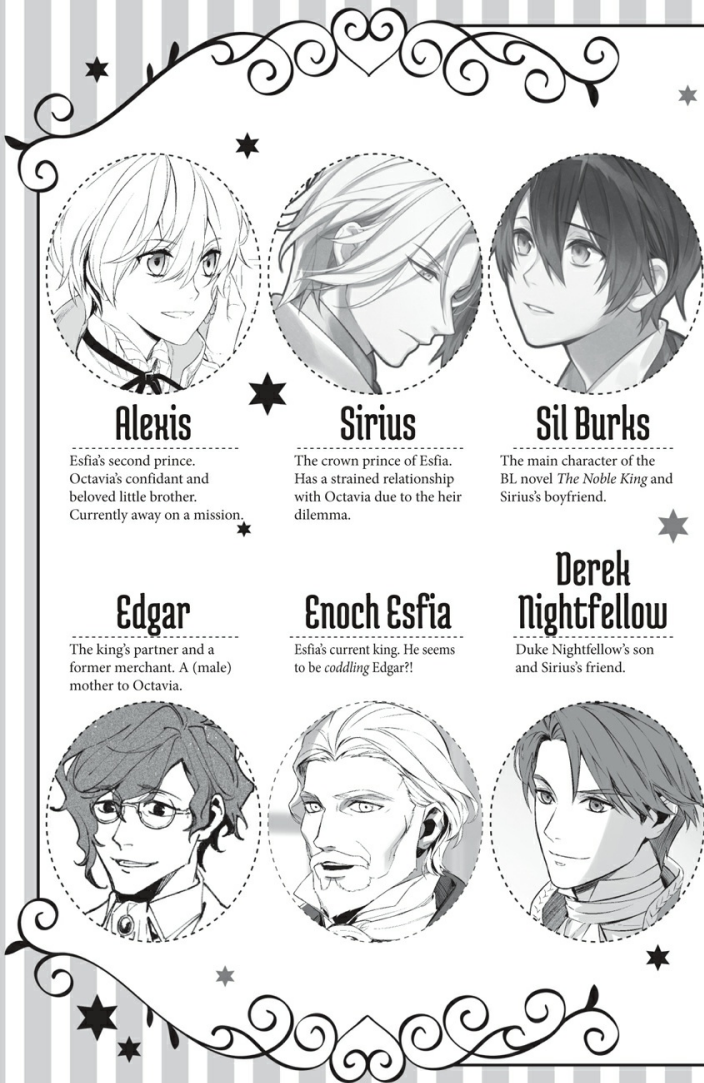
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**Alexis**

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.



**Edgar**

The king's partner and a former merchant. A (male) mother to Octavia.



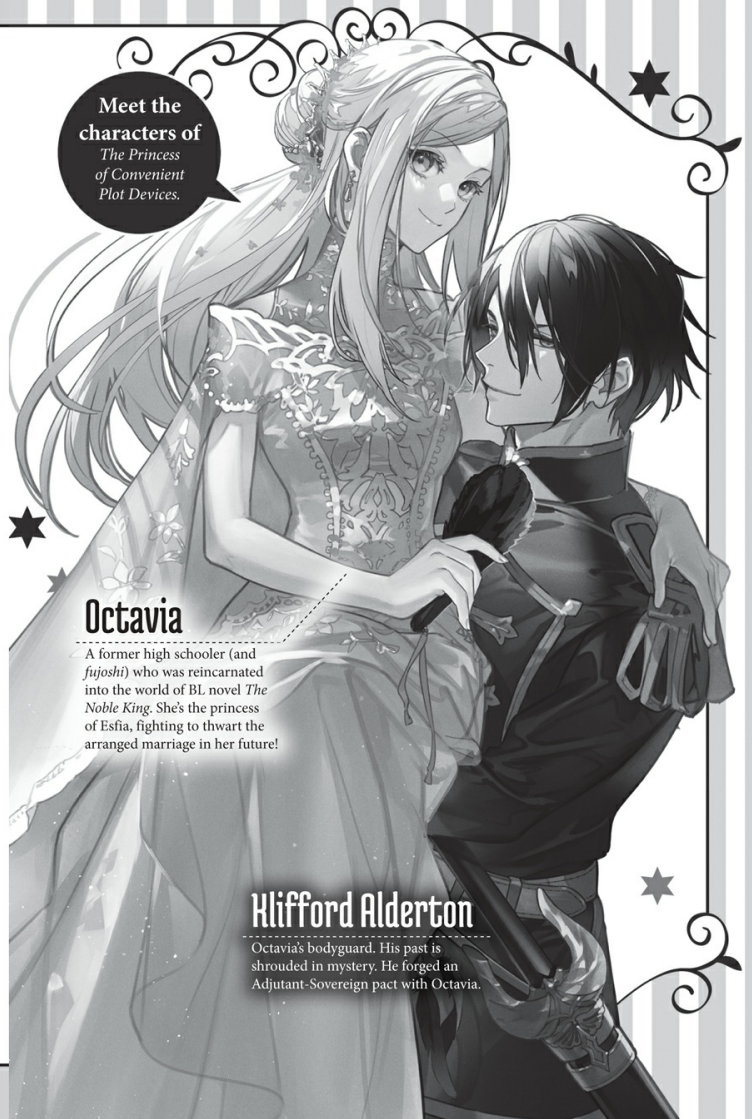
**Enoch Esfia**

Esfia's current king. He seems to be *coddling* Edgar?!



**Derek Nightfellow**

Duke Nightfellow's son and Sirius's friend.



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!

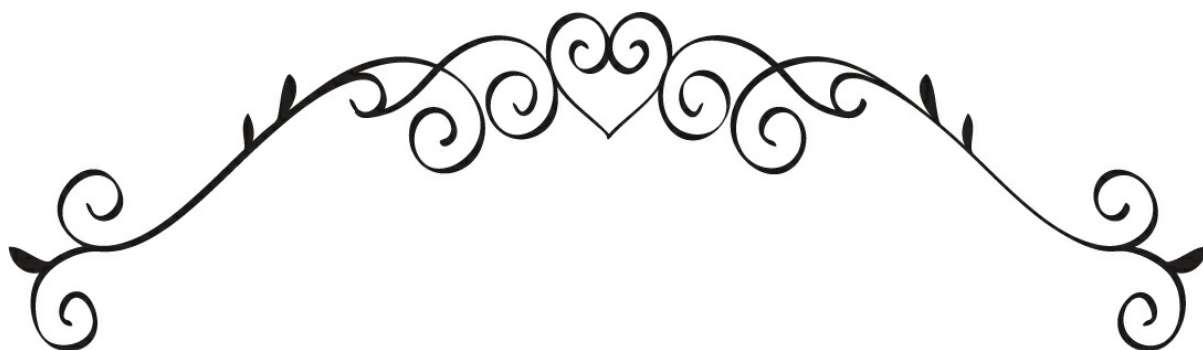
**Klifford Alderton**

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

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## Another Alexis: Part 2

A young man tossed and turned in bed.

*I can't sleep.*

Running his hand through his hair, Alexis rested his hand on his brow.

“It’s not that I can’t sleep... I don’t *want* to sleep,” he muttered to himself.

Ever since arriving in Turchen, his dreams of King Eus had increased. Most of these dreams took place at the Earl of Turchen’s castle, where Alexis was staying.

However, according to history, Turchen was part of Khangena during Eus’s reign. The nations were at war, but there was no record of King Eus conquering Turchen at the time.

Now Turchen was a part of Esfia, but that had only happened about a century before, and yet the Eus in Alexis’s dream walked the castle of Turchen as if it belonged to Esfia.

Alexis’s dreams were likely of the time King Eus went to Turchen to wage war against Khangena, but his dreams were fragmented, and he could not glean much information from them.

He had learned three things: One, his dreams showed King Eus after he had killed his sister, the queen, and ascended the throne; two, during the war, King Eus had fought against the warring tribe of Adjutants; and three, King Eus had felt an extreme hatred toward these Adjutants.

*But if all of this is true, then why had King Eus not conquered Turchen?*

There were no images of a post-war Turchen in Alexis’s dreams, but in these dreams King Eus clearly was the victor. King Eus and his soldiers were inferior to the Adjutants in battle, both as individuals and as an army, but the Esfian army had strength in numbers, and the king’s shrewdness—his willingness to do whatever it took to win—had made Esfia’s victory possible.

“Let’s not forget, this is only the case if my dreams are true.”

Alexis sat up in bed.

*I can't sleep anyway...and I don't even want to.*

While in Turchen, Alexis slept in his regular clothes so he could be ready for action at a moment's notice. He stood, grabbed a coat, and lit a handheld lantern.

"Randal. Follow me at a distance," he called out to his attendant knight after opening the door.

It was late at night, and the castle was blanketed in silence—as it should be. The castle's master, the Earl of Turchen, had left with his family for the Council of Feudal Lords just as Alexis and his party had entered the dominion to stay. Their early departure was at someone's request, or so Alexis had heard. He need not ask whose, because it was due to that request that Alexis could visit an empty castle in Turchen.

It was certainly by order of his father, the king.

Alexis's secret mission had two objectives. The first did not seem right to him—the urgency of it in particular. It was difficult to believe it had been assigned to Alexis.

And the other objective...was yet unknown to him.

*"By going on this mission, you will be helping Octavia."*

His father's words likely referenced the second objective. And the longer he spent in Turchen, the more his suspicions grew.

*Why did father send me to Turchen? And why did he use the Council of Feudal Lords as a pretense to evacuate the earl and his family early?*

Alexis walked through the castle, lighting the way with his lantern. When he reached a particular wall, he stopped. It was an ordinary wall with an ornamental desk and a vase in front of it. Had the Earl of Turchen put these things there on purpose to hide what was behind them? Or had the secret been lost to time?

The spot did not have any particularly distinguishing features. However, according to his dreams of King Eus...

Alexis pressed his fingers to part of the wall, just as he had seen Eus do in his dreams. He wasn't sure what he hoped would happen—probably that *nothing* would happen. This wish became painfully clear to him once he sensed the anomaly.

If nothing had come of him touching the wall, he could believe his dreams were a mere delusion. If only he had found one thing to assuage his growing dread.

But, just as in his dreams, the wall sank in where he pressed it...activating a mechanism. Before his eyes, a pathway the width of a person opened.

“...!”

Alexis noticed Randal gasping in shock behind him. Alexis wasn't surprised by the door—in fact, it was strange that he remained calm.

He took a step inside the empty passageway.

*No hesitating.*

He had no reason to hesitate. In his dreams, this pathway led *there*. Even though it was his first time walking there as Alexis, it was a place that King Eus had already visited.

All he needed to do was retrace the steps from his dreams.

As the second prince of Esfia, Alexis was free to wander Turchen Castle while its inhabitants were gone. The same applied to inspecting the lands of Turchen.

But there was one place *nobody* was allowed to enter—not even royalty. At the very least, his grandfather—the former king—and his father, the king, had kept this spot secret.

The pathway Alexis currently walked led to this place deep within the castle. Though the Earl of Turchen's castle was indeed decorated differently in the modern era, the basic construction remained the same as in Alexis's dreams. This likely applied to the passageway as well.

While he was a welcome guest there, Alexis could not bring himself to go in broad daylight. There would be trouble if someone saw him. Completing his mission in secret was his top priority.



If he hadn't had those dreams...he would never have fathomed doing something like this.

But he simply had to if he hoped to confirm his suspicions.

A while after Alexis entered the passageway with Randal several steps behind him, the opening in the wall closed. Realizing that Randal had once again spun around, Alexis said, "Don't worry. It's rigged to close after a few seconds."

*That is yet another element of my dream now confirmed.*

According to his dream, it was also possible to close the wall manually.

"It seems...this passageway hasn't been used in a while," Alexis murmured.

The passageway could hardly be called clean. Dust kicked up with each step, proving it hadn't been disturbed in a very long time. It was probable that the passageway's existence was long forgotten and, if that was the case, the last person to use it might very well have been King Eus.

If his dreams depicted reality, that is.

Alexis reached a dead end in the passageway. Even in the lantern light, it looked like an ordinary wall.

"..."

But Alexis paused...and copied what he'd seen in his dreams. He touched the part of the wall King Eus had touched. He squeezed his eyes shut, an unbearable feeling coming over him.

*Why...?*

Just as before, an entrance opened in the wall.

*Why did you have to open...? Why do you have to be real?*

What lay beyond that point, Alexis did not know. This was where his fragmented dreams cut off. If he wanted to know how that dream progressed, Alexis would have to navigate it in reality.

Exhaling hard, Alexis opened his eyes. Lighting the darkness with his lantern, he stepped through the opening.

It was a dreary room with a high ceiling and walls of white stone. There were only two objects in the room. One was a large mirror; the other was a rusty sword.

The sword was thrust into a stone platform that rose from the floor in the center of the room. It was a Turchen blade, with distinctive ripples.

The mirror and the sword—that was all the room held.

But unlike the passageway Alexis and Randal had just walked through, this room showed traces of upkeep. It was clean... Perhaps the Earl of Turchen kept it tidy.

Alexis approached the sword. When he reached for it—the sensation of grabbing the sword filled him *before* his fingers could even touch it.

“Ngh!”

*The scene is so vivid.*

He knew he was standing there holding a lantern, but reality and dream had collided.

*.....There's a corpse.*

King Eus—he removes the sword and looks at the person he just killed. At the man, lying face down, covered in blood.

As he gazes upon the body, not even a shred of guilt or regret finds him.

Only one feeling remains in his heart.

*“How tiresome...”*

A dry laugh escapes his mouth. Killing that man was supposed to change everything—yet nothing happened. His one ray of hope was dashed. The earnest desire he had clung to all this time would never come to be.

But he can never let it go.

Then what should he do?

How can he possibly...

*"...bring Esfia to ruin?"*

This question, directed at no one in particular, spills from his lips.

And then it appears before him—a certain test.

*That's it...*

The fog suddenly lifts from his mind.

If he, the king, were to die standing in this vortex—what would happen?

He turns the bloodstained sword on himself.

However—

Though his mind is clear, he cannot do it. His hand gripping the sword shakes faintly.

Is he afraid to die?

Ridiculous.

*Somebody else* is stopping him.

*"Yeah, that's gonna throw a wrench in things."*

He hears a voice—a voice that should not exist.

He still cannot thrust the sword into his own heart.

But there is one body part he can move freely—his head.

The man ought to be all alone, and though he had felt no other presence enter the room, he sees a man standing before him.

It is a young man.

His hair is gold, and his eyes are amber. His features are strangely constructed—inhuman, almost. His clothing and everything else about him do not belong to that time or place.

*Wait, is he truly human?*

The man opens his mouth.

*"Esfia's monarch lived a long life, you see? He's not supposed to kill himself like this."*

*"Is this...some sick joke...?!"*

*The monarch lived a long life? Then why did my sister, the queen, die?*

*"Hey, don't pass the buck, man. The important thing here is that you killed your sister. Everything you're doing now—aren't ya just taking it out on someone else?"*

*"...!"*

A fiery rage burns through his body.

*"Besides, I can't have Esfia fall to ruin yet. The real story doesn't start until much later, and I'll wind up breaking my promise to Maki. Be that as it may—"*

The man pauses, peering down at the corpse on the ground beside him.

*"So much for this flesh-and-blood proxy I prepared."*

He turns to look into Eus's furious eyes.

*"I never dreamed people of this world could kill... Guess my read on the situation was way too optimistic."*

Though his words express frustration, the man's tone is cheerful. He begins to clap his hands, as if in praise.

A metallic taste fills Alexis's mouth. He is grinding his teeth too hard.

*"I must show you my utmost respect—you exceeded expectations and dragged me all the way out here. I never thought I'd find myself here, in the flesh."*

The man puts a hand to his chest and gives an exaggerated bow. And then he casually poses a question, the way one would to an old friend.

*"Hey...do you really want to destroy Esfia that badly?"*

And the man smiles. More beautifully...and more hideously than anyone.

*Do you really want to defy the happy ending?*



.....*The happy ending?*

*Whose happy ending?*

“Prince Alexis!”

Randal’s loud voice snapped Alexis out of his thoughts. He shook his head, warding the daydream away.

“Somebody’s coming.” Randal drew his sword and stood before Alexis. He was facing not the pathway from which he and Alexis had come, but a regular door meant for access to this room.

They listened closely as someone’s footsteps approached.

Whoever they were, they were bold enough to come here in the middle of the night when this castle’s true master was absent. Alexis was in no position to point fingers, but they ought to be able to deal with the lone visitor.

He looked at Randal, signaling, *Prepare to attack*.

Then the door opened—

“Wait, Randal.”

The moment he saw who it was, Alexis commanded his knight to stand down.

“Well...I didn’t think anybody else would be here.”

The visitor pushed back the hood that had been obscuring his identity. His brown skin and blond hair now revealed, Randal sheathed his sword and bowed his head.

“Prince Yarsh...” Alexis voiced the visitor’s name aloud. He was the third prince of Valjean, a mercantile nation in the southwest. He was also a guest at the castle, having arrived just after Alexis.

“Randal—the door.”

Randal closed the door as commanded. Yarsh, lantern in hand, watched it shut before turning his gaze back to Alexis.

“I suppose you and I are both intruders here? Though I used this little thing to enter.”

He boastfully held up a rust-colored key.

“...Where did you get that?”

“I borrowed it from a servant when he wasn’t looking.”

“...”

Alexis raised an eyebrow. Then Yarsh asked a question of his own.

“And how did *you* get into this room? There’s only one key and I have it.”

“...It is not my duty to answer you.”

“Fair enough,” Yarsh said with a smirk in a sudden playful change of expression. “Doesn’t change the fact that we’re both intruders, eh?” He seemed to have given up on acting prince-like. Raising a hand, he said, “Let’s cut the formalities, okay?”

Yarsh approached the sword in the platform, took his chin in his hand, and scrutinized it with deep curiosity. “So, Alexis, do you know what this room is?”

“I do not.”

“Then I’ll tell you. Turchen is where most of the combatant tribes of Adjutants live. When an Adjutant took a Sovereign in this castle, there was a particular room where they performed the ritual. According to literature, it takes place in a room with a lone sword stabbed into the ground.”

“A lone sword? But I see a mirror, too.”

“You’re fourteen, right? For someone only five years my junior, you sure have no romance in your soul, Alexis.”

Yarsh folded his arms and shook his head at the deplorable notion.

“...” Alexis watched Yarsh with a chilly gaze. He knew of one other person who believed in such things: King Eus, before he killed his sister, the queen. “Aren’t your actions a bit reckless for a prince visiting from another kingdom?” Alexis asked.

“I’m only a prince on paper—I’m staying out of the struggle for succession in my nation. I’m not carrying the responsibility of Valjean on my shoulders, not even if it causes diplomatic issues... Guess it’ll give my whole family quite a

shock, though.”

Valjean was a monarchy where the ruler was allowed more than one wife. As such, he or she could have many children, and those children would compete against each other to decide who would be the next monarch. Neither gender nor age were prioritized—the monarch was determined on merit alone. It was a system that only a mercantile nation like Valjean could have established. Since brutal killings had taken place between royals in the past, there was now an unwritten rule that these fights could not result in bloodshed...though whether this rule was actually followed was highly suspect.

Yarsh, the third-eldest prince, had publicly distanced himself from this power struggle. He was an eccentric fellow who loved history and travel. He was such a free spirit that he wandered Turchen castle unguarded (though this couldn't be the case outside it). He spoke Esfian fluently and roamed where he wished, but if one read between the lines, the only reason he could do this...was because he was a strong enough fighter to handle danger by himself.

Well-versed in the history of other nations, he had researched the legends of Turchen's Adjutants. He valued curiosity above common sense. The likeness was undeniable to Alexis... He was a bit like the King Eus of his dreams; the Eus before his sudden change. For this reason, Yarsh made Alexis uncomfortable.

“Besides, I think you'll be in just as much trouble as me if we're caught breaking and entering, especially since you didn't come here by the proper means. So...how are you going to explain that?” Yarsh asked, glancing at the rust-colored key as he spoke.

“I am the Prince of Esfia. Though we both may have broken in, do you think that I—a royal of the nation—and you—a royal of an outside nation—will receive equal treatment? No. If we're discovered, our punishments will not be the same.”

In Esfia, citizens and outsiders were judged differently in court. As such, Yarsh's sentence would naturally be more severe, even though he was a prince. He did not enjoy the same rights.

“Yeah, but the way I see it, you don't *want* to be caught, right? So wouldn't it be best if we both turned a blind eye? I've satisfied my curiosity, so I'll gladly

leave, taking this secret with me. I won't pry, either. In exchange, you'll forget you met me here. Not a bad deal, I'd say."

"Considering the gap in status between us, I've received the much shorter end of the stick."

In fact, it would be easier to turn Yarsh in, claiming Alexis had entered because he was suspicious of the prince.

"Well, you drive a hard bargain... Fine, I'll give you this."

"...!" Alexis's eyes went wide.

"This's what you came here for anyway, right?"

The mission Alexis's father, the king, had given him had two objectives.

The first was to observe conditions in Turchen and report everything back to the king.

The second was to receive a sealed letter from the third prince of Valjean, who was to visit Turchen in secret. Alexis had begun surveying Turchen the moment he arrived, before the third prince got there. Once he received the sealed letter, he ought to be able to return home.

*"I promise I'll return in ten days."*

And yet not only was Yarsh one day late to arrive, but he had also made excuses to avoid giving Alexis the letter until now.

Alexis could not neglect his mission—but worry for his sister consumed him. The words he told her the day he departed returned to his mind. There wasn't much time left until the promised day of his return.

He had just concluded that drastic measures may need to be taken, and then Yarsh casually handed him the letter.

"Why did you wait so long...?"

"It wasn't by my will. King Enoch ordered me not to give it to you right away."

*My father ordered him...?*

"Guess I bought him plenty of time. I've fulfilled my duty, now you fulfill yours and tell nobody we met tonight. A fine deal, I'd say."



“...Why?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did my father ask you to stall?”

*Don't give it to me right away?* Alexis was ordered to retrieve the letter, while Yarsh was ordered to delay giving it. *What was the meaning of this...?*

“I don't know... Either he wanted you to stay in Turchen as long as possible... or he wanted you away from Esfia for a while. One of those? But he needed you to stay within his own nation, where he could keep an eye on you. That's where my mind went, at least.”

“...You speak as if you and my father are friends.”

“Since his enthronement, King Enoch has visited Valjean many times. That's about it. When he was crown prince, he spent several months in Valjean to study, so the Valjean people consider him a friend.”

*No... It's likely that the only royal connection my father has besides the King of Valjean is Prince Yarsh. He's caught my father's—vigilant—eye.*

Alexis surmised that his father thought Yarsh would probably be the next king. Despite abdicating his right to the throne, his siblings were wary of him, and multiple attempts had been made on his life. Popular with the people of Valjean, the third prince was always high in the running for king. Tales of a prince who brought a wasteland back to a fertile farm of specialty crops had spread all the way to Esfia. (Though, either intentionally or unintentionally, the name of the prince had disappeared from the story after it had passed between too many mouths.) Yarsh loved to travel because he was safer outside of his own kingdom. That likely had something to do with why he preferred to wander this castle alone and not in the company of anyone from Valjean, making a late-night solo excursion like this possible—even his love of history wasn't necessarily the truth. Alexis wondered—what if it was merely a facade he embraced?

“And this *duty* of which you speak?”

“It's a duty—what else of it? You used the word earlier, so I'm sure you know what it means.”

In other words, he didn't want to answer.

"So...what's your move?" Yarsh asked.

Judging by how quickly he had produced the letter, the prince had likely carried it with him all this time. From what Alexis had observed of him over the past few days, it was unlikely anybody had given it to him or that he'd left it in his room, so the letter was probably genuine.

"If you've satisfied your curiosity...then you should return to your quarters," Alexis said, reaching for the letter. It was unexpectedly lightweight, even for paper.

"The deal is done, then. Hey, while I've got you here, help me satisfy another curiosity of mine."

For a while, Yarsh walked the sword and mirror room in silence. Then he returned to the platform with the sword.

"It's rusted, but look at those characteristic ripples...", Yarsh said in a low voice. "Is this the Turchen blade Adjutants use...?" Then he looked at Alexis. "What do you think, Alexis—is this the room where they held the rituals? The Earl of Turchen would probably know, but it's not like we can ask him."

"I don't care—"

*But if this is the room where the rituals were held... The daydream he just had rematerialized in his mind. What was King Eus doing in here?*

*"Do you really wanna destroy Esfia that badly?"*

*And who was that mystery man?*

He had never appeared in Alexis's dreams before.

How did King Eus answer him?

Alexis didn't know, but he could imagine.

King Eus would say—

*No. If it were me, I would say—*

A surreal sensation overcame him—a sensation he had felt recently before... The day he departed, when he was talking with Guy...and gave his sister the

blessing.

But it felt more intense—far more intense.

*“Alexis, what’s wrong?”*

His brother Sirius materialized in his mind, but not as his current self. He was much younger.

“Alexis.” Yarsh was staring at him. His gaze was deeply sober. “Look in the mirror.”

*The mirror?*

He looked at the large mirror in the room. Yarsh and Randal were reflected in it...with Alexis reflected beside them.

But the color of his eyes...had changed to amber.

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Maybe I just misheard that.

“Might you repeat what you just said?” I asked, just in case.

“Yes, Princess!” the guard barked clearly, his hands clasped behind his back. “Hugh Roberts was relocated—he is no longer in the underground cell.”

*Huh...?*

*He’s not here...?*

I froze behind Blackfeather, which was open in front of my face.

The morning after Hugh was arrested for plotting an assassination, I went to the underground dungeon to visit him.

And looking back, I was hella fired up about it! Thanks to me chanting *“I’m seeing Hugh first thing tomorrow!”* as I fell asleep, my eyes shot wide open this morning!

But though my own feelings were quite clear to me, I was still completely in the dark about how Hugh was being treated. Rather, his future looked anything

but bright to me.

*What hurts the most, though...has gotta be the fact that Hugh really was guilty.*

On that fact alone, it would be impossible to avoid a guilty verdict. The only angle I thought might work was Hugh's motive. Like, *"Your Honor, it was totally a deceive-your-enemy-by-deceiving-your-friend scenario orchestrated by Prince Sirius!"*

There was Sil's runaway carriage before the junior ball. Then there was the attack on me and Sirius during our survey of the castle town—though the real target of that was also Sil.

Everything was connected, and Sirius's secret command to Hugh was the root of it all.

His command had been, *"If I try to take a same-sex partner like the former kings, stop me."*

All of Hugh's actions were an effort to carry out that edict.

*And yet Sirius doesn't remember giving that command. That's the crux of it.*

It was the main reason I figured Sirius wouldn't be able to get Hugh pardoned for his crimes. Though if he actually remembered giving the order, things could change...

*No, wait a minute... Nothing's set in stone yet.*

I didn't know how Sirius kept his cool when he visited Hugh and learned his true motives.

I could only imagine.

As somebody who's lived sixteen years as a princess (in a manner of speaking), I didn't feel right keeping Hugh's motive secret...but I knew I couldn't just take the direct approach and unilaterally let him go free.

*There's nothing I can do... I just have to accept it...* When I returned to my room from the dungeon, I was leaning more toward defeat.

However!



Even if he was just convicted as a mastermind...and even if Hugh accepted his fate—hoped for it, even—it still felt like it was *wrong* for him to be executed, you know?!

He may be cool with it, but I'm not!

I know what's done is done. And Hugh can't take back what he did.

But what about the future?

Isn't there anything I can do for him?

So anyway, after tossing and turning and agonizing over all that last night, I had an epiphany!

The first step was a *“deceive-your-enemy-by-deceiving-your-friend scenario orchestrated by Prince Sirius”* defense.

*Then*, what if you replaced *“orchestrated by Prince Sirius”* with *“orchestrated by Princess Octavia”*? That's how I reached my epiphany!

Hugh was only obeying orders from his superior *and* everything was a strategy to bring the anti-royalist traitors in the castle out of hiding!

I could use the latter for Hugh's motive. Parts of our stories lined up, so it wouldn't be a total lie. Also, if you think about it, with Sil as the target, if the order came from me (a third party) instead of my brother, the whole story would sound more natural.

Sil and my brother were lovers, and I was the little princess who disapproved of their union. Going with the *“deceive-your-enemy-by-deceiving-your-friend scenario orchestrated by Princess Octavia”* defense, this would paint a picture in which disregarding the potential harm to Sil wouldn't be weird at all.

A truly riveting plot.

I had faith in my fabrication!

But I had to stop and take a breath.

Because I knew where this could lead.

I knew the dangers of hyped-up late-night brainstorming sessions...

There's always the possibility that when you wake up, you go, *“That idea is*

*crap! There's gotta be a better way!"* so you *always* give it another mulling over first thing in the morning!

With that resolve burning in my heart, I fell soundly asleep that night. Then when I jolted awake the next morning, I mulled it over again for a good fifteen minutes.

And as luck would have it, my plan didn't need to change.

So I was off to the dungeon!

After getting myself ready at supersonic speed, Klifford came to my room for his morning rounds, and I flew out of there. Hugh first, breakfast later!

I mean, as solid as my strategy was, I still had the minor issue of getting Hugh's cooperation! (He'd probably need some convincing!) So that's how I found myself in a spirited charge toward the dungeon for the third time...

*Hmmm.*

"....."

I gave the guards posted at the dungeon entrance another glance. Though it was a different lineup from the day before, there were still three of them. One was the guard I had used as an intermediary to get a message to Sirius. He was in his late twenties and had shiny brown hair. I recognized him, given that I had just seen him the night before.

He was also the man who answered my question at the beginning of this chapter.

I closed Blackfeather. Then I asked again, just to make sure. "Hugh Roberts... was he relocated last night?"

I had arrived at the dungeon entrance brimming with enthusiasm. Everything was going perfectly until that point.

But just after I arrived, that's the news I received. Hugh—the man my strategy was hinging on—wasn't there!

"Yes, Princess! I was present when he was relocated," the brunette guard answered crisply with a bow.

I guess it should have been obvious to me, but asking the same question multiple times will yield the same answer.

*I should've executed my plan last night when I first thought of it instead of waiting...! It turns out acting while hyped up on late-night brainstorming was the correct choice! Is that even a thing?*

*No, no, no, pull yourself together, Octavia—*

“And to where was he relocated?”

Holding his polite bow, the guard shook his head. “We were not informed of the location.”

“Then do you know the reason for his sudden relocation?”

“No, my lady... The others who were arrested yesterday are still in their cells.”

*I'm getting a lot of headshaking from this guy. Hmmm... Aha!*

“You said my father gave the order, yes?”

I definitely remembered him saying so before I repeated my question.

“Yes, Princess!”

This time, I got a yes.

So, to recap.

According to this guard, my father—the king of Esfia—gave an order in the middle of the night. He had decided to relocate Hugh from this dungeon. Only Hugh.

*But why my father? Like, really? And why in the middle of the night? That's totally a weird thing to do.*

*Something stinks. I smell a fishy scheme afoot!*

What reeked most of all was the relocation. Why was it done? And why was the location a mystery?

*If I could just get a clue... My kingdom for a clue! Did Hugh leave anything behind in his cell? Like, a secret message?*

But once the thought struck me, I swatted it away.

*Based on how Hugh was acting yesterday, he was in no place mentally or emotionally to leave behind a desperate cry for help...!*

My first step needed to be locating Hugh—

“—Don’t move.”

As I schemed to myself, nodding and mumbling behind Blackfeather, I was interrupted by Klifford’s deep voice.

I looked up.

And there I saw the guard I was just talking to, with an unsheathed longsword pointed at his neck by *Klifforrrrrrd?!*

Meanwhile, the brunette guard with the sword to his neck was frozen stiff, his hand resting over his chest.

*Klifford would never put someone in check without reason...and judging by the way he stopped short of fully attacking the man—and from the position of the guard—this looks like Klifford saw the guard about to take something out of his pocket, thought it was sus, and stopped him?*

Then the way to resolve the mystery was simple.

“You—empty your pockets.”

There happened to be a table at the dungeon entrance where visitors were given a pat down. Anything that could be used as a weapon was confiscated and kept there...or so I’d heard. But since royalty and their bodyguards weren’t checked as a rule, that was a clear flaw in the system.

Take me, for example. When I visited Klifford in the dungeon before, Sirius had warned me about Blackfeather...but only because he’s my brother. As a rule, guards never frisked royalty.

The brunette guard moved quickly.

“This is everything, my lady...!”

His breast pocket—was it a custom mod?—seemed to hold an awful lot of stuff. He just kept piling things on the table.

I scanned the loot. First, there was a small dagger...probably his spare

weapon.

When the dagger appeared, Klifford raised his sword. As he did so, the wreven feather tassel danced at the hilt. My eyes wandered to the tassel for a bit...before returning to the table. I looked down at the guard's spare dagger again. It was a modest weapon with a wooden handle. It was a practical piece.

*Yup. This is definitely what set Klifford off.*

It was probably okay for this guard to have a spare weapon—after all, I'm sure the other two guards had them—and though he had no need to draw his dagger on me, the princess, Klifford's alarms had gone off.

Next to the dagger were...several hard candies wrapped in cloth, likely for a snack. Even eba, the Esfian confectionary beloved by all, was among the mix.

*...It appears our friend here has a sweet tooth!*

Was *this* what he was trying to take out? Like, to share with me? Not gonna lie, I'd kind of love that. I want to accept his kind gift! But even if that was his intention, I could not accept the gift so easily lest it be poisoned—oh, how cruel the world is!

And the last thing on the table was a piece of paper, folded in a square. The yellow color indicated that it was the kind of paper soldiers at the castle used for giving and receiving messages.

"I was about to give Her Highness this letter, Sir Knight!"

The guard solemnly held the folded letter in two hands and held it out to me.

"I tucked it next to my dagger so I wouldn't lose it—I swear, it was not my intention to turn my weapon on you, my lady...!"

*I'm innocent! I was trying to pull out a letter! A letter, not a dagger!...*is what the guard's wild, bloodshot eyes were saying.

"I understand... Please calm down."

"Yes, Princess!" Still holding the letter, the guard snapped to attention.

But still...

*A letter to me...? Is it maybe—from Hugh?*

But would a guard really take a letter from a relocated prisoner? If it were from Hugh before his imprisonment, I could understand.

*But then...who?*

I gave the letter presented to me a critical looking over.

“...!”

And I immediately understood.

I reached out and took the letter. There were letters written on the surface of the yellow paper, folded in a square.

Japanese letters.

“オクタヴィアへ,” it said.

The addressee was written in Japanese. It was my name—Octavia.

Japanese was a secret language in this world known only by me. Or so I had thought...but only yesterday, I discovered somebody else could read it. And going off the specs, if he could read it, it wouldn't be unreasonable that he could write it as well.

This applied to only one person...

“Sirius... He left this letter for me?” I asked the guard, just in case.

He nodded with vigor. “Yes, Princess!”

*So I was right... That explains why Sirius handed the letter off to the guard without hesitation.*

“The person who handed me this letter assured me you would know who it was from, Princess.”

*Urk. Is it just me or are this guard's eyes sparkling...! His eyes are just screaming, I knew you'd know who sent it!*

*By knowing it was from my brother without even reading it...am I like... receiving way too much credit here? The horror...!*

“No, no.”

Better set the record straight!

“...?”

“I only knew this letter was from Sirius because he always puts a mark on letters that only I can decipher.”

*And that mark is called Japanese kana!*

I stared at him hard, willing the words *Are we clear?* into his mind. Then the guard nodded.

*Good!*

“Did my brother, pray tell, say anything else to you?”

The guard fell silent for a moment, recalling the events of the night before. After a while, he answered, “He told me only to give you the letter if you came here.”

*Which begs the question—*

“And if I didn’t come here?”

“In that case, he instructed me to destroy the letter.”

*Hmmmmmm...*

“Under what circumstances did my brother hand you this letter?” I asked, holding the letter up to the guard.

“It was just after the prisoner was relocated. Prince Sirius pressed a hand to his head—he didn’t look well. Then he asked for something to write with. And though I was worried it would be rude to do so, I gave him the papers we always use for correspondence.”

*So he pressed a hand to his head...*

Was it the headache I’d observed my brother suffer many times?

“Thus, he used your yellow paper to write me this letter,” I confirmed.

*Okay. Now I’ve grasped the conditions under which Sirius wrote me the letter.*

Next—the contents!

Since the addressee was written in Japanese, he knew a third party wouldn’t hesitate to discard it, in the event I no longer needed to read it. There was also

no need for me to sneak off to my room to read it alone.

I opened the letter and read the first line...

The words *“To my beloved sister”* flew off the page.

*Um... Big brother of mine...?*

If he were there right then, I would have grabbed him by the collar and shook the living daylights out of him.

*No, wrong takeaway, Octavia—he wrote the words “To my beloved sister” in Japanese.*

The entire letter was in Japanese...!

*To my beloved sister,*

*I’ll keep this brief. Octavia, you’ve noticed I’ve lost parts of my memory, haven’t you?*

*But last night, my memories temporarily returned.*

*I can think of two reasons why—but since I can’t verify either, I’ll refrain from writing about them here.*

*The most important thing is that I’ve regained my memory now.*

*I was the one who gave Hugh that order.*

*And that is exactly why I cannot punish Hugh, even though that’s what he wants. Hugh’s only crime was carrying out an order I gave him.*



*But unfortunately, I fear I won't remain in this state for much longer.*

*It's quite likely that by tomorrow, or even a little after I finish this letter, I will forget everything again.*

*When that happens, I won't be able to defend Hugh, even if I vaguely trust him.*

*The most vital memory to confirm all of this will disappear.*

*I decided to take action while I'm still myself. I lobbied Father to set the wheels in motion regarding Hugh's treatment. As a result, Hugh will be relocated before the morning. No harm will come to him. That I can guarantee.*

*I wrote this letter to give to you if you take action tomorrow to help Hugh. You probably feel disappointed right now, Octavia. That's why I gave the guard this letter, to give to you if you are in that state. If you're reading this, I suppose that's what happened.*

*First and foremost, you can rest easy about Hugh. There is no need for you to bear the full brunt of any consequences.*

*The only thing worth any concern is how I will act once I've lost my memory. With or without my memory, I'm still me. I hope I won't do anything*

*foolish, but I cannot guarantee that. Thinking over my past self thus far, that alone worries me.*

*I'm sorry.*

*If I cause you any trouble, retaliate in full. Don't spare my feelings.*

*I tried to do everything I could during the night. However, I don't think I'll be able to see you. I truly regret that. I encountered your bodyguard in the Great Corridor and thought I still had time to see you, but I was being overly optimistic.*

*Then again, if I went to see you during the night, you would be asleep anyway.*

*Whenever you dozed off during the day, I would often hear you whimper and cry.*

*Are you no longer tormented by those nightmares?*

*That would make me happy.*

*I hope that the next time I get to speak with you as the real me, it will be in person and not by letter.*

*—Your brother, Sirius*

*Huh...huh...huh...?*

*Sirius!*

*Wait a minute. It's crazy how after all this time, I now remember this is how Sirius used to be!*

When I saw *"To my beloved sister"* at the beginning, I'd flinched a little, but when I saw him close with the words, *"Your brother, Sirius,"* it reminded me of the letters he used to send to invite me to tea—they were exactly the same. (Though those letters were in the Esfian language.) But the biggest issue of all was just how much information he crammed in there...!

Starting with a comparatively minor detail, back in the carriage during our survey, he said he could "read some, but not all" of my Japanese writing—and yet he's basically fluent in this letter!

Then there's his memory. Even if it was temporary, he had regained it. Was that why? Was his mastery of Japanese awakened with the return of those missing memories?

He even used all three alphabets—hiragana, katakana, and kanji! If I had to nitpick, the only issue was that some of his characters were shaped slightly weird? So, basically fluent. But maybe his weird handwriting came from using mine as a guide...

*Y-yeah, that's probably it.*

*And those "two reasons why my memory returned"—what are they?!*

*That's kind of super important, brother of mine!*

*I don't care if you don't have proof, just write it down! He didn't write a rough draft for that letter, so he probably just scribbled it all down as he went—which probably means he accidentally started writing about something he didn't intend to reveal and had to take it back.*

*"....."* I stared hard at the letter and fell deep into thought.

*Based on what he said in this letter...he might have written it while he felt himself returning to the version of himself without those memories...*

But regardless, are Sirius's headaches caused by his missing memories...?

I looked up from the letter and asked the guard, “What were your impressions of Sirius after he handed you this letter? Did he look ill?”

“No, my lady. After he handed me the letter, he seemed to be feeling better... but he did come back once after that to ask some final questions, perhaps in connection with the prisoner relocation.”

*So I was right. After he handed over the letter, Sirius turned back to (for lack of a better word) “normal”... Is that the most likely scenario? Maybe he didn’t understand what he was doing there, so he asked the guard for confirmation... Unless, maybe he didn’t even remember writing the letter...? Yeah, no, maybe I should just assume he didn’t remember...?*

“When he came back to ask questions—did he ask about the letter?”

“He did not ask about it, no... Should I have shown him the letter once more then?” The guard sounded worried.

I smiled reassuringly. “Of course not. You followed my brother’s orders well.”

If anything, not mentioning the letter was a great move. Going off the contents of the letter, if my brother found out the letter existed—or if he read it—he might be very confused, despite having written it himself...

Then again, calling both of these versions of Sirius simply “my brother” was confusing.

*Maybe I should draw a distinction between the two?*

*One of them can just be called “my brother.” And as for the other... If I want a different way to express the fact that he’s my brother... Big Brother... Brother-dearest... Big Bro... Bro... Brosky?*

*I already refer to him as “Brother” when I talk to him, so that would be the safest bet, I guess...but I kinda want to make a distinction.*

*Hmmm...*

Then I suddenly remembered.

*“Isn’t Big Brother a bit stiff ? You could call me Bro-bro. I heard that’s a cute nickname some people use.”*

*“.....Big Brother.”*

When we were kids, Sirius wanted me to call him something cuter and more familiar, but I pretended not to notice.

But when I was Maki, I called my big sister the Japanese version of “sis” all the time— “Onii-chan—”

Without thinking, I said the Japanese word for brother.

I remembered having this strange aversion to calling him “Onii-chan” or any cute version of the word “brother” back then.

*Saying the word out loud now...feels weird.*

*“ ...”*

*Well...okay then, let's make the distinction some other way!*

*Like, I could call the version of Sirius who wrote the letter “former brother” or “original brother” or “brother 1”... Isn't that a bit robotic?*

*Maybe...I could distinguish by memory.*

*“My brother (with memories)” and “my brother.”*

*A bit expositiony, but it works!*

*Okay, that's settled.*

I looked down at the letter from my brother (with memories) again.

The most important bit of news was that my brother (with memories) had taken action to save Hugh. The very man who gave Hugh the command that imprisoned him had aided him.

*And roped Father into it, too?*

Let's just assume we avoided the worst-case scenario and the only people who knew the finer details were as good as gone now. One was Hugh—relocated—and the other was my brother (with memories) who had devised the scheme to have Hugh moved.

*Should I just go talk to my brother?*

*No, wait. I can't forget that the person who gave the relocation order was my*

*father the king himself...*

*That's right, my father!*

*Should I...go ask my father directly?*

It would be nice if I could just bump into him around the castle, but that rarely happened. If I wanted to speak with him, even though I was his daughter, I had to request an audience. And it was proper for me to do so through Matilda, my chief lady-in-waiting.

*I can't meet with him at a moment's notice!*

Such is the plight of having a king for a father. It was easy for my father to see me, but the reverse was abnormally difficult...!

*Hey! Don't be all doom and gloom, Octavia!*

Even though everything worked out in the end, I wouldn't be in this predicament now if I had just acted as soon as the idea came to me! And I'm not under the late-night hype's influence now, so it's time to prioritize action over caution!

I did a mental fist pump. With my resolve renewed, I tucked the letter in my skirt pocket and said, "Thank you for delivering the letter."

"Yes, Princess!"

The guard bowed. His shoulders looked a thousand pounds lighter.

*Well, then—*

I turned to look at Klifford.

"Klifford, I know where we're going next."

"And where may that be, Your Highness?"

*Where else?*

"His Majesty's study."

It was fairly easy to guess where my father was at any given time.

He was an early riser—a morning worker! He typically took his breakfast in his study while he worked.

In the afternoon, he would usually be in the throne room for audiences, or he would go out, leaving his study vacant.

Meaning, since it was still morning, this was the perfect time to find him in his study!

If I submitted a request for an audience in person, he might squeeze me in!

For I am Octavia! I dare to barge in without an appointment under the pretense of asking a favor!

I mean, the whole request-an-audience thingy—you can't submit the request yourself! I don't make the rules! (...Though I do bend them, I guess.) If Father says it's cool, then cool, and if he tells me no, I'll wait a while and it'll work out somehow...or so I'd like to think.

*Okay, I'm in the dungeon under the training grounds, so to get to Father's study I need a shortcut...*

In a moment of insanity, I considered using the secret passageway, but as I would probably just get lost in there, I quickly checked myself. I just had this *vague* sense that my father's study was *kinda* in the direction of the secret passageway...but nothing more. Plus, I was clueless about the path beyond that point.

Also, the shoes I was wearing that day were the biggest issue.

My dress was one of my favorites. It was an everyday gown with a practical design for walking around the castle. It was light pink. I'd figured if I chose the cheeriest color possible, that would give me the best chance of convincing Hugh to go along with my plan. And, well...that ship has sailed now. So anyway, choosing shoes to match my dress was fine and all at the time...except that these babies happen to be brand-new, very high heels.

Actually, in Esfian noblewomen's terms, my heels were of average height, if you could believe it. They weren't even sharp enough to kick off and use as a

projectile weapon. But to somebody like me who's used to low-heeled shoes, they felt exceptionally high...so I took them for a test run...and had no problems after a few steps! (Or so I thought.) But now, after walking in them for more than a few steps (and running top speed in them), if I attempted to stroll through a secret passageway, I'd probably eat dirt.

And the icing on the cake: Ever since I left the dungeon and headed for my new destination, my brand-new shoes started to give me that familiar issue. A blister... A blister in one foot was imminent!

*Hmm...but it's not so bad that I have to change shoes.*

So I decided to just take the Great Corridor like a normal person! Both the proper route and a shortcut!

I walked through the door opened by the guards to the breathtaking painting of the creation myth—the Sky God's dominion on the ceiling and the earth, the human dominion on the floor.

Its unique artistry got some sort of reaction from everybody who passed through it. Most would look up at the ceiling in awe first, then down to the floor. From what I had seen, nobody remained emotionless... Wait, I take that back. There had been one person.

I stared at Klifford's back as he walked in front of me. When Klifford became my bodyguard three months ago and walked through the Great Corridor for what was probably his first time—he didn't react. Or at least I think he didn't. I mean, he barely glanced at the ceiling, so I remembered that clearly, even though I didn't know his name back then.

It just struck me as so odd.

It struck me as odd again now, the way he stoically walked through it.

Between his reaction when I told him *"It's an oracle from the Sky"* and our conversation at the junior ball when he touched the three-sided die...I wondered if Klifford has some baggage about the Sky God.

Unlike Alec, he didn't seem to like the Great Corridor...or maybe he even hated it?



I continued walking, turning my gaze to the ceiling. We had almost reached the Sky God's Judgment.

In the center of the Great Corridor was a painting of Heaven and Earth, Sky God and humans looking at each other. If you stopped in the center of the Great Corridor and looked up, you would get a taste of what it feels like to have the Sky God looking directly down at you.

And the act of that itself had come to be called the "Sky God's Judgment." Whether it's true or not, apparently some king in history received a vision from the Sky God. I thought it was BS at first, but if the Sky God *was* something that mysterious young man included when he created this world...then it might actually be true?

Alec and I had looked up at the painting together many times, but we never felt a thing.

*Aww, speaking of Alec...I really miss him.*

Seven days had passed since he left on a secret mission for Father. He couldn't tell me where he was going, either...though I assumed it was somewhere within Esfia's borders. Now that we were not at war, the mission shouldn't be anything life-threatening...so I was sure he would return home safe, but I couldn't help but worry just a little.

I stood still in the middle of the Great Corridor.

*Hey, since I'm here anyway—*

In Alec's place, I would receive the Sky God's Judgment for the first time in ages.

*"..."*

After a few seconds, I looked up...and there was no change.

I breathed out and looked down.

*Nothing—that means Alec will come home safe!*

I decided to give it a convenient interpretation.

*Oh... Klifford's turned around to look at me. Makes sense. I did kinda stop*

walking.

I was about to take a step forward when—

*Y’know, come to think of it...*

I remembered the letter in my dress pocket.

*My brother (with memories) said he met Klifford once in the Great Corridor!*

Naturally, Klifford had no obligation to report that to me, and that was totally fine. But if I asked him, he would have to tell me!

Besides, the Great Corridor was a special place that only highborn people could traverse—nobody else was here.

*Isn’t this, like, a golden opportunity?*

“Klifford, may I ask you a question?” I asked, instead of continuing down the Great Corridor.

As Klifford stood at a distance neither far nor near—the optimal location for a bodyguard—his deep indigo eyes met mine.

“...!”

And in that moment, my heart leaped into my throat.

*Urk...!*

I was going to ask about my brother (with memories), but my thoughts were buried by something entirely different. Something I had shoved to the furthest recesses of my memory had suddenly burst into the front of my mind...!

“What is it you wish to ask me, Your Highness?” Klifford asked with his usual subdued tone.

What do you do when you’re dealing with Mr. Cool and you’re anything but? I wanted to avoid Klifford. Running away sounded amazing, actually. However!

“Yes... My question...”

*I can’t talk.*

I snapped Blackfeather open.

I never thought I’d see the day that I’d use Blackfeather as a shield against

Klifford!

“.....”

*Ahhhhhhh. See, you're saying nothing and now Klifford's giving you a dubious stare!*

*Oh...oh dear... I recoiled without meaning to.*

*AHHHHHHHHHHHHH! Now Klifford's stare has increased in dubiousness! It's definitely increased!*

*What happened, Octavia? You were perfectly fine a second ago!*

*Um... Actually...the better question would be, how have I acted normal around him all this time?*

I desperately racked my brain.

“.....Your Highness?”

*Great. Now he's called out to me.*

*Easy, Klifford! Slow down, old boy!*

*My brain is buffering!*

*From the moment I woke this morning, my mind had been consumed with Hugh. I didn't have time to give it a second thought when I saw Klifford.*

*But, for now, it's safe to say we've avoided the worst-case scenario.*

With my shoulders now slightly less tense, I looked at Klifford again and the two of us gazed into each other's eyes—alone for the first time.

...And that was why the psychological stuff I'd put off had burst to the surface again. I just know it!

Yesterday, I had displayed incredibly shameful behavior in front of Klifford.

I made him indulge me (selfishly?)...and after I had him pat my head I had the *audacity* to pat his head in return!

*It's really hard facing that memory while sober...!*

And meanwhile, I got a happy flutter in my heart at the sight of my wreven feather tassel on his sword hilt...because I realized he didn't put it on just that

one time to be polite.

*So, in a word, I feel like I'm coming face to face with my dark history! And it's embarrassing!*

I had screamed and rolled around in bed for quite some time over it, but it wasn't nearly enough to console me!

Even though I shouldn't be afraid of him, I took another step backward...then another.

"Your Highness—the way you're walking..."

*Huh?*

".....!"

*Oh. Shit.*

During all that edging backward, I forgot I was wearing extra-high heels.

*My foot—*

Just when the words *I'm gonna fall* reached my brain...

I felt my body float, without falling backward.

*No, wait, I think I only pitched a couple inches forward?*

Klifford held my hand in his right and my waist with his left to stop me from falling.

"Do be careful, Your Highness."

His indigo eyes were filled with concern.

*Urrrrgh. I deserved that.*

Klifford, like a proper bodyguard, had moved to catch me. Meanwhile, I'm here like...

Imagine nearly falling backward trying to avoid a guy, only to be rescued by aforementioned guy!

"Thank you."

*Sorry, my bad. Sorry I'm a terrible Sovereign.*

*Arrrgh. But what was this—a lucky mistake? Exposure therapy? Now that I’m too close to Klifford to escape him (and supported in his arms, for that matter), I’m finally getting used to—NOPE!*

“I’m all right now. You may release me. I merely lost my footing a little as I am unaccustomed to wearing these shoes.”

If you asked the conventional wisdom of Esfian high society, they would say it’s my own damn fault for wearing flats all the time!

Still way too close for comfort, Klifford looked down at my foot, then back up at me.

“I noticed you favoring one leg earlier when we were walking.”

“.....Was I really?”

*Yeah, that’s because I have a blister...*

“Yes. It was subtle.” Klifford nodded firmly.

*I get the sense he isn’t gonna let me pretend it didn’t happen...!*

“Have you twisted your ankle? My apologies for not noticing sooner.”

*Uh, actually, Klifford, you noticed it incredibly soon! Don’t you dare apologize with such deep regret in your tone, okay? Okay?!*

*I’m seeing a vision...of a giant dog sulking with its ears drooping!*

“It’s just a blister.”

“But if you continue walking, it will grow worse.”

*Grr. A sound argument. B-but hear me out! In the glamorous royal and junior balls, noblewomen dance and chat with high-heeled shoes and big smiles on their faces as they push through the pain. That’s just the way it is!*

“We should probably examine the state of your wound as soon as possible.”

“...Don’t call it a wound. It’s not that bad.”

“.....”

*Looks like Klifford ignored my assertion. Grrrr!*

*I could just steamroll him, but... I glanced around us. That’s right. The Great*

*Corridor is lined with chairs. The castle has a fair amount of chairs stationed everywhere, in fact, from hallways to personal rooms. Castles are big and people need to rest.*

“Very well—you may assess the state of my foot over there.”

I pointed to a chair that blended in with the décor of the Great Corridor flawlessly.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Klifford nodded. “I shall carry you there.” Then he picked me up like it meant nothing.

“Hmm?!”

As my eyes rolled into the back of my head, Klifford began to walk.

*W-wait! Hold up, good sir!*

I cast him an admonishing glare. And the recipient looked oblivious to what had warranted it.

“I can walk on my own.”

“As I mentioned earlier, Your Highness, if you walk, you may worsen your injury. Moreover, you needn’t force yourself to walk under these circumstances. Please, make use of me.”

With a glance down at my bandaged hand, Klifford continued, “It already vexes me—how long your wounds take to heal.”

“I don’t think it’s taking longer than average...”

Regarding my left hand, that was only because the wound had opened again...

But—

I understood what Klifford was trying to say. It was the same thing my father had scolded me about earlier.

As a princess, I could not take my health or injuries lightly. Moreover, the reason I couldn’t get away with insisting I was okay was because this was Klifford.

And I am in the midst of giving Klifford the incredibly reckless command of “*Don’t let yourself get hurt!*” He’s a bodyguard—a profession that already

comes with an abnormally high level of personal risk—and yet Klifford was keeping his end of the promise. He walked the walk.

When I tried to brush that all aside by saying, *“A little blister is no biggie, totally fine,”* who exactly was in the wrong? Me! Clearly me! ...I’m all talk and no walk...

I relaxed my muscles and wrapped my arms around Klifford’s neck. “Klifford, carry me to that chair over there.”

“As you wish.”

*Is it just me, or was that a smug smile on Klifford’s face just now?*

After he sat me down on a chair, Klifford knelt opposite me. My right foot felt perfectly fine. It was my left foot that was getting a blister.

Klifford carefully removed my left shoe.

.....I never thought anything of it when I took off my own shoes. Why did I feel so self-conscious having somebody else do it?

“.....”

My blister was really just a slight peeling of the skin between my heel and the ball of my foot by my big toe, but when Klifford saw it, he frowned.

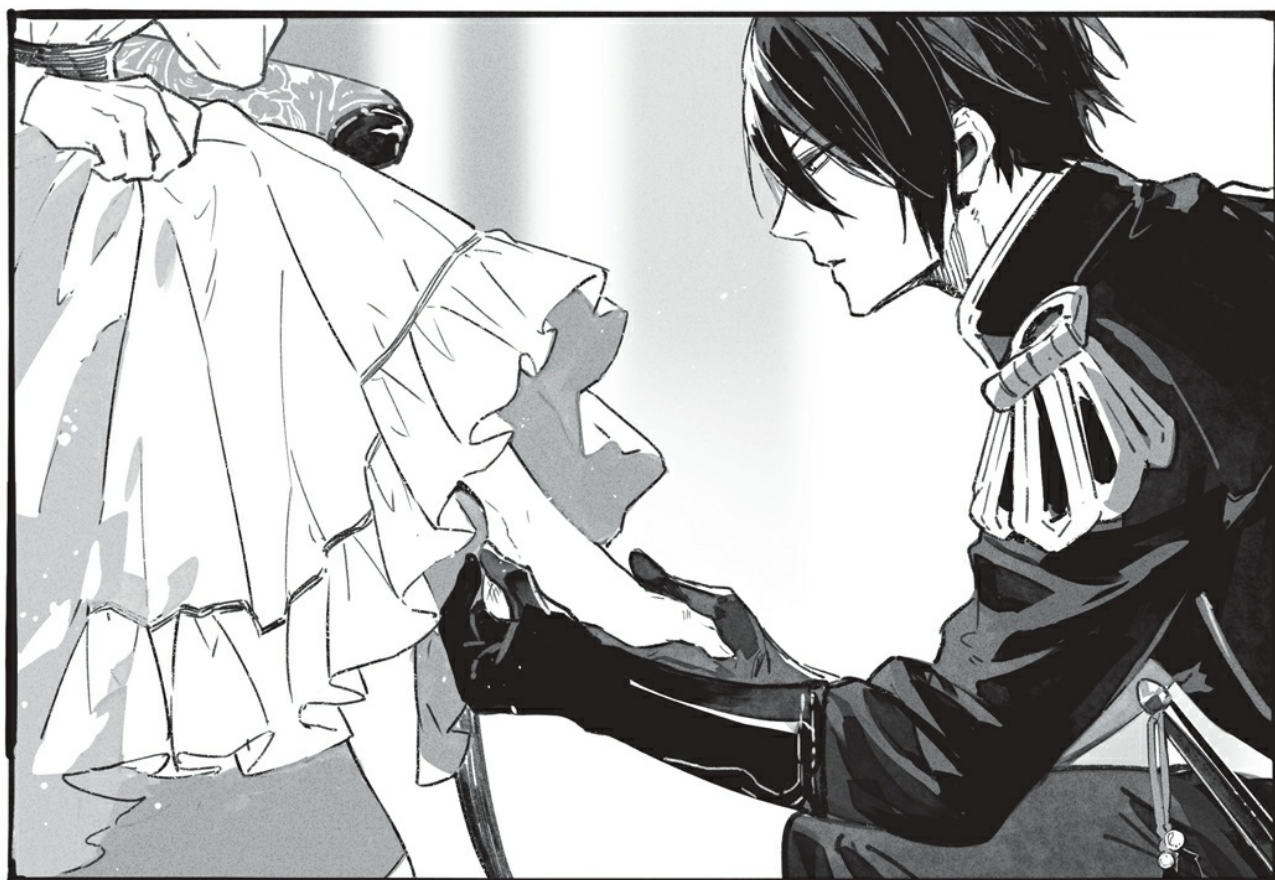
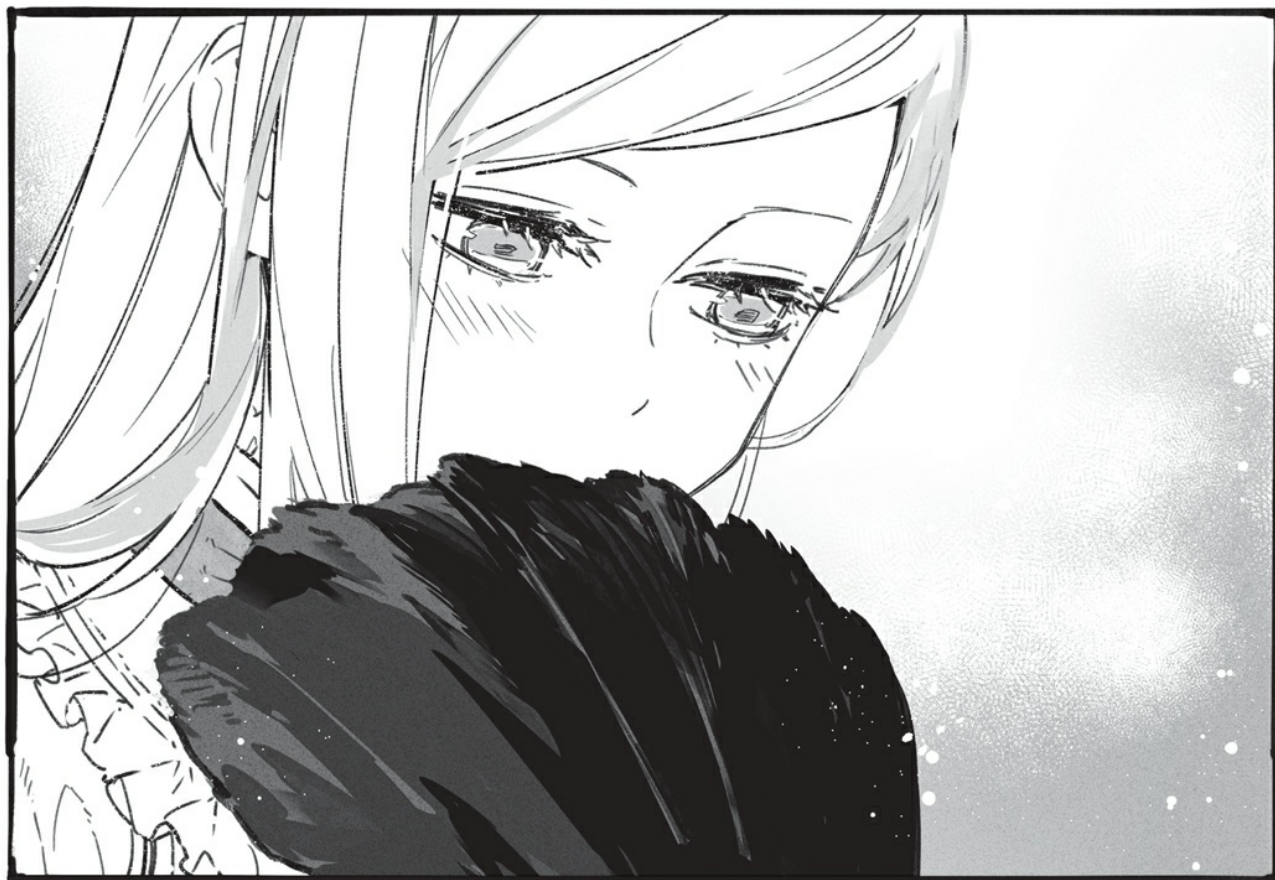
My impulse to run away from Klifford because of what had happened the day before may have been subdued, but now his silence was unbearable, so I said, “See...? It’s nothing serious.”

Klifford looked up at me.

*Urk. He’s practically emotionless, but is he giving off vibes reminiscent of that time he said, “I’m terribly furious” back in the Sky Chamber? I mean, I know I was at fault back then, but this time, it was an inevitable happenstance! And the degree of injury is way different, too!*







“...This needs first aid.”

That was all Klifford said. It sounded like he had a load of other things he wanted to say but suppressed them.

“Understood... I suppose so.”

I, too, suppressed the urge to argue and pulled back.

*Okay, then. I guess we'll go see the doctor on retainer at the castle. I might as well change my shoes while I'm at it. No, wait, won't that mean Klifford's gonna carry me until we reach those destinations? Yeah, he'll object to the idea of me walking. I could always ignore him and walk anyway, but that's a silly hill to die on... But now, by necessity, we're in Handsome Knight Sweeps the Princess Off Her Blistered Feet territory...*

*Also, lest we forget, our main objective is to get to Father's study as quickly as possible. If we swing by the infirmary first, that'll take a while. If carrying me is the alternative, it would probably be best to bring the doctor here to examine me...yeah? Yeah. Let's go with that!*

“Might we ask the guard stationed at the door to call for help?”

Klifford looked a bit conflicted. Staying on one knee, he scrutinized the Grand Corridor. It was still quiet and completely empty... Was he doing a safety check?

But then, for reasons I'm sure only Klifford knew, the conflict in his face disappeared.

“I will go. Wait here for just a moment.”

With that, he leaned forward to stand up. He was about to carry out my request flawlessly—if not for the fact that the navy-blue sleeve of his guard uniform was firmly in my right hand's grasp. Like I was begging him not to leave.

.....?

I quickly released his sleeve. Unable to believe my own actions, I stared at my right hand. And Klifford, his indigo eyes wide with a rare display of surprise, knelt before me again.

“...Is something the matter?” he asked gently, the surprise now gone from his

eyes.

*Oh... This sensation... It's like what I felt under the kallum trees.*

*Just like this—Klifford knelt before me... But he wasn't looking down at me like he is now...he was at eye level. I've experienced this before...but when?*

*I remember...the other time this happened...I didn't want him to leave.*

*When... Where did this happen?*

I felt so close to remembering, yet I couldn't. It was frustrating.

Exhaling deeply, I shook my head. "No, I'm all right. It's just—"

I gave him a canned response, but the truth was, nothing was wrong with me. Nothing was wrong, yet I had grabbed Klifford's sleeve—completely subconsciously. Even though I was the one who had told him—commanded him—to leave.

Unless...it was because of what happened yesterday? Was Maki, the girl I usually kept hidden under my princess persona, coming out? Did Klifford trigger all her clingy baby sister idiosyncrasies...?

"It's just—I remembered a question I forgot to ask you."

But there was no way I could tell him any of this. So instead, I quickly said I wanted to ask Klifford a question.

*Okay, time for an emotional reset.*

His indigo eyes looked up at mine, waiting patiently.

"I read something in the letter I received from the guard in the dungeon. Last night—did you see my brother here in the Great Corridor?" As I spoke calmly, I felt the waves of emotion start to subside.

"Yes, I did see him," Klifford answered, as if it meant nothing.

"May I ask what you two talked about? If it was personal, you needn't tell me. But I would like you to tell me what you can, within reason."

I couldn't be too nosy, of course. But then again...though I broached the subject in the first place, I can't even imagine what a conversation between Klifford and my brother (with memories) would be like...

“...He asked if I would work for him.”

“...!”

*My. Good. Man. WHAT?!*

First Father, now my brother, too...?! Wait, it was my brother (with memories) who did the soliciting... And the Sirius from the source material would definitely have deemed Klifford an asset and tried to hire him—my fan theory was right!

“And what was your answer?” I asked.

Klifford was still literally being my bodyguard as we spoke, so I didn’t technically need to hear the answer, but just in case!

“I turned him down,” he said curtly.

*I already knew that...but it still feels good to hear it.*

“Well, of course. You are my bodyguard after all.”

“I am.”

Klifford nodded and looked right up at me...and for no reason whatsoever, I retrieved Blackfeather from my side and opened it.

Then I cleared my throat and said, “And did my brother have anything to say about Hugh?”

“No. Not to me.”

“I see...”

Okay, so that means my brother (with memories) didn’t come to Klifford to talk about Hugh specifically. Was it just one of those weird coincidences?

“Why do you suppose my brother was in the Great Corridor?”

Only a handful of people could utilize it, and though royalty often passed through, there was one element that struck me as odd. As far as I knew, Sirius didn’t particularly like the Great Corridor or have any affinity to it. Also—and this is purely speculation on my part—if I had to choose one or the other, I’d say Sirius used the Great Corridor less often than average. I figured he usually took the secret passageway instead.

It wasn't like he never used the Great Corridor; rather, he prioritized the secret passageway as much as possible. He valued efficiency.

That's the kind of person my brother is.

But then I quickly corrected myself.

That's not the kind of person my brother (with memories) is.

*Thinking back to when we were kids, my brother (with memories) used the Great Corridor a lot. I think...? So, I guess it's not actually that odd after all...*

I shifted my gaze upward and lost myself in the breathtakingly majestic ceiling painting.

"Prince Sirius...appeared to have something on his mind," Klifford offered.

"Did he tell you what it was?" I returned my gaze from the ceiling to Klifford.

"Not everything, I assume."

"Then perhaps he knew you might relay the information to me. He may have wanted that, even."

I know Klifford will pick up on the important bits and tell me!

"Are you sure that is what he would want?"

I thought too soon. He gave me an unexpected reply.

*Um, I recognize that tone. Are we saying there are things it would be better for me not to hear?*

"....."

*Well—yeah, I already knew that! That's why I said you didn't have to tell me what he said if it was too personal!*

I snapped Blackfeather shut and said, "I don't mind."

Still on his knee, Klifford looked up at me and asked, "Are you suggesting, Your Highness, that I am intentionally keeping something from you?" Then he added, "I may indeed harbor malice...or intent to deceive you."

After a pause, I answered, "First, let me establish that I trust you, Klifford. I don't believe you would ever deceive or betray me."

Klifford let out a soft, cynical chuckle.

“I am honored. But please at least consider the possibility. If I were to—”

“If you were to betray me?”

“Yes.”

Klifford nodded. His indigo eyes looked straight into mine.

You know...the thought had never occurred to me. I mean, Klifford said an Adjutant can't lie to his Sovereign. But then again, just because he can't tell a lie, that doesn't mean there aren't any loopholes. It's possible to be honest and mislead at the same time. And it's possible to lie by omission.

If he wanted to.

*What if Klifford...resented me, deceived me, and betrayed me? Would I be angry? Sad? Vengeful?*

Those emotions were the first to pop into my mind...but they didn't feel quite right.

*Maybe it's because I'm his Sovereign, but to me, trusting Klifford means—*

I looked back into Klifford's eyes and said, “I would still trust you, betrayal and all—I suppose that is how it would be. Committing to trust you means a certain allowance of betrayal.”

Putting it into words further solidified my thoughts.

“I think...that to me, trusting in someone comes down to how many transgressions I will forgive from them.”

So I'm the one that's being tested.

“Your actions aren't the issue—mine are. Is this a person I wouldn't mind being betrayed by? That is what it means to trust in myself. That's why, *if you were to betray me*, I would accept that. After all, wasn't I the one who decided to trust you?”

“Wouldn't you then think you were mistaken for trusting in me?”

“I wouldn't. Once I've decided to trust you, the results of that are less important.”

“...Because you trust me, betrayal and all?”

“That’s the gist of it.” I smiled brightly. “That’s why I don’t mind if you are intentionally hiding something my brother told you.”

You have my seal of approval!

“May I ask just one question?”

“Yes.”

“Prince Alexis—do you like him?”

Klifford’s question caught me off guard, but I didn’t have to think about it to answer.

“Of course I like him. He’s my sweet baby brother.”

I always had the same answer, no matter who asked the question.

There was a moment of silence.

“Understood.”

Klifford bowed his head, his gaze cast downward.

“Did Sirius say something about Alec?”

Klifford looked up and slowly shook his head. “No. Prince Sirius spoke of a different matter with me. He gave me a warning...to remain vigilant at all times. He seemed quite worried about you.”

*Well, yeah, my brother (with memories) is a lot like the childhood version of him... Yeah, if that little boy stayed as he was into manhood, that’s what he would have said. Still...*

“Those are *some* words, coming from the very person who put you in the dungeon, wouldn’t you say?”

If I were Klifford, Sirius is the one I’d be vigilant about!

Then again, it was my brother (with memories) who asked Klifford to work for him, so I guess it’s a matter of memories.

“Was that all my brother told you?”

“He also said...that when tomorrow came, he would likely be wary of me.”

*So, when Sirius told Klifford to be vigilant at all times, what he really meant was, “Be vigilant of me”? I mean, Sirius never exactly hid his distrust of Klifford. And even though Klifford was found innocent in the end, there’s still no telling what’s in my brother’s heart of hearts.*

From what I’ve heard so far, it sounds like my brother (with memories) wanted to have an important talk with my bodyguard... The takeaway here is, I’ve figured out the main difference between my brother and my brother (with memories).

“I’ve certainly kept you quite a long time... Could you go call for help now?”

“Yes.” Klifford rose to his feet.

“...”

My right hand gripped Blackfeather’s handle, and my left hand made a fist by my heart.

I subconsciously didn’t want to move it.

*I don’t know why...but strange impulses come over me sometimes.*

But this time, I did not grab onto Klifford’s sleeve.

## 71

Octavia the Blistered hath made a full recovery!

The castle physician happened to be making his rounds, so he came immediately and tended to my foot, lickety-split. He applied a salve and a bandage and gave me some gentle advice: “I see this affliction often in noblewomen, and it’s important to treat it early.”

...My naïveté was exposed.

*’Tis but a blister! Ahh, but a blister all the same...!*

So I changed my shoes! They weren’t pink like my dress, but they were flats like I was used to. My handmaid Sasha brought them. I slipped them on and stomped to get a feel for them. Then I walked—so far so good. With these babies, even a full-speed dash down the secret passageway is within the realm



of possibility!

Watching me, Sasha said, “But my lady, shouldn’t you just let Sir Alderton carry you anyway?”

“I agree,” the doctor echoed. “I may have treated the wound, but it is still not fully healed. You should strain your foot as little as possible—in other words, not walking is the best medicine.”

After that ridiculous exchange, there was a dicey moment during which Klifford asked “Shall I carry you?” in all seriousness, but I cleared that hurdle and arrived at the door to my father’s study on my own two feet.

If Klifford carried me through the castle, my sanity would suffer in more ways than one. Just as I finally got comfortable being close to Klifford again, I would be whisked back to square one.

*It’s just... My father’s study right now...*

The guards that ordinarily flanked the door were not there. The guards stationed at the stairway leading here were still present, though. A little polite begging led the guards to reveal that Lord Edgar was visiting my father at the moment.

Sometimes my father would send his guards away when Edgar came to see him.

Meanwhile, there I was, brazenly marching up to the door of his study anyway.

This challenge was a first for me.

I gulped nervously. For a speedy request-for-audience, I had considered just asking the guards stationed at the door...but now I had no choice but to ask him face to face!

*Strike while the iron is brave!*

I knocked on the door and—

“—I just don’t see why you’re angry, Enoch. At the very least, your anger is misplaced.”

It was Edgar's voice, but I had never heard him speak in that tone. He sounded cold—very cold. As if he was being forced to speak with somebody he truly detested... But that couldn't be. It didn't make sense.

Always peaceful and kind. That was the image I had of Lord Edgar. And all the more so, considering he was talking to...

"Are you saying I don't even have the right?"

...my father. And yet...

The answer my father gave Lord Edgar was...cynical...and filled with self-deprecation.

Edgar's laugh was laced with hostility. I could hear the contempt in his voice.

"No, you don't. You aren't—"

*Stop it.*

*I shouldn't be hearing this.*

I pounded on the door.

"Father, it's Octavia. I've come to request an audience!"

I spoke as loudly as I could.

But I heard it anyway. And Edgar's words sank eerily into a corner of my mind.

*"You aren't a part of the family."*

What he meant by that...I didn't know. I had no idea whose family he was referring to.

All I knew was that his words cut like a knife—a rejection that left my father utterly helpless.

The silence continued. One second...two seconds...three seconds...

Then I heard the door to the study click open.

"It's been three days... I haven't seen you since our little chat in the garden, Octavia."

Edgar was the one who opened the door. His expression was gentle, just as gentle as it had been when he put the Lieche orchid in my hair. He gestured

toward the study to welcome me in.

The way he treated me was so ordinary that it was hard to even imagine them having the conversation I had just overheard.

I peered into the study. It looked about the same as it did the night I came by after dinner, before Alec departed on his mission. The only difference was that my father had been seated at his desk...but now, he was standing.

He was talking with Edgar—if it could even be called talking...it feels more like *arguing* is the right word to use here—and that's probably why he was standing.

From my place in the hallway, I glanced between Edgar, who was standing right beside me, to my father, who was deeper inside the room. Edgar smiled when our eyes met. My father was emotionless.

After a breath in and out, he finally said, "Enter, Octavia. Leave Alderton outside."

Last time he had let Klifford join me, but not this time. With a nod, I turned to Klifford to give my own order. But then— "Given yesterday's events, wouldn't it be safer to let Octavia keep her bodyguard with her?"

Edgar stepped up to defy the order.

"Octavia, do you perceive myself or Edgar as a threat?"

"Enoch, that is neither here nor there. It's a matter of emotional security, not physical. Unless, Octavia, were you planning on discussing anything you didn't want him overhearing?"

"No, Lord Edgar."

He was right, I would feel more emotionally secure with Klifford in the room. So I had no reason to oppose Edgar.

My father sighed deeply. Edgar said nothing more. The final say lay with my father, the king.

"I stand by what I said—only Octavia shall enter."

Klifford was on standby outside the door—the *door* part was key here. When you consider how my father had sent his own guards and everyone else away from his study, I think the gesture was rather generous for him. Case in point, Klifford was the only guard stationed outside the door to his study.

It was so far so good...until we hit a little snag.

Just after I entered the room, Edgar heard my tummy rumbling. Anyway, sensing I had skipped breakfast, it was decided that we would have breakfast together in Father's study!

And boy, when my stomach growled, my cheeks almost literally burst into flames... My only saving grace was that I think only Edgar heard the rumbles in my gut! I mean, I usually pig out at the breakfast table, so was it because my stomach was unusually empty this morning? Nonetheless, I do wish my stomach would learn to read the room!

Since there was no dining table in my father's study, we had snacks instead of a proper meal.

My father sat at the head of the long reception desk, and Edgar and I sat across from each other on the sides. And after a quick call to some servants, the table was covered with an assortment of things stuffed between pieces of black bread—basically, sandwiches—drinks, and fruit. Though where my father was sitting, there was also a stack of documents.

And we were right in the middle of Esfia's version of *itadakimasu*—my father asking the Sky God to bless our meal.

As the pile of sandwiches stared at me, I glanced at the door to the study.

*Klifford came to my room early this morning, didn't he? I'm sure Sasha summoned him early for my sake, but did Klifford have to skip breakfast, too? If he did manage to eat anything, it would have to be pocket rations or something...*

As I sat there, musing to myself—

"It appears the chef went a little overboard. I don't think the three of us can finish all this food..." Reading my mind, Edgar spoke up on my behalf. "Why don't we have Klifford help us eat this?"

“Good idea,” I replied.

“...Then have a servant bring it to him.”

But the servant in question had already left the room.

“No need for that, Father.”

“What?”

“I shall deliver it personally.”

*I mean, Klifford isn't exactly the kind of guy to take food or drink from a third party! But if his Sovereign feeds him, he can't refuse!*

“...” My father's brows furrowed. He opened his mouth to speak—then shut it. Silence. In other words, “*Do as you wish.*”

And thus, I began the selection. I stared critically at the assortment of sandwiches and jammed breads.

*What would he like...?*

*.....!*

Then I had a sudden realization.

*I don't know what Klifford's favorite foods are...!*

And so, since I couldn't pick around his likes and dislikes, I went orthodox and chose sandwiches with a meat similar to teriyaki chicken.

They were wrapped in paper for ease of delivery, so he didn't have to eat them right away, either. He could tuck them in his pocket to eat later, like the dungeon guard had with his snack.

I rose from the table and headed for the door. Edgar waved merrily at me. And with a click, I opened the door. The *heavy* door—but just as I thought that, it suddenly got lighter. Klifford had opened it for me.

“Your Highness?”

“This is for you.”

I handed him the parcel of sandwiches. Klifford surely knew that we were having breakfast.

“We can’t finish everything by ourselves. I know you’re on duty, but I’d be happy if you could help us.”

His indigo eyes looked at me thoughtfully.

After a pause, Klifford said, “Then...I humbly accept.”

And the weight of the sandwiches disappeared from my hands.

A sense of victory similar to what I felt after yesterday’s successful tea invitation filled me.

Like...this is a bad analogy, but I felt kinda like a trapper whose prey just took the bait.

But that feeling lasted only a moment. Since Klifford took the food from me unexpectedly smoothly, that made me feel insecure. Was I wrong to think he would reject my offering?

The memory of us drinking tea together came to mind.

*Oh! Could it be, he figures it couldn’t be poisoned enough to be a problem, so he accepted the food because it would be more of a hassle not to?*

“Um, don’t take food without permission, okay? Even in the castle. I’d like to think as a rule, we have nothing to worry about here, but still...”

Both Sirius and Alec had incidents of foreign objects in their food before...and according to the source material, so did Sil... But it wasn’t an attempted murder by poisoning. More like, love gone too far? You know, stalker logic. It’s highly plausible that Klifford would fall the same fate as them for the same reason.

Klifford gave me a curious look.

*Huh? Did I say something off the mark?*

“I never accept food from anyone other than you, Your Highness.”

“...”

*My face... I feel like it’s turning red.*

I cursed myself for not bringing Blackfeather with me. I wanted to open it and feign serenity.

I knew he meant it in an Adjutant-Sovereign sense, but come on, I couldn't help but think he just said I was special!

"Right... Klifford...are there any foods you like or dislike?"

*I kinda want to give you something you prefer next time!*

"Not in particular."

...I saw that coming. I really did, okay? But I doubled down and asked, "But surely there's something?"

Klifford looked uncomfortable. I raised an eyebrow. I think Klifford is the only person in the universe who would look so perplexed over the simplest question.

Silence hung between us for a while, until Klifford finally spoke, "...As in, foods I can and cannot eat?"

The ultimate dichotomy! But being able to eat something is not exactly the same as liking it. It's applicable not only to the sandwiches I just gave him, but to just about everything! Wait—there are people out there who like everything...but Klifford is not one of them. I just know it!

"Aren't there any foods you've found delicious?"

"Just one."

Just one?

"Though I assume it was the circumstances that made it seem delicious to me."

It's probably that phenomenon where the thing you eat when you're starving feels like a lavish feast to you. That's what I think he's talking about. So, in essence, he's never found any food actually delicious.

"Okay... I think I understand."

By necessity, my association with Klifford was going to last a long time. I'd just have to spend that time figuring out what foods he responds well to! He seemed to think "it's something edible" equals "I like it," but he's bound to have some specific tastes.

"Anyway, once you've eaten this," I said, indicating the parcel I'd handed him,

“let me know what you think...but that’s not a command. Just a humble request.”

I had to add that caveat, otherwise Klifford was bound to think it was a Sovereignly command.

“All right...”

And in his affirmative answer, I could distinctly hear notes of hesitation.

My conversation with Klifford lasted a few minutes. Once back in my father’s study, I took out my own sandwich and chomped down on it.

Can’t go to war on an empty stomach!

And of course, I’m filling my stomach with stuff I like.

It was similar to an egg salad sandwich, with thin slices of hardboiled egg. The mayonnaise... Well, that doesn’t exist here, but these Valjeanian seasonings sure hit the spot! Without Valjean, Esfian cuisine would have been very lackluster—I can say that with confidence.

As I ate, I watched the pair—Edgar and my father. Edgar, who was seated across from me, was eating a meat and *forsa* sandwich. And *forsa* is...well, it’s a vegetable that I secretly christened “bitter cucumber.” It looks like a cucumber. And the first time I bit into one, thinking it was a cucumber, it turned out to be so bitter! Thanks to that memory, I can’t eat *forsa*.

Actually, my father hates *forsa*, too. It’s a typical vegetable in Esfian cuisine, but it’s very divisive. Bitterness is its distinctive feature, so it’s a matter of whether you like that or not.

Even so...eating it by hand was a technically advanced feat that tested one’s manners. It was an easy means of finding fault in someone. And yet Edgar ate *forsa* so naturally that he could easily be mistaken for a highborn man. Like, dang, Edgar. Mad respect.

*If anything...it’s making me feel insecure.*

My princess dignity—*dignity*... I mustn’t *chomp* my sandwich; I must aim for



elegance...!

I shifted my focus from Edgar to my father. He held a document in his right hand and was feeding himself a sandwich with his left.

*It looks like he's almost done. He's eating the bread with jam that the servant purposefully left at his place when they came to set the table, so that's probably his favorite?*

It was a little unexpected, him choosing just plain jam and bread.

Naturally, Esfia had a variety of jams. Some of these jams and the fruits they're made of are named the same way as they are in Japan: strawberry, apple, blueberry, etcetera, etcetera. But not the jam my father was eating. Just like forsa, it was unique to this world.

The jam was made from *chirro*, a sweet vegetable in the same family as chestnuts and sweet potatoes. Now, chirro are not pretty to look at. They have this ugly, thorny sort of appearance to them. Because of that, they're not highly regarded among royalty and the nobility. Pity, since once they're cooked, they look much more appetizing...

That's why they're considered peasant food in Esfia. While they're a staple in lower-class houses, you seldom—nay, you *never* see them gracing royal dinner tables! But I've always got my radar tuned to catch any info about Esfia's cheap eats! Though my radar is kinda crappy and only tends to pick up things I'm interested in, like how to handle wreven birds...

"Father...do you like chirro?"

My father froze mid-bite. He looked down at the bread with chirro jam and a soft smile spread on his mouth. So soft that it made me wonder if it was tied to a precious memory.

"Yes...I came to like it when I ate some with Edgar."

"...Yes, I remember that, too." Edgar smiled and nodded, but it struck me as odd...probably because of the unnaturally long pause before he spoke. Maybe it was because I'd overheard their fight earlier.

My father put his chirro jam bread on his plate. Then he set down his

documents.

“So—?” He clasped his hands and looked at me. “Why did you come all the way here to ask for an audience? I can’t very well throw you out now, can I?”

*Aha! He took the first shot!*

No way was I not gonna latch onto that. I set down my own sandwich and looked back at my father.

“It’s about Hugh Roberts. I wanted to ask you some questions.”

Father surely knew everything that had happened the day before, during our survey, so I could skip the preamble.

“Aha... Roberts.”

Either he was expecting the question...or he wasn’t... His reaction could have meant either.

“Where was he relocated to?”

“...” No answer.

“The decision was made after meeting with Sirius, correct?”

My father sighed deeply and shook his head. “I can’t tell you where he is. And, Octavia, you aren’t the only one. The only people in the castle who know Roberts’s whereabouts are myself and Sirius.”

“Then...please at least tell me this: Did you take him to the same place where the people who raided the junior ball are being held?”

Ordinarily, if a prisoner was moved from the dungeon, he would be moved to a similar location like the one I’d just suggested—the prison tower where the raiders had been sent.

*That’s right... Hugh was the one who told me about the practice.*

“No.”

“Then is he in a holding area in preparation to go there?”

What I really wanted to know was: Is he in prison?

My father sighed again.

“I know what you’re trying to find out... *No*—is that what you want me to say?”

“Father!”

My father paused and asked, “Did *that* Sirius say anything to you?”

“Well, he—”

...gave me a letter...

“*That*” Sirius?

It almost sounded like my father had grasped that Sirius had issues with his memory. Did Sirius (with memories) explain this to him when he was making arrangements to relocate Hugh? How far had his explanation gone? Would the ruler of a kingdom just take that at face value? I suppose that could make sense if he already knew about Sirius’s condition to an extent— “I take that as a yes...,” my father said. “In that case, what he said to you is everything. Trust Sirius. He doesn’t want you involving yourself with Roberts, and neither do I.”

I looked down and bit my lip. Trust my brother (with memories), he said...

I thought back to the conversation I had with Klifford in the Great Corridor. But I still couldn’t say with full conviction that I trusted my brother.

I thought there was an eighty percent chance that everything would be okay... but if my trust led to horrible results, I wouldn’t be able to accept it, and I didn’t want to regret that.

He continued, “But if you still insist on knowing...”

My eyes darted up.

“The day you introduce your lover to the family is almost here.”

*He abruptly changed the subject. But how is that connected—*

“After the formal introduction.”

.....*The formal introduction?*

“After your lover is formally introduced to us, I will tell you where Roberts is, if you wish.” My father released his crossed arms and retrieved the documents at his side. And perhaps because there was no reaction from me, he asked, “Is

there a problem?”

I gave the only answer I could. “Of course not. I appreciate your consideration, Father.” I embellished it all with a Princess Smile.

And, so he wouldn’t pick up on my emotions, I picked up my egg salad sandwich and chomped—rather, daintily bit into it like Edgar. Before I realized it, I’d eaten the whole thing.

*Okay, Octavia. Organize your thoughts.*

*Good news is, you have a way of knowing where Hugh was relocated. Also, you know he wasn’t sent to the prison tower with the raiders.*

*That’s one step in a good direction.*

*It’s just... How many days are left until the formal introduction? The clock is ticking!*

*Even now, there’s still no shadow or shape of him—my beloved! (Fake-beloved, but you get the point!)*

*Rust, my first choice, didn’t work out for me because of that damn face of his. Then my next target, Guy, turned me down...*

Not as a palate cleanser but as a mood cleanser, I took a sip of unflavored sparkling water. Mmm, nice.

I guess I have to buckle down and finally come up with a solution...

I decided to ask my father a question regarding a tactical withdrawal.

“Father, what would you do if I said I wanted to keep my lover a secret?”

In other words, what if I ditched Meet the Parents?

My father cast me a sideways glance from his documents and said, “Then I would take that to mean he does not exist.” Then he tapped the desk with his left index finger. “However—if that were to happen, then I wonder what would become of the drums of betrothal marching your way.”

*The drums...of betrothal?*

I had no fiancée. According to Esfian law, if a princess has not found a fiancée by the time she is of marriageable age, then a partner most beneficial for the

kingdom will be chosen on her behalf. And since I was sixteen years old, that conversation should have come up by now. But it hadn't...until today.

"Gentlemen from Khangena and Valjean have both submitted requests."

*Um, aren't we being a little too casual about this, Father?!*

"Well...this is the first I've heard of it."

*For real, tho!*

"To be sure. There were whispers of it for some time, but the formal requests came in two days ago."

*Isn't that, like, way too recent? Here I am, unable to find a fake boyfriend on my own, while meanwhile, I've got game in a sport I'm not even playing...?*

My father produced two sheets of paper from the documents next to his breakfast. "From Khangena, it's fourth prince Kamil. And from Valjean, it's third prince Yarsh."

My father slid two resumes across the table at me. These were the basic sort of dating profiles suitors filled out when submitting a request. They contained stats and pictures.

*Kamil, fourth prince of Khangena. Age: Thirteen. Dude, he's younger than Alec...? According to his profile pic, he looks like a rebellious blond beauty, and he's got purple eyes.*

"King Liam...," I murmured.

"Exactly," my father replied. "Due to his looks, Prince Kamil is hailed as King Liam's second coming."

In the neighboring kingdom of Khangena, the monarch's power was absolute. Esfia and the other kingdoms had powerful monarchs, too, of course, but not nearly as powerful. And there was a clear reason behind this.

It happened just before King Eus ascended the throne in Esfia.

Due to an incompetent Khangenan ruler, the monarchy there was overthrown for a time. They had a revolution, and the people instilled what we would call a democracy. But the democracy didn't last forever.

“Let the will of the people decide.”

It was majority rule, but bribery was rampant when it came to voting. Stubbornly clinging to the royal family’s conviction, even the young princes and princesses were publicly executed.

They did as they pleased in the name of revolution, but even revolutionaries got burnout. It was like, toppling the monarch was their mission, but they hadn’t thought about what came next? Also, they weren’t an organized unit—that was their other problem. So there was fighting among the revolutionaries.

Fast-forward only a few years of corrupt democracy later, and some of the proletariat began to say they wanted their monarchy back.

So there was a second revolution.

In the first revolution, the surviving prince’s vassals helped him escape. Then, after the storm passed, he returned to the former royal capital with an army containing Adjutants. The tables were turned and the revolutionaries were sent packing.

Restoring the monarchy, the prince was crowned king of Khangena. And luckily, he just so happened to be a natural-born leader.

Even today, King Liam was the most popular figure in Khangenan history. While he was admired in Esfia, “If only King Liam *hadn’t* been on the throne...,” was a common gripe in our history books.

Then again, from their POV, it was like, “If only King Eus hadn’t been around...” Both sides can conclude that if their periods of reign hadn’t overlapped, the present state of both kingdoms would be much different.

And one other thing about King Liam—he was a hottie: a dazzling beauty with silvery hair and violet eyes. The letters sent to me by my pen pal Cissy were chock-full of King Liam stories that set my little *fujoshi* heart ablaze! King Liam had a staff officer, you see, and under a keen eye, that officer’s relationship with his master was hella fishy...

Er, where was I?

Right, since the monarchy was toppled and restored in the past, royal rule

was absolute in Khangena today. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say King Liam was deified. Just being born with violet eyes in Khangena made you one of the chosen ones. If you're royalty on top of that, it's like you'll never taste defeat.

With silvery hair, violet eyes, and royal blood, this guy's basically invincible. So when an invincible boy like this proposes to you—how do you react?

*Okay, what's the catch?*

Prince Kamil's profile... It was a tad concerning just how flowery the language praising the prince was... Assuming it wasn't sanctioned by the boy himself, I'm just gonna guess it was written by some rabid fangirl or cultist. It's just a lot! ..... And as exaggerated as the text was, it made me wonder if his profile pic was doctored, too.

As if that wasn't already too much to stomach...I had another profile to look at.

I ran my eyes over the profile of Yarsh, third prince of Valjean.

He was nineteen years old. From his picture, he was a cheerful young man with brown skin, black eyes, and blond hair streaked with red.

Whenever I heard the word "Valjean," the first things that came to mind were matcha *shiratama* ice cream and curry! They were an innovative nation with delicious cuisine. Aaand I think it was a Valjean prince who bred chirro into the product my father loves today? The breeding actually made the plant look thornier and worse in appearance, but the flavor improved, and it was easier to grow.

Another thing about Valjean was that the king was allowed multiple partners, and all princes and princesses born from him were treated as equals, regardless of their mother's title. "Might makes right"—that was their law. Their pyramid of power was formed purely on talent. You might even have something like the tenth princess at the top and the eldest prince at the bottom. They competed against each other, and the strongest would ascend the throne. Even their budgets were distinctly separate from each other. It was survival of the fittest for the Valjean royal family.

But Prince Yarsh's profile was...in a word, "basic"? It says his hobbies include traveling to historical sites. Maybe it was because I read it after Prince Kamil's profile, but it felt really boring.

Except there was one thing... Not sure how to put it, but I had the sense that he was selling himself short on purpose and trying not to highlight his good points. And maybe his profile pic was selling him short, too? Those are the sorts of doubts the profile evoked from me.

Going off just their dating profiles—Khangena was assertive and Valjean was passive? I got the sense that a lot of details about both countries were grossly simplified...

"Father..." He looked at me without saying a word. "Let's assume neither betrothal comes to fruition..."

I wanted to have a romance like my brother and Sil, but I was painfully aware of my place. Marriages of love were the exception among the royalty, not the rule.

Most marriages between royalty were political, to strengthen alliances, or like a hostage situation. Depending on how much power your nation had, you either gained rights...or gave up rights... That kinda thing.

"Would that negatively impact Esfia?"

If I turned them down, would relations between our nations sour...?

My question received a scornful snicker.

"No," my father replied firmly. "If you reject these proposals, Esfia will suffer no negative consequences. This kingdom is far too strong to be shaken by something like that—we are on solid ground."

But contrasting the boldness of his words...there was a catch in my father's voice that sounded anything but confident. It sounded...anguished.

"Whether the crown engages in debauchery, marries a commoner, wages war—no harm will come to us. That is Esfia." He paused there, mid-thought. After a moment of silence, he finished, "Because of this, you have no need to worry."

*That's not what he was going to say.*



My father had changed his mind halfway.

“However, if you are to be unattached, attaining a lover is something you should consider.”

“How do you feel about these proposals, Father? Not as a king, but as a man?”

A playful smirk dented my father’s face.

“As a man? I think they’re all right as far as proposals go, but your feelings come first. You may instead introduce your beloved officially when the day comes. I pray the one you’ve chosen is not problematic.”

*Ahhh, right... My father did say once that there were exceptions. There’s still the possibility that if I bring home a guy like, “Hey-hi, here’s my boyfriend!” my dad might reject him!*

*And in the event that I don’t produce a fake boyfriend, a political marriage is already knocking at my door. Is it just me, or am I in more of a jam now than I was when I first made the big lie that I have a boyfriend?*

“If you wish to keep your beloved a secret, you may do that, of course. I won’t force your hand. But I won’t tell you where Roberts was moved to, either. The conditions under which I would feel safe revealing that information to you would disappear.”

*Um, yeah, you definitely are forcing my hand!*

And with that, my father backed me into a corner. I had no idea how me revealing my boyfriend and my father revealing Hugh’s whereabouts were connected, but as far as I was concerned, any chances of evasive action or delay were now completely dead.

*Fine. Challenge accepted. I’m not confined to my room and other limited locations—I’ve completely eliminated that barrier. And under the assumption that Meet the Parents is unavoidable, I already cleared my post-junior ball schedule of all obligations aside from the survey I just went on—so at the moment, I’ve got heaps of spare time.*

I’m the type of gal who puts off my summer homework until the last day. I

was made for this!

“Please forget the last question I asked, Father. I do have a beloved. We love each other, just like you and Lord Edgar. I just worry... Wouldn’t revealing his identity end the peaceful quiet we’ve enjoyed thus far?”

“Just like me and Edgar...,” my father muttered, staring at Edgar. He followed it with a smirk and said, “I’m happy we could be role models...don’t you agree, Edgar?”

Before Edgar could answer, my father rose from his seat, walked over to Edgar, and leaned over. Then he pressed his lips to Edgar’s temple.

And I wasn’t the only one surprised. Edgar was so startled, he dropped the glass he was about to pick up. My father grabbed it.

“Enoch...”

With a stern look in his eye, Edgar grabbed my father’s collar and pulled him close. Then he whispered something. Surely my father heard it, but he did not so much as flinch.

I had seen my father and Edgar behave intimately in the past, but this was the first time I’d seen them handle each other like this.

And maybe that’s why...

...something felt amiss. And not because in-family BL made me gag, like the times I’d caught Sirius and Sil making out. At the very least, whenever I saw Sil and Sirius canoodling, it was always more like a, “Yeah, yeah, we get it, you’re so in love,” envious sort of feeling. It felt natural.

But when I saw the pair before me now—

“Oh my, I did not expect to find you here, Your Majesty—and Octavia as well?”

I turned to look in the direction of the voice. Beyond the closed door, that clear voice sailed through the hallway all the way into the room. With a glance at the entryway, Edgar released my father’s collar and my father set the glass he still gripped in his hand down on the table.

He headed to the door himself and opened it. The action looked rough,

coming from my father.

“Leif. What do you want?”

Standing behind the opened door was Leif Nightfellow.

Uncle Dearest.

To me, he shall always and forever be my messiah!

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My father and Uncle Dearest sat across from each other at the desk in his study. There was another person there, standing, by the way. It wasn't me or Edgar—it was Klifford. For all the stink he put up about Klifford coming in the room earlier, my father sure was keen to order him into the room when Uncle Dearest came in. So I shot him a *You may enter* command with my eyes as well.

He was on standby next to the door inside the room, and as far as I could tell...he was no longer holding his sandwiches. Either he had shoved them in his suit pocket or eaten them... I wondered which.

After a formal greeting to my father—king of the nation—Uncle Dearest put a thoughtful hand to his chin.

*Woo, Uncle Dearest's charcoal-gray eyes met mine a little.*

“With Lord Edgar and Princess Octavia here, I suppose I've disturbed you all.”

Taking advantage of my namedrop, I spoke to him, “Unc— Duke Nightfellow, so good to see you again.”

*Oops, I almost called him Uncle Dearest there.*

“Yes, indeed. So good to see you looking well.”

I basked in the glow of his warm gaze.

“I apologize for being unable to say good-bye properly at the junior ball,” he added with a bow.

“Oh, you aren't at fault.”

I mean, I fell asleep! No way could Uncle Dearest say good-bye to me then.

"I suppose...things were rather difficult for you after that."

There was a hint of empathy in his eyes.

"Ah—you mean the survey."

"Yes, I heard what happened. I wish I could have done something to help..."

*He heard...from Derek, I assume?*

"You helped *more than necessary* at the junior ball, Duke," my father said.  
"The survey would have been too much."

*"More than necessary"... Shots fired! My father is definitely acting weird today. He's more...emotional than usual? He was the same with Edgar...but he's clearly being salty with Uncle Dearest today. He usually keeps his feelings hidden. Did my cunning plan to mend their relationship by having Uncle Dearest give him the true crown backfire?*

I was sure that would improve my father's opinion of Uncle Dearest.

"It's the thought that counts," I butted in. "There weren't many casualties anyway...and the survey itself was carried out start to finish."

"Yes, like the distribution of flowers. I heard the people loved it. And my wife—she immediately put in a dress order at the clothing shop you both went to. She was terribly excited, let me tell you."

*Ooh! Did I help Melina's business? An order from a duchess is great PR!*

"She also suggested we go to the restaurant where you ate lunch. Oh, and she told me she already purchased a fan with wseven feathers...it's rather overwhelming," he finished with a sheepish smile.

"So did the shop of sundries also—"

But just as I said the word, I returned to my senses. Every shop I visited during the survey was immensely satisfying, so I had slipped into that bad habit unique to otaku: I wanted to spread the gospel. But wanting a bunch of customers to go to that shop of sundries was a selfish desire on my part. I know they should be left alone, and that now was the worst time to bring them up, besides.

“Yes, Princess... I heard you visited Lord Edgar’s family home?”

I felt the mood frost over around me. The malice came from my father.

“Leif,” he snapped, staring harshly at the man. “Enough chitchat. It’s intolerable.”

Uncle Dearest smiled.

“Forgive me. Chatting with Octavia is so much fun I trespassed on your kindness. For that, I apologize.”

He gave a flawless nobleman’s bow—though that was to be expected, since he was Derek’s father.

“At ease,” my father sighed.

Uncle Dearest complied.

“Leif. This is the fifth time now.”

*Huh? Fifth what?*

But it was Uncle Dearest’s next words that clarified what he meant.

“Due to a decree by the former king, the head of House Nightfellow is free to request an audience with His Majesty the King whenever he wishes. However, including now, you could count the number of times I have personally exercised this right on one hand. I do this in service of Esfia, I assure you. Please pardon me, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, I am well aware of your love for king and country.”

“Your words humble me, Your Majesty.”

My father lowered his chin with a silent, *“Out with it, then.”*

“Regarding the junior ball—and this pertains to Princess Octavia, too, of course—and the sentence you decided for the traitors we captured, Adjutants included... I have doubts, Your Majesty.”

The normal order of operations was to carry out an investigation, then hold trial, then carry out a sentence.

*But if he has doubts...that must mean they aren’t being given due process. Did*

*Uncle Dearest come here to negotiate directly with the king?*

“We should discuss this in private. Edgar. Octavia.”

In other words, “*Get out.*”

I took the hint.

“Come with me, Lord Edgar. Klifford, take the lead.”

Since Edgar’s bodyguard was nowhere in sight, it made the most sense for him to leave with someone who had a bodyguard.

“Thanks, Octavia.”

Klifford walked out of the study and Edgar followed behind. I stopped by the open door—but just before stepping outside, I spoke to the gentleman staying behind.

“Duke Nightfellow...”

He immediately looked at me.

There was something...something I’d wanted to confirm the next time I saw Uncle Dearest.

“Duke Nightfellow. You and the former head of the house...were you on good terms?”

He died the day Alexis was born, so Kihlgren surely had a relationship with the man before he became duke.

Uncle Dearest’s charcoal-gray eyes narrowed to slits, and he wasn’t the only one who reacted this way. My father’s face was completely emotionless, as if he had killed every bit of feeling that threatened to escape.

“You speak of the late Duke Kihlgren, I assume.”

“Yes.”

Uncle Dearest nodded once.

“Indeed. His will played a great role in my becoming head of House Nightfellow.”

“So...do you know what he looked like when he was young?”

“Yes, I do.” His answer was warm and peaceful.

“.....”

Uncle Dearest was not lying. He answered truthfully. Was that because *I* had asked him?

Then...why...? When he saw Rust in the Sky Chamber, why hadn't he reacted at all? Of course, he didn't *have* to react. Maybe he wasn't surprised by the sight of Rust because he already knew him? But...I didn't get that vibe. Maybe he knew Rust's name and knew the name of the eldest son of House Byrne was Rust.

And let's say he hadn't known what Rust looked like. If that were the case, he would have immediately thought of Duke Kihlgren the moment Rust took off his mask.

...Had he not known what the man had looked like when he was younger? No...that can't be true; Derek told me he saw a portrait of the young duke at their house. No way would Uncle Dearest not know that.

In addition...when I asked him that question...why did he give me such a non-answer? He was quiet. I know—just because he knows something, he's not obligated to tell me about it. Uncle Dearest did nothing wrong, but I just can't let this go...because of the connection this all has to *that mysterious young man*. The face...that looks just like his.

My father is just as suspect. What happened between him and Kihlgren? I was fixated on the fact that he looked like that mysterious young man, but in my father's case I think it's the other way around. He had beef with Duke Kihlgren—personal beef?

“Something troubling you?”

I quickly looked up at Edgar in a fluster. Behind him, I saw the pillar that young Alec used to hide behind. Since there were other bodyguards by the Great Corridor, we were going to drop off Edgar with them. Klifford would temporarily guard us both.

But we had already made it back to the Great Corridor. As Edgar walked on my left side, I was about to dismiss his question—but stopped myself.

“Yes,” I assented.

“I see.”

Edgar merely smiled and said nothing more. It was calming.

And it made me think, *it's now or never*.

“Lord Edgar, while on survey, I met your—”

“You called on my parents? Yes, the duke said so. Then again, I heard most of the details about the survey from Enoch.”

“So did you also know I put your parents in a horrible position?”

I had retraumatized them in the name of helping me. I had “borrowed” their horse and clothes that meant a lot to them so I could escape. Even though I had arranged to thank and repay them discreetly so that only they would know it was from me, I still wasn’t sure I had done the right thing.

“...Did you?” he asked.

“Yes, I did.”

Edgar chuckled.

“You know, for humble merchants, my parents refuse to do anything that truly displeases them. They’ve been that way ever since a certain event. No matter the circumstances, if they agreed to help you, it was their true will.”

“Yes, but I’m royalty... Didn’t my father promise we would stay away from them?”

“But *you* chose their shop as a survey destination, didn’t you, Octavia?”

“It was just a coincidence.”

I cringed as I said the words. It sounded strangely dishonest... Truthfully, it was an innocent happenstance, but if I said I brazenly and deliberately called on them during my survey, that might feel more genuine.

“All right, I’ll believe you.”



Now I was definitely reluctant to go, *Er—no—it was really a coincidence!*

“.....Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Anyway, if my father and mother accepted you, I’m in no place to complain, so don’t be tactful for my sake.”

All I could do was uphold my end of the bargain...and help Edgar.

*“If in the future—if our boy...if Edgar ever does anything treasonous...please save him.”*

I gazed silently at Edgar’s profile. A snippet of the exchange he had with my father before I first entered the study flashed across my mind.

“Lord Edgar, why did you invite Klifford to join us for breakfast?”

Okay, I went with a different question at the last second. I’m a coward.

“Well...maybe because I felt like rebelling against Enoch?” Edgar answered with a smile. “I really did think you would be more comfortable with Alderton there—that part was true,” he finished, with an even deeper smile.

“...” I just stood there.

“...Aren’t you going to ask?” he said.

“Well, I...”

“I know you overheard me and Enoch fighting.”

From the moment I set foot in the study, they’d shown no signs of that. The vibe was weird. Was today the only time I’d felt it? But...how...? Was it only today?

“Lord Edgar, do you dislike my father?”

It was inconceivable. I knew it was inconceivable, but I just couldn’t leave the question unasked.

But now that I thought about it...why was it inconceivable? I always just took it for granted that, since my father and Edgar were married, I just assumed they were in love, too.

But...what if my assumptions were wrong?

“Well, I hate him more than anyone in the world, I suppose?”

My eyes went wide. I thought my heart would stop. I turned my head sharply to the left.

“Because he couldn’t protect the one he was supposed to,” Edgar muttered, his eyes empty.

“.....”

The one he was supposed to protect... I think I knew who he meant. I thought back to Edgar’s family home. Of the family painting, hanging on their wall.

Of the girl who was in the painting, but no longer in this world.

“But...then...why...did you...?”

*Why did you marry my father?*

The bright smile returned to Edgar’s face. He stopped in his tracks and peered into my face. “Wow, you really fell for that, didn’t you? I was only teasing...”

I stopped walking and looked up at Edgar. I smiled weakly.

“That’s a cruel joke.”

“Sorry?” Edgar replied.

In my heart, I knew it wasn’t a joke. But Edgar wanted to pass it off as a joke, so I played along. For now.

“Don’t worry about me and Enoch. We’re just going through a rough patch—all couples do. You take care of yourself first,” Edgar added.

His hand froze for a moment as it reached for my head.

“...May I?” he asked, indicating his own hand.

He didn’t need to ask permission.

Well, no, maybe I would have recoiled or avoided him like last time if he had moved too suddenly.

“Yes,” I nodded obediently.

Since I knew he was going to pat my head, I didn’t flinch the same way I had when he put the Lieche orchid in my hair.

*It tickles...*

It was a completely different feeling from Klifford's head-patting the day before. I was Edgar's daughter... Well, neither of us thought of our relationship that way, but the action was still very...familial, I guess. I felt like his little sister, maybe. Could it be—that he did this to Irene once?

“Whoa, there...”

Edgar suddenly pulled away, as if he remembered something.

*Aww, I could've used more head-patting...*

I turned to where Edgar was looking.

*Behind me?*

But all I saw behind me was Klifford, watching over us both. I traced the gaze that ran between Klifford and Edgar.

*This feels different from how he stared at the guard in the dungeon. After all, it's not like Edgar did anything suspicious to me—he even asked permission to pat my head. In other words, Klifford had no need to take action as my bodyguard. So...what is it?*

“I see you and Alderton match,” Edgar said suddenly, warmth in his voice.

*We match...*

“Your Blackfeather and his sword tassel.”

*Urgh. Hearing Edgar say “Blackfeather” really hurts my pride. Way to rub it in my face that even Edgar knows all about the infamous Blackfeather...*

But that's my Lord Edgar! So you noticed! You noticed that I made Klifford a sword tassel from wreven feathers! Incidentally, the first person who noticed was Sasha, if you can believe it! She was like, “Is this related to the proclamation you made at the junior ball...?”

“Yes, it was a gift from me to Klifford.” I opened Blackfeather with a flourish.

Gotta push that they're made from the same material...wreven feathers!

“I think that suits Alderton's sword better than its former decoration. At a glance, one can tell he works for you. Alderton,” Edgar addressed Klifford

directly. “Would you mind removing this tassel so I could have a better look at it? It sparks my interest. You’re all right with it, aren’t you, Octavia?”

“It belongs to Klifford. You don’t need *my* permission.”

*But Lord Edgar...you never once asked to get a better look at my Blackfeather!*

“Alderton, what do you say?” he asked again.

“If I am allowed to choose yes or no...then might I say no?” His deep indigo eyes stared back into Edgar’s.

“I thought you’d say that.”

Klifford subtly bowed his head. “Do excuse me. This tassel is part of my weapon, and a weapon should not be touched by others in vain, regardless of social standing.”

*Whoa. Sh-should I cover for Klifford? I mean, Edgar asked nicely and had a good reason, but he was just like, “Hell no” to the king’s husband!*

Even good-natured Edgar would be pissed by that!

Edgar chuckled softly.

“Regardless of social standing, eh? Then what if Octavia asked you the same?”

“She is the one I serve. I have no reason to resist her.”

*True. All this time, he’s let me touch his sword and loaned me his dagger. So wait, would he have refused if I’d made one wrong move...? His weapon... Yeah, he did seem really uneasy when he had to take his sword off when we practiced dancing.*

“Well, I respect your wishes. Looks like I overstepped.”

The opposite of my worst fears came to pass. Not only was Edgar unfazed by Klifford’s reply, but he also actually smiled softly.

Our conversation ended there. We resumed our walk down the Great Corridor and approached the door just as another bodyguard ran over to us.

*Well, our task is done, I guess.*

“Thank you for accompanying me,” Edgar said.

I shook my head. It was extremely unlikely anything would happen to him in the castle, but after the extremely unlikely thing that happened only the day before, there was no way I could leave Edgar all by himself !

Edgar's bodyguard approached us. After a brief exchange of words, we turned to part ways. Just before we went, Edgar said, "Octavia, have you also had a change of heart?"

*A what now?*

"A change of...heart?"

"When we spoke in the garden, I suspected...you've changed a little, haven't you?"

"Oh... Have I?"

"You're much easier to talk to now."

I was floored. The way he phrased that...I know what that's code for!

"Are you saying...that I was bitchy?"

Edgar laughed and shook his head. "No, no, not that at all! More like, the thick wall around you got thinner? I'm happy about it. I'm also glad you have a bodyguard worthy of receiving a tassel as a gift." He glanced at Klifford, then gently back at me.

*A wall...*

*I guess to everyone except Alec... No, even Alec. I can't say I never put up walls with him.* I didn't let it show on my face, but I was laughing at myself on the inside.

It was then that a thought struck me: Maybe it was the same for Edgar. Being kind and gentle was his way of keeping everyone at a distance.

"Lord Edgar. I made a promise."

Even if what I have to say is unclear to Edgar.

"A promise?"

"To your parents."

I'll help him. Such a need shouldn't arise in the first place. But if it does.

"So it's okay to get excited," I assured him.

"Well, that makes me happy."

If Edgar remembers what I said—then that makes me happy, too.

"Of course I'm excited about meeting your beloved on the special day."

*Th-that was uncalled for, Lord Edgar!*

And with a playful smirk and twinkle of brown eyes behind his spectacles, he added, "I'm much more excited than before."

And what in the world would give you a reason to be more excited?!

I thought my schedule was clear...and boy, was I wrong. Thinking back, the three days between the junior ball and the survey felt like a mini summer vacation. But now, if I miss even one day of school, I'll be in big trouble! Believe it or not, it's no different for princesses!

So even though I couldn't possibly take care of all my tasks in one day...I chose from three days' worth of tasks and crammed as much as I could into one day. I also followed up on all the things that concerned me after the survey.

First, there was Sirius's behavior. According to Matilda, despite dealing with the survey aftermath, he was spending his time quite normally. I put a pin in talking to him, thinking it might be best to wait. He wasn't making any moves, either.

Sil was being handled as a victim of Hugh. But at the same time, because of what had happened in the Sky Chamber, he was treated differently—per his request—and was under house arrest. He was getting the VIP treatment, though, so nothing to worry about in that department. There were also no signs of his appetite failing or his falling into a stupor. I wanted to visit him...but that was dicey since it required Sirius's permission. And if I did go see him, that would only complicate matters further... But should I just say screw it and go see him anyway? I'm still mulling that one over.

Nathan was still in recovery. His injuries were not life-threatening, but it would take a while before he was in soldier-shape again. That said, I heard he's been out of bed and giving the doctor a headache. I also heard that Nathan hasn't spoken a word about Hugh.

Then there were Guy and Heller. Even though on the surface, our survey had ended without a hitch, news of a carriage returning to the castle carrying Heller in a dress and Guy as his bodyguard spread to a portion of the guard. They had been through enough that I thought they deserved a day off, but since that would clash with the story we were going with, giving them the day off would seem unnatural, so they were both carrying out a normal day's work.

And mine own eyes hath already confirmed it! Since visiting them today right after yesterday's shenanigans would do more harm than good, I sneaked by and stole a little peek at them. I happened upon Guy talking to a soldier who had dead eyes, and Heller was with them...but when Guy happened to look in my and Klifford's direction, his head abruptly turned in the other direction, so maybe he saw us?

I wrote them a letter of thanks and arranged for it to be sent to them. It was the least I could do. But once the dust settles, I want to talk to them in person. It would be awkward to summon them by name...but even if I was going to fake a coincidence and bump into them, I couldn't exactly talk with them out in the open until the case was closed.

I flopped onto my bed, pencil in hand, tapping the pages of my diary as I flipped through it.

To be honest, there were still heaps of problems and concerns. However...

"At least there's only one life-and-death problem remaining."

My pencil froze at a single line of Japanese text.

"Reexamine the fake boyfriend situation."

It was my pre-bedtime solo plan-of-attack sesh!

Okay, first question: How much longer is my deferment period?

Answer: Time remaining before Meet the Parents where I can move about

freely is six days.

And just today, I gained another reason other than hubris why I must see that day through. Without a fake boyfriend, I wouldn't learn where Hugh was relocated.

Then a thought popped into my mind... Do I actually need to know that?

The nightmare scenario I had envisioned at first was as good as avoided now, so I didn't need to stick my neck out. I could just let my father and my brother (with memories) handle this.

And yet I didn't want to, probably because I felt guilty about what happened to Hugh. I kept asking myself if there was something I could have done before he went through with the crime. That was the biggest reason for this feeling weighing on me.

I didn't want to have that regret. I had no idea how everything was going to be settled and what shape that would take, but I couldn't rest until I saw with my own eyes that Hugh was going to be okay.

And before I could take any sort of action on that front, I had a choice to make.

I tossed and turned in bed, sighing now and then as I ran through the choices over and over in my brain.

Naturally, the question was: Who should I ask to be my fake boyfriend?

Ever since the day I made my bold, self-serving lie, my relationships had transformed. I decided to analyze that a little.

And the results: After Rust and Guy, my next target would have to be...

"Derek's the only one left."

I nodded heavily and wrote Derek's name into my diary.

Derek Nightfellow—eldest son of house Nightfellow and Uncle Dearest's son.

I'll swallow my pride and ask Derek!

Real talk, I wouldn't have even considered Derek a candidate when the Meet the Parents date was set. A major factor was that he was Uncle Dearest's son,



but he was also Sirius's best friend, and he and Sil were also pretty close. Given that and our messy history, I always perceived Derek as being on Team Sirius.

But after the way he acted at the junior ball and the survey, I came to realize that even though Derek was technically in my brother's camp...he also kind of wasn't. I got the impression he would help me out if I asked.

If nothing else, when I told him my crazy proposal, he would at least hear me out with an open mind.

In the event that he agreed to be my fake boyfriend, I would have to worry about how that might affect his relationship with Sirius. But considering what happened during the survey, I had a feeling I could calm any storms that arose from that as well.

Also, if there's any guy everyone would blindly accept as my boyfriend when I go, "*It was him all along!*"—it was Derek.

For starters, his and my families are real tight, and he's the eldest son of a duke. And to pile it on thicker, Derek and I are childhood friends! It wouldn't be at all surprising to find a secret romance had blossomed between us. You know, the whole, "I didn't notice him when we were younger, but once we started to mature, I saw him with new eyes" trope.

Additionally, nobody could gripe about a gap in social standing. It's like, if the heir to a duke won't do, then who will?

The only downside was the way my father would treat Uncle Dearest. But looking back on all their public behavior thus far, my father was nice enough to Derek. I didn't get the sense he judged him for being Uncle Dearest's son.

So, putting it all together...if I introduced Derek as my boyfriend, it's very unlikely my father would exercise his veto power. When backed into a corner like this, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like Derek was the only choice! That's how I was starting to feel anyway.

Well, actually, this totally wouldn't fly, but there is another candidate just as good as Derek.

It's the very hero of *The Noble King* himself—Sil Burks! My Lord Sil!

“Too bad I can’t just ask Sil...”

Just like with Derek, our experience at the junior ball had brought us much closer together. Sil was definitely the easiest guy for me to ask.

He would be a fake boyfriend through and through, but only until I found my own true love. I figured it would take about a year? And we’d have to simulate the whole thing, from courtship to engagement to a satisfying breakup. I knew that, with Sil, we could breeze through the whole thing while still being friends.

If only he and I didn’t have a complicated relationship. If only he weren’t already Sirius’s lover!

In my fantasy, I could practically hear him humbly replying, *“I’m all right with it, if you’ll have me.”*

Then again, even if I wanted to ask him, it would be kinda hard to do that right now. He’s under surveillance, and Sil really isn’t in a good place to be a fake boyfriend anyway.

And he was already Sirius’s lover! That really said it all.

“In other words, it’s not in the cards...”

I hung my head in disappointment.

And thus, my only remaining target was Derek!

I drew a circle around the name *Derek* in my diary.

Hmm.

However, I must never forget that this whole arrangement has to serve me. Truth be told, I wasn’t sure what sort of resistance Derek might put up.

Of course it was possible he would reject me outright, just like Guy.

And if that happened—if I failed to secure Derek as my partner in crime—there was still one option left.

I gripped my pencil firmly.

For I still had one forbidden trump card up my sleeve!

A last resort named Alexis!

My angel of a little brother, Alec of course!

Even though he felt like a brother to me, by blood we were just cousins. And since this world was modeled after a book series written in Japan, marriage between cousins was legal in Esfia. He still met all the requirements to be my fake boyfriend!

A part of me always wanted to confide in Alec about my dilemma anyway. With Alec, I could put my hideous vanity on full display! And he would accept me with open arms and an open heart!

*“The truth is, I have no boyfriend! Sirius just pissed me off so much I mouthed off and now I can’t take it back! I tried to find somebody, but I couldn’t! So please, I just have to make it through the Meet the Parents! I wanna take the piss out of my brother!”* See, if I could just tell him the truth like that...!

Alec would cheerfully agree to my plan...the deceptive plan by his shameless sister.

There’s just one catch...

With a start, I sat up then propped my chin on my elbow in bed.

My dynamic with Alec was not so much he-protects-me, but rather I-protect-him. With Alec, I didn’t feel like the baby sister Maki was. Being reborn as Octavia had given me a taste of maturity I’d never felt before. It was likely the sort of feeling my big sister felt for me in my past life.

And while I was itching to tell Alec the truth, I also just wanted to look cool in front of him...as his big sis! At present, the latter weighed heavier on me.

As Alec’s big sis, who worked really hard to be a good role model, I just didn’t want him to see me at my most cringe!

Alec wasn’t in the capital at the moment, but he promised he would be back before Meet the Parents...in ten days from his departure. Put another way, if I’m being really honest here, I didn’t want to have to ask Alec for help unless I absolutely couldn’t find anybody else. I didn’t want to give him weird things to worry about.

Therefore...

I drew another circle around the name.

...my target is Derek!

And thus—

I reached for the invitation on my desk. It was from Lucinda Nightfellow. With a glance at the surname, I knew it was from Duchess Nightfellow, Uncle Dearest's wife.

It was an invitation to the Nightfellow villa in the royal capital for a private tea party tomorrow. She asked that I let her know if the date or time was unsuitable for me.

It was delivered to my room that afternoon by the official channels, but it suddenly hit me—the true sender of this invitation was Derek.

After our stroll under the kallum trees during the survey, I already had an open invitation to visit his home. But Derek had gone through the official channels so that it wouldn't be considered at all amiss for me to visit the Nightfellow villa.

On paper, he made it a personal invitation from his mother to me, which made sense. An invitation from his father would have worked as well, but it was more natural from a fellow lady.

I had already sent in my RSVP, "I would be delighted to attend tomorrow," and my schedule was all cleared! That's why I had crammed three days' worth of work into today!

It's giving, "two birds with one stone."

I can pay the Nightfellows a visit and get my fake boyfriend at the same time!

So it shall be.

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When visiting the Nightfellow villa for tea, I took extra care not to draw too much attention to myself. Having said that, going incognito would make me stick out like a sore thumb, so I took the princess carriage there. My driver was

the one who had given me the smoothest ride ever to the junior ball—Karl! I just had to request him this time, since I wasn't able to have him drive us around for the survey.

I took as few guards as possible—just a couple passionate soldiers on horseback to ride alongside the carriage. Once I arrived at the villa, I would have just Klifford by my side.

The question of what kind of security detail a royal would take with her to visit a duke was actually a rather sensitive one. If you took a heavily militarized approach, that made for a rather touchy situation. It was basically advertising, *I don't trust you, bitch. Got it? Wanna fight?* Major threatening vibes. Hella toxic.

Meanwhile, if you answered a formal invitation with barely any guards, it was like, *I super trust you, bestie! Love you!* Hella BFFs.

It varied from noble to noble, of course. For ducal houses, you could basically take the above interpretation, and that was why I visited the Nightfellow villa with the latter model!

Also, given how snippy my father was with Uncle Dearest yesterday, I wanted to project just what a good relationship the royal family and the Nightfellows really had!

“Good afternoon, Princess Octavia. We've been expecting you.”

After about a thirty-minute gentle jostle in the carriage, I arrived at the Nightfellow villa, and Derek greeted me with the impeccable manners of a duke-to-be. This was nothing new, however. His manners always left nothing to be desired.

“As I thought, it was you who sent the invitation, Derek.”

I was secretly thrilled that my detective work was right. And by the way...my outfit's okay, right? I'm kinda worried Derek's impeccable dukeness is upstaging me.

I lowered my gaze just a little, then looked up again. My left hand was gloved and safe as long as I had a bandage around it, which was a necessity whenever I went out. In my right hand, I held Blackfeather closed.

I was wearing the third dress I'd tried on at Melinda's shop. It was predominantly red with black mixed in. In style, it resembled the one I wore to the junior ball. Melinda finished the alterations early and it was delivered first thing this morning! And since I didn't have to leave for tea until the afternoon, I tried it on then and there. It was a perfect fit! I had bought it to wear as an everyday dress, but even as an outing dress, it did not disappoint!

I also got Sasha's seal of approval.

"Your ensemble is perfect as the goddess of wrevens herself!" she said.

.....Wait, huh? Now I'm starting to think that wasn't a compliment...

I snapped Blackfeather open for an emotional reset.

"Well, to be honest, our relationship is a bit odd, Princess. Surely people would talk, and I wanted to avoid that," Derek explained.

And yeah, I could see his point... Me visiting him on my own without my brother was a little sus. I could definitely imagine tongues wagging. Since Sirius was there when I received the invitation, he wouldn't think anything of it, but anyone other than him would surely let their imaginations run wild.

"I asked my mother to—" Derek blinked and cut himself off. His brown eyes shifted to where Klifford was standing, a few feet away. ".....At the junior ball..."

*Hmm? The junior ball, what?*

"...you said you would give Alderton a tassel for his sword...and I see you've done just that." Derek smiled lightly—his nobleman's smile.

I always thought Derek didn't feel any creep factor regarding Blackfeather, so I assumed he wouldn't feel uneasy about the wreven feather tassel, but maybe I was wrong? Derek was an expert swordsman, after all. Maybe he felt that putting wreven feathers on a sword was another matter entirely, or something like that?

I tended to forget just how unlucky wrevens were considered. Having a man who made a living off fighting affix wreven feathers to his sword was basically like happily putting one of your feet in a bucket before a battle. But you see, by making a point to use wreven feathers, you could say that death is on your side

on the battlefield! And Klifford seems cool with it, besides. Take that, superstition!

“Why, yes. Was there ever any doubt?”

Derek shook his head.

“No, I didn’t exactly doubt you...” His polite smile vanished. “I’m just... surprised, I guess,” he muttered, scratching his cheek.

“Derek! Why are you making Her Highness stand outside?!”

A voice rang from the villa entrance and out appeared a lone noblewoman. She wore an elegant purple dress—it was Lady Lucinda, Uncle Dearest’s wife! As Derek’s mother, she had brown hair and eyes just like his.

Derek sighed softly. “My mother has prepared a simple tea. Would you care to join us?” Then he suddenly slipped into escort mode. “Your hand, my lady. Let me take you there.”

When I saw his extended left hand, I hesitated for a moment. He really didn’t have to go that far on my behalf...but I guess it was one of those social graces a true host owes his guest. In Esfia, it doesn’t matter which hand you offer, but he was offering his left instead of his right because my left hand was wounded. He was taking care not to hurt me.

Funny, seeing how up until very recently, the very idea of Derek escorting me like a perfect gentlemen seemed ludicrous.

I gave him my right hand, Blackfeather and all, and with a quick glance behind me, Derek smiled.

I walked the familiar halls of the villa on Derek’s arm. I used to come here often. And as we walked, it became clear to me that my memories of the place were not at all rusty.

As a ducal family, the Nightfellows had money and power, but their villa in the royal capital was surprisingly quaint in design and size. The walk from the property line to the house itself was short, but aesthetically, the garden was the best or second-best in the land. Though the house itself was not necessarily

gorgeous to look at, it only contained items worthy of a ducal family.

The adjoining lands that housed the Nightfellow private army were also quite vast. The house itself may be quaint, but when you took the land in its entirety into account, that was another matter entirely.

There was a spot in the villa with a great view of the training grounds—the perfect nook for some BL fantasizing. The other bonus was in the summer, when the men trained shirtless and you got to admire some abs.

As I reminisced about those summer days, we arrived at the location of our little tea party—the villa courtyard. Unlike the other gardens on the property, this garden was inside the house proper. Inside a gazebo adorned with stained glass, Lucinda was waiting for us.

She was seated with someone else I recognized. The other guest was about twelve years old, with fluffy silver locks and green eyes. It was the girl I'd met at the Sky Chamber.

So Uncle Dearest took her in then and there...back to the Nightfellow villa for safekeeping. She's blind, I think. She seemed scared back at the Sky Chamber... and she hadn't looked too well, but now she looks quite calm and healthy. Does she know her Adjutant, Emilio, was captured...?

Perhaps he wasn't much of a substitute, but at the moment, she was being assisted by the redheaded young man Steyn. He was positioned so he could assist her at the drop of a hat. From the look of it, he was waiting on her, too.

"Mother...I hate to tell you, but Steyn makes a horrible bodyguard."

Two empty chairs waited for us. Derek pulled out one for me as he groaned and then threw his mother that remark.

"It doesn't matter, because he isn't acting as a bodyguard. Besides, Her Highness is here. Save your complaints for later."

"Yes, yes. A little too late for that, I'm afraid."

After I sat down, Derek was the last to lower himself into his seat. Klifford was on standby diagonally behind me. Taking that as a signal, Lucinda broke the ice.

"Welcome to our home, Princess Octavia. Do forgive the sudden invitation.



Truly, I hope we didn't offend? My husband and son both lie to me all the time, so I don't trust them."

"Hey, don't lump me in with Father."

Lucinda was the same age as Uncle Dearest. She was an elegant lady with her hair up—and it need not be said she was also a beauty. She had an air of sophistication, yet she was gentle. Neither was she pompous—but it was a well-known fact that she could be tough as nails when needed.

"Oh, it was no lie, your grace. I was the one who broached the subject of a visit with Derek to begin with."

"Well! Then I suppose I shall trust his word. Now, Your Highness, I hope you and I can have a nice chat. Since the invitation was sent in my name, I do wish to give you a warm welcome. I've prepared tea and sweets for us all. I hope you like them."

Steyn proceeded to pour tea into our cups, and on the table was a spread of goodies just begging to be eaten.

Oooh! It's the villa's personal chef's specialty, eba! I looked forward to it every time I came, since it could only be eaten at the Nightfellow villa. Every time eba is presented at the table, I'm always the one who finishes it! Eba are so profound, there's a variety of delicate flavors one can achieve with variations in the recipe. They even had some working-class favorites, too—it was obvious they chose the menu to suit my tastes.

Lucinda was friends with my mother, so she knew most of my favorite foods. Having said that, whenever I visited my mother...I always took full advantage and requested all my favorite foods! All the best working-class cuisine Esfia had to offer! I made my mother sick of the stuff. Anyway, Lucinda had come to visit my mother on one of those occasions.

In most tea parties, a certain level of refinement was expected. It wasn't enough that the food tasted good, it needed to evoke a sense of nobility, not only in flavor, but in appearance as well. Peasant sweets were avoided. When tea was prepared for me, a princess, that sort of thing just never made an appearance because it was seen as disrespectful.

Peasant food also really clashed with the vibe, which even I could understand. I once tried to get all my favorite foods to become popular tea party fare. But if everything they served was my favorite, tea parties would definitely become chaotic affairs. It's tough, communicating the foods I like, so I decided I'd have to take baby steps. As a result, the list of people who knew my true favorite foods was very short.

But this menu was only the sort of menu that Lucinda—as somebody in the know—could select.

“Why, you selected this menu for me, Lady Lucinda. Of course I like them.”

Like hell I wouldn't like them!

“...”

As Derek beheld the spread on the table, he cast Lucinda a pressing glance. Derek was right to be uncomfortable, but in this very specific case, he was wrong...!

All my favorite treats were thoughtfully shifted toward my seat. The nobleman's equivalents were also on the table.

Lucinda smiled, then turned to the girl at the table who hadn't yet spoken a word and raised her hand.

“And now—pardon asking your permission after the fact, Your Highness, but I've invited another guest to our little tea party. This is Liliciana Turchen, daughter of the Earl of Turchen. She will be our guest at the villa for a while... I just thought you two should be acquainted, Your Highness, as I doubt you've heard anything from my husband.” She glared at Derek and added, “Or my son.”

“I simply didn't have a chance to tell her.”

But Derek's excuse did nothing to break Lucinda's death glare.

“Um... Let me introduce myself,” the silver-haired girl said, rising to her feet.

“Good afternoon,” I said. “I'm Octavia.”

Her wandering eyes landed on my seat. She gripped the hem of her skirt and curtsayed. “My name is Liliciana. It is an honor to meet you, Princess Octavia.”

...“Meet” me?

But we already met in the Sky Cham— Oh. Right, my voice. I didn’t say anything when Liliciana was in the room. She might have sensed my presence, but it would make sense that she wouldn’t recognize that I was there that night.

Besides, the Nightfellows probably didn’t tell Liliciana more than she needed to know.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Thank you, you’re too kind. I’m honored to speak with you, Princess Octavia.”

Liliciana smiled sweetly and sat down. Was she nervous? If she was, she didn’t look it anymore. Lucinda might have invited Liliciana to tea for her own good. To distract her.

She probably wondered why she was being kept here or why Emilio wasn’t by her side. And even if nobody told her why, she surely was able to get some sense of it.

And now I, too, had learned that the girl I had met in the Sky Chamber was staying at the Nightfellow villa as their guest.

“...” Liliciana suddenly looked at me again. Well, not at me exactly—?

“Um, pardon me, but is there anybody else here besides the Princess, Lady Lucinda, Lord Derek, and Lord Steyn?”

“My bodyguard is also here,” I answered.

That is where Liliciana’s gaze was directed—Klifford. And even with the gazes of the other two on him, Klifford didn’t bat an eye. After we stared at him like that for a while, he raised an eyebrow at me as if to ask, *Something wrong?* But there was no way I could tell him I was just staring for no reason.

I shook my head and turned back to face the front. My answer seemed to have disappointed Liliciana.

“Liliciana?”

“I knew it wasn’t him...but he has the same aura as my attendant...”

The same aura... If her “attendant” was Emilio, then what he had in common with Klifford was being an Adjutant. Was this Adjutant-related, then?

“In what way are they the same?” Derek suddenly asked.

“Their...way of being, I suppose? Except Her Highness’s bodyguard feels much sharper.”

“Sharper than Emilio, eh...?” Derek murmured to himself. Liliciana shivered at the sound of Emilio’s name.

Lucinda clapped her hands together. “Come! The chef will cry if we don’t eat this delicious spread. Do go ahead, Your Highness.”

In simple gatherings and small meals like this, it was customary to offer a short prayer to the Sky God on an individual basis. After finishing my little prayer, I went straight for the eba. How many years has it been? Nightfellow’s specialty eba, you are mine at last!

“Lady Liliciana, what would you like to eat? I can tell you what’s available.”

Steyn told Liliciana what was on the table and then gave her whatever she asked for. And I was tempted to demand why Steyn’s manner of speech was way out of character.

Maybe that was why Steyn was with Liliciana—because she was comfortable around him? She looked much more natural when she spoke with him. And as I quietly watched over the pair, I nodded in satisfaction at Liliciana’s selections.

Good, good, she went for the eba first. One! Of! Us!

Lucinda and Derek kept their hands off the sweets and stuck to their tea. Then Lucinda set down her cup and gave Derek a harsh warning. “And Derek—don’t you dare say anything depressing during tea. A tea party should be light and festive.”

“Don’t you mean, a bitter battle between ladies?”

He had a point. As a rule, Lucinda’s tea parties were drama-free. Everyone could attend without worry. But not all tea parties were like that. More than half of them were like a battle? A factional dispute, at least.

“Derek, mind your words. For goodness’ sake, who taught you that turn of

phrase?”

“My father, whom you love so very much.”

Ahh, this dynamic...hasn't changed a bit.

Whenever I came to the Nightfellow home, I always felt the family vibes. The unique nature of Esfia's royal family was partially to blame. But if I couldn't be part of a normal family, then I at least wanted to breathe the same air as one.

Uncle Dearest was a devoted husband. He had no male lover on the side, and Derek was loved and cared for by both his parents. Speaking of which...I didn't see Uncle Dearest around.

“Is the duke not home?”

“I'm afraid my father is out today.”

“My husband is rarely home this time of year,” his mother added.

“Well, I saw him at the castle yesterday, so I was hoping I could see him today...”

“Oh my. At the castle, you say?”

“Yes. He came regarding the survey—he told me about the dress you ordered and that he invited you out to that restaurant with the delicious coffee.”

“And he came all that way just to tell you that, Your Highness?” Lucinda rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “It was all very welcome information for me... All the places you visited on your survey aren't the sort of places I would ordinarily visit...understandably so.”

Lucinda's eyes wandered over toward Derek, probably at Steyn, who was distributing some chirro jam-filled cookies. Ooh, I'm gonna have some chirro cookies, too!

“Though somebody in this very house had already gone to those places on that very day.”

Steyn muttered a little “Oops” under his breath and said, “My lady...how did you know?”

“See if I tell the men who lie to me all the time. I have my own information

network, you know. That Leif can be so impulsive with his secrecy...”

“Mother...sometimes there are things we really can’t tell you.” Derek stepped up to defend his father. “I can understand why that makes you unhappy, but please stop giving Father the silent treatment. It hurts him more than you. Remember that one time you made him mope?”

Since the story came from her son Derek himself, it was most credible.

“Oh, I would love to see his grace like that just once,” Steyn cooed.

Sorry, Uncle Dearest, but I’m with Steyn on this one!

“Duke Nightfellow...mopes when he can’t speak with you, Lady Lucinda?” Liliciana sounded intrigued, and I was, too. I couldn’t imagine Uncle Dearest moping.

“Yes...and it’s incredibly annoying.”

Derek folded his arms with the authority of someone who was there.

A peculiar look filled Lady Lucinda’s face as she reminisced.

“Yes, quite.”

They shared a mother-son understanding.

After that, we chatted and depleted most of the refreshments. Then our tea party came to a close.

“Thank you so much for a lovely afternoon, Lady Lucinda. Good to meet you, Liliciana.”

“Likewise, Your Highness.”

“I also had a great time!” Liliciana cried with an energetic nod as Steyn handed her cane to her. She smiled like a forest sprite.

I smiled in turn. God, she’s so cute... If I had a little sister, she’d probably be like her. In looks, at least. Her hair is the same as mine and Sirius’s. Meanwhile, her eyes remind me of Alec and my father. If somebody said she had Esfian royal blood running through her veins, I’d totally believe them.

“Steyn, escort Liliciana to her room.”

“Yes, your grace.”

As Liliciana dangerously teetered off, Steyn chased after her.

I took a deep breath in and turned to face Derek. Now that fun time was over, I had to accomplish what I set out to do when I came here to the Nightfellow villa.

I had to, but...

Seeing the drop of tea left on the table, I had a sudden thought and turned back to look at Klifford. Then I approached Lucinda and whispered a request in her ear. “...if that would be possible?”

I still hadn’t heard from Klifford what he thought of that sandwich yesterday. Since I had asked to hear his impressions, maybe that meant he had none, but my methods of sussing out Klifford’s tastes were effective as far as I was concerned! So I made a little request along that avenue! It would satisfy my need, while I was at it.

The brown eyes just like Derek’s lit up in Lucinda’s face.

“Request accepted, Your Highness.”

## 74

Now, let’s play the memory game.

What was the original reason I decided to come to the Nightfellow villa?

Was it to ask Derek to be my fake boyfriend? No.

It was to learn more about what Duke Kihlgren looked like when he was younger. That’s where we have to start.

I asked Derek if he could show me the portrait of Duke Kihlgren, and thus, hanging before me now was that portrait. We were in a long hallway on the second floor of the villa, and this was one of the portraits that adorned the walls.

For a hallway, it certainly was vacant. Derek probably ordered his servants to keep away. It was just me, Derek, and Klifford, but that was a good thing. It

gave me a chance to really get a long look at the painting. I closed Blackfeather and looked up at the large portrait.

I used to walk down this hallway all the time when I frequented this villa, but I guess I always breezed past this painting without giving it a glance... After all, I had no memory of the name of the painting or who it was a painting of. At the time, I probably thought it was just a painting of some random old duke in the family.

The Kihlgren in this painting...how old was he? He died in his eighties, so maybe he's around that age. And as for the features I would associate with that mysterious young man...the hair and eye color maybe? Definitely not the spitting image of him.

If somebody told me, "*This painting is him!*" Well...I guess I'd sort of see the resemblance?

"Lord Derek, you never met Duke Kihlgren, I take it?" I asked Derek as we stared at the painting. I remembered him telling me before that he had only seen paintings of the man, but I just wanted to double-check.

"That's right, I never met him. My father's the only one who has."

"Not Lady Lucinda?"

Derek shook his head. "I asked my mother the same question, and she said no."

Lucinda never met him, either? That struck me as odd. Then again, I hadn't met Edgar's parents until a couple days ago. Maybe there was a special reason...

"I think it was my father's will to keep her away from him," Derek added, as if he'd read my mind.

"What makes you think that?"

"My father despises any situation that will put my mother in danger."

Well, of course! He's a devoted husband!

"Since he wouldn't let my mother meet someone he knew, it had to be for that reason."



For...“that reason”?

“He thought it would put my mother in danger to meet Kihlgren, so it was best to keep them apart—that’s the sense I got from it.”

“Are you saying Duke Kihlgren was a bad person?”

“...” Derek put a hand to his chin in thought.

“No. At least, I’ve never heard any bad rumors about him from anybody in the family. King Enoch interacted with Duke Kihlgren frequently before he married. I even heard that the late duke relied on him much more than the former king.”

That...can’t be true, can it?

That was my sincere impression. My father couldn’t have possibly been friends with Duke Kihlgren. If he was, he never would have reacted the way he did...

“What about after he was married?”

Derek shook his head. “I’m not sure. All I know is that they saw each other much less often. I looked into it but could find nothing.”

So they used to be friends, but they had a falling out? That would explain why my father seemed uncomfortable when Duke Kihlgren’s name came up.

But one thing remained uncertain—whether or not Duke Kihlgren truly resembled Rust and that mysterious young man.

*“Kihlgren is deceased. Rust Byrne looks like my uncle...your great-uncle. The spitting image of him, when he was young. It was almost...as if he had come back from the dead.”*

It all started with that confession from my father.

“Lord Derek, what about the painting of Duke Kihlgren when he was young?”

I remember him saying he saw it once, but that it was gone. He also said he would look for it.

“I haven’t found it yet...” Derek turned just his face toward me and said, “I have a question to ask you. Yesterday, did you say something to my father? Not pertaining to the survey, that is.”

“Yes... I asked him if he knew what Duke Kihlgren looked like when he was young.”

“So I was right.” Derek nodded to himself. I shot him a questioning glance. Then Derek smiled and said, “I’ll amend my former statement. I haven’t found the painting yet, but I do know where it is. I think it’s probably—”

But then he stopped midsentence. He looked at Klifford, then exhaled loudly.

“Princess Octavia—I wish to avoid another junior ball mishap, so could you please tell Alderton not to be on guard?”

Junior ball mishap? Which one? There were so many...

“I will show one of my reserve daggers now, and not with the intent of attacking you, Princess. I need it.”

Oh, so that’s the junior ball mishap! The one where Derek had a weapon and Klifford stood protectively in front of me!

But as far as I could tell, Derek wasn’t carrying a longsword now...

“You arm yourself even at the villa, Lord Derek?”

Isn’t this, like, your home? I would totally just let it all hang out. And wait, he said “one of” his reserve daggers, so that means he’s got two, right?

“You never know what might happen.” Derek gave a cool smile. Too cool, almost?

A glance at Klifford revealed his hand was on his own sword hilt.

All the pieces just came together.

It was okay that Derek was carrying right now. Klifford and I both determined at the junior ball that he was safe. The issue was his reaching to take out his weapon, just like with the guard in the dungeon. And, in the guard’s case, Klifford made him show what he had in his possession.

But there was a difference this time. The guard had been about to take out a letter from Sirius (with memories), but Derek was about to take out a dagger. Still...

“Klifford, I trust Lord Derek.”

His indigo eyes widened a bit. I sensed him grip his sword hilt just a bit tighter—the wreven feather tassel shook ever so slightly from the momentum.

Ever since our talk in the Great Corridor, I thought I'd made it clear that I didn't take my trust in Derek lightly...and rightly so? I knew Derek wouldn't hurt me, and even if he did, I would take responsibility for it.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

Finally, Klifford's hand left his sword hilt. Seeing this, Derek slid his hand inside his jacket lapel. As promised, he retrieved a dagger. It was in its sheath, and it was quite small. The sheath had gemstones on it, and there was a unique design pressed into it.

“This is actually a key, though it can also be used as a dagger.” Derek slid the weapon halfway out of its sheath, exposing the blade. It looked quite sharp. Then, with a metallic ring, the dagger was immediately re-sheathed.

But...did he say “key”?

“In this villa, there is a room Sirius and I refer to as the Impossible Room. The day I found the portrait of young Kihlgren, I was snooping around the villa, trying to find a way into that room. Once I got in, I found that there was nothing but junk in that room—it looked like only servants ever went in there. The painting was covered in a cloth, and it was covered in dust.”

“Did this happen before Duke Kihlgren died, or after?”

“After he died.”

“And the painting is no longer in there?”

Derek tucked his chin against his chest. “It isn't.”

“But it is in the Impossible Room?”

“Very likely, yes.”

The moment I saw the door, the memory came back to me.

The Impossible Room—I know this place.

A conversation I had with Uncle Dearest long ago revisited me. I had been looking for him and found him standing here, so I called out to him.

“Uncle Dearest, aren’t you going inside?”

“I can’t go in.”

“Isn’t there a key?”

“You need two keys to get in here. And now I only—” He looked down at me... then with a curt nod, he said, “I have one key.”

“Where’s the other key?”

“With the royal...”

And he told me part of the way to enter the room. There was a single-swinging door on the northern end of the first floor of the villa. Its design was the same as the other doors in the villa, except its keyhole was a bit larger.

“So...this is The Impossible Room?” I asked Derek.

“Yes. That isn’t its official name, but it is impossible to open. Only the master of the house—at the moment, my father—can enter it. And this is the key.” Derek held up the dagger in his right hand.

Only the master of the house... So that means...

“How did you get that key? Did Uncle Dearest give it to you?”

“Hardly,” Derek smiled proudly. “I just borrowed it for a short time since I figured out where the location was. As luck would have it, my father happens to be out today.”

“So...you made a point to invite me over on a day you knew your father wouldn’t be home?”

His smile was all the answer I needed. “I won’t get in trouble when he finds out I’ve already gone in the room, but I couldn’t get into the room in the first place if he stopped me.”

Derek faced the door, slid the sheathed dagger into the keyhole, and turned it. Then, with just a little push, the door opened inward...

...only to reveal a narrow passageway followed by another door. That was all

the room contained. This must be why Uncle Dearest had told me there were two keys.

Derek walked into the tiny room and approached the second door. It looked exactly the same as the first. At a glance, it seemed like it would also open from the same dagger.

Let's get that door open!

"Lord Derek?"

But Derek didn't budge.

"This is it... This is as far as I ever got."

"Huh?"

"Do you honestly think devious little me would have given up on the Impossible Room? At the time, I thought that this little guy—" Derek skillfully twirled the dagger in one hand and caught it, "—was the only key. But I was wrong." He pointed at the second door with the dagger. "This thing stood in my way."

So he had already tried to conquer the Impossible Room...and failed.

"And that's where you come in, Princess. Do you know how to open this door?"

No, I do not— No, wait a minute. Didn't Uncle Dearest tell me?

*"With the royal..."*

The royal...what? I'm drawing a blank...! I! Can't! Re! Mem! Ber!

"Lord Derek...what makes you think I know?"

Any hints, Derek?

"I don't have any definitive proof that the painting is even in here. I just deduced it from my father's behavior. It's the same with the key. I got the sense that my father told you something about the second key. Well, did he?"

Well, did he? Yes, he did! He did, but...my stupid brain deleted the most important part of what he said. The royal...something?

Uncle Dearest! HALP! I squeezed my eyes shut and raced through my memories.

*“—if you do, then the dagger will transform.”*

Aha! I think I remember what happens after we open the first door?

O-okay, first things first.

“Klifford.”

I gave Blackfeather to Klifford to free up both hands. Then I held out my right hand to Derek. He handed me the dagger.

Right. Judging by the keyhole, this dagger has to go in.

No, wait. This keyhole—it’s a bit different from the first? Maybe it won’t go in with its sheath...if I unsheathe the dagger, it should be a perfect fit.

But I’m sure that’s not enough. It can’t be... I’m missing something.

Like he said, the royal...something.

Royal...blood?

Images of Sil slipping out of his trance from royal blood flooded my mind. If royalty did something to the blade, it would transform...

Simply having a royal hand hold it...didn’t transform it. Okay, what if I unsheathe it?

I slipped the dagger from its sheath. The blade was just as sharp and beautiful as when Derek showed me before. But it looked no different.

Okay, royal...

Hmm... It’s gotta be blood, right? Should I?

My fingertip? Just a little nick in the fingertip, clean with the dagger. It’s not like I’m gonna slash my hand again, so it should work as a little test. This feels right.

But just as I braced myself for the cut—

“Your Highness.”

Klifford’s quiet voice reached my ear. I looked to the side and met his gaze. I

could practically hear his gaze growling, *Please don't tell me you intend to harm yourself again with that dagger.*

Bull's-eye.

*But I'll never know for sure until I try it!*

*I mean, I can't think of any other—*

*No, wait, I can.*

*Isn't there another way?*

I mobilized the full extent of my past life otaku knowledge. In times like this, when blood is needed to unlock something, there's usually a way to get around that rule!

Like, some other bodily fluid besides blood. In other words— I brought my lips to the blade of the dagger. Saliva was a bodily fluid, just like blood! Since spitting on it would just kill the mood, I decided to kiss it instead. Your move, dagger!

If this doesn't work, guess I'll have to use bloooooood?!

"...!" I gasped silently. The blade's color changed. It took on a bluish hue and a symbol glowed on it. I stood before the second door, transformed dagger in hand, then slid it into the keyhole. I didn't even need to turn it. Just touching it to the lock made it click. I pulled out the blade. The color returned to normal, and the symbol disappeared.

And with my left hand, I gave the door a gentle push...and it opened.

My eyes fell to the dagger in my right hand. How did the physics of it even work? There were two keys. The first was this dagger. And I was able to open the second door...because of my royal blood? Maybe the true key was a person with royal blood. By putting our bodily fluid on the blade, we transform it into the second key— "Splendidly done," Derek said, staring at the unlocked door.

"I couldn't have done it without Uncle Dearest telling me how."

(Even though I had forgotten the most important part of what he said...) I handed the dagger back to Derek.

“This room—maybe it belonged to Duke Kihlgren,” Derek murmured as he stared at the dagger in his hand.

The only member of the Nightfellow family with royal blood would have been Duke Kihlgren—the younger brother of the former king, my grandfather. Duke Kihlgren’s son, the former Duke Nightfellow, passed away before his father without leaving behind any descendants, so Uncle Dearest did not have royal blood. This meant Uncle Dearest, Lucinda, Derek—nobody in the current Nightfellow house could open the door without the help of royalty.

But when he was still alive, Duke Kihlgren could have opened it by himself.

“.....Let’s go inside.”

I was eager to enter, but this wasn’t the castle. I was still a guest here. As a resident of this house, Derek should go first. When I indicated this to him, he nodded. He slipped past me to push, and the lightly cracked-open door opened all the way.

As I took my first step into the room, I had a sudden realization. This was a Nightfellow family secret.

“Derek, I’m not sure Klifford should—”

Can he come with us?

Derek turned around and smiled awkwardly.

“As a Nightfellow, I should probably say no...but he can come in as long as he doesn’t breathe a word of what he saw here. I trust you to make sure of that, Princess.”

“Understood. Is that all right, Klifford?”

“No problem, Your Highness,” Klifford answered dispassionately, bowing his head.

Well, even if I didn’t swear Klifford to secrecy, he wouldn’t really be interested in this Impossible Room anyway...

Now I finally followed Derek into the room.

And...



“...”

...it was empty.

That's all that could be said about the room. Only a bookcase and a desk proved that it was once used. There weren't many other things in it except a thick layer of dust in the dark. The only light came from the two opened doors we came through. Still, the few furnishings were clearly high-quality items, as they should be, being in the house of a duke.

“Is that...?”

Derek shuffled over to a point in the room. He picked up a cloth on the desk.

“...!” I stopped breathing. There was the framed portrait, hiding underneath.

The name Rufus Nightfellow was inscribed on the lower right-hand corner of the painting. Without this particular placement, one might assume it was the name of the artist.

He was likely in his twenties. He had golden hair and amber eyes. The only difference was his hairstyle. The absence of a facial scar made him look even more like that mysterious young man than Rust.

No mistaking it. It's the same face.

And in a corner of my heart...I was relieved to see it. Relieved to see that this painting wasn't the same one I saw hanging in the hallway of the second floor when I used to frequent this villa. If I had happened upon this painting back then, I might have had a nervous breakdown.

“You know, he really does resemble Rust Byrne. Well, resemble isn't exactly the word here.”

*Yeah. He basically is that mysterious young man,* I answered in my mind.

Derek had said those words partially to himself. Then he turned to me and asked, “Princess...you knew Duke Kihlgren and Rust had the same face, didn't you? Is that why you wanted to visit me? To see for yourself?”

For a moment, I hesitated. Should I not tell him...? But I really shouldn't lie...

I nodded. “Yes. That's why I asked if I could be invited to your villa.”

“But Duke Kihlgren’s bloodline ended. Byrne is not his descendent. Wouldn’t their resemblance have to be mere coincidence?”

*If only he didn’t look exactly like that mysterious young man*, I finished to myself. Otherwise, I could have easily passed it off as mere coincidence.

“Back in the Sky Chamber, Uncle Dearest said he was going to get Rust’s testimony. What became of that?”

“He’s staying here at the villa as my father’s guest. I don’t know whether they’ve spoken or not.”

“Is he here today?”

“No... I think he’s with my father. They’ve gone to the prison tower.”

The prison tower... The events of my father’s study the day before reentered my mind. My father had taken action against the arrested junior ball raiders that Uncle Dearest did not approve of... Is that what this was about?

None of this was in the books...

Going off *The Noble King* lore I knew, Rust was an anti-royalist. It was difficult to imagine that had changed. But at the junior ball, he had escorted me to the Sky Chamber and helped me (though not unconditionally) find the true crown. And during the royal survey, he had helped Derek...and helped protect me, a royal, in turn.

Beyond his phantom pains and his attempt to slash Queen Idéalia’s tomb, Rust knew more than he should—even knowledge that was never revealed in the books.

But at the very least, from Rust’s words and actions alone, I never saw any traces of that mysterious young man. If there were traces, Rust wasn’t aware of them.

In contrast, since Duke Kihlgren was deceased, in a way, he was more shrouded in mystery than Rust. Including the fact that he was in a position quite close to the Esfian royal family, if anyone had a more direct connection to that mysterious young man, it would not be Rust. It would be— “Princess...why do you think my father took that action in the Sky Chamber?”

I looked up from the painting. Derek was staring right at me, arms crossed.

Took “that action.” Even though he was vague, I knew immediately what he meant. The same thing had probably tugged on Derek’s conscience.

And...it’s likely Derek also did not think the resemblance was a coincidence.

“Are you asking...why did he not react when he saw Rust’s face? Why he feigned calmness?”

Derek’s eyes closed.

“Yes.”

I didn’t know why. But the only person who could have brought this painting to the Impossible Room was the owner of the dagger key, Uncle Dearest. This was a place that was possible, but quite difficult to enter.

It didn’t make sense.

How did Uncle Dearest get in here?

If my deductions were correct, he needed royal bodily fluids to get in. He would need a royal to touch the dagger, either directly or indirectly. And ever since Duke Kihlgren’s death, the only royalty remaining were my father, Sirius, me, Alec, and the mother who bore me. Uncle Dearest would need one of those people to assist him...and I knew it wasn’t me. So...who was it?

There was one other oddity. It would have made the most sense to just throw away this painting, so why didn’t he?

“Well, one thing is clear—Duke Kihlgren is involved somehow.”

That was all I could say.

I looked around the room that was frozen in time.

“.....?”

My eyes stopped on the back wall. It was difficult to see, but there was an easel standing opposite it. It was still covered with a cloth, and on it was...a painting?

“I think there’s another painting back there.”

Apparently Derek noticed it, too.

We approached it. Derek moved the easel, turning it to face us.

And the painting behind the cloth was revealed.

Even though it was still on an easel, the painting was finished. However, the bottom fourth of it was blackened with smoke, as if somebody tried to burn it, but the fire was extinguished.

But it was clear what the painting was. The remaining portrait was colored vividly, and it was beautifully made.

It was a wedding.

A happy bride and groom were gazing into each other's eyes.

The man, I knew well. He was wearing a crown. He was much younger, but it was my father... He had no beard, but he had the same golden hair, dark emerald-green eyes, and facial structure...

And the woman—she resembled Edgar a great deal. As white flowers bloomed wildly around them, the woman's long dark brown hair flowed in the breeze. Her cheeks were flushed beneath glittering eyes of dark brown.

A fanciful painting—

I reached out to it but balled my fingers into a fist before touching it, even though nobody told me I shouldn't.

"This could also be interpreted...as a funeral painting," Derek murmured. "The white flowers around them are surely Lieche orchids. Just as they can serve as both medicine and poison, they are used both in celebration and in mourning—they hold both meanings simultaneously."

A flowery wedding...and also a funeral?

I pressed my lips together tightly.

Going off the people in the painting...

My father was still alive. But the woman. The woman who greatly resembled Edgar...

Only one person came to mind.

Edgar's little sister...Irene.

It was clear just how deeply they loved each other.

It was that kind of painting.

It was also clear that it depicted a scene that never happened. But just how much? Just how much of it was fantasy? Were there ever feelings between the two?

The painting had no title.

But its artist—the hand who painted it left traces of its owner behind.

On the lower left-hand side blackened with soot, the artist's signature was visible.

I read it.

“Si...lt...sfi...”

Si\_\_\_lt *sfi*..

It was easy to fill in the missing letters.

“Siehalt Esfia...,” I murmured.

Only Esfia's monarch took on Esfia as a surname.

This was the name of the former king—my grandfather.

My grandfather had painted this painting.

## 75

We put the Impossible Room behind us, saying very little. Derek appeared deep in thought, and I was still processing all the new information. It was almost a relief to look at Klifford and see him completely unfazed by the whole thing.

I took a deep breath. After being in that dark room, the outside air was almost delicious. A lot of time had passed between the tea party and the Impossible Room.

It was already evening. The sun was red. As we walked through the Nightfellow villa garden, I finally started to calm down. Dyed in the colors of sunset, a clear sky above us, the songs of the birds and rustling of the trees and flowers was a serenade.

Oh...

Light pink petals fluttered around us. Seeing it in the center of the garden, I approached it.

A lone kallum tree. The one Lucinda had transplanted.

Maybe it was seeing the rows of kallum trees during the survey so recently that allowed me to simply think, *Yes, they look like sakura...*and not linger on the thought.

I opened Blackfeather and looked up at the kallum tree.

I closed my eyes—then opened them.

*Yeah. Nothing changed. I'm in Esfia. I'm at the Nightfellow villa.*

I turned my back to the kallum tree.

And when I saw Klifford, something felt amiss. He was still on guard to protect me from harm, that much was the same...but.

*He's caring... Worried about me?*

I thought I sensed those emotions in his indigo eyes.

There it is...again... I feel like I've seen this gentle look from Klifford... somewhere before...

And when I saw it that other time, these same pink flower petals were falling then— "Sakura..."

The sound of that voice made whatever it was vanish.

That...scared me.

I turned to face the person who had just murmured the Japanese word—Derek.

"Was that right? It's the magic word you used to say. Does that mean kallum

trees are...sakura?”

He was right...but...I didn't think Derek had an affinity for Japanese like Sirius did...

But then I quickly arrived at a revelation.

Kid-Sirius told him! It wouldn't be strange for him to have figured out that kallum was “sakura” in Japanese.

“Long ago...my brother told you that, didn't he?”

As the setting sun dyed him in warm colors, Derek looked down and smiled.

“Yes. Sirius did tell me. So...was my pronunciation correct?”

“It was.”

But it was surprising for Derek to bring up my Japanese—magic incantations, rather. Uncle Dearest seemed curious about them, but Derek always looked like he didn't like it. He would always frown and demand, *Why won't you speak in Esfian?*—never out loud, of course, but his eyes said it all.

Derek looked up at the kallum tree from where he stood. With each gust of wind, its blossoms rained down. “Do you like kallum trees?” he asked.

*Do I...like them? I'm not really sure.*

I observed the sakura lookalike again.

“I like them—”

Then I cut myself off. They reminded me of sakura, and I loved them for that. They made me feel like I was home, back in Japan.

This was especially true in this garden. Even though it existed in a different world, it wasn't all that different from mine. It was easy to trick myself into believing I was actually in Japan, and I had merely wandered into a lush Western-style garden.

“And I also hate them, I suppose?”

No matter how much they resembled sakura, they weren't sakura. They rubbed it in—that I was in Esfia and that I could never go back home. In that way, I hated them.

Derek blinked a couple times, then he smirked.

“What a coincidence. I feel the same way.”

Derek also loves and hates kallum blossoms?

“Every time I see them blooming, I’m reminded of my own shortcomings.”

It wasn’t his nobleman’s smile...it was sincere. It was a pretty smile.

Another flurry of pink blossoms rained down. And, maybe because of the sunset’s colors, his smile also looked sad.

“So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?” His smile vanished. “We aren’t strictly alone, but I assume it’s something all right for Alderton to know.”

Upon the discovery of the painting of the young Duke Kihlgren, my first mission in coming here was accomplished. I also made an unexpected discovery—that fantasy painting and the name of its artist.

It’s just, I couldn’t speak with Derek frankly about what had happened in the Impossible Room. No matter what approach I took, we would go into dangerous territory. If I were to be honest with him, I would have to tell him about the mysterious young man, for one thing, and I’d have to divulge secrets about my father and Edgar, for another.

And regarding the latter point, as a vassal, Derek would not voice any of his theories out loud, but I’m sure we both had arrived at the same conclusion. Derek had visited Edgar’s childhood home with me. He saw the family portrait. He knew how Edgar’s parents felt, too.

I sighed quietly, to cleanse my palate of the bad taste the Impossible Room left in my mouth.

Then I turned my gaze forward.

Even though I had been emotionally shaken, I still couldn’t return to the castle yet. But broaching the subject in that room was simply not going to happen. It didn’t exactly sit right with me either, to be like, *“So be my fake boyfriend, tee-hee!”* right after that experience.

But if I missed my chance now, I would only be delaying the inevitable.



*Okay... How do I bring this up?*

“The thing you wish to discuss... Is it related to what happened during the survey?”

Even though it had happened only the day before, we had avoided the subject to unnatural extremes. It had come out in snippets during our conversation with Lucinda over tea, and Derek surely knew the surface-level facts.

But does he know Hugh’s motive? Would it be okay for me to just tell him? There’s something else...Sirius’s memory temporarily returning... Maybe I should tell him about that.

“I got a letter...from a past version of Sirius.”

“...!”

If he took my words literally, they wouldn’t have meant much to him, but Derek understood what I was trying to say. That the letter was from a Sirius with his memory back.

Derek exhaled and ran his fingers through his hair. “I got a letter, too. Did he tell you where Hugh was sent?”

“No.” And if he asked that question, it must mean— “He didn’t tell you either, I take it?”

“I’m afraid not, though he did write a lot of demanding requests of me...”

But he still knew Hugh was moved.

“Did he tell you...anything about Hugh’s motive?” I asked.

“Only that he didn’t do it to betray Sirius, but out of loyalty.”

“I see...”

So our understanding is the same.

“I wish to know where Hugh was relocated. Don’t you, Derek?”

“Well, of course I’d love to know, if possible. But Sirius doesn’t seem to know anymore.”

Really? But Father said Sirius did know... No wait, he probably meant Sirius

(with memories).

I renewed my resolve. The ideal fake boyfriend would also know about Hugh's secret circumstances—it had to be Derek!

"My father said that once I formally introduce my beloved to him, he will tell me where Hugh was relocated."

"Your beloved... Ah yes, I remember," Derek smirked cynically. "So how many more days will we have to wait?"

He asked the right question, but he was slightly off.

"Simply passing the days until the formal meeting arrives will not fulfill the required conditions. I need to introduce my boyfriend."

"...?" Derek gave me a clueless look. I sympathized.

To be honest, my courage flew out of my heart. Dropping a truth bomb meant exposing my lie not only to Derek, but to Klifford as well. But I've gotta make this omelet...so let's break some eggs!

I took a deep breath.

"The boyfriend in question...does not exist."

Holy crap, I finally said it.

"..." Derek froze, his brown eyes wide, staring at me. His lips parted slightly, as if he was about to say something.

*Is it really that hard to believe, Derek? I mean, at the junior ball, weren't you the one who told me about some friend of yours who thought I didn't have a boyfriend? Surely you at least are aware of the fake boyfriend trope, my good sir!*

But now was no time to waffle. I gave another push.

"So that's why...I want you to be my fake boyfriend, Derek."

*There! I said it! Hoo boy, I said it!*

And his reply?

"Are you sure...you don't have a boyfriend?" Derek's gaze wandered

elsewhere, then snapped back to me. “You aren’t just keeping him secret because you can’t expose him for some personal reason?”

“No, I really don’t have a boyfriend. What makes you think I’m lying?”

“Well, because you—” Derek’s speech got muffled suddenly. “.....I’d rather not say.” With a big sigh, he rested his hand on his forehead. Then, after a long shake, he looked at me...then he spoke again. “Okay, so—you want me to be your fake boyfriend?”

“That’s right. I wish to introduce you to my father formally on the designated day. And of course this would only be temporary. Once you found somebody...”

*“Once you found somebody you loved, we would break up”*—is what I was going to say, but it was then that I realized I had omitted a very crucial point.

Derek was not betrothed. When I asked him at the junior ball if he liked anybody, he even answered that romance *“isn’t in the cards”* for him.

But that was just his superficial answer...

If Derek actually did have a lover or a crush, wouldn’t that complicate things? I mean, if he were dating somebody, surely I would have heard rumors about it. But it was also just as possible that Derek was seeing somebody and was just doing a really good job hiding it...

“I don’t have a lover,” Derek answered, saving me the trouble of asking.

“But do you have feelings for anyone?”

“...” Derek fell silent for a moment before answering, “No, I don’t.”

He smiled softly, shaking his head. His voice sounded incredibly tender...which makes me wonder if he actually does have a crush on someone. Okay, Derek’s out. Better fall back on my safety boyfriend and ask Alec if— “All right.”

Huh?

I was so startled, I snapped Blackfeather shut. The kallum blossom petals seemed to fall in slow motion all about us.

“If you’re all right with me, I accept your proposal. I will be your fake boyfriend, Octavia.”

*Heck...*

I clenched both fists.

*He said yes...right?*

“Do you...mean it?” I pushed.

*Won't you regret it?*

“I mean it,” Derek nodded.

*But...I need to make super duper sure.*

“You...thought it all the way through?”

I mean, didn't he say yes too quick? From Derek's POV, this isn't exactly the sort of deal he should take lightly. If it were me, I'd need at least a whole day, tops...

Derek burst out laughing. “It's all right. I thought it through.”

Doubtful...

Derek suppressed his laughter and continued, a serious expression on his face. “Sometimes, the more serious a matter is, the easier it is to make a judgment call. The right choice becomes quite clear.”

Is that why he was so quick to say yes?

“So don't worry, Octavia.”

And finally...it started to hit me that this was really happening.

*I finally get to say what comes after “Heck”! Heck yeah!*

I shoved the excitement back down inside of me and let the words that popped into my heart flow out of my mouth.

“Thank you, Derek.”





“...You’re welcome.”

As the kallum blossoms danced around him, bathing in the light of the setting sun, Derek smiled softly.

And thus—I finally attained a fake boyfriend.

Right after our agreement was formed, Derek and I had a thorough conversation. We had to get our stories straight so we wouldn’t mess up on the big day. If Father gave us the third degree and our questions didn’t sync up, our little lie would be dead in the water.

I pushed for the secret-romance-blossomed-between-us-since-childhood trope, but Derek rejected me outright. The big meanie.

“Isn’t that...a bit too difficult to pull off? Since childhood is a tall order. We barely had any interactions back then. The more they dig into our pasts, the more cracks in the story they’ll find.”

“Okay then, how about we say it started a few months ago?”

“That would probably be a good timeline. It’s after the war, besides,” Derek agreed. “We can say our feelings changed because the war was over.”

“Ooh, let’s say we exchanged letters under fake names.”

And that’s how we hammered down all the little details.

“Do you suppose we should do more lover-like things leading up to the formal introduction?” I asked.

*Like see each other more often? Or go on dates?*

“I wouldn’t mind that...”

I sense a “but.”

“Suddenly being out in the open together would be a bit too contrived—it would actually raise suspicion. You’ve supposedly kept your lover secret this whole time, after all. Why would you suddenly act chummy with me just days before the formal introduction?”

Yeah, I guess I wouldn't do that...

It would be more natural to just keep things as they have been until the day-of...

"But we did dance together at the junior ball, didn't we?" I asked.

"Well, that's neither here nor there. The nobility is keeping watch in real time whether I fall to destruction or glory. According to my subordinates, my odds are sixty-forty."

*What the hell? Sixty...forty?*

My confusion must have shown, for Derek smirked and explained, "The nobility are starved for excitement, right? So they place bets. The odds of me falling to destruction are sixty percent, and the odds of me rising to glory are forty. Well, actually, after the survey, the odds changed to fifty-fifty... In other words, only Octavia knows my fate."

"Well, you're playing the role of my lover—you'd better rise to glory."

"I appreciate your vote of confidence."

Lastly, we arranged to have Derek come to the castle the day before the Meet the Parents to go over a final checklist together. He had plans to visit Sil that day anyway, so that worked out well. Until he was introduced formally as my lover, he would "happen to bump into me" while visiting Sil. During that meeting, we would go over our plan of attack for the next day, and this would include practicing lovingly calling each other by name and such.

That way, I could also get a Sil update from Derek, so win-win!

After that little strategy meeting, I got in my carriage and headed back home. I turned and waved at Lucinda, who came to see me off.

"We depart!"

At the signal, Klifford and two soldiers gripped their horse reins and galloped as the carriage took off. I watched the Nightfellow villa get smaller and smaller through the carriage window.

I set Blackfeather down by my side and reclined into the bench seat.



Ahh... Now that the fake boyfriend dilemma was resolved, I suddenly felt very tired.

Karl's driving was impeccable as ever, so the ride was smooth and comfortable.

"..."

My mind went blank in relief.

I rubbed my eyes... I was getting sleepy.

Just like the carriage ride over, I was jostled for a mere thirty minutes before we passed through the castle gate and parked the carriage. The sudden stop jolted me awake from my little doze. I shook my head to ward off my drowsiness. I had to get out.

*Oopsie, can't forget my things—I need Blackfeather and that thing I asked Lucinda for.*

I grabbed the basket handle. Lucinda had placed them in a cute basket so it would be easy for me to carry. Klifford had already dismounted and was offering me a hand, but as I had to carry the basket with both hands, I stepped outside on my own.

Okay. Now, let's get right to it— I pulled one of the items out of the basket. It was something I requested the minute our teatime was over. The special confectionary that could only be enjoyed at the Nightfellow villa—specialty eba!

I had asked if she could send some to the castle in a few days, but she insisted I take some home with me that very day and asked the chef to whip up a batch then and there.

So I returned to the castle with a souvenir. Even though my main objective was to get my own stash, since I'd told her it was mostly to give away as gifts, each pastry was individually wrapped...and there were way more eba in the basket than I had anticipated.

I'll divvy most of these up with my handmaids and— "Klifford." I called to him, holding out some of the specialty eba. Klifford's gaze fell to the eba in my hand, a hint of doubt mixing with the indigo in his eyes. "This is for you."

“For me—”

I nodded. “Remember how you helped me eat breakfast yesterday when I went to visit my father in his study?”

“But there’s no reason to give me anything this time.”

Right, I gave him those sandwiches under the premise that we couldn’t finish them all. Aha. I guess Klifford needs some sort of reason to accept a gift. Okay, let’s give him a reason.

“My reason is...because I want to give you a gift?” It was the truth, after all. “I find this particular eba to be incredibly delicious, and I want to share my favorite foods with everyone.”

I want to spread the gospel! I felt the same way when I used to regularly visit the Nightfellow villa, but feelings of restraint had a hold over me back then... I guess the impudence of my years emboldened me to ask this time.

Also, my selfish motive to learn Klifford’s likes and dislikes had snapped into action on its own.

Instead of taking the eba, Klifford said, “Regarding the snack you gave me yesterday—”

*Hark! Is he giving his impressions? Is that what’s happening, Klifford?*

“Did you eat it?”

“Yes.”

I looked up at Klifford, my eyes glittering with anticipation.

*I’m gonna have to give him a nudge, but whatever.*

“What did you think?”

“It was...edible,” he answered, with excessive solemnity.

Yeah...that tracks. To Klifford, food is either edible or inedible, so I guess sandwiches have to fall into the “edible” camp...

I had a long road ahead of me...but I would not be defeated!

“All right then... This time, I’d like you to eat this eba for me.”

I shoved the Nightfellow specialty eba in his face. This was undeniably an “edible” thing, so it would surely fall into Klifford’s “liked” foods by his definition.

“.....”

“.....”

A silent staring contest commenced between Klifford and me. The outcome (probably?) depended on my feelings.

“.....”

“.....”

The silence continued, during which I exuded a tentative aura of calm.

I stared at the specialty eba. I knew they were delicious, but with my great plan having made some progress, maybe I was pushing my luck?

Just when I was about to withdraw my hand, Klifford raised his left hand from its hanging position and took the wrapped eba from me.

“I humbly accept.”

The way he softly exhaled sounded like he had resigned himself to defeat.

“There’s nothing dangerous inside...,” I assured him. I had eaten them, after all, and they were a gift from Lucinda. I had to make sure he knew they were safe.

“Since you gave it to me, I doubt it would be unsafe to eat. And even if it was unsafe, I wouldn’t care.”

*Er, please care? You’re supposed to care about that stuff, Klifford!*

“It’s the same as your trust in me, Your Highness.”

*Oh...*

I dumbly looked up at Klifford.

“Accepting your gift is my answer. You have no need to add the disclaimer that it is safe to eat.”

“...” My face felt a little hot. I touched my right cheek just to be sure, and as I

thought, it was hot. My mind was blank, too.

Klifford stared at me, blinking a couple times. Concern filled his indigo eyes as he looked at me.

“Pardon me, Your Highness—”

He shifted the eba into his right hand and removed the black leather glove from his left. Then he gently pressed the palm of his big hand to my forehead.

I closed my eyes. It felt good. Klifford’s hand was nice and cool...

“You have a fever...”

My eyes opened with a start.

Is that why I was in a daze the whole carriage ride back? It wasn’t just out of relief?

“I’m going to carry you to the castle. Is that all right?”

*Nope. Nope. Nope.*

“It is *not* all right.”

*No way are we doing the Handsome Knight Sweeps the Princess Off Her Feet all the way to her room!*

“I can still walk with a fever, you know?”

But Klifford certainly was not as optimistic about my fever.

“Your Highness.” Klifford dropped to his knee and looked up at me. “Please... do not martyr yourself. Use me. Please.”

Martyr...myself? That wasn’t my intention at all. I touched my forehead just to be sure. I guess...it’s hot? Is that why my brain is so slow? Well...what would a princess do— “Klifford?”

“Yes.”

“Carry me to my room,” I commanded him.

“Yes, Princess.”

In a way, my dazed state of mind was a godsend. I handed off my basket to one of the guards. And when Klifford lifted me into his arms, I wasn’t all that

embarrassed, even though the castle servants' stares were obvious with each step we took.

I mean, of course we're standing out...and the walk to my room is quite long. Poor Klifford... It was only then, semi-after-the-fact, that I realized what a long distance Klifford had to walk while carrying me.

"Klifford, rest as many times as you need on the way to my room."

Klifford glanced down at me and said, "No need."

"But Klifford—"

"I carried you with no issue before."

He spoke as if he was a pro at carrying me long-distance.

"This is my second time."

*His second...time? When was the first time...? My brain is so slow.*

After a while of thought, I finally reached an answer. It was when I fell asleep at the junior ball...

My memories cut out after we left the Sky Chamber and entered that tunnel. When I woke up, I was in my bedchamber at the castle. Based on context, it was obvious how I got there.

"....."

*Uh-oh... I think my fever just got worse.*

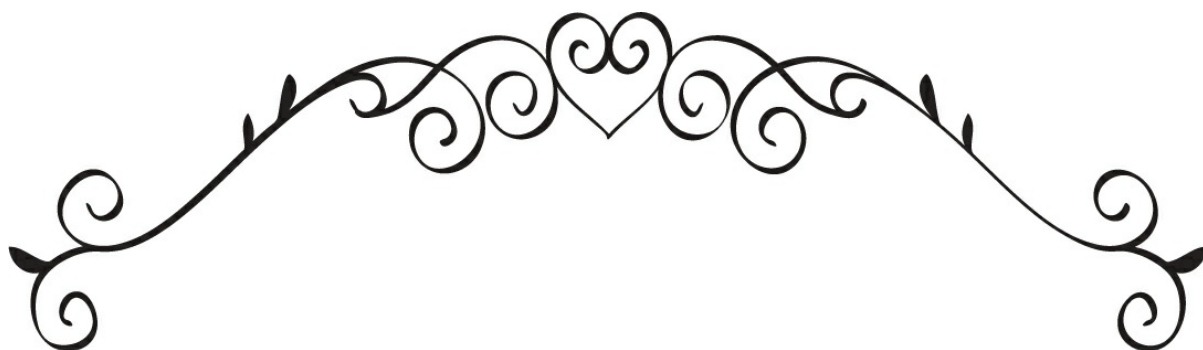
*I'd better keep my mouth shut. Don't want to dig my own grave.*

*But if I don't talk...it's just gonna be Klifford carrying me...*

The sleepiness I felt in the carriage came back with a vengeance. Probably because Klifford is so warm...and I feel so safe...

Unable to resist the temptation to sleep any longer, I closed my eyes.

And that is where my consciousness cut out.



# The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: Part 8

*What should I do?*

Even after Klifford laid Octavia in her bed to sleep, he was unable to move. Lying in bed, the sleeping princess had grabbed onto the sleeve of his uniform. Her grip was strong as ever.

"..."

Slowly, he reached out to disentangle himself...

"Don't..."

Just as he managed to untangle a finger from his sleeve, Octavia's hand reached for something in her dream and grabbed his hand. Now Klifford found his left hand clasped firmly between both of hers.

"....."

His left hand was still ungloved. Octavia's bare hands were hot from her fever.

"Don't go...", she murmured in her sleep.

Her words weren't directed at him, yet he almost caught himself responding. He pressed his lips together, laughing silently at himself.

And on top of that...for some reason, his unspoken reply was, *"I won't go."* It was an unrealistic response, both in that moment and in general.

His hand still held captive, Klifford glanced at the door. In doing so, something entered his field of vision. A basket on the desk. The item Octavia brought back from the Nightfellow villa. One of her handmaids had retrieved it from a guard earlier. She had left with the chief lady-in-waiting to fetch something important but had left the basket there on the way.

Inside the basket were pastries called eba, one of which Klifford had in his possession. It was a gift from Octavia.

*“My reason is...because I want to give you a gift?”*

That was her reason, but why Klifford accepted it was unclear to him. He knew Octavia would have forgiven him if he had refused the gift.

*So why?*

He gave it further consideration, and still could not find an answer.

He had even said he didn't mind if Octavia had poisoned the eba. What's more, he would not have accepted the eba from anyone but her. Everything he told her was the truth, but he still was under no obligation to accept the gift.

But the moment he sensed her eba-filled hand recoil a little, he'd moved.

Meals were never a peaceful affair for Klifford. He knew he must eat whatever was put in front of him to survive, even if it was poisoned. He was never given a choice in his meals. He had the freedom to refuse to eat, but too much of that would only result in him starving to death.

It was likely a test to see how much his body could withstand. It was a way to make a useless wretch like him useful. He was in no state of mind to taste or savor the food. Sometimes even the most beautiful and most appetizing foods hurt him unbearably when he thought they were safe to eat. He would rather eat discarded leftovers than get his hopes up.

But those days ended the first time he held a weapon.

And when he ate harmless food for the first time, he noticed that he had lost his sense of taste—not that he felt at any disadvantage because of it.

Was it edible or not—this was the criteria by which Klifford judged his meals.

And anything Octavia gave him to eat was, of course, edible.

The only impressions he could give her of the small meal he had the other day was that it was edible. It did not contain poison or anything else of the sort. It was harmless, nothing more. It was as good as flavorless.

“...” He looked down in silence.

That was why, even though it was flavorless, the fact that he felt something about it was different...was a trivial matter.



“Sis...”

Octavia’s voice sounded so vulnerable, so small.

Klifford’s gaze returned to the sleeping princess. Her breathing was even... She wasn’t having a nightmare.

“I have something to tell you...”

Octavia smiled blissfully...but there was a hint of sadness in her lips. Octavia had no sister.

But Klifford had some idea of what she meant— A memory of their shared dream revisited his mind—a dream of a black-haired girl and her family.

“Maki...,” he murmured.

In the dream, Octavia was the black-haired girl, and her name was Maki. She was with her family in a world different from this one, underneath some trees that resembled kallums, but were called sakura.

Octavia called kallum trees “sakura” in her own language, but she did not confuse the two. They were different trees.

The kallum trees were certainly not sakura.

But in her dreams and in her waking hours, when Octavia gazed up at the kallum trees...it was the sakura that she hoped to see.

*Or perhaps it is the world in that dream she wishes to see?*

The restraint on his left hand—which could hardly be called a restraint—would be easy to untangle, but he hesitated to do so. Klifford instead reached for Octavia’s silvery hair. Caressed it.

“Ngh...”

Octavia’s face nuzzled against Klifford’s captured hand. Her smile transformed into one of contentment.

A smile appeared on his own lips...and with it, came a question.

*Why do I share her contentment?*

His hand froze on her hair.

*Why am I upset whenever I see anybody other than myself touch Octavia?*

Be it the king consort, Edgar, or Derek Nightfellow, it was indeed a similar emotion to what he felt for his weapon.

But there was one part that did not match up.

The scene that just transpired at the Nightfellow villa reentered his mind.

*What was that all about?*

A fake boyfriend—it shouldn't matter whether Octavia had a lover or not. That would not harm their Adjutant-Sovereign relationship. It was of no interest to him...or at least, it shouldn't be.

It shouldn't matter whom she chose for a fake lover.

That did not matter in the slightest.

And yet, for some reason, when Octavia chose Derek Nightfellow, it upset him. Was it because he was Leif Nightfellow's son? Was it because he felt his Sovereign was in danger?

No—

Neither was correct.

"A command..."

He was upset, in a way...because it was a matter the likes of which she should have commanded him to take care of.

It was ironic to him.

He wished for her command?

Even though the Adjutant-Sovereign covenant he formed with Octavia was of his own free will, he'd hated his first Sovereign's commands with every fiber of his being, to the point of resisting until the command was forced upon him.

Sensing an approaching presence, Klifford looked up. "...". He removed his right hand from the silvery hair, its silklike threads trailing smoothly through his fingers.

And after a few moments, the door burst open.

“How is Octavia doing— Alderton?”

As soon as he recognized Klifford, the visitor—first prince Sirius—frowned and entered the room.

“Are you the only one here?” he demanded.

“The doctor has not yet arrived,” Klifford replied. “Her chief lady-in-waiting left with another handmaid to fetch the materials needed to care for Her Highness.”

“So Matilda and this other handmaid left her in your care? Where are the others?”

“To ensure Her Highness’s safety, the chief lady-in-waiting has forbidden entry by anyone that cannot be completely trusted. She said the last time Her Highness fell ill, there were quite a few suspicious movements in the shadows.”

Sirius fell silent for a moment. He’d likely heard about it and had some idea of what Klifford meant.

“But that doesn’t mean a bodyguard can just—” His aquamarine eyes pierced Octavia like daggers. “Why is Octavia holding your hand? And why are you letting her?”

Why was he letting her?

That was simple.

Because he wanted to stay that way.

“She was sound asleep, and I did not wish to disturb her.”

“Let her go.”

At Sirius’s command, Klifford felt the rage rise inside of him. Only Octavia was allowed to command him. Not to mention— “Prince Sirius...are you of a relation to Princess Octavia that warrants concern?”

Sirius swallowed his words. He pressed his fingers to his temples. Then, in time, he squeezed the words out of strained vocal cords. “Octavia...is my sister.”

Sister.





Did Sirius—wary of Octavia in his efforts to protect Sil Burks—have any right to worry about his sister? If his caution toward Octavia extended to her bodyguard—Klifford—that would be proper.

He surely did not remember it, but that night, in the Great Corridor, Sirius had told Klifford in confidence that Octavia was the one person Alexis would not harm. To anyone but Octavia, he was a danger.

And that applied also to Klifford. As long as she was his Sovereign, Octavia was the one person Klifford could never harm, but Octavia was the only exception. His nature had not changed one bit since his days on the battlefield.

To say Klifford was not an enemy of Sirius or Sil Burks...that was not a denouncement he could make.

“It is perfectly normal...for a brother to worry about his sister.”

A sibling bond—was it really as simple as that?

A cold smile formed on Klifford’s face.

Do you mean to say that siblings always care for one another?

No.

Sometimes even a sibling is less than nothing to someone.

Klifford hated the little brother that was only connected to him by one parent. He never once worried about him.

He would forever mean less than nothing to Klifford, and he was fine with that.

Klifford glanced at the door again, and a few seconds later he heard a voice. It was Octavia’s handmaid.

“This way, Doctor!”

*I hate myself.*

Hunched over on my desk, I was filled with regret.

Today was the day before the Meet the Parents.

*The. Day. Before.*

Since it was very important, I repeated the phrase once more to refresh my mind.

*THE DAY BEFORE!*

I found my fake boyfriend, but I didn't want to waste the days I had left, so I was going to work really hard and check everything off my Princess Schedule. But alas! Instead, I found myself a bedridden invalid for three whole days.

On the way back from the Nightfellow villa, I came down with a fever. From the symptoms I felt, I figured it was the common cold. Except we didn't call it the common cold in Esfian, we called it "sky sickness." It was something along the lines of, by the whim of the Sky God, you fell ill. You had all the symptoms of the common cold, though comparatively milder.

But no matter how many times I mulled it over, I couldn't figure out how I caught my sky sickness. Nobody else around me had it for me to catch...

But anyway, I was diagnosed with sky sickness and my fever was pretty darn persistent. And even though the first day included my visitation to the Nightfellow villa, three days was a new record for me. Sister-dearest in the books had a rather frail constitution...but in reality, my Octavia was quite healthy. I'd never gotten sick once. I was secretly really proud of that.

Even if I did get a case of the sky sickies, it would never last more than a day.

And yet this time my fever lasted a whole three days!

According to the doctor, it was likely brought on by compounded fatigue from the junior ball and the survey.

*Was that really it...?*

I mean, looking back, I guess every single day in the past week had been jam-packed with eventfulness.

And even after my fever went down, the doctor gave me all sorts of stern warnings. I mustn't exercise. I should stay in bed. Any plans to go out should be postponed. I should not let myself get cold, etcetera, etcetera.

As a result, the finger of suspicion fell on Klifford, and I was basically returned to my caged state from before. Until the Meet the Parents, I had to spend my days in extreme quiet. I wanted to see Sil, but after a lot of mulling it over, I decided to restrain myself—not out of coercion, but self-discipline.

I could walk freely about the castle, but not for very long. I stared down at my wrapped left hand. It was still not healed. My foot blister was mostly healed and did not hurt a bit.

I felt perfectly fine. Having said that, even though I only had the sky sickness, if it had gotten worse, the problem would have spread beyond myself.

*Self-care... Maybe I ought to up my efforts in that department? That's what the past three days taught me. Then again, I never meant to neglect my health, even now...*

It was so bad that Sirius came to visit my bedside several times. But it was always when I was asleep—to the point that it made me assume he planned it that way—so I never got to speak with him directly.

My father and Edgar each came to visit once, but separately. I was awake both times, but since I still had a fever, neither stayed long.

I received some flowers from Lucinda: a bouquet of yellow and pink gerberas. They were exactly the same in name and appearance as their real-world counterpart, and even though Lucinda's name was on the card, I guessed they were really from Derek. Since I was going to see him today anyway, I was planning to ask him.

Especially since there's a new thing I want to ask him about.

I had resumed my rounds as princess now that my fever was down. This involved visiting the library on the daily. My first and second times, Sasha accompanied me, insisting, "You're still not fully recovered, Your Highness."

The library...was a place of unexpected encounters.



If you could believe it, I actually bumped into Guy there for the first time since the survey, and not just in a nodding-as-we-passed-each-other way. I also met with Guy's soldier friend with the big, dead-looking eyes. It was probably the sane person he'd been chatting with at the training grounds.

The dead-eyed soldier was checking out *The Legend of King Eus—Abridged*, the very book I read when I was struggling to learn the Esfian language. That alone made me feel a kinship with him, so I made a mental note.

And Guy was checking out a book called, *How to Tame Your Wreven!*

Unlike Heller, he denied it himself, but this proved that he was okay with Blackfeather!

*When Guy sets out to make a name for himself, maybe I should give him a wreven feather tassel for his sword? Oop—but I'll need Alec's permission...*

The moment Alec popped into my mind, I couldn't sit still anymore, so I jumped up from my slumped position on the desk. I could never act with such unladylike disgrace when Sasha was around, but since it was only Klifford today...whatever.

"You said you'd come back in ten days..."

The complaint tumbled from my lips.

Alec had never broken a promise with me before, but it was the day before Meet the Parents, and he was not back at the castle yet.

There must be some problem—there was no other possibility. Then again, there *not* being a problem would be ideal. And if there was a problem, hopefully Alec and his men would be okay! Something like, the road they were going to take home was under sudden construction and they had to take the long way back.

Since Alec was on a secret mission, I couldn't contact him even if I wanted to. That being said, as Alec was busy on aforementioned secret mission, he couldn't exactly contact me, either.

Also, since the story was that Alec has been ill in his room in the castle this whole time, people were surely starting to suspect something.

Alec coming back in ten days...that was a promise just between me and him.

From my father's POV, it wasn't at all peculiar that Alec wasn't home yet. Because of that, I couldn't ask my father about him, either. It would reveal to Father that Alec had told me about the secret mission anyway. Even if Alec returned home from a successful secret mission, his success would be marred by my actions.

*AHHHHHHH.*

I slammed my book shut.

I was in the middle of reading through Esfian royal history to glean any information about King Eus that I could, and also anything about Nightfellow family origins.

But, as I feared, I couldn't find a word about Queen Idéalia. Not even a shadow of her. The only thing I was able to loosely confirm was that traces of Queen Idéalia were around when King Eus was enthroned.

I foresaw many library trips in my immediate future... Libraries were the best places to research history, but the catch was that history cut off at the present.

Like Siehalt Esfia, my grandfather. Since his era remained in recent memory, it was perhaps a bit difficult for scholars to write about.

I heaved a sigh and stood from my chair. I returned my book to the shelf and turned to Klifford.

"We're leaving."

Klifford silently nodded.

I already knew our next destination—the side gate.

My other daily activity was visiting the side gate after the library, mostly because the side gate was by way of the library.

And why the side gate, you ask?

Because Alec used the side gate when he left, so I figured he'd use the side gate to come back.

And, at present, my hopes had been betrayed again and again. If the

drawbridge by the side gate was up, it meant nobody was going to come that day.

Okay, side gate...what've you got for me today?

I opened Blackfeather and put the library behind me.

I saw the side gate in the distance—and sighed in disappointment.

It was the same sight I always saw. The drawbridge was not lowered. In other words, Alec was not coming home yet.

But then I shifted my gaze.

The side gate, by nature, was not the sort of area people passed through unless somebody was using the drawbridge.

And yet a soldier stood near the closed side gate. He had healthy-looking tanned skin, black hair, and black eyes.

*Wait... Isn't that Guy?*

I jogged—or I was about to jog, but then thought better of it—and walked at a normal speed to meet him. I would obey my doctor's orders for a little while longer!

Since Alec had an eye on him, Guy had to be talented. Though Klifford and I were both still quite far away, Guy lifted his gaze from the ground and turned to look at us as soon as we began our approach.

Is it an aura thing? Can he sense auras...and he picked up on ours? Even though we're so far away? As we walked, I glanced back at Klifford. He was so perfect at his job that I hardly noticed him even though he was standing right behind me.

Since we were walking at a normal speed, it took some time, but we finally made it to Guy.

"Guy, haven't seen you since the library."

"Yes, Princess Octavia!"

He was already at attention long before we got to him, but he gave another stiff bow. I guess it was selfish of me to wish he'd loosen up around me... I kind of wanted to do a post-mortem on the survey with him, too...

"May I ask what brings you out here?"

Guy's eyes shifted side to side. "Um... A bird."

"A bird?"

"Er, a wreven bird, I mean—" Guy pointed at the bramble. There was something black in it. "I witnessed it fluttering down there..."

Did he chase after it because he was worried?

Where Guy was pointing, there was a black bird—a wreven—huddled up in the leaves. I got closer and noticed that while it could walk, it didn't spread its wings. Was it unable to fly?

"So anyway, I found it, but I'm not sure what to do..."

Just as Guy's voice filled with worry, the wreven suddenly spread its wings—its wing, rather.

"Hey, pal! Cut it out!" Guy yelled at the wreven.

Well, Guy had checked out the *How to Tame Your Wreven* book. He probably wants to be a wreven tamer. This wreven...looks like its wing was struck by an arrow. Maybe the arrow broke when it tried to pull it out on its own. When the bird spread its wing, the tip of the arrow could clearly be seen in it.

As I bent over and peered at the wreven, I heard a voice from above.

"What do you want to do?"

It was Klifford.

".....I want to help it."

Klifford nodded in reply. Then he slipped out his sword and— Whoa, what? Hey, stop it! You're making Guy cower in fear, too!

"Klifford?"

He answered calmly. "The wound is not life-threatening, but it is serious.

Without first aid, the bird cannot be saved. If left as is, the bird will suffer and die. I will put it out of its misery.”

That’s your interpretation?! I mean, yeah, that is one way of thinking about it, but still!

I said, “While that could work, isn’t there a more compassionate option?”

See? Guy is nodding his head eagerly, too!

“But nobody knows how to give first aid to wrens,” Klifford argued.

But there is somebody! Right here!

“There’s somebody right here. Guy, you know how, I take it?”

“Uhh... Well, I only read about it in a book and got an idea in my head...”

After a pause, Klifford asked me, “Why do you want to save the wren?”

“Well, because I want to, of course.” Klifford assumed a dubious frown, to which I replied, “Also, because I have the power to do so.”

I held Blackfeather beneath a smug grin.

“A power...which others lack?” he pressed.

“I suppose,” I said with a nod.

Well...the main reason I wanted to save the wren was because of that hypothetical story about saving an injured cat that the mysterious young man told me when I died and wanted to come back to life.

I thought, *Huh, that hypothetical looks an awful lot like what I’m seeing now.*

But this isn’t a matter of money; rather, what sort of situation I’m in to help. In IRL terms, it would be like happening upon an injured animal in the road on the way to school—on finals day! And you can’t be late...versus it happening on a lazy afternoon when you’ve got no plans. Totally different in scale.

And now, I am Octavia, hear me roar!

I have no aversions to wrens! In fact, Blackfeather is my emotional support fan every day! It is a necessity, as far as I’m concerned! And who birthed my Blackfeather? Wrens, good sir!

On color alone, they resembled crows. But seeing one up close like this, it didn't look very birdlike...it was just a completely different shape. As for its floofy feathers... Well, I don't know much about birds, so I can't make a comparison. Anyway, when faced with a genuine wreven bird, I didn't feel even slightly ominous vibes.

Gun to my head, though, I'd probably say it's the wreven's *kaw*? That's definitely distinctive. If I heard it at night, I'd probably find it creepy.

"This little fella was lucky..."

Except the part where it took an arrow to the wing.

But it was...lucky...

*"You were just unlucky."*

Saying the exact opposite of the words I heard when I died...was a strange feeling.

"Absolutely, Your Highness."

Klifford slid his sword back into its sheath.

Good, good. Your sword hilt has black feathers dancing off its tassel. Killing a wreven with that sword would be a bit...gauche.

"W-well then, I'll just grab the wreven and—" But as soon as Guy tried to gently grab the wreven, it flapped its uninjured wing and jerked its injured wing in a grand escape. Fast little bugger.

Ooh, now it's coming to me! Maybe I should just catch it myself. We keep more than horses in the castle stables, we also raise hens and have a vet on retainer!

Be that as it may, a thread of worry formed in my mind.

The vet...would tend to a wreven, right? And if the vet refused, I could always use my Princess Privilege to push it through!

I crouched down and reached out to the charging wreven with both hands... however!

Klifford lunged in from the side, capturing the wounded creature with one

arm. After putting up a brief struggle, the bird folded its wings and became as docile as a pet cat.

*Is this another one of Klifford's cheats? Does he have the bird-taming skill?*

Cradled in Klifford's arm, the wreven looked straight at me and cocked its head.

*Ooh, look... I didn't know wrevens had bluish-gray eyes!*

"Wow, little fella has a very unusual eye color," Guy blurted out in surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes, Your Highness. They're usually brown. Oh, I can carry him! I c-couldn't let an esteemed royal knight such as yourself carry it..."

Why not? Oh, wait, from Guy's POV, Klifford is his superior. He might feel awkward making him do all the work.

"Very well, you may take the bird."

I glanced at Klifford. Reading my signal, he handed Guy the wreven. Guy carefully took the bird, copying Klifford's technique and taking it with one arm.

"Ow-ow-ow!"

But the bird clamped his wrist in its beak. Muttering, "But the book said...grip it this way...like this...", under his breath, Guy finally managed to secure the bird with both hands. The wreven settled down, seemingly unbothered by the way it was being held. Behold the power of *How to Tame Your Wreven*! I think I'll borrow a copy myself...

Guy heaved a sigh of relief.

"Let's take him to the stable," I suggested. "The wreven must be examined."

"Yes, Princess! I shall accompany you," Guy eagerly replied.

But then it happened—

I heard a sound. A heavy sound.

I turned and looked in the direction of the sound.

My eyes shot open.

The side gate...was moving!

And simultaneously, the fence keeping the gate shut had begun to move.

Just like me, Guy was staring at the scene in disbelief. Klifford was the only unsurprised one among us. Still, he watched the gate with caution.

In time, the fence rose, and the drawbridge was now walkable. And beyond the bridge, now no longer hidden from view, were two human silhouettes.

They were both on horseback, wearing cloaks with thick hoods. Their horses crossed the drawbridge. The figure in front removed his hood the moment he finished crossing.

It's him... It has to be him, right?

Hope and excitement filled my chest.

Spilling out of the lowered hood were golden tresses, and the face beneath them was clear as day. It was an angel with beautiful emerald-green eyes—my baby brother.

It was Alec.

Our eyes met.

Feeling something fiery well in my chest, I couldn't stand still any longer.

"Alec!"

"Sister!"

The doctor's warning flew out of my mind. I just made a beeline straight for Alec.

We weren't even that far away, but he felt so distant.

Almost there...almost there—

And as Alec finished dismounting his horse, I flung my arms around him.

"....."

Alec spread his arms wide and hugged me back, burying his face in my shoulder. Is he...trembling?

"Alec...?" I whispered, gently rubbing his back. "What...happened?"



His face still buried in my shoulder, Alec shook his head.

“Nothing... I’m okay.”

The other silhouetted figure was Randal, Alec’s bodyguard. He dismounted, removed his hood, and stood silently at the ready.

*Something must have happened... They departed with a larger party. Why are there only two of them now?*

Alec repeated himself.

“Nothing happened... My mission was a success...” I sensed a silent “however” hanging at the end of his sentence. In a frail voice, he continued, “I broke my promise to you, Sister...I broke the pinkie swear...”

“But you’ve come back safe and sound.”

“But I promised I would come back in ten days...and I didn’t. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right, Alec...”

“...” But Alec fell silent. He was devastated.

I caressed his hair. I could tell he had come back as quickly as he could. His golden locks were caked with dust.

“Well, then...would you like me to stick a needle in your eye?”





Alec knew what the magic words of the pinkie swear chant meant.

“If you want me to, Sister.”

*But he can't stick a needle in his eye! That would really hurt! And I don't have one on me, besides. I don't wanna have to run all the way back to the castle—what a pain!*

“You may have crossed your heart, but I hope you won't die.”

Silence fell.

“...better...ed...”

Alec's voice was so soft I couldn't hear what he was trying to say.

“Listen, Alec? I don't want you to die, so I don't care that you crossed your heart—I'm not going to let you die.”

“Well...if you died, Sister...I would break...”

Guess my attempt of taking the pinkie swear chant literally to lighten the mood was a fail. Maybe it was wrong of me to assume he was going to respond with, “Of course I didn't mean it seriously!” Alec always takes everything seriously...which is usually a virtue, but not in this case.

“Listen...Alec?”

“Yes...?”

“Forget about the pinkie swear. Isn't there something you want to tell me?”

“...”

Alec slowly lifted his head from my shoulder and stepped away from me. When I finally saw his face, it looked unfamiliar somehow, even though he wasn't away that long. Was it because he accomplished his mission? No... What I saw in his eyes was not a sense of accomplishment. It was an air of maturity.

And then, with tears in his eyes, he hurled a curveball at me.

“Sister... Am I Alexis?”

“What are you saying, Al—”

But I cut off midsentence.

*Did this have something to do with Father's mission? Did something happen to him out there? I knew Alec wouldn't tell me, even if it did, but still...*

"Yes. You are Alexis. Who else could you possibly be?"

All I could do was answer his question honestly.

*If Alexis weren't Alexis, then who would he be? There was no way I could be wrong.*

"—All right." Alec nodded slowly and deeply. Then the smile finally returned to his face. "It's so good to be home. I missed you, Sister."

At last. The words I was dying to hear spilled from Alec's lips.

*Ahh yes. Music to my ears.*

It finally felt real to me.

"I missed you, too, Alec."

I smiled back at him.

Meet the Parents was only one day away.

And my baby brother was finally home.

In my room, I was going over my checklist for the third time.

Tea set—check. Refreshments—check. Seats—check.

We're good to go. And among the refreshments were the special gift from Lucinda—eba! My share was included in the pile. One of the great things about eba was that they kept well if stored at room temperature, and they tasted just as good as when they were fresh!

All that remained was to wait for Alec to arrive.

Without much reason, I paced around the room.

I hope Alec's report is well-received by Father...

As soon as he returned to the castle, Alec reported straight to our father without stopping to rest. He was to visit me right after.

“Sister... There are so many things I want to talk about. Would you set aside some time for me?”

“But...you just got home. Shouldn’t you relax?”

“Nothing would be more relaxing than talking to you.”

Well, if he needed to talk, of course I had to make time! I’ll gleefully toss everything else out of my schedule for him.

He was only gone a couple weeks, but I had heaps of things to tell him, too. My days back at the castle were the epitome of eventful!

And what’s more, tomorrow was the Great Boyfriend Reveal I was thinking we wouldn’t be able to have a nice chat until afterward, so I was actually really flattered when Alec begged to see me sooner. I mean, the very day I grandstanded to Sirius about having a boyfriend—when the family gathered for supper that evening—I had promised Alec I would make time to visit him in his room and tell him all about it. The talk just got delayed, what with Alec leaving suddenly on a secret mission.

But instead of me visiting Alec, he was now going to visit me—grace my room with his presence!

Alec’s report to Father seemed to be taking longer than anticipated. Meanwhile, I’d already taken the wreven to see the vet and brought it back.

I looked at the cage. The wreven’s ash-blue eyes stared back. The wounded bird was to convalesce in my room. Guy, who had come to the stable with me, was conflicted about whether or not he should take in the injured bird, but it was decided that the bird would stay with me.

Well, technically, I was the one who suggested it. I mean, it is a wreven, after all...and Guy had a roommate, and other people were creeped out by wrens. That was probably what had caused somebody to shoot it with an arrow in the first place.

The other reason was...this wreven was rather particular about people.

It was unconditionally docile with Klifford, for a start. And it seemed to like Guy since he knew how to hold it properly. But as for me...I wasn’t sure. It did

let me touch its beak, so I wanted to think it liked me...

Meanwhile, it put up a big dramatic struggle with the vet. It was so unruly that the vet couldn't have examined it properly without Klifford's assistance.

But what I found most curious of all— This bird wouldn't kaw at all.

The vet, in spite of disclaiming, "I've never treated a wreven in all my born days..." still managed to treat the wreven. The arrow was removed, the bleeding was stopped, and the wound was disinfected. I was to mix a sedative into its food and feed it after a while. Those were the only care instructions I was given.

The only other warnings I got was that it would likely be able to fly again, so once I saw it flapping, I should let it out of its cage. Also, particularly intelligent birds tended to get moody, delicate, or sensitive to any stimulation—just like injured humans do.

We also learned that this was a male, adult wreven. He was a bit smaller than the average adult wreven. His wing was likely injured by a loosed arrow—which led the vet to believe he was a loner. This made him an easy target, and meant he had no friends or family to help him. Believe it or not, wrevens flocked together and had strong ties to their kin, but they tended to ostracize anyone who was different.

In this little guy's case...it was probably because of his eyes?

But the vet also said that unique wrevens like this one were more likely to become leaders. All that time alone forces them to get stronger, and when they return to the flock, they defeat all the competitors.

It's a bird-eat-bird world.

I walked over to the cage and crouched in front of it. The wreven locked eyes with me, so I talked to him. "Looks like we'll be roomies until your wing heals. Happy to have ya, buddy."

The wreven tilted its head, almost like a nod. Some people say wrevens can understand human language, but I wondered if that was really true.

And then there was a knock at the door.

*Alec is here?!*

I ran to the door and flung it open. Klifford was standing in the hall—but that's a given, so ignoring that—“.....”

*Oh. It's just Derek.*

He smirked and said, “Well, if you're going to look at me like that, I'm tempted to back out of our little arrangement for tomorrow.”

*Urk. Was my disappointment that obvious? Did I look bitchy, even? Sorry, Derek.*

“Do forgive me.”

But Derek was early for his appointment.

“Not that I mind, really... I did come earlier than I was supposed to. I was going to visit Sil first, but my mother insisted I deliver this to you, so I've come to leave it before I visit Sil.”

Derek was holding a box wrapped in a cloth. It came with a nice envelope labeled *For Octavia*.

“It's more eba. Sorry if it's too much—”

*Too much?! No such thing, good sir!*

“Oh my. Thank you.”

*Lady Lucinda, my goddess!* I gleefully took the box.

“She says this is to celebrate your recovery. I'm glad to see you're looking well.”

“Yes. I learned that sky sickness shouldn't be taken lightly.”

“Just sky sickness—but sky sickness nonetheless, as they say.”

We had a saying similar to this in Japan, so it was funny hearing it in Esfian from Derek...

“I'm so tired of hearing that...” I sighed.



Derek chuckled and changed the subject. "But who were you expecting? As your consolation prize, I'd like to know."

"Alec." A big smile popped onto my face.

*Er... I can't exactly say, "I'm so excited he's finally back home!"*

"I suppose you heard he's been ill? Well, he's recovered now."

We had decided in advance that the day he came home was the day he "got better."

"Well...I'm glad to hear it. May I offer my heartfelt sympathies." Derek smiled politely and bowed. "Anyway, I'll take my leave... I will return in a while."

"See you later."

Derek turned on his heel. Apparently, he really had only come by to drop off the gift from Lucinda. Wait, I just remembered, I wanted to ask him about the gerberas... Oh well, I can do that later when we have our actual strategizing sesh.

As I thought about that and watched Derek's retreating figure down the hall, I saw Alec approaching with his bodyguard Randal in tow. He and Derek exchanged greetings as they passed each other.

And now Alec had replaced Derek at my door. The way he looked as if he had run a little was so wholesome.

But the moment he saw Klifford's face, Alec's mood darkened.

"I see Alderton is still your bodyguard."

When Alec met me at the side gate, Guy was the one who called out to him on his way to see Father, and while I'm sure Alec noticed Klifford was present then, he gave an extra-disappointed sigh at the sight of him now.

"Isn't a long appointment the norm? I went through bodyguards way too quickly before."

"I suppose so, but..." Alec gave Klifford a look, then his breath caught. "Are those...the same feathers your Blackfeather is made of?"

He was staring at the black feathered tassel hanging from the hilt of Klifford's

sword as if it were a squished rat.

“Yes, I thought I should give my personal guards their own sword tassels. You know how I’m called Princess Blackfeather?”

I’ve embraced my cringe nickname, thank you very much!

“Is that a reason to give wreven feathers to Alderton...?” Alec asked, his dissatisfaction not entirely appeased.

I yanked his hand. “Come on in!”

“Sister! Randal, you wait out here.”

With a bow of acknowledgment, Randal took his place by the door, just opposite Klifford. As per Alec’s request, no bodyguards were permitted. Sasha was also excused.

Time for some quality brother-sister time!

Once Alec was in my room, I set aside the box from Lucinda—I could open her present later—and sat opposite Alec. These were our predetermined places whenever Alec visited me in my room. I set some freshly brewed milk tea in front of him. Milk tea was his favorite, the same as me. Whenever I drank it, Alec would always drink it, too, and... Wait a minute, did I brainwash him?

W-well...there’s no mistaking that Alec’s favorite way to take black tea now was with milk. I poured myself a cup and sat down with him.

“Drinking this tea...really makes me feel at home again,” Alec said, sipping his tea and smiling with contentment.

“Well, you can drink as much of it as you like from now on.”

“I will.”

I couldn’t help but stare at Alec and smile like an idiot. I knew a person couldn’t grow up in just two weeks, but he definitely had an air of maturity about him. He was still my little angel, though!

“Well, you came back from a successful mission! Father praised you for it, didn’t he?”

“Well...I suppose. He was surprised, actually. He had reservations when he

sent me on the mission.”

*Guess Father had a pretty meh reaction then. Alec sounds so indifferent.*

“Was it...hard?”

“No. I didn’t have much trouble.”

“But...didn’t it take much longer than it was supposed to?”

Alec trembled a little. Then he mumbled, “Well...I fell ill and I had to push through it for a few days.”

Whoa! Hold up, Alec!

I rose from my chair. “Don’t tell me you still feel ill? You should go back to your room and go to bed right—”

“Sister! Please, don’t worry. I waited until I recovered before I came back. Just look at me... Do I seem like an invalid to you?”

I sat back down and gave Alec a hard, discerning stare. His golden locks were now silky and free of dust, and his emerald-green eyes were sparkling clear. His cheeks had a healthy flush to them, too. He showed no signs of weight loss, either.

He looked exactly as he did when he departed— This thought prompted Alec’s parting words to rematerialize in my brain.

*“Sister...have you ever met the late Duke Kihlgren?”*

*“Father called me...Kihlgren...when he gave me the mission...”*

The young Kihlgren looked just like Rust—and that mysterious young man. I could understand why my father was reminded of Kihlgren when he saw Rust.

*But Alec looked nothing like Kihlgren, so what made Father call him that?*

Alec was born the day Kihlgren died.

*What if he’s Duke Kihlgren’s reincarnation?*

The intrusive thought buried everything else in my brain.

Assuming that’s what Father thought...what’s his proof?

The very concept of reincarnation—as somebody who used to be a Japanese

girl who was reborn into Octavia's body—wasn't something I could entirely refute.

But Alec has always been Alec. I never got the sense that he was an adult trapped in a child's body... No. Alec is Alec.

My inner self shook her head vehemently to exorcise the thought. I regained my composure and asked Alec once more just to be sure.

"Are you...certain you feel entirely better now?"

"Yes," Alec answered with a nod. "What about you? How did you get on while I was gone? You attended the junior ball, I assume?"

"Yes—"

I told Alec what happened at the junior ball, starting with everything that was declassified. I was supposed to keep everything that happened in the Sky Chamber under wraps, so I told him about Sil's runaway carriage, attending the junior ball with him, dancing with Derek, and the raid by the anti-royalist traitors in disguise— "There was a raid?! Is my health really what you should be worried about right now? Sister—you are the one who was in peril!"

This time, Alec was the one to jump out of his chair.

"The traitors were arrested, Alec, and I was not even slightly harmed, so please, don't worry."

But I couldn't fool Alec.

"Then...what about your hand?"

*Gulp.*

"Sister, why is there a glove on only your left hand? And wait, at the gate, wasn't it..." His expression grew sterner and sterner. "It was wrapped in a bandage, wasn't it?"

*Wait. He noticed but didn't say anything...?!*

It would be pointless to claim I decided to put on gloves for his visit. Did wearing only the one glove make it all the more conspicuous? If only I'd also worn a glove on my right hand...! But it's a pain pouring tea with gloves on!

Betrayed by my own hand...!

“You’re wounded...aren’t you? And you’re trying to hide it?”

*Was Alec a star detective all this time? Why does my angel of a brother have to be so smart?*

“This...had nothing to do with the raid. Yes, it’s a wound, but it was the result of my own clumsiness.”

“Your own clumsiness? Even so, shouldn’t your bodyguard have protected you? I hope Alderton was punished for failing to fulfill his duty.”

*Hot dang! Alec is giving the exact same speech Father did... Wait, stop being impressed.*

“Effectively, yes, he has been punished. He was put in the dungeon.”

“.....?”

With a puzzled look on his face, Alec sat down. Noting that he had calmed down a little, I told Alec about the case against Klifford, starting with Sil’s sabotaged carriage.

“A decoy... How could you put yourself in such danger?”

*Alec didn’t jump to his feet this time, but he was hopping mad!*

“But Sirius was in danger, too.”

“If it had been me, I wouldn’t have let you go.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Alec, but I would have gone through with the survey even if you had tried to stop me.”

“...” Alec fell silent, his face twisted with pain. But this was a hill I was willing to die on. I wouldn’t have let anyone stop me.

“That’s very like you, Sister...and I hate it.” Then Alec breathed in sharply. He murmured soon after, “It was Hugh...wasn’t it?”

“.....Yes.”

I didn’t tell Alec what Hugh’s true motive was, even though part of me wanted him to know...

“Are you feeling all right?” Alec looked at me compassionately.

“Huh?”

“If somebody who protected you—even for a short time—was found guilty of a crime, I don’t think you’d be able to cut him out of your life. Especially Hugh. You always liked him.”

“I wouldn’t quite say that...”

“But Sister...you’ve always known his name, Hugh Roberts. Nathan Holden, too.”

*Well, that’s because they were both characters in the books...*

“Well, that’s because...they were both Sirius’s most trusted knights. I know your bodyguard’s name, too: Randal.”

“That’s true...”

Alec nodded halfheartedly and sipped his milk tea, like he wasn’t entirely convinced.

Meanwhile—

“Come on, Alec, I’ve brought us some choux, too. Want to eat them?”

My favorite confectionary may be eba, but the pastry I wanted to hype up just as badly was choux! They were a spin on cream puffs from my world: fluffy, crisp pastries filled with buttercream! In Esfia, these were considered a royal confection, and I must say, I was quite happy that I got to eat my fill of these fine gems!

I must confess, ever since I started checking the side gate for Alec’s return, I had the castle head chef bake them every day! As such, I had choux for dessert every day.

“Yes...” Alec bashfully smiled. This time, his answer was sincere.

He took one, popped it into his mouth, and the first choux disappeared down Alec’s throat. Except, even though he was a fourteen-year-old boy—and eating choux with his bare hands, what’s more!—the way he oozed with dignity was just criminal!

I took a specialty eba myself. Milk tea and eba. In this case, the double sweetness harmonized beautifully.

“That eba...,” Alec murmured in sudden realization. “The castle chef didn’t make those.”

My little brother’s powers of perception were above average...but not even he was able to suss out where exactly they were from!

“They’re specialty eba. The chef at the Nightfellow villa made them.”

“Right... I remember you always cleared the platter...”

Sometimes Alec would join me when I visited the Nightfellow villa. When he saw how I scarfed them down, he politely offered me the rest of his! Of course, I couldn’t bring myself to take eba from a baby—but I didn’t want to hurt Alec’s sweet little feelings—so I remember splitting his eba with him.

“I’d love to hear what happened on your end while you were away from the castle, Alec. Of course, only what you’re allowed to disclose.”

Alec finished his second choux and fell into thought. “There really isn’t anything worth telling you...”

“Well, did you meet anyone new?”

“Did I meet anyone...?”

*Hark! Dost I see a reaction?*

“I did bump into the third prince of Valjean by coincidence.”

I almost spat out my milk tea, but I gulped it back down.

*Close call!*

*Wait a minute, does he mean...*

“Was it...Prince Yarsh, by any chance?”

*As in, the prince who sent me a marriage request?*

“Yes...?”

“What is he like?”

Alec frowned.

“...Difficult.”

*One word. Huh? Um, you’re making me nervous, buddy! Based on the profile I was given, how would Alec’s contribution of “...Difficult.” fit in? But then again, gotta hand it to Alec, he gave me a good objective opinion.*

“He’s apparently very inquisitive and enjoys traveling alone,” Alec elaborated. “He and Father correspond, so I presume they are friendly.”

*He and Father correspond? Is that why I got the vibe that Father was steering me in his direction?*

“But why are you asking me about him, Sister?”

*Uhhhh... Funny story, Alec...*

“I received a proposal from a Valjean prince...and it was Prince Yarsh.”

“...!”

Alec crushed the half-eaten choux to paste in his fist.

*Wh-where’s a napkin?!*

“Alec? Let’s toss that and wipe your—”

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

He popped the crushed choux into his mouth and licked the buttercream off his fingers. Right after, he wiped his hand with one of the napkins I had on the table.

“Alec...”

*Um, that wasn’t very prince-like, was it, buddy? Then again, seeing the elegance with which he licked his fingers made me really question his genetics...! He looked like a work of art!*

*Er, anyway, as his big sister, I can’t let such rude behavior slide.*

“I know it wasn’t very prince-like...but you had these choux made special for me. I couldn’t bear to throw them away. Besides, I crushed it myself, and it was still edible.”

The way his shoulders slumped as he strung the words together was just too



stinking cute!

“Well, at least I’m the only other person here...” I conceded.

“That’s why I felt it was okay.”

“Oh, you...” I had to give in. “But, Alec, was it really that shocking?”

“Well...I don’t want you to have a political marriage.”

“Alec, have you forgotten? I have a lover.”

*So the chances of a political marriage were as good as zero!*

*Except it’s a fake lover, okay? And there wasn’t even a hint of him until, like, a few days ago, okay? But now I can declare my fake love with pride! Thanks, Derek!*

*For a minute there, I really was caught between a rock and a hard place. I thought I’d have to ask Alec. But I couldn’t bear to lose face with Alec that way, and now that other part of my fragile ego is safe at last!*

“Tomorrow is the day you’re introducing him to the family, right?” Alec murmured, his eyes downcast. But he quickly looked up and said, “This lover of yours... Who is he?”

*That was the question I couldn’t answer after dinner that night. I evaded it, saying now wasn’t the time or place to discuss it—God, I wish I could go back to those innocent times.*

*But now I can answer this question.*

“It’s Derek.”

Alec’s emerald-green eyes widened.

“Derek, you say...? As in, Derek Nightfellow?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Then...why weren’t you able to say so sooner?” Alec asked.

“*Because* it was Derek. He’s Sirius’s best friend. When you look at it that way...doesn’t it complicate things? That’s why we kept it secret.”

*Even I was shocked by how convincing the lie was. In other words, this proved*

*Derek really was the best option for the role!*

“But couldn’t you have at least told me?” Alec’s eyes filled with hurt. And with that, my ego gauge shifted sharply from Saving Face to Coming Clean.

*But, as they say, deceive your enemies by deceiving your friends first!*

“Now it makes sense... That’s why Nightfellow eba are here. It’s also why I crossed paths with Derek earlier.”

*AHHHHHHHHHHH, now Alec is sulking.*

“Alec,” I called out to him. “I’m sorry I kept this from you.”

*It was wrong of me to keep this a secret from Alec... I think I know what he’s feeling. It’s the same lonely pang I felt in my past life when my big sister got a boyfriend; a sort of jealousy—a fear that I would lose my sister to someone else.*

*Then again, the boy next door clearly had a crush on her since childhood and I was rooting for them to hook up, so I was also bitter that this new guy ruined my ship...*

“But. Alec, just because I have a lover now, that doesn’t mean anything will change between us. You’re my precious baby brother.”

“Precious...baby brother...”

“That’s right. And have I changed at all while I was keeping this secret?”

“No...” Alec loosely shook his head.

“Even with Derek in my life, you hold a place in my heart that nobody could fill, Alec.”

“.....Okay.” Then Alec finally smiled. “Sister...”

“What is it?”

“The junior ball was held in Paradise in the Sky, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Did you go to the Sky Chamber?”

Taken literally, the question wasn’t all that significant, but, to me, it was a very loaded question.

“No... I didn’t go there,” I lied. The Sky Chamber Alec referenced was the Sky Chamber everybody knew about. In reality, another Sky Chamber existed...and I visited both of them, but that information was classified. I couldn’t tell Alec.

Telling him I hadn’t gone to the Sky Chamber filled me with guilt. I mean, why wouldn’t it? Alec was so adamant that I not go there!

“All right—that’s good to hear,” he replied. “The Sky Chamber is not a good place,” Alec whispered anxiously, hanging his head.

Right after, the birdcage jostled loudly.

I looked over to see...the wreven was flapping violently?!

*What?! It flew out of the cage?!*

*Oh no, the latch must’ve gotten loose—hey, stop flapping at Alec’s face! What’s the big deal, buddy?!*

“No! Bad bird!”

*It’s no use. He won’t listen to me! I can’t handle this...*

“Klifford!” I yelled outside the room. “Catch the bird!”

Alec, who was shielding his face from the wreven attack with both arms, whispered something under his breath. He reached out with one hand— But before he could touch the bird, Klifford grabbed the wreven’s neck from behind. He had entered the room completely undetected. Maybe because it was Klifford, the wreven went limp in his hand.

*...Are you chill now, I hope?*

Klifford smoothly turned and put the wreven back in his cage and latched it shut. An aftermath of feathers littered the room.

And a surprising silence fell. Alec...was frozen in a daze.

“Alec?” I approached him and he flinched, recoiling away from me.

“Uh...” The lone syllable spilled from his lips. “No, Sister. It’s not you. I was...”

I shook my head. “You did nothing wrong, Alec... I’ve been caring for a wounded wreven. I was warned the bird would be moody while it was in recovery. It was a failure on my part to not tell you.”

“You saved a wreven...—like—too—”

I wasn't sure what Alec said. But he was on the verge of tears.

Keeping my distance from Alec, I asked, “Are you hurt?”

“No... I'm fine.”

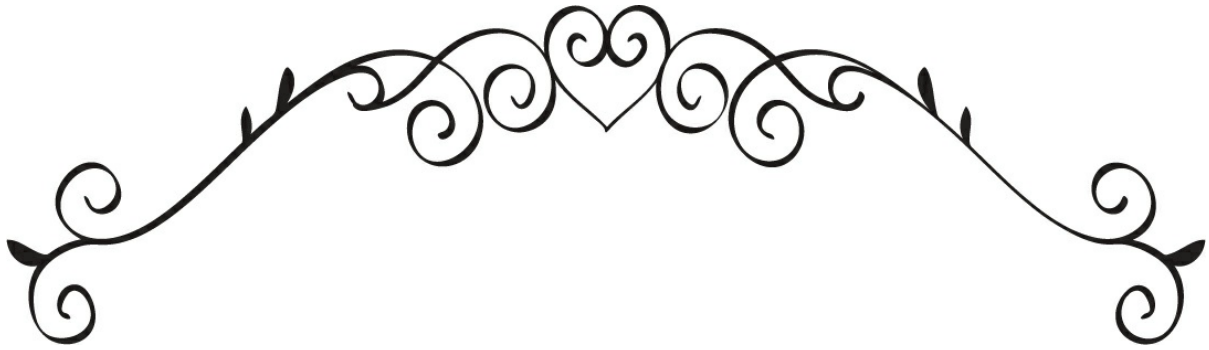
But his expression betrayed his words. He looked unharmed physically, but mentally...

Alec spoke before I could. “Sister, I really must be tired from my journey. Sorry, but may I leave early?”

“Yes...”

No. I didn't want him to leave one bit, but I felt such a strong wall of rejection from Alec that I couldn't stop him.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” Alec promised, forcing a smile.



## Derek Nightfellow's Special Visit

*Let's just say it's a luxurious house arrest.*

That was Derek's honest impression of the current conditions under which his friend Sil resided. He was staying in a room reserved for high-class noble guests, and it was furnished with every basic necessity so that he need not ask for anything.

However... Derek glanced at the two guards stationed in the room. One of them was Sirius's bodyguard, but the other was one of the king's own. Neither showed any signs of budging when Derek entered the room. They were there both to protect and surveil Sil. They would report on every visitor he had, every word they exchanged.

*Guess we can't discuss anything controversial...*

It was also a little surprising to Derek that Sirius was not present. Derek had required permission to visit Sil, and that permission had come from Sirius himself. And yet...

*I wonder... Did Sirius visit Sil at all while his memory was temporarily back?*

"Derek?"

Derek made himself smile when he heard his name.

"Hmm? Oh, right. How are you feeling?" he asked Sil, who was seated at the other side of the desk.

“Not bad.”

And indeed, Sil showed no sign of injury or distress. It seemed to be true that he was the one to request house arrest. What had transpired at the junior ball in the Sky Chamber—Sil losing his mind and turning a sword on Octavia—Sil did not remember, but he was very determined that it be investigated.

Derek figured what scared Sil the most was the possibility of it happening again.

“Right. Why don’t I pour us some tea?”

As Sil reached for the teapot and began to scoop the tea leaves, Derek quickly stopped him. “Wait, Sil, allow me.”

“Huh? But you’re my guest, Derek, I should—”

“Your tea always has an overly complex flavor. You make the fine royal tea leaves weep.”

While he meant well, Sil was a dunce in all forms of cookery. There are some skills a person simply cannot attain, no matter how hard he tries. It was difficult to evaluate his skill, too. His cooking wasn’t inedible—there were some things one could eat. And his cooking wasn’t exactly disgusting, either...but everything he touched was too intense. This was vividly evident even in a simple cup of tea. The result—an overly complex flavor. Any subtle nuances that should be present were decimated.

Then again, his tea was always at least presentable to the average person. And in Sil’s case, being a mediocre cook—or tea brewer, for that matter—was not even a problem.

“Sometimes I forget you’re the son of a duke, Derek...”

“It has nothing to do with class—I’m just very particular about flavors. I want to avoid eating anything substandard unless the situation insists on it.”

If necessary, Derek could eat or drink basically anything, but now was not such a case. He would rather brew his own tea than let Sil do it. Derek already knew that his standards were above average.

“Substandard...” Sil was crushed. Derek felt sorry for him, but he couldn’t tell

a lie. “But Sirius always happily drinks my tea...”

“Because love makes us blind to any faults. Also, while Sirius doesn’t have a dead palate, he ultimately cares more about a food’s nutritional value than its taste.”

As he said it, Derek realized that was one trait the couple shared. While Sil also had a discerning palate, he cared about quantity over quality. And despite his delicate appearance, he had a hearty appetite.

Derek stood up and took the teapot from Sil. He proceeded to brew tea with the proper procedure and the exact amount of tea leaves required. When the tea was finished, he poured it into Sil’s cup before filling his own.

Then he returned to his seat and said, “There. Drink that and tell me what you think.”

Sil silently sipped the tea. “You’re right... It is better than mine...”

“Delicious, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but...I remember when you were kids, you taught Sirius the incorrect way to brew tea...and poor Octavia was harmed the most by it...”

“Pfft!” Derek choked on his tea. “But that’s all in the past.”

“I’d love to taste it just once, Derek—your disgusting tea.”

“...Can we please not?”

That was a memory Derek wished he could forget. He didn’t know the difference between right and wrong back then.

“Well, I’m not making you tea like that. If you insist—”

*“If you insist on drinking it, just ask Sirius,”* was what he was going to say, but he shut his mouth.

It was an impossible notion. The very person Derek had deceived did not even remember it happening. So naturally, he didn’t remember how to brew the tea either. He did have a glimmer of hope...that someday, Sirius’s memory would return fully...but still.

“If you insist on drinking it that way, you’d best give up,” Derek rebuffed him.

Sil tucked his chin downward in disappointment.

“By the way...” Derek decided to change the subject. The purpose of his visit was to check in on Sil. “Aren’t you tired of being surveilled by now? You’re surely starved for information. Isn’t there anything you’d like to know?”

Sil’s eyes blinked rapidly. He paused in thought.

“Well, I don’t know, Derek... Do you have any good news for me?”

Now it was Derek’s turn to blink rapidly in surprise. At first, he suspected Sil might be referencing the survey. Sirius tended to hide intel from Sil. That alone surely made Sil curious about all sorts of things—like Hugh, for one.

But “Do you have any good news?” was the last question Derek was expecting from him.

“Like, in my personal life?” Derek asked.

Sil nodded.

“What makes you think something good happened to me?”

“Well, being a higher nobleman, you are quite skilled at concealing intelligence...but I’m your friend. I can just tell...something’s different.”

“You mean...I’m different?”

Sil nodded yet again.

Derek was completely unaware that he was different, but if he had to find a reason why, he had one idea.

But was that a good thing for him?

“It’s just, I don’t normally see you like this, Derek.”

For someone who seemed dense, Sil could sometimes be quite perceptive.

“Well...I just received word that Prince Alexis has made a full recovery. As a vassal of the royal family, I suppose that is very good news to me?”

As he answered, he scrutinized the reactions of the two guards...and it appeared that was news to both of them.

It was a well-known fact at the castle that the second prince had been ill for



the past couple of weeks. Personally, Derek had his doubts as to whether or not that was true, but he had no definitive proof one way or another. He just couldn't help but think...maybe Alexis's illness was merely a cover for some sort of secret operation.

"Oh, I see," Sil murmured. Then he dropped his gaze to his cup and said, "That is good news."

An anxious smile filled his face.

*There it is again.*

Derek never made a point to call him out on it, but whenever Alexis came up in conversation, Sil's face always tensed ever so slightly. Like he was trying to hide his emotions but failing.

To Sil, Alexis was the younger brother of his lover. This made them close associates. There didn't seem to be any particular disputes between the two.

Derek trusted Sil was not the sort of person who would hate someone without good reason. And Alexis, as far as Derek could tell, wasn't all that interested in others. He was aware of Sil—whether or not he liked Sil was irrelevant. If Alexis were to take an interest in anybody, it would only happen to somebody whose relationship evolved, in any way, with Octavia.

And at present, Derek presumed this did not apply to Sil. This was why Sil's reaction mystified him.

He glanced at the two guards. Should he ask, or shouldn't he...?

"Sil. Did something happen between you and Prince Alexis?"

Sil frantically shook his head. "No. Nothing at all."

"Then you ought not show it on your face."

Sil sighed heavily.

"Um, seriously. Prince Alexis did nothing to cross me. This is my problem alone."

"Your problem?"

"Yeah... When it comes to him, I'm a little...guarded? Nervous? Maybe it's

because he's a prince."

"Look, Sil..."

His lover, Sirius, was also a prince, and he said he liked Octavia, a princess.

"I'm trying to get over my aversion... I don't want to offend Prince Alexis."

"Well...sometimes people just don't get along, I guess. People have prejudices, too."

"Have you had prejudices, Derek?"

It was an innocent question, but one person immediately came to Derek's mind. From the moment they met, he thought they wouldn't get along, and that this would never change even when they grew up—Octavia.

Derek took a sip of tea and said, "Yes."

"Huh?" Sil sounded surprised, like he had asked the question rhetorically and hadn't expected an answer.

"Ever since the day we met, we were an absolutely horrible match. Each time we saw each other, I developed more and more reasons to hate that person. Eventually, it led me to believe my first assessment was correct." He paused. "But now..."

Even though it was now for a different reason, he still felt like they were ill-matched.

"Do you like them?" Sil asked.

Derek smiled vaguely.

"Well...I'm not sure."

Once, in the past, he had decided never to fall in love. Whether or not he was keeping his promise to himself...he did not know.

But in reality, he understood...that saying he did not know was actually his way of avoiding the truth.

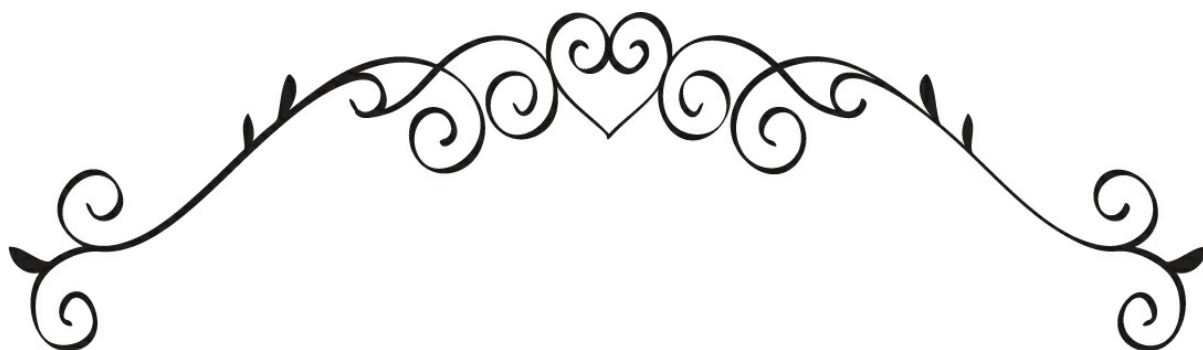
The truth that he was not keeping his promise to himself.

Otherwise, his heart would not be elated over the visit he was about to have

after this one.

Derek heaved a sigh. “Well, damn...”

Sometimes he found himself so insufferable.



## Another Alexis: Part 3

“Don’t follow me, Randal!” Alexis shouted the order over his shoulder as he left his sister’s quarters. His hands were shaking.

*Though I finally reunited with my sister...*

He quickly proceeded farther into the castle. After walking for a while, he arrived at the entrance to the Great Corridor. He inhaled and exhaled deeply to slow his breathing.

*Is it something like imprinting?*

He entered the Great Corridor and looked around as his chaotic thoughts and emotions calmed. The trembling in his hands stopped.

*“You... You’re just like a bird.”*

*I couldn’t have said it better myself.*

“Sister...did you hear what I said?” The question fell from his lips.

*No, I’m sure you didn’t hear it. And I’m sure I won’t end up uttering the same thing as King Eus. Even if—*

Alexis stared at his right hand. The hand that had been about to reach for the wreven. When the wreven attacked him, he’d had something like a daydream. It was probably because the scene was similar to an incident that once happened to King Eus. The king had grabbed the body of an attacking wreven. Alexis felt the sensation so vividly that it was as if he had done it himself.

*The feeling of feathers in my hands. The flapping of wings weakening... The moment the life drained from its body.*

The king’s sister and...*that man*...had once saved a wreven. Then, after King Eus’s sister died, he’d taken in her pet wreven. The bird had grown fond of him. Alexis had dreamed about it before. However, King Eus killed that wreven with his own hands.

*“I wish...you had been saved by my sister only,”* the king had muttered darkly.

If that man—Klifford Alderton—hadn't caught the bird before Alexis did, that daydream could have become reality.

*And right in front of my sister, no less.*

"I don't want my sister to hate me." After saying this, Alexis realized something.

*No, I don't want that at all. That's right.*

"I'm not the same as King Eus."

But then his lips twisted in a self-deprecating smile.

*So what if I didn't take a life? It's not as if I care about the wreven. I only care about what my sister thinks.*

"I'm glad I didn't kill that bird."

He hadn't done anything yet. Alexis clenched his fist.

*The line between me and King Eus is blurring. I can't trust myself.*

"...It would be better if I just died."

*Wouldn't that be best for my sister?*

When they'd met at the side gate, that thought had crossed his mind for a moment, and then it floated away again. He shook his head.

"....."

After going to Turchen, Alexis became convinced. He'd been King Eus in a dream.

It's because things were different from true history—because things were wrong—that he knew he was in a dream.

That's what he believed. Rather, that's what he wanted to believe.

But it was the opposite.

His dream—that was the true history.

That's how he knew. About the true Sky Chamber, that King Eus murdered his sister Idéalia Esfia there, and that her tomb was there now.

*“Do you really wanna destroy Esfia that badly?”*

The man who appeared in his dream in Turchen. Ever since the appearance of that mysterious man, his dreams had gotten much more lifelike.

Still, it was just a dream. It shouldn't have any effect on Alexis's life...and yet.

*Is that really true?*

The innocent question materialized in his mind.

*Do those dreams truly have no effect on my life?*

A memory flashed through his mind—his reflection in the mirror that day.

His own eyes, turning amber.

Eyes suddenly changing color—he had never heard of such a thing before. But one thing was clear: It had to be connected to his dreams of King Eus.

Most importantly...did it only happen that one time?

That was the only time Alexis was aware of. His eyes had never changed color since.

*But what about in the past?*

As far as he could remember, it never happened...or so he thought.

But a doubt materialized in his mind again.

*Are you sure?*

*“In the past...”*

*Here...in the Great Corridor...I met with somebody.*

*“...”*

He turned around. He was forgetting something, but he couldn't remember what. He got the sense...it was something he was not supposed to remember. Either that, or— “Something...I don't want to remember?”

His question hung in the air, unanswered.

He slowly walked on. When he arrived in the center of the Great Corridor, Alexis stopped. And a silly notion popped into his mind: *If I receive the Sky God's*

*Judgment, will He save me?*

Many times, he had prayed to the Sky God.

Most of his prayers concerned his father the king.

But his prayers were never answered.

He knew it was pointless.

Even so—

Alexis looked up at the ceiling. At the god painted on it.

“.....?”

Nothing was supposed to happen, just like always. He expected nothing. And yet. Why?

*“—Do you really want to defy the happy ending?”*

It was that vision again.

Or...the man was really there, talking directly to Alexis.

The man's amber eyes gleamed with ecstasy.

“A...happy ending?”

“That's right. The happy ending where one of your descendants is bonded in true love with one of the same gender.”

The first thing that popped into Alexis's mind was Esfia, the kingdom itself. A free nation where the king was permitted to marry another man.

“After all, this world was created for that sole purpose.”

“Stop...tormenting me...!”

He wanted to attack the man, but he could not move.

“But you're alive because this world was created. And your big sister was born, too. Poor thing. You had to go and kill her.”

The man's words tortured every fiber of his body. Like poison.

“That's why I'm asking for your input. If ya think about it, simply being reborn into the book world as is would probably be boring for Maki as well as everyone



else.”

“Maki...?”

*Who was that? That was the second time the mysterious man said that name.*

“So anyhoo, here’s my proposal: Wanna defy fate? If ya do, I can help.”

He could move again.

He tried to approach the man— “He...disappeared?”

No. Alexis shook his head. He didn’t disappear. He was never there to begin with. The man was just a figment of his imagination.

Unable to stand any longer, Alexis fell to his knee.

“Ah! Prince Alexis?”

Alexis slowly raised his head.

From up ahead—from the opposing door of the Great Corridor—he saw the silhouette of somebody running to him.

It was Derek Nightfellow. The brown-haired man. His brother’s friend.

And his sister’s—

“Lover...”

The moment he murmured the word, a murky, ominous emotion spread through his entire chest.

*Stay away! No. Come to me.*

The closer he got, the harder the emotion boiled inside.

He grabbed Derek’s arm.

“What’s happened to—!”

As Derek tried to help Alexis, the man’s expression suddenly changed.

*Aha... Now I see.*

It felt like he was seeing this through someone else’s eyes.

And surely, his eyes had changed to amber again.

Just like the time he met with his elder brother here—

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At last.

At last—the day is here.

Today's the day I introduce my boyfriend—Meet the Parents. The very Meet the Parents that Sirius insisted would be just between us.

Wouldn't you assume that means Father, Edgar, and Sirius? If anyone else were to join in, maybe Sil?

*Yeah! About! That!*

The deeper you dig, the more you realize that all the main nobles are kind of also invited...?! Like, the top dogs of the True Love and Adulterous Noble factions...and the Nightfellows, Uncle Dearest and Duchess Lucinda.

My father was to blame. He invited everyone. When I confronted him about it, he said, *"Well, we received proposals from two different nations, after all. We should make it a public affair so news will spread outside Esfia."*

But here's what he really meant: *"You could always just keep your boyfriend secret...but you're going public, right? Then what's the problem?"*

*Oh, and the cherry on top? We're holding the event in the freaking throne room.*

Dad's gonna sit all high-and-mighty on his throne while his subjects all line up in two rows beneath him.

Meanwhile, my boyfriend and I will stand at the foot of the small flight of stairs leading to the throne while the formal announcement is made...

It's one step away from an official state event. I say one step away because I don't want to accept that this is an official state event! My wish for an intimate family affair was firmly at odds with it.

I rested my hand on my chest and took another look at myself in the mirror. I was all dressed up and had moved into the tiny room leading to the throne room to make some last-minute adjustments. Klifford was waiting on the other side of the door, and I had sent my handmaids away.

Fake though he was, I was to introduce my lover here. So naturally, I couldn't wear an everyday dress. But unlike my dress for the junior ball—where I needed to search for a fake lover—I didn't need to go too crazy about it (though I still couldn't be careless). I was going to ask my partner Derek's opinion yesterday. However...

I heaved a sigh.

I wound up choosing the dress myself, with a little help from Matilda and Sasha.

*I have to stay positive!*

So I chose an orange dress! The kind with a full skirt. The bodice was bejeweled with tiny gemstones. It didn't show much skin. Like my survey dress, the sleeves fanned out like capes. And for jewelry, since the dress went up to my neck, I wore earrings instead of a necklace, and I made a point to wear aquamarine gemstones.

I wore my hair long as usual, but I had it styled with tiny real flowers. They were orange to match the dress. They were what we would call kalanchoe in my world, but here, they were called *lacolle*.

For shoes, you bet I was wearing flats! I didn't want to repeat that blister nightmare...! They were pink, but they were decorated with orange stones.

And on my left hand, I wore the now-familiar glove. It was also orange to match.

All that remained was Blackfeather, which I opened now. I faced the mirror and gave my best Princess Smile.

*Not too shabby, if I do say so myself.*

I was ready.

The only problem was—

“Excuse me. You’ve summoned me?”

*About time!*

I asked him in advance to come to this little room. I even sent him an urgent letter yesterday, so if he didn’t come after all of that, I was screwed!

“Come on in, Derek.” When he entered, he left the door ajar, so I deterred him. “Please shut the door.”

“What? But—”

*Um, we’re gonna have a secret meeting. Leaving the door open won’t do.*

“The two of us shouldn’t be alone.”

*Even though we’re sort of basically lovers?*

“Then I’ll let Klifford in as well—Klifford?”

Even though Klifford had not volunteered his own opinions on my fake boyfriend dilemma, he was present when I recruited Derek. Therefore, he fulfilled our need of being someone I wouldn’t mind hearing classified info.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

With a light bow, Klifford entered the room and stood beside the closed door.

Inside the room, Derek walked over to me, stopping at a distance to greet me again.

“Good day. It is an honor to see you.”

*Real talk? I was pissed. Like, isn’t Derek kinda being a dick?*

*Why, you ask? Well, let me tell you why—*

*He stood me up yesterday!*

Despite our agreement to have one final meeting; despite the fact that he left a gift from Lucinda and promised to come right back!

Long after the scattered feathers were swept up and he still didn’t show, I almost suspected foul play. *Was he unable to connect with Sil? Or did Sirius hold him up? No, no, no—*

My mind inflated with bad images.

So I had looked into it and—

He went home.

He did meet with Sil. And his conversation with Sil ended without any issue. Then he up and left for the Nightfellow villa.

*What is the meaning of this...?*

I mean, he might have had a good reason for going home. But he could've at least sent word by somebody or sent a letter—anything would've worked, really—even a short message saying, *Sorry, can't make it!*

Knowing Derek, he surely would have thought of such a thing. Yet I didn't hear a peep from him, so I just assumed something horrible had happened—if only!

Well, I guess it's technically a good thing that nothing horrible happened to him...

But still. I was kinda hoping he'd have an explanation for me when I saw him today.

“‘Good day’? What the hell, Derek, are you being serious?”

I just let my true colors show. We weren't even on stage yet and I was already forgetting my manners.

“...Princess.”

*Uh... Wha?*

*Something's...off.*

Derek had recently been calling me by name, even in formal settings. It was so apparent that I almost started to think that was why Sil had started calling me by name, too.

When Derek called me just plain “Princess,” with that edge in his voice... If memory served me correctly, that was back when he truly hated me—during that period when I'd visited Uncle Dearest as a child.

Keeping his distant and indifferent demeanor, Derek continued, “What ails you, Princess? I don't believe you and I are on a first-name basis...”

*What ails me? More like, what ails you, my dude!*

He was still polite as ever. Derek was maintaining respectable distance befitting a noble and a princess.

But—

“What about our little arrangement?”

Derek frowned. “Arrangement...you say?”

“You promised you’d be my—”

The rest of the words got stuck in my throat.

*You promised you’d be my fake boyfriend.*

*Derek...did you completely forget?*

*It’s no use. I have to say it.*

“You promised...that I could introduce you as my lover today.”

“.....”

Confusion...and a fair amount of disgust flashed in Derek’s eyes.

“Princess! Please, stop jesting. You are well aware that you and I are not in a romantic relationship.”

*No shit, I’m aware!*

I was at the end of my rope.

“Derek...,” I whispered, on the verge of tears...then Derek suddenly looked different.

His hand was pressed to his temple. His face was twisted in pain.

“Derek?”

“Ngh... Damn you!” he cursed, as if he was fiercely fighting something.

Klifford’s sword, still in its sheath, pressed itself against Derek’s neck.

To keep him from getting any closer to me.

Because Derek’s arms had lashed out to grab my shoulders.

But Derek didn't even seem to notice the sword.

"Ngh... Listen to me, Octavia. I'm just like...Sirius..."

Derek's brown eyes pierced mine dead-on.

Derek... It's really him. The Derek I decided to trust.

"Please... Don't trust me."

*Just like...Sirius... Has Derek's memory been tampered with?*

"Dere—"

But before I could finish his name, his demeanor changed before my eyes. He look around curiously. Klifford lowered his sword.

"...Lord Derek. Do you remember what you just did?"

Derek blinked a few times. "My deepest apologies, Princess. Did I do something to offend?"

"No... Everything is fine."

I firmly gripped Blackfeather's handle.

"..."

"..."

An awkward silence fell.

Then there was a knock at the door.

"Your Highness? It's almost time."

*That's Matilda... It's almost time for me to come out with my lover.*

"Well, I'd best take my leave," Derek said.

"...Yes."

Derek gave a very duke-like bow. It was no different from any bow he had given before...and yet.

I had a realization... Derek had become quite friendly with me, but he had started talking to me like this only recently—at the junior ball. Whenever Derek was with Sirius, he always kept me at a respectable distance, just like now.

*I feel so stupid...taking this long to notice.*

“Are you both ready, Your Highness?” Matilda cracked open the door and gestured to the throne room.

*What do I do...?*

I squeezed my eyes shut. Then they shot open.

“Might we have just a little more time?”

Bewilderment flashed in Matilda’s eyes, but she nodded and said, “Understood, my lady.”

I was at the edge of a cliff. The crisis of a lifetime.

I paced the length of that tiny room over and over.

This means whoever tampered with Derek’s memory is nearby, right? And not just Derek’s memory—Sirius’s, too.

Was it somebody who didn’t want Derek to be my lover? But nobody else knew. Unless this was a coincidence and Derek’s memory just happened to be tampered with at this very moment? Did this have something to do with that young man?

Questions popped into my mind one after another.

My one saving grace is that neither Derek nor Sirius are in any mortal danger, so it’s not like I have to act immediately here. It’s just their memories... That’s the only thing they’re lacking. But because of that, I need to tread carefully. Ironically, it was a good thing Derek became a second victim. Now I know firmly in my heart that something needs to change.

I took a deep breath in and out.

So that means, at present, my biggest problem is: How do I make it through this presentation?

I couldn’t find a new fake boyfriend this late in the game.

Should I go ask Alec? After I already told him Derek was my boyfriend? And



when he was acting weird yesterday? Am I really gonna rope my baby brother into my drama just to save my ego?

Maybe I should just march up to the throne and pick some random guy from the lineup of guests...

I shook my head.

*Some random guy... What a laugh...*

I bit my lip.

No such guy exists.

Then Klifford entered my field of vision.

*No, wait... He does exist.*

But I quickly shot myself down.

No. Never Klifford. That's the one command I don't want to give him, because I know he would be forced to say yes, even if he didn't want to do it.

"....."

I snapped Blackfeather shut.

There really is only one way.

I was hesitant since the quaint little Meet the Parents I had envisioned had blown up into such a big public spectacle...

But I was only in this mess in the first place because when Sirius accused me of not understanding his love, I got salty and insisted I was in a relationship.

*I have to swallow my pride and tell the truth: "I was lying. I don't have a boyfriend." It's the only way...!*

I'll probably want to spend the next several days holed up in my room, but they'll probably let me do that.

*I'll need to find another way to figure out where they took Hugh...*

"Please make use of me as you wish..."

I looked at the speaker with a start. The man who never spoke out of turn unless I prompted him—Klifford.

“Do you remember what I said, Your Highness?” His indigo eyes searched mine.

Of course I remembered.

*“I am a unique Adjutant. Do not take my service lightly. Please make use of me as you wish.”*

“Of course I remember.”

“Then give me a command.”

I knew what he was trying to say... The hidden implications.

*Use my command...to make Klifford my fake boyfriend?*

“I don’t want to do that.”

“...Why not?”

I swallowed my words.

*Because...it makes me sick?*

“An Adjutant cannot stand idle while his Sovereign is in a predicament. If you make use of me, you can escape your dilemma. I told you at the start, please make use of me as you wish.”

*You know...I’ve thought this for a while, but—*

“The way you say the word...‘use’... I don’t like it.” Doesn’t it make Klifford sound like an object? But he’s a person. And to make matters worse, he talks about himself as if he weren’t a person. Besides. “If I give you a command as your Sovereign, you aren’t allowed to refuse it.”

Klifford gave me a confused look back.

“Why would I need to refuse?”

*I don’t need to refuse...was what he meant.*

Maybe when you base your entire existence around commands, this is the logical conclusion...

“What if I don’t give you an official command...but a simple selfish request instead? Would you mind it then?”

“As I am now...” His indigo eyes locked onto me. “I would not mind it.”

D-dang, that was blunt. Klifford refuted my worry with such ease.

“But if you give me a command as your Adjutant, I would kill my own will to carry it out.”

*Y-yeah, I thought so... Like, is he speaking from experience here? Was he ever forced to carry out a command he disagreed with? It's just a baseless theory, I know, but I just have a sense he did...or is currently? As in, present tense?*

“But since I became your Adjutant, I never once received such a command. The same applies to personal requests.”

“...Do you mean it?”

“If it does displease me...,” Klifford continued, “then I will feel that way, when such a situation arises.”

“...?” I stared at him blankly.

“Like when you refuse to give me a command, Your Highness.”

*Um, let's see... Is he saying he's upset that I haven't commanded him to be my fake boyfriend...?*

*At my core...I'm a selfish person, okay? If you say a line like that to me, you'll just enable me to interpret it however suits me best. You okay with that?*

“Being my fake lover... It's a hellish task.”

“Never has a command of yours felt hellish to me.”

But I still didn't want to command him. If I had to choose, I'd rather make a personal request than a command. If I was putting my feelings first, I would request, not demand it. But— Then I had a simple realization.

*I should just ask him.*

“Klifford, which would you prefer?”

“What do you mean?”

“A command...or a request.” Before Klifford could answer, I hammered it home. “And you can't say you have no preference.”

After a breath, Klifford answered, “Then I prefer your command.”

Klifford clearly expressed his wishes.

*Okay... Now I understand.*

My mind was made up. Or my eyes were opened, maybe. If I had to ask this of Klifford, I might as well do it in the way that would make him gladly say yes!

I took a breath and said, “Klifford, I command you... Be my fake lover.”

“...As you wish.”

The corners of Klifford’s mouth turned slightly upward as he answered.

Standing at the entrance of the throne room, I gulped nervously.

At my feet, the bright red carpet extended out to the throne. All I needed to do was walk in a straight line. It was not far, but with all the eyeballs staring at me, I couldn’t help but feel like the room was swallowing me whole.

I spread Blackfeather wide in a futile attempt at respite and brought it in front of my face.

Alone, I proceeded along the red carpet.

My father sat on the throne, and Edgar sat on the throne beside him.

Filed on either side were the attendees of the great reveal— I found Sirius and Sil on the right-hand side of the line furthest to the front. Sil wasn’t under surveillance...or I suppose that responsibility was handed off to Sirius. Sil’s face lit up the moment I set foot into the throne room. Though I had heard through Matilda how he was doing, it was a relief to see him looking so well. His complexion had much more color than it did the last time I had seen him.

Then there was Alec. Alec...was acting strange the day before, but he seemed normal enough today. He was looking at me with worry.

Suppressing the urge to wave, I looked over on the opposite side—the left.

I spotted Uncle Dearest and Lucinda immediately...and Derek. He was wearing his shrewd nobleman’s smile. Until very recently, that was the only smile I ever

saw on him... We had grown so close, and since that was no longer the case...I was probably still in shock.

Shifting my eyes away from Derek, I walked on.

When I arrived at the small staircase at the foot of the thrones where my father and Edgar sat, I stopped. I closed Blackfeather, shifted it to my right hand, and curtsayed to the pair.

Okay, then—

My heart was beating so fast it felt like it might explode.

“Octavia,” my father called, resting his elbow on the armrest of the throne. “Where is your lover?”

“Don’t worry yourself, Father.”

Well, my father made a point to change up the original arrangement and invited a bunch of guests. The intimate Meet the Parents was no more. That’s the gist of it. And so...I decided to be as extra about it as possible.

Rather than entering with my lover, it was a lot more dramatic to bring him out later.

“I shall call him now.”

I turned around, to my waiting lover.

“Klifford.”

On my cue, Klifford strode toward me. Under a sea of attention, he walked the red carpet until he stood beside me.

Back in the little room, we had a brief meeting to go over the necessary details. (Actually, Matilda bought us a little time, but it was barely enough for me to tell Klifford what to do!) I gave him the extremely broad instruction of “*Follow my lead!*” and nothing else. But even in an intense situation like this, Klifford was chill. He’d clearly been much more nervous when I’d asked him what his favorite foods were!

I couldn’t let Klifford upstage me. From that moment forth, I would be a great actress!

I took Klifford's hand, lacing my fingers through his. In my world, we called it a lover's knot, and it was the same in Esfia! Klifford immediately looked at me and I met his eyes!

“.....”

There was hesitation in Klifford's eyes...probably because, as I was holding Blackfeather in my right hand, he was holding my left hand—the gloved one.

Come on, you're supposed to grip my hand back!

Klifford got my psychic message and gripped back.

Lover's knot—success! (Though it was a rather loose knot...) I looked at my father and smiled.

“Father, may I introduce my beloved: Klifford Alderton. He is also my bodyguard.”

A hushed murmur filled the room.

“Alderton? That count's son...?”

“Isn't he adopted?”

“He was a commoner...”

“Silence.” When my father's quiet but firm order rang out, the room immediately fell silent. “Octavia. Alderton is the one you love? And you two are romantically involved?”

I felt like I was under a hot lightbulb in an interrogation room.

“No need to ask again, Father. As I told you, we are lovers.”

“Hmm...”

His elbow still on the armrest, my father rested his chin in the palm of his hand.

“When did your relationship start?”

*Wh-when, you ask? I didn't lock that down at allll. Everything's riding on my improv skills here...! Okay, maybe—plot twist—we secretly met as kids? Or in Turchen? No, wait, I've never been to Turchen! Going off when I actually met*

*Klifford, I'd have to say—*

“Three months ago, when Klifford became my bodyguard. I developed feelings for him first. And over time, our hearts joined as one.”

*Me falling first was definitely more believable! I mean, my first love was Gray, one of my bodyguards.*

My father's interrogation lightbulb shone to the side.

“Alderton, what do you say?”

I watched over him, suppressing the butterflies in my stomach. I squeezed his hand.

Oh...I thought he was barely squeezing my hand, but he actually squeezed back.

“What Princess Octavia says is true.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Old reliable Klifford—undaunted, even in the face of my father the king's inquisition. That's the spirit, keep following my lead!

Feeling just a little cocky...I checked to see how our audience was reacting.

*Sirius is...frowning? Is he upset that Klifford is my boyfriend? Why? But Sil's got the complete opposite reaction! He looks super stoked about it. I know that look. Unless I'm mistaken, isn't that the smile a fangirl makes when her favorite ship comes to fruition...?*

I shook the thought out of my head.

*No, don't compare Sil to a modern fangirl. That's disrespectful.*

Then there was Alec...who was probably surprised to see Klifford standing beside me when I had told him it was Derek. He was staring at the floor... I didn't know what sort of expression he was making.

“I see you've given Alderton a new tassel for his sword. Was that a romantic gift?”

I returned my gaze to my father. He was emotionless. And Edgar on the throne beside him was— *What's this? A smirk of understanding?*

“No, Father. It had nothing to do with our romantic relationship. I gave it to Klifford as my bodyguard.”

Wait a minute. I wonder if Klifford falls under my father's “exception” clause.

*“There is an exception, however.”*

You know, how he said he had veto power over any lover I introduced to him.

“And what was your true reason for not revealing the name of your lover to us sooner?”

*My true reason? Well, because I didn't actually have a boyfriend, of course! Okay, when he asked me at dinner that night why I wouldn't drop a name, I think I said it was because I didn't want to inconvenience him. Guess that means he won't accept the same excuse again. Okay, gimme an excuse, any excuse...*

“I thought...that it was not yet time.”

*Attack with the powers of...ambiguity! But it's not technically a lie. It actually wasn't the right time for me...but now that I have a fake boyfriend, now's the perfect time!*

“Surely you can understand, Father?”

*We got marriage proposals from Khangena and Valjean only a few days ago, for one! It would have meant giving up my single status! I was at the end of my rope!*

“...” My father's eyes narrowed slightly as he sat there quietly.

I decided to go on the attack. “Father, are you not prepared to bless my romance with Klifford?”

“This romance...is there any proof of it?”

*.....Proof?*

*Father. What in the world are you even saying?*

“Words are meaningless. They are easily spoken. I know that you both have forged an amicable relationship over the past three months. His continued



service as your bodyguard is evidence of that. You also helped clear Alderton's name when he was suspected of a crime, and you gifted him a tassel to match your Blackfeather. I will acknowledge that you have a close master-servant relationship." My father paused for a breath. Then he continued, solemnly, "Listen, Octavia. Alderton is not an exception to my rule."

Before I could jump in the air and scream "*Rock on!*" my father continued.

"However...I don't think Alderton is capable of loving another human being."

"Well, that's just your opinion, Father."

"Is it?" He looked down at us. "Then show me proof of your love for each other."

*"Show me proof."*

*That was my father's final word.*

*Okay...Father... But what kind of "proof" do you need?*

I took the direct approach and asked, "What proof do you need?"

*Bring it on! I'll give ya any proof you ask for!*

"A kiss."

"..." For a moment, I doubted my ears.

"If you two are in love, a kiss is to be expected, no?"

*K-kiss? As in, the thing Sirius and Sil were doing on the very day I lost my shit and lied about having a boyfriend?*

*C-come on, man, no need to press lips to lips here... Y'know, there's foreheads and cheeks and stuff.*

"On the lips."

*H-he cut off my escape route. And...I'm not sure why, but I got the feeling what my father was really saying was, Checkmate. I know you can't go through with it.*





But his cynical gaze was not directed at me...but at Klifford.

*W-we can too go through with it!*

"Klifford...", I murmured. "Bear with me, please?" I apologized in a voice only he could hear.

Still holding Blackfeather, I cupped his cheeks in my hands.

Silently chanting *I'm an actress* on repeat in my mind, I committed to what I had to do.

I closed my eyes, stood on tiptoe— *All I have to do is lean in.*

It was a simple act...*but I couldn't do it! I couldn't be an actress...!*

I squinted my eyes open to peek at Klifford.

Then he smiled.

He wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me close.

"Forgive me," he whispered, in a voice only I could hear.

Then his other hand found my chin. And something soft pressed to my lips.

".....!" My eyes went wide.

*He's...kissing me?*

Klifford's gaze met mine. *Uh, I have to act...right?*

I took my hands off his cheeks and wrapped them around his back.

"Mmm..."

The angles of our lips changed.

*H-how am I supposed to breathe exactly...?*

"Enough," my father's voice broke the silence.

Klifford's face left mine.

But his arms were still tight around my waist.

My heart was about to burst out of my chest.

"Now do you give our relationship your blessing?" Klifford asked my father.

My father looked down at him, as if he were looking for something. And then he finally answered, "I suppose I have to."

Silence fell over the throne room.

"And to celebrate his blessing, may I request a dance from the two of you?"

The question came from Edgar.

And it was a bombshell of a question.

*A...dance?*

"Edgar," my father admonished him. (And for once, I was on my father's team.) *After all this, I have to dance with Klifford? Do you want me to die?!*

"But you and I danced here when it was our time," Edgar argued.

"That was...when we got engaged."

"It's hardly any different."

*Um, no, Edgar, there's a big difference between meeting the parents and getting engaged!*

"Octavia, won't you make my wish come true? Please?" he asked gently.

And before I could stop myself, I said, "Of course I will."

A servant approached me. "Your Highness, allow me to take Blackfeather."

Yeah, it would be dicey to dance while holding onto Blackfeather.

*I am an actress... I am an actress...* I chanted silently to myself as I unwrapped my arms from around Klifford's back. I mean, I had to chant the mantra, otherwise I'd move like a robot. Klifford followed my lead and stepped away from me slightly.

I handed Blackfeather to the servant, but the servant did not back away. I suppose it was because Klifford still had a sword at his belt.

"Klifford may keep his sword. I don't mind."

With a bow, the servant left with just Blackfeather.

"Are you sure it's all right?"

“Yes, unless you won’t be able to dance with a sword on your belt?”

“That won’t be a problem.”

I lowered my voice and added, “Just don’t slack off like you did when we practiced.”

Klifford showed a glimmer of surprise. Then, with a little smile, he said, “All right.”

Then my eyes wandered to his lips...and my heart nearly jumped out of my chest again.

*Dammit, just when I was finally able to talk to him again, he makes me fall out of character!*

*Well, can you blame me? Including my past life, that was my first kiss...*

Music played from the pianola. It was the same tune that played when Klifford and I practiced dancing: *Hofballtanze*, by the composer Weisen. From the intro, it sounded like the half-length version of the full ten-minute piece.

Klifford extended his hand, and I placed mine in it.

The guests parted to the sides of the room to give us space to dance.

And once we started dancing, it was simply fun.

We were perfectly in step.

And once again, I realized what an OP character Klifford was. His dance abilities were way above average, and though the sword on his belt moved around while we danced, he was able to mitigate its movements so it didn’t interfere. Even in the difficult sections, he didn’t skip a beat despite being self-taught.

Since I was focused on the dance, that wound up being a good thing, as it prevented my mind from wandering to awkward places.

*Th-then again, I could do without our faces being this close!*

*Maybe I should just talk to him?*

I spoke up, “For the record...it was just a kiss. Nothing to fret over. I’m sure you’ve had experience, Klifford...”

*I mean, look at him.*

“No, I don’t have any experience.”

*Huh? That was Klifford’s first kiss, too?*

*Dammit. I let my emotions mess me up!*

I lost my footing, but Klifford yanked me back up. My skirt twirled as he righted me.

“Then...,” I began tentatively, “I suppose it wasn’t just a kiss...”

*This is seriously evil! How could I command him to give me his first kiss?!*

“Was it...just a kiss...to you, Your Highness?”

*Like hell it was! It’s only one of the most important events of a person’s life?!*

“No... It was my first time as well.”

It’s just, in my case, I resigned myself to it because I had to reap what I sowed. But it wasn’t the same for Klifford, who had to follow my lead as my fake boyfriend.

“Is that so?”

“I shouldn’t have commanded you to do it.”

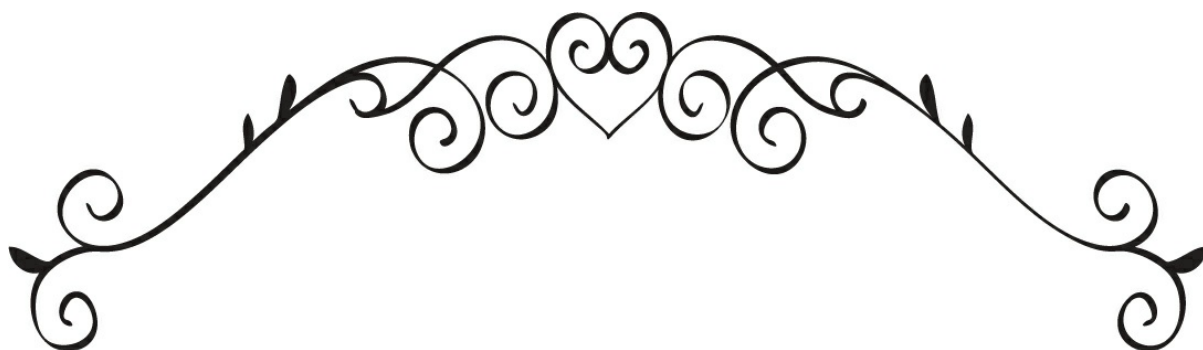
“It...hurts to hear you say that.”

His indigo gaze softened...and I had to look away.

We said nothing more after that.

And we danced through the five-minute *Hofballtanze*.

As if we were true lovers.





# The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: Part 9

Left alone in the throne room, Klifford looked up at the king sitting on the throne. He was ordered to stay behind by King Enoch himself.

Octavia had commanded him to *"Come right back to me once you've finished speaking with Father. I'll be waiting right here."*

That's why he sensed a presence just outside the throne room. It was hers and a guard's. She ought to be safe for the time being...

"What are you playing at?" the king snapped, his tone filled with irritation.

"What do you mean?"

"Ongarne, I'm speaking to you."

He hadn't heard that title in a long time. Perhaps he had gotten accustomed to the way Octavia called him Klifford over the past couple of weeks. It even made him feel strange, being called by another name.

*"Well, we can't just call you the Emissary of Ongarne... You'll need a name."*

Strange, since the name Klifford was only given to him when Count Alderton adopted him.

What used to feel like a borrowed item, he now recognized as his name.

It probably began...the first time Octavia called him Klifford as his Sovereign.

"I find it hard to believe you are Octavia's lover."

"What led you to this doubt, Your Majesty? I showed you proof."

A kiss...

That was meant to test him, not Octavia. If Klifford were the sort of person the king imagined him to be, he would not be able to go through with it. And indeed, the king was not wrong.

However, that was not applicable to him. It was as simple as that.

“Indeed, you did.” The king continued, “Perhaps one of my estimations was off. However, I said it then and I’ll say it again: You are not capable of loving another human being. What does Octavia think of this?”

Klifford answered, “I said it before, and I will say it again: It is exactly as Princess Octavia said during the presentation.”

“Hah!” the king scoffed. “I’m sure both you and Octavia have your own agenda. Unless they’ve converged?”

“You yourself blessed our relationship, Your Majesty.”

After a pause, the king said, “That I did.”

The king probably knew he was there and pretended not to notice. The man hiding behind the curtains in the throne room made himself visible. Klifford bowed.

With a soft tap of footsteps, Edgar, the king consort, stood before the throne beside his husband. “Are you going to rescind your blessing, then?”

“.....”

Silence.

“You won’t do it... Can’t do it, rather. Isn’t that right? So if the relationship is to be overturned, it will have to be done by Octavia or Alderton.”

Stern lines appeared on the king’s face...then vanished.

“Come now, it’s obvious just by looking at them. They are attracted to each other, by every measure of the word. Even if they aren’t lovers now, it’s only a matter of time.”

By her command, Klifford played the part of Octavia’s lover. Kissing her was part of the command, nothing more, and yet Edgar’s words were strangely filled with conviction.

This realization made Klifford feel a little uncomfortable.

“Edgar, you only say that because you know nothing,” the king said.

“I don’t have to know anything; my merchant’s senses are keen as ever.”

As the two bickered, they looked a far cry from a king and his husband. The

king consort turned to Klifford and said, "Alderton, you may go now. Go back to Octavia. I need to speak with Enoch."

"Aye..." With a proper bow, Klifford turned on his heel.

"But, Alderton, I suggest you have a little more self-awareness," a voice advised behind him. "Ask yourself why you were angry when I caressed Octavia's hair."

*Why was I angry?*

To be sure, he did feel uncomfortable whenever anyone else touched Octavia. It was the same at the side gate, and the feeling was getting stronger. But wasn't that only because Octavia was his Sovereign, and he cherished her the same way he would a weapon?

*Self-awareness...of what?*

He kept walking, not turning back, and opened the door to leave the throne room.

Octavia was waiting for him. Blackfeather was open in front of her face and her eyes were sparkling. Feeling a smile form on his lips, the same doubt shot into his mind again.

The king's reading of Klifford was off the mark.

*But that still didn't explain it. Why did he kiss Octavia?*

He acted as her fake lover because she had commanded it, but wouldn't a fake kiss have sufficed? It would have been easy enough to make it look convincing.

To begin with, his former self could not have even thought of it. Being close to another person produced nothing but discomfort.

His eyes fell to Octavia's left hand. He often caught himself looking at it.

Her injury...

"Klifford?"

He was holding her left hand. The wound she had sustained in the Sky Chamber had not yet healed. It was still wrapped in a bandage and hidden by

her glove.

*Why won't it heal faster?*

It was his dagger that had hurt her. That was probably why it weighed on his conscience. Was it because the same dagger he had made his first kill with... hurt her?

Octavia did not resist his touch, which made another indescribable feeling well up inside of him.

"Did my father say something disagreeable to you again?"

"No. The king consort came to my aid."

"Lord Edgar did?"

"Yes."

"I just assumed Father would try to rescind his blessing..." Octavia shook the quizzical look off her face and continued, "Then we still have his blessing to be lovers?"

"Yes. As long as you or I don't rescind it."

"Then we have no problems there," Octavia smiled.

He reached out to touch her cheek, then stopped himself.

"Hmm? Something wrong?"

Klifford shook his head. "No, Your Highness."

This was not like the time when she was asleep in the carriage.

The urge to caress Octavia's hair... It had become a strange new compulsion of his.

—*Fin.*

# Afterword

Thank you so very much for reading *The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices*, Volume 6!

Mamecyoro here.

Volume 6 is all about Meet the Parents. It outlines the events between the end of Volume 5 and Octavia formally presenting her lover. Now, who do you suppose Octavia chose to play her fake boyfriend?

Oh, and You-know-who is also coming back.

During the initial planning stages, this series was going to be in three parts. Part 1 was the Meet the Parents Arc. Part 2, the Council of Feudal Lords Arc. And Part 3 would take us to the end with the Turchen Arc.

And while that plan hasn't changed much, I put some events that were supposed to happen in Parts 2 and 3 in Part 1, which made Part 1 kind of long... Even I think so.

Since Volume 1 was all about, "I'm gonna find me a fake boyfriend!," this arc ended with her getting aforementioned fake boyfriend.

And thanks to all of you dear readers, I've finished Volume 6. Thank you with all my heart!

Since getting to the Meet the Parents was always a big driving force in me, I am truly so pleased to make it past this very big finish line.

That's right, I thought of this as the first finish line.

In my mind, since this was Part 1 of this series, I never doubted that I had

crossed the finish line. It was like, I got everything I wanted in there, so we're good!

But when I handed my first draft for Volume 6 to my editor, they were like, "What, is this the end?!"

Huh?!

Was my finish line metaphor...way off?

I mean, come on, she introduced her fake boyfriend to everybody—that's a big finish, isn't it?

But wait, put another way, when you think about all the other things...well, yeahhh...

My editor has a point!—I believe you'll also get that out of Volume 6.

Now, since I wrote about Klifford in Volume 4 and Octavia in Volume 5, this time—despite what happened to him in the story—I wanted to put the rom-com character spotlight on Derek.

So. Derek... Not like I mean to neglect the guy, it's just, when it comes to romantic hierarchy, he's the one I'm the most indecisive about! Actually, he's damn low on the hierarchy. "Why don't you just make him romantic already?!"—is what the rom-com gods are screaming right now.

Since his feelings are more conscious than subconscious, he's the opposite of Octavia. Also, if I had to pick between pursuer and pursuee, he's definitely the type of character who would be pursued, which is why I figured if he was forced to be the pursuer, he would be incredibly awkward about it. Also, he had altogether fatally horrible timing!

But he'll be okay. He is a certified resident of the rom-com world!

If he successfully wrestles his demons, he has the potential to be the most powerful man in The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices Rom-Com Literary Universe.

Lastly, I would like to thank my editor for helping me out so much once again, and Fuji for the wonderful illustrations. It's amazing to see how the pair on the cover art was updated so perfectly.

My proofreader and my designer, and everyone else involved with this series, I offer my humblest and deepest thanks to you all.

May we meet again!

*Mamecyoro*

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