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My fiancee whom I'm deeply in love is almost made to be a villainess, so the heroine side will be paid for what they did. Volume 3

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First published in Japan 2022 by MAG Garden Corporation English translation rights arranged with MAG Garden Corporation through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo

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**Cross Infinite World** 

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crossinfiniteworld.tumblr.com

First Digital Edition: June 2024

ISBN: 979-8-88560-122-1





# Prologue: I Finally, FINALLY Prepare to Marry My Beloved Fiancée

**FATHER** read the sheepskin document before him and nodded heavily.

"We believe all is in order."

Presently, he was looking at the guest list and layout for none other than Elizabeth and my wedding ceremony. As it was such a formal event, not only were all the nobles in the land invited, but formal invitations had also been issued to the royals of all neighboring countries, and there was a great deal of fuss about whether to invite their spouses or heirs and to what extent. Having me compose the guest list was nothing short of an international relations test.

For instance, from our northern neighbors in the Kingdom of Orion, I was obviously inviting Crown Prince Malius and my former schoolmates—his younger brother, Leohardt, and Prince Malius' fiancée, Lecia. Our southern neighbors in the Kingdom of Nieve, however, had no queen or heirs to note, but they had been our close political allies since I was a mere child. It would've been proper to invite the king's younger brother, but he was in no condition to leave the kingdom, so I only invited King Ricardo himself.

Our allies aside, there was also the pressing matter of which of our less amicable neighbors to send invitations to and to what extent. It was an optimal chance to consider who I wanted to form alliances with when I was king.

The tension left my shoulders as Father announced my passing grade.

"This is an incredibly du— *important* matter, after all," Father continued, correcting himself halfway through.

Did he just call it dull?

Given its importance, I didn't call him out on it, but I got the feeling my appointment to the task had a hidden meaning.

I nodded politely. "You are free to adjust the itinerary as you see fit, of

course."

"Indeed. You may continue to get Lizzie's affairs in order, then."

"Gladly."

"Ah... And Vincent." Something in the air had suddenly changed, and I gave Father an inquisitive look. His expression was unusually dire, and his emerald eyes were deeply thoughtful. "You must marry Lady Elizabeth," he told me gravely, "no matter what comes to pass."

"Well...of course."

He didn't need to tell me that. I studied his features carefully—if he were simply reasserting his adoration of my fiancée, that would be one thing, but he seemed far too serious for that.

Before I could figure out his intent, he relaxed and smiled through his beard once more. "No...forget We said anything. We must have gotten ahead of Ourselves, given We will soon be able to see her every day. You are just as excited for that, no doubt."

I could tell that wasn't what he was thinking of and knitted my brow with worry. Something didn't sit well with me, but no amount of questioning could pry the information out of him.

He's not planning on seeing her every day, is he? I shudder to think of what married life will be like with him looming over my shoulder.

I resolved to talk to the steward about packing Father's schedule more tightly. There had to be lands to survey, diplomatic missions to embark on, and banquets to attend. If I was lucky, Mother would accompany him to most of them, and Elizabeth and I could enjoy our privacy.

"Excuse me, then." I bowed crisply before turning to leave.

There's no need for him to be any the wiser of my intentions yet, I thought as I walked toward my room.

It was not long after midsummer, and I would soon return to the Royal Academy for the latter half of my third and final year. There would only be a few short months of lectures left, and the graduation party would happen just

before spring. Then, we would be in the thick of the wedding season. New graduates would arrive at the castle to receive their official status and titles, after which they would either begin to work or return to their family lands to govern. Each would have new responsibilities and likely new titles to accompany them—and while neither was directly related to marriage, many young bachelors and bachelorettes elected for the ease of doing so while they were still in the capital.

There was always a rush of engagement declarations from early spring to summer, the busiest season for our public servants. Each house had traditions for the process—some simply submitted their marriage license to the palace, while others held opulent ceremonies.

This spring would be different since I would be graduating. As the crown prince, every noble in the realm was convinced there would be a grand wedding and was doubtlessly waiting to receive their invitations with bated breath. Every effort was being made to satisfy the expectations of the realm's countless messengers.

As I strode down the palace corridors, I came across Harold waiting for me. He held out a pair of crisp white gloves. I nimbly put them on, noticing Harold's gloves were equally new. Beside him was a neatly partitioned cart stacked with piles of cushions.

Elizabeth would soon live in the palace, and a great deal of preparation was left ahead of us. Tradition stated that a prince and his bride would spend the early months of their marriage living in a small, separate mansion on the palace grounds, but Mother and Father were adamantly against that. As such, Elizabeth would have a fresh room made for her beside mine.

I hope she won't be scared off by my overbearing parents.

I had to prepare a room for Lars as well. Knowing him, he would eagerly abuse his position as Elizabeth's guardian dragon to royally muss up Elizabeth and my love nest. He pretended to be content to sleep in a basket at the foot of her bed in the la Montlivere mansion, but I would not tolerate any untoward behavior. If he was so desperate for company, he was welcome to share Mother and Father's bedroom.

At any rate, Elizabeth would be moving in soon. I had to prepare our rooms, parlors, and studies for her use. We were slated to sleep separately for the time being, granted, but I was hoping to invite her to my room on occasion.

I took a deep breath as I opened the door to my room. I first spotted Elizabeth —or rather, her larger-than-life likeness that occupied nearly an entire wall. Her smile was more brilliant and a thousand times more precious than the ornate gold frame that encircled the painting. Meeting her "gaze" brought a smile to my face despite the prickling of Harold's disapproving glare on the back of my neck. At least she wasn't judging me.

"We can leave the portrait, can't we?" I wondered aloud.

Harold gave me a worried look. "Er. Highness?"

"What? Mother and Father have portraits in their room."

"Those are the kings and queens of old. Besides, are you certain you wish to show your wife this?"

"M-M-My wi...?!"

I fervently moved to cover my blush but knew that was not the issue. Having a portrait in my room across from my bed, of all places, was highly inappropriate. I reluctantly removed Elizabeth from her spot and rested her on the cart.

On the shelves, I had a variety of much smaller portraits paired with one with a small clock embedded. Since I added a new one to my collection every year, there were ten, but it would surely be fine. They had a small case I could store them in, so I decided that was all the likenesses of Elizabeth I would need.

Now for the last issue, I thought, turning to the door leading to the adjacent chamber. It was originally a reception room, but now it had a very different purpose. I led the way as Harold pushed the cart behind me.

I threw open the double doors and peered inside. Much younger Elizabeths covered the walls. The first was the largest, but they chronicled every splendid year of her maturity. The artist had mastered painting and calligraphy at the age of ten, and each expression was brimming with life. Though he couldn't observe his noble subjects, his fantastic artistry was quickly noticed, and his services were highly sought-after to this day. No doubt, it was partially thanks to his

gorgeous subject matter that he had reached such heights of genius. Mother always said that one must grow accustomed to the best, and this room stood as a testament to that development.

Of course, even I knew Elizabeth would be shocked by this room. Every letter she had ever sent me and every flower pressed into perfection were here, decorating the frames about the countless Elizabeths. Then, there were the sculptures and the fine porcelain...

As such, today's objective was to safely move all the art into storage.

"Allow me." Harold laid his hands on the nearest painting, but I gestured for him to stop.

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"No. I'll do it myself."

"Wouldn't it take too long to do it yourself?"

"But you already have Lady Margaret, don't you?"

"Er... Yes."
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There was an unspoken question in the air as to what that had to do with anything. The intensity of his silent glare rapidly corroded my desire to leave it at that.

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"Please, don't touch Elizabeth," I finally said.
"...."
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His gaze grew sharper still. Evidently, he worried I was confusing her likeness for the real thing.

In the spring of last year, I finally confessed my love to Elizabeth, and despite a few twists, she requited my feelings. We've been officially lovers ever since, talking regularly during our school breaks and even going out on dates on the weekends. I had assumed I would grow more used to her and maintain my composure about her better with time, but it was the opposite. I had fallen in love with her all over again, harder than before.

I could scarcely believe I was in a relationship with such an adorable angel. Just thinking she returned my feelings made my heart melt. Should I lose myself in her eyes and mutter aloud that I love her, she would flush bright red and tell

me the same. Compared to my nine dark years of secretly pining for her, I was frighteningly happy. The angels themselves had blessed my fortunes, and life was better than I ever dared dream.

My bliss had raised my blood pressure and pulse nearly permanently, and with it, my burning desire to have her all to myself. I tended to get a tad overprotective at times, even, but there was no need for logic. I had surpassed such trifles.

I composed myself as best I could before looking Harold straight in the eye. "Imagine these were all portraits of Lady Margaret. You wouldn't want me getting my greasy hands all over them, would you?"

"I... Regrettably, I have no portraits of her at home." After a short stare-off, he slowly withdrew his hand. Evidently, he understood my desires. "From worthless to mirthless," he muttered.

He was right. I had grown only more twisted, but I was unwilling to grant him the satisfaction of a response.

Harold unaffectedly watched as I loaded all of Elizabeth's likenesses into the cart over the next hour. Then, we took our precious cargo to a far more secluded storehouse. As we walked through the relatively isolated inner courtyard, Harold leaned over to whisper in my ear. "If I may be so bold, Your Royal Majesty, you might wish to show her more of your true self."

The grinding, squeaking wheels of the cart seemed far harsher than they had moments before. I didn't so much as glance back at him. Elizabeth knew nothing of the depths of my obsession, let alone the lengths I would and had gone for her. I had to remain her infallible knight in shining armor—not to mention that the weight of my love may put off a delicate lady like herself.

"Maybe you're right," I replied. "Perhaps coming clean and showing her all of this would be easier on me. But do you truly believe she would want to see all...this?"

He didn't reply, though his expression spoke volumes.

"I know you want only the best for me, Harold, but I don't want to force my twisted delusions upon her."

Even if my perfection was only skin-deep, it was a persona of my own creation, and her approval of it was as good as loving the "real" me. That was enough for now.

Besides, I thought as my gaze drifted to the sky, that only serves to complicate what's to come.

It was far more pressing than the invitations, my parents, Elizabeth's moody pets, or my own changed demeanor put together. I was referring, of course, to the wedding kiss. Looking her in the eyes *while* I kissed her was more than impossible; it was incredibly lewd and immoral. Whoever devised the tradition must have lived in a dark age of unbridled sexual deviancy.

Elizabeth seemed every bit as anxious, but when she suggested we practice, my legs nearly gave out from beneath me. We had attempted to practice several times in the interim when we found ourselves alone, but our labor had yet to bear fruit. The sight of her puckering her succulent lips, her eyelids fluttering shut, was too much for my poor brain to bear, and I could hardly draw my mouth closer to her cheek. It was surprisingly stressful as well, and I was always rather sore the following morning.

I could share none of this with Harold, *especially* since he was said to have kissed Lady Margaret already. He gave me a puzzled look at the sight of my flushed cheeks, but neither of us said a word.

"This place seems fitting," I finally said as we arrived at an unused room just off the main hall. We stepped inside, and I hung one of her many portraits on an exposed wall. "Well? It's not slanted, is it?"

"Not in the slightest."

"You're not looking at her face, are you?" I asked.

"Perish the thought. My eyes have been on the frame the whole time."

"Excellent."

With our combined efforts, we hung every portrait properly in under an hour. As I turned from the wall to take in the newly decorated chamber, however, I froze.

There, in the center of the room, a cloud of white smoke had begun to form. Though it trickled up from the floor, it didn't reach as high as the ceiling, and there was no smell of burning or heat of flame to be found. It was highly unusual—but I had the displeasure of seeing such a phenomenon once before.

"Y-Your Royal Highness!" Harold stepped forward to cover me with his body. He had arrived at the same conclusion I had.

"Go call for help," I commanded him.

"No, I shall keep them at bay."

Granted, no servant would leave their lord alone with such a strange emanation. He was correct in his decision.

I nodded. "All right. Don't do anything rash."

"Kekekekeke! There's no escape for you neow, blood of Mariabel!"

Before I could reach the door, a strange voice spoke to me from nowhere, as if the words were being spoken directly into my head.

With an almost comical popping sound, the smoke parted in an instant. Floating there, suspended among the steam, was a violet-furred cat with a large belly. Its slitted golden eyes flickered open, and it opened its fanged jaws in a confident grin. A red-furred cloak hung loosely about its shoulders, and it folded its arms imperiously as it looked at me.

The purple cat and I stared at each other in silence for a long moment.

"Well? Nyaren't you surprised?"

"I thought as much," I groaned.



From Harold's slumped shoulders, I could tell he wasn't impressed, either.

The unnatural "smoke" curling up from the floor, while a different color from Lars' that I saw in the neighboring kingdom of Orion, was unmistakably miasma. I could only assume it was densely packed with mana.

"Why have there been so many of these lately?" I muttered discontentedly.

I'd been far removed from all forms of monsters and familiar summoning for most of my life, but something about these past few years had ruined my good streak.

"Enough grumbling!" the catlike creature hissed, jabbing a pudgy paw at me. "You, boy! Are you or are you neowt the descendant of Mariabel and Gaius?!"

Harold looked back at me as well.

I recognized the names—the Beautiful Mercy and Lord of the Continent, as they were. Not only did they sound familiar, I'd known them since I was a little boy.

"Those names..." Harold muttered.

"Mother and Father?" I wondered aloud.

"Aha! The son! Nyo wonder you looked just as handsome as Mariabel! Well, I have neowt forgotten what they did to me! I'll nyever forget!"

Evidently, the cat had a history with them, and Father's odd warning made significantly more sense now. I sighed and cradled my head in my arms. I desperately wanted nothing to do with this mess, especially as I believed no child should have to pay for their parents' sins.

"Let me show you to Mother and Father," I offered. "You've no grudge against me, I gather, and I've no time for this."

Harold nodded. "Selling out your parents to magical entities, I see. Interesting how quickly the thought came to you."

I pretended not to hear him. I really was too busy to be embroiled in this mess, but given the cat's disposition and my experience with similarly obstinate individuals, I doubted it was even listening to me.

The cat pointed an imperious paw at me. "I am the long-sealed king cait sidhe, Lord Plum!"

Uh-oh.

"Flikker Licht!!"

Almost as a reflex, I recited the incantation for a spell, letting the mana escape my lips on my words. It was a near-perfect defensive spell that could shut out any offensive spell. On a more personal note, Lady Lecia put a great deal of effort into learning it last year as a facet of her "saint training." Elizabeth praised her casting back then, so I picked it up myself.

I'm rather glad I did.

It was as good as a declaration of war, however, and it was clear I was prepared to fight.

"Neow you will suffer the same pain and anger I did! Your greatest treasure is mine, nyahahahaaaa!"

"What does that even mean?!"

Regardless, I had no time to think about it. The cait sidhe—Plum—launched itself further into the air to attack from above. It was clearly used to fighting humans. Its claws lashed out at me from above, colliding with the Divine Wall that surrounded Harold and me. The wall held for only a moment before violet mana seeped out of Plum's claws and corroded the light at a startling rate. Its pupils dilated momentarily as though it were expecting no resistance whatsoever, but its shock shifted to jubilation as it broke through.

"Nyot half bad...but I didn't spend twenty dull years preparing to defeat Mariabel for nyothing!"

Twenty years? That's before I was even born! Why don't you go take your anger out on Mother? I won't stop you, I swear!

"Neow, I have nyo shortage of mana!"

"W-Wait, I'm only her son! I know nothing about any of this. Why can't we talk it out?"

My second attempt at diplomacy failed, however, as the cait sidhe simply hissed. Mana rippled through its short fur, rapidly accumulating in its claws again. The razor-sharp tips grew large and laden with magic as it forced its way through.

Its mouth split into a demonic sneer. "Tell mew, boy, what do you hold meowst dear?" it whispered into the depths of my heart.

The question had an incredibly obvious answer, given the massive number of portraits in the room. And yet, at the creature's question, I wavered and found myself thinking about Elizabeth.

With a thick *criiick*, the wall began to wail under the weight of the cait's assault, sending a radius of hairline cracks throughout the wall. I hadn't run out of mana; rather, I was being overpowered through sheer force. Then, with a catastrophic crashing sound, the Divine Wall burst, sending fragments of light through the air and making it nigh impossible to see. The cait alone was visible through the shower, diving toward me.

Harold intercepted it, delivering a punch and a high-arching kick, but the creature nimbly wove through his assault.

"Your greatest treasure is mine neow!" it hissed, claws splaying mere inches from my face.

I braced, but no pain came. Instead, I felt a sudden violent twisting of mana, paired with a distinct fracturing sound.

Oh, drat. There goes my magic-nullifying ward...

Through my swimming vision, I glimpsed an angel with long, flowing ribbons in her hair. I attempted to reach out to her, to call her name, but my body was stiff and unresponsive. Something about the ordeal felt gut-wrenchingly familiar. I tried to fight against it, but my head was growing heavier, my thoughts foggier with each passing second.

E-Elizabeth...

Then, I blacked out.

## Chapter 1: I'll Fall For You as Many Times as It Takes

THE royal family was generous enough to send us a polite letter informing us of how the wedding preparations were proceeding, and Father and Mother seemed relieved by the news. Nearly ten years had passed since my engagement to Prince Vincent was made official, and while I once felt I would never be anything more than his fiancée, the time had finally come to begin living together in the palace proper. My household was abuzz with preparations.

Though everyone was happy for me, a sense of loneliness left me feeling conflicted about the affair. Mother could not prepare any of my dresses without breaking down in tears, and while I had tried to smile throughout the proceedings, my mood had soured somewhat by the end of it.

We were preparing my wedding dress that day, and Mother was inconsolable. It was pure white and would be the dress in which I would officially become the future queen of the realm, and as such, it was masterfully crafted with delicate silver and gold thread embroidery and the finest lace I'd ever laid eyes on. His Majesty had it sent specially from a distant country, as no seamstress in the kingdom could utilize such refined techniques as the article required, and the generosity of his gift deeply touched me. He was rather fond of me, no doubt.

"Oh, Mother, you don't need to fawn over me any more than you already have," I said.

"Oh my... I must've gotten carried away. His Royal Highness promised to make you happy, after all."

Following our return from the Kingdom of Orion, Prince Vincent escorted me to the palace to formally introduce me to his parents as his future wife. Mother couldn't stop crying the entire time I was getting ready, and I could scarcely imagine the state she'd be in on the day of the ceremony itself.

I nodded firmly. "He has. Besides, His Majesty wrote to inform me that you're

both welcome to visit me in the palace whenever you'd like. Try not to feel so lonely."

As I said so, my eyes slid to the nearby mirror, and I saw the opulent dress I wore in the reflection. The queen was a tall and slender woman, so the dress was a tad long on me without tailoring, but it gave me an air of elegance and composure I could never muster in my everyday life.

### I wonder if Prince Vincent would agree?

The thought of his gentle smile rose to my mind, and I let out a dreamy sigh. After nine long years of engagement, we were finally lovers. There had always been something between us, but looking back, knowing what I did, it felt bittersweet—to the point that I attempted to avoid him for a time. Aside from one small issue, our relationship was proceeding smoothly...more or less...I hoped.

The issue is whether or not, at the height of the ceremony, with Vincent in his finely tailored suit before me, I could...k-kiss him. My cheeks flushed hot red at the thought. There was little I had to do aside from stand at the ready and let him kiss me however he pleased. Now that I knew he loved me, however, the wedding kiss went from a mere formality to an insurmountable barrier.

With the fitting at an end, I hurriedly returned to my room, where Prince Vincent awaited—or rather, a portrait of him. Since he confessed his love to me and I realized my feelings in return, I couldn't look him in the eyes. That couldn't stand, so I requisitioned a life-size portrait of him. In the steward's words, the artist had rendered the prince's smile as strained as if he had overeaten dessert and was experiencing a severe case of heartburn, but it would have to do.

When the painting arrived several months later, I was thrilled by the results. I felt awkward putting it in my bedchambers, so I enshrined it in the adjoining room I usually studied in—it deserved to be somewhere I could appreciate him day and night alike. Lord Lars loathed it and avoided my bedroom altogether, but as I occasionally wanted to be alone with my thoughts of the prince, that was a welcome development.

And soon, we'll be wed...

Becoming crown princess was a great responsibility, and knowing I had to act appropriately always made my back straighten. Despite the pressure, the opportunity to live in such close proximity to Prince Vincent made my heart flutter with delight.

"Oh, but wait..."

I was beside myself with glee at the thought of our life to come, gazing dreamily up at my prince as he reached out to me with his divine smile when I made a horrible realization.

"Should I really be taking this painting to the palace with me...?"

It felt wrong to leave it behind, what with all the work the artist had put into it, but I had Prince Vincent in the flesh. Would he think it weird if I arrived with his life-sized likeness?

I thought of how he had an image of me inside his pocket watch and moaned. There was no need for me to use such a large painting to grow used to his face when there were smaller and more portable solutions aplenty. I'd assumed that bigger was better, to my embarrassment, and now I was in quite an embarrassing situation.

Would he mind? How can I be sure?

I heard a knock at my door.

"Elizabeth? There's a messenger from the castle for you." The voice was Father's, and he sounded uncharacteristically panicked. My chest tightened with worry. "Something happened to Prince Vincent," he continued. "They request your presence immediately."

"His Royal Highness...?"

My brain shut down, but only for a moment. The adrenaline was already kicking in. I took a deep breath and straightened my posture.

"Understood. I'll leave immediately."

After checking briefly to ensure my dress and hair were in order, I left to retrieve Lord Lars from his sleeping quarters.



**UPON** arriving at the palace, I was surprised there was no sense of urgency or other indications that anything was amiss. Even the servants who greeted me at the front doors were smiling and cordial.

Father and I exchanged glances. Whatever had happened to Prince Vincent was so dire that they couldn't allow word of it to escape. I clenched my quivering hands and relaxed my quickened breathing. I must not allow myself to grow too worried before even learning what's amiss. Prince Vincent would remain calm and composed were our places reversed.

Once our arrival had been announced, we were led to the deepest room in the palace, the king's private chambers. A small table and chairs were assembled for visitors, but all the seats were vacant. Instead, the queen and Prince Vincent were standing alert at the bedside, waiting for us. In all my times visiting the palace, I had never once visited this room. That alone was a testament to the secrecy of this news.

A portrait of Her Majesty was on the wall beside her bed, painted when she was younger. Her face hadn't changed a bit in the intervening years, and a delicate smile was on her lips. Father cast it a dubious look, but Her Majesty seemed unaffected by his surprise.

If Her Majesty doesn't mind a portrait of herself in her room, perhaps Prince Vincent won't, either? No, it's not the time for such thoughts.

His Royal Highness was looking at me in awe. "A-Are you an angel?" he muttered.

#### A what?

I turned around, but I could see nothing of the sort, and I certainly hadn't misheard him. He seemed to be in fair health, however, and I grew more curious about the reason for our summons.

I tugged on Father's sleeve, and realizing his rudeness, he hurriedly bowed. I curtsied beside him.

"We have arrived with all due haste, as requested," Father announced. "May I ask what the problem is?" His gaze drifted to the bed, where His Majesty was lying, his face oddly pale.

"Let's dispose of formalities," the queen insisted before pinching her husband's nose closed. "Wake up, now, dear."

His Majesty's face grew strained, twisting with discomfort. He moaned painfully. "Gh...ugagh..."

"A-Are you certain you should be doing such a thing?" I hazarded.

"Of course," Her Majesty promptly replied. "He's simply resting from a lack of mana. I've given him some of my own, so I imagine he'll awaken presently."

"M-My apologies," I hurriedly replied. "I had no intention of overstepping my bounds."

"No, it's quite a normal response." She nodded graciously.

To each their own.

Her Majesty's fingertips gave off a pale glow, and moments later, His Majesty's eyes fluttered open.

Father rushed to his bedside. "Your Majesty."

Before the king could breathe a word, Prince Vincent stepped forward. He was smiling warmly, but something was decidedly off about him—his eyes brimmed with an odd, sharp confidence, and his smile was a mere upturning at the corners. His pervasive gentleness was gone, and his grace concealed something else—a ferocity, almost.

His Royal Highness gingerly took me by the hand, and as if we were meeting for the first time, he bowed deeply and kissed the back of my hand. He looked up at me as he did so, causing my heart to skip a beat, though not even that could quell the maelstrom of confusion rising in my chest. His next words were far more harrowing.

"I nearly thought an angel had descended upon us! You're quite the cruel man, Your Grace, hiding such a gorgeous young lady from me."

"P-P-Prince Vincent...?"

My eyes swam, seeking any possible explanation, before alighting on Lord

Harold behind my prince by the wall. His mouth was a hard line, and his silence seemed to be killing him. Even his shoulders were visibly trembling.

What in the world...?

Prince Vincent regarded my shock with a saccharine smile. "Shall we get married? Ah, but first, I suppose I should ask your name, my lady."

I froze, and my mind went blank, and he politely cocked his head to the side as he awaited my reply.

His mannerisms, the way he spoke, everything about him were foreign to me, save one crucial detail. His luminous jade eyes were brimming full of iron will, a facet of him that I'd come to know well over the past decade. I had no idea what had caused such a change in him, but I knew I could trust him. He had to be the same gentle man I knew him to be.

I closed my eyes, pressed my hand over my throbbing heart, and took a breath. I focused on how it felt passing through my body, fixing my pose from my feet to the very crown of my head. There was only one response I could offer him.

Taking another breath, I proudly met his gaze. "I am Elizabeth la Montlivere, Prince Vincent. I am both your fiancée and your lover."

Surprise overtook his eye. "Fiancée?"

"Yes."

"...Lovers?"

I nodded firmly. "Nothing less."

It was embarrassing to repeat it, but it was by his own admission, and I did... well... I-love him, after all. Acting bashfully about it was nothing less than an insult.

He folded his arms and stroked his chin. For a long moment, he was silent. Then, "So that explains it!"

With that, he promptly fell to the ground and curled into a ball. Lord Harold hurriedly reached out and helped him back to his feet, but the servant's face was downcast, and his shoulders continued to tremble.

"We were right not to fear," His Majesty mused. "Of course, he would fall again."

The queen shook her head. "Ever the lovestruck fool, it seems."

The royal couple knew what was wrong with my prince.

I turned to them. "Might I ask what happened to His Royal Highness?"

"You see," the queen began, "the King Cait Sidhe that had been sealed in the palace basement revived. It was a fierce monster that attacked us some twenty years ago. With His Majesty and my mana combined, we succeeded in sealing the fiend. I knew the seal would need strengthening soon, but it appears we were a tad too slow."

"Oh my," I muttered.

"The fellwyrm's resurrection was the trigger, no doubt. That much miasma in motion likely altered every seal in the palace."

I hurriedly dipped my head deeply. "I'm dreadfully sorry for that."

Lord Lars was my familiar, and although he was a hallowyrm now, it was my fault he fell to such depths in the first place. I glanced at the small dragon to see his tail between his legs, wings quivering shamefully. Given the day he spent with Her Majesty in the past, he seemed terrified of her, and rightfully so. At his side, Prince Vincent's head was still in his hands as he moaned on the rug.

"It's no fault of yours," the queen replied. "My slothfulness is to blame."

"But what of His Majesty?" I asked.

"His state has nothing to do with you." She glanced at the king. "After all, I would've had more than enough mana to reseal the creature for good if someone hadn't interfered in an attempt to show off."

The king shook his head. "We could not let you shoulder such a burden alone, Mariabel."

"You wound up manaless and unconscious on the ground, did you not? You must also consider you're twenty years older than you once were, as I warned you, Gaius... but I suppose we should return to the topic at hand." She cleared her throat and gestured at His Royal Highness. "The fiend encountered Vincent

almost immediately after breaking free. According to Harold, who was present at the scene, the foul feline stole 'his greatest treasure' from him."

Prince Vincent looked up at his mother, betrayed. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of this, Mother?"

"His greatest treasure," I muttered to myself.

So then...would that mean...?

The more I thought, the hotter my face became. I had to fight to maintain my composure. Vincent pointedly turned away, a childish pout on his lips. As if to accentuate the new divide between us, Her Majesty sighed.

"It seems that all of Vincent's memories of you are lost to him," she said.



A little before Elizabeth arrived at the castle, I opened my eyes to a familiar yet unusual ceiling above me. I cast my gaze about to find a portrait of my mother—it was my parents' bedchamber. I had hardly set foot in the room since I was a child.

I was lying on a sofa a short distance from the large bed. My head felt heavy but airy and empty, and I felt oddly emotionally strained.

"So you're awake, Vincent?"

Mother stood from the bed. Beside her, Harold was standing at stiff attention, his face pale. The sight of it stirred my memories.

Right... We were assaulted by Plum, the King Cait Sidhe. It appeared in a cloud of smoke and attacked me, but what happened? I can scarcely remember what happened right before or after that.

"Do you feel all right?" Mother pressed. "Anything off? Does your head hurt?" "No, not at all."

I had to assume Harold's complexion was from horror due to letting me come to harm. Nothing hurt, however.

"Can you think clearly?" she asked again.

The odd sensation I'd felt right after waking up came to mind, but that had

already faded. Instead, I noticed my mood had taken a turn.

"I... Well, I feel oddly capable."

I stood to face the mirror. My hair was silky and well-kept, and I had an immaculately balanced face. I was a crown prince; I excelled in the arts and duels and had impeccable manners. If I remember right, I was even called a miracle, a gift from the gods. As a child, however, I distinctly remembered taunting my tutors, running about the courtyard, and refusing to study to take the throne. For the life of me, I couldn't recall what had made me such an obedient child, though I was certain there was a single decisive factor. Whenever I felt on the verge of recalling, fog descended upon my brain, and I lost it.

"Odd. I didn't think it would have such a positive effect," Mother mused. She looked up to meet my gaze. "I've sent a messenger to the duke already. Once we've assured Lady Elizabeth's safety, we'll proceed to catch Plum."

I looked at her blankly.

Mother folded her arms. "Is something the matter?"

I know what she said, but...

"Who is this Lady Elizabeth? Do I know her somehow?"

Mother and Harold exchanged glances. Behind them, I finally noticed Father was asleep on the bed, his face somewhat pale. While I was puzzled, Mother nodded in understanding.

"Ah, that would explain it. Lizzie is safe, then."

"Lizzie?" I repeated the unfamiliar nickname.

Who in the world is that?

"It only stole that which was within you... And here I'd assumed that little troublemaker could not harm anyone!"

Mother cackled to herself, and Harold looked at her in confusion—no, barely concealed disgust. I was likewise appalled she could laugh so readily when her husband and son had fainted.

"It seems you understand what has transpired, Mother," I observed. "Could you kindly explain?"

If we didn't get answers soon, poor Harold might actually break.

She smiled warmly at me. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

A moment later, Duke la Montlivere's arrival at the palace was announced. The door opened, and he and his daughter entered. The sight of the daughter took my breath away. My breathing and heart stopped apiece. Then, they spurred back into motion, working harder than ever before.

She looked at me, and the grace she moved with and the pure-hearted worry in her eyes utterly enraptured me. Every last motion, down to her fingertips, was trained to perfect elegance. I could tell at a glance that she was a lady to her core.

This must be fate.

I smiled warmly and stepped forward to greet her—whereupon my perfect proposal ended in miserable failure as the truth of the matter came to light.

"IT seems that all of Vincent's memories of you are lost to him." Mother said those horrible words to Elizabeth. Harold still supported me, his shoulders trembling.

Where did his sorry look go? Agh, I wish I could return to my room right now and scream into my pillows!

"This is Plum's idea of a 'prank," Mother continued.

My "greatest treasure" was, it seemed, my memories of my fiancée. I was head over heels in love with her, no doubt, and I had put so much time and relentless effort into becoming a fitting man for her, mastering everything from my studies to proper manners. Thinking back to the long hours poured over my desk, I could recall unnatural devotion, levels of dedication, and focus that were wholly mad. I was frothing at the mouth to become a worthy man for this Elizabeth. That devotion had paid off and won me her heart—not that I expected anything less.

Elizabeth had noted my confusion and retained her composure perfectly as she reintroduced herself as my fiancée—and, more pressingly, her *lover*. It was a direct and proud confession of her feelings, which I wagered had more to do with her feelings for me than confidence in herself. She had an honest heart, that much was certain, and it made sense that I would fall in love with her on sight, not just once but twice.

"Hehe..."

I pried myself free of Harold's support to stand on the marble floor with my own two feet. That would explain the odd lightheadedness I experienced after awakening. Though I had managed the equivalent of taking off at a sprint only to fall face-first after three steps, I was still the single luckiest man in the world. We'd been engaged for ten years—ten whole years of lovey-dovey antics and bedroom tangles. The idea of such a perfect life made me lightheaded again.

Pressing a hand over my wildly beating heart, I looked at Elizabeth and spotted a pair of eyes peeking over her shoulder. It was a small, white dragon with stark blue eyes. I could feel the waves of euphoria ebbing instantly.

"Lars," I muttered. "It's Lars, isn't it? I remember you."

Not all of it was clear in my mind, but the important parts seemed to be there —Lord Dominic's explanation of his transformation to a fellwyrm, his purification, and so forth. That obscuring fog in my head, then, was Elizabeth.

Lars fluttered forth and rested a paw on my shoulder. Though it seemed reassuring, the flicker in his eyes told another story.

That little pest is mocking me, isn't he? I recognize that look. Honestly, you'd be better off in some fairy tale.

I turned to Mother. "Wait... That monster was angry at you, not me. It was simply venting at me."

She took Elizabeth's hand, eyebrows knitting. "You're not wrong. I feel rather sorry for poor Lady Elizabeth and that a small mistake on my part inconvenienced you, my dear."

Elizabeth shook her head firmly. "No need to apologize, Your Majesty! As you said, this was an accident!"

"Er. Mother? Could you perhaps apologize to me?" I interjected.

Elizabeth was the one more overtly harmed by this unfortunate turn of events, as it was worse to be forgotten by one's lover than to forget. I was likewise determined to recover my memories at any cost. If we'd been lovers for the past ten years, there was no telling what delightfully steamy encounters had slipped my mind.

As I confronted Mother, I tried to look as handsome and confident as possible —with only a slight glance at Elizabeth. "Surely there must be some way to recover my memories?"

Mother nearly snorted with laughter at the sight of me, for some reason, but she covered it with her fan. "Y-Yes, of course. There's an anti-magic barrier about the palace, and though it was designed to prevent outside attacks, Plum should be unable to leave through it. It must be here somewhere, and should you catch it, I will persuade it to break the seal on your memories."

From the glint of mana across her fingertips and the way Lars stiffened in fear, I gathered she'd be using far more than a strong argument.

"Alternatively," she continued, "you could attempt to shatter the seal yourself, but you don't have the mana for such a feat. You'd likely confuse yourself and end up in a worse state than you started."

"Can't you break it yourself?" I asked.

Mother shook her head, dashing my hopes. "I've less than half my proper stores now, and I must attend to the royal agenda in your father's stead. I'd rather not use any mana I don't have to."

She sighed and rested a hand on Father's cheek. He was still pale and lacked the energy to stand. I was a little worried, though I noticed Mother's mana improved his complexion significantly.

Even if he's not on death's door, she can't enjoy seeing him suffer, so... It'd be wrong to ask too much of her.

I glanced at Elizabeth, and she smiled readily back at me. She was adorable, and my legs grew weak. What love has passed between us lately? I wish I could woo her the same way. I couldn't stand to lose her.

"Allow Lord Lars and I to help," she offered nobly.

"Thank you...but first, there's something I must ask," I replied.

"Yes? What is it?"

I swallowed hard, trying to keep down the niggling fear that was now rising in my chest. "What if... What if I never regain my memories? What then?"

Her eyes flew open, their amethyst cores glinting in the light.

An engagement between the royal family and a duke's house couldn't be broken on a whim, but we were evidently close. There would no doubt be friction between us, but I was already so smitten that I'd cry on the spot if she wanted to scrap our relationship. More importantly, I didn't want to force her hand. It was already clear she wasn't the type to dwell on the trappings of rank and power, and if she didn't truly love me, marriage would mean nothing.

Her reply, however, was swift and certain. "If that happens... Well, I'll have to work heart and soul to make you fall in love with me all over again."

She was flushed but spoke with the same certainty as when she affirmed we were lovers. Her eyes met mine unflinchingly, and there was no cunning or ulterior motives in them. From the bottom of her heart, she believed such a thing to be possible. Nay, ideal. Her reply was so earnest, so charming, so genuine that I couldn't even think for a long moment and couldn't reply. We looked into each other's eyes silently for a glorious few seconds before she gasped and looked down.

"Wh-What? Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, but... um..." Her voice dropped to a whisper so low I could barely hear her. "Y-You asked me to marry you a few minutes ago... Does that mean you've already...?"

I froze.

"No, forget I said anything! I must've misheard you."

Her lips trembled, and her gaze drifted awkwardly about our feet, but that was more than enough to grab my heart in a chokehold.

I don't understand. How can she be this sweet? Is she a true angel, untainted

by the filth and depravity of our world? What could my past self have possibly done to warrant a relationship with such a wonderful woman?!

I idly looked behind me, and Harold averted his gaze in perfect unison. Lars' eyes were stone-cold, and he vomited a handful of stones onto my parents' bed in disgust. Even Mother was blushing to the tips of her ears; her hand clamped tightly over her mouth in a gesture of restraint. Her other hand was still resting on Father, and—

"M-Mother?! That's enough! Father's glowing!" I cried.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I must've channeled too much mana into him. If I hadn't stopped just now, I might've accidentally blown him apart..."

"Geh." I shuddered with horror. I could still vividly recall her spanking me after shirking my studies as a young boy. It was a miracle my bottom hadn't exploded.

Mother rapidly composed herself. "If you two are going to flirt so shamelessly, do it in your room. I might accidentally kill His Majesty otherwise."

Elizabeth bowed apologetically. "M-My apologies."

I couldn't reassure her innocence as we hurriedly left the room.

Wait. What about the duke?

I turned around to find that he'd already retreated through the room's other door with our steward and seemed to be headed for the hall. I was surprised and impressed he was leaving his daughter alone with a man in such a state. Personally, I was so shaken up and uncertain about the proper distance I should take with my apparent lover that I was profoundly lost.

"This way," I directed her. "Er... Have you ever been to my room before?"

"N-No, this will be the first time."

"Oh...the first."

Something felt profoundly wrong about that. I tried to remember my room, but again, the fog blocked my memory. Said space was just large enough to fit a life-sized portrait, but that surely meant nothing.

Elizabeth giggled at my confusion. "This is rather new."

"What is?"

"You've never been so blunt with me before."

"...I haven't?" I hurriedly glanced back at Harold, who nodded firmly.

So, I used to put on an act to make myself more palatable? I can't imagine growing accustomed to such a thing.

"Do you mind how I act now?" I asked her, and she shook her head.

"Even if the way you talk has changed, you're still the man I know. I was a little surprised at first, but your heart is the same as it always was." She gestured down at my hand. I'd been leading her like a proper gentleman would without even realizing it, extending my hand down at a level she could grasp and adjusting my stride to match hers perfectly. "Besides," she continued, "you look me in the eyes the same way when I have something to say."

That's because you're far too attractive to look away. I can't imagine the reason has changed in all these years.

"But you said it yourself, I'm a lot rougher with my words," I pressed. "Don't you hate that? Doesn't that repulse you?"

"Of course not."

"I'll speak like this from now on, then."

Despite saying that I was different and spoke with more abandon now than before, she only chuckled into her hand.

"Of course."

I could hear Harold's pace behind us slowing to increase our lead, but we were already in a world of our own.



AFTER worriedly peeking inside my room, I confirmed that the only likenesses I had of Elizabeth were a few small pieces on the shelf above the mantle. My worries were clearly unfounded. Even if she was the sweetest, most beautiful woman in the world, having a massive portrait of her in my room struck me as

overkill.

Checkmate, Father. At least I don't have a painting of my partner in my room.

Elizabeth and I sat down on the loveseat. I wrapped my arm around the back of it so I could hug her lithe body closer to me. The faint yet distinct smell of something sweet curled into my nostrils.

"Y-Your Highness?!" she started in shock.

Across the room, Lars hissed in fury, but Harold held him back from leaping at me.

What? What did I do?

"Is something wrong?" I asked her.

"Well, n-no, but... What are you doing?"

"Am I doing it wrong?" I asked, peering more closely into her eyes. She instantly went beet red. "I thought I was acting as lovers should."

"H-How can I relax with you so close to me?" She seemed to be telling the truth as she shrunk away in my arms.

Isn't she overreacting? Even though we're nobles, I assumed we'd do at least this much all the time.

"We're lovers, aren't we?" I asked for confirmation.

"Y-Yes."

"The lovey-dovey kind?"

"L-Lovey..." Her gaze drifted away from me.

"What do we normally do when we're alone?"

"Well, when we have total privacy, you call me Liza, and I call you Prince Vince sometimes..."

"Hm?!"

My heart thudded with dull pain, and I had to clamp my hands over my chest as I tried frantically to breathe normally.

So lovey-dovey! My gods, I really made the most of my youth!

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"Y-Your Highness?!" she panicked. "Are you all right?!"

"I'm fine. Why don't we try that out now...Liza?"

"Wha..."
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She stilled. Lars let out a bloodcurdling howl across the room and flailed even harder against Harold's grasp. The manservant himself was standing with his back to us, meaning I was the only one to witness the sweet confusion on Elizabeth's face. Harold was the ideal servant.

"You don't want to?" I asked.

"The thought of addressing you as such, especially on request, is a little embarrassing..."

"Perhaps, but what if that helps me remember something?" I gave her a pitiful look, resting my hand on her forearm. "Please, I beg of you...whisper it in my ear, if you don't mind."

Her mouth opened and shut soundlessly, as though she couldn't make up her mind until finally, she drew her shapely lips closer to my ear. "Prince Vince," she breathed.

"Gh?!" My cheeks burned up.

Such is the destructive power of a lover... How terrifying.

"S-So?" I hurriedly changed the topic. "What else would we do?"

"Well...hm." She thought for a moment. "I would often visit the palace on weekends, and we'd wander through the garden before enjoying some sweets."

"And then?"

"That's it."

"That's... What?"

There has to be more. The pet names, all the delicate mood-building... I can't have wasted it all, can I?!

"If you don't want to say it out loud, I can have Harold and Lars wait outside," I offered.

Her brow furrowed. "That's all there was, honestly."

"Did we go on any undercover dates?"

"Only one."

"Did we whisper sweet nothings in each other's ears as we watched the sunset?"

"Once we debated the course the country should take at sunset, pulling up historical examples to support our points."

"No lap pillows? Pillow talk, perhaps?"

"Lap...what? I'm afraid I don't understand."

I rubbed my temples. "What did we do, exactly, over the past ten years? Weren't we *lovers*?"

"We've only been lovers as of last year."

Last what?!

"What in blazes was I doing for the past nine years, then?" I asked, horrified.

"You threw yourself into your studies, mastering the arts so you could be the best king possible."

"Did we do anything together, I mean?"

"Of course, at banquets and other formal functions."

"But the pet names!"

"That started before we became lovers."

I sighed heavily. "Did I have any proper sense of intimacy at all?!"

"I don't understand what's so unusual."

From the confusion in her eyes, her question was genuine. Her smooth, golden locks framed her face and made her eyes gleam like jewels. She was terribly beautiful and, apparently, terribly dense.

"So that's it!" I wailed, putting my head in my hands.

"Are you feeling ill, Prince Vincent? Perhaps you should lie down?"

Her voice was soft and sweet. I clasped the hand she offered me readily, feeling the smoothness of her skin against mine as I sunk into the cushions. From my slumped position, I looked at Harold.

"Was I really a useless, lovestruck fool?" I asked him pleadingly.

"Regrettably, it is not my place to list your many inadequacies," he said drolly. That's a yes, then.

In other words, I spent nine years nursing a one-sided love for this girl, and when I finally started a relationship with her, I was so clumsy about it that I couldn't invite her to my chambers even once. I could understand his feelings—Elizabeth was a true angel by any measure, and former Vincent was hellbent on remaining in her good graces. He played the act of saintly partner too well, however, and Elizabeth was far too innocent.

From the sheer wealth of memories that I could no longer access, I could tell she meant the world to me. He strove to obey her will, to be worthy of her, and to that end, he smothered any part of his true self out of fear she would disapprove. That meant that Elizabeth was meeting the true me for the first time, in a sense.

"Ugh!" I relaxed utterly as a new wave of exhaustion rolled over me. I'd wasted ten years with virtually nothing to show for it, after all.

"Your Highness..." Elizabeth peered at me worriedly from where I lay among the cushioned leather seats. Even now, there was nothing but pure, heartfelt love in her gaze.

You overthought it, Vincent, you idiot. Showing weakness won't make her despise you. She knows how hard you've worked to get where you are today. He was still the luckiest man alive, regardless of how he enjoyed his gifts. I struggled to understand how the pair had failed to meet eye-to-eye so completely. Wait a second... There's no need to grow so despondent. She said she accepts me even as I am now, so if we couldn't act as proper lovers in the past, we simply have to do it now.

I propped my head up on the back of the couch with my elbow, gingerly brushing her hair out of her eyes with my other hand.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

She blinked in surprise, and despite her cheeks flushing, she nodded. "Yes... I do."

"I love you, too. I've loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you, and I'm sure that past Vincent was the same." She started in surprise, but I continued. "Therefore..." I gave her a pleading look, and my lips curled into an impish grin. "Should you kiss me, I'll feel a lot better."

I watched for her response, but none came. She maintained her gaze, staring blankly ahead. After a long moment, I could practically hear the blood rushing into her head.

I knew it. I think I've gotten a proper grasp of their relationship's limits now.

"Y-Y-Your Highness!" she stammered frantically, her fingers idly scratching the sofa at an alarming rate. "W-We can't... A few rather p-pressing issues need to be, um..."

Let me guess—the old Vincent was too inept to ask for such a thing.

She continued fretfully, "W-We have been practicing, but, um..."

Practicing?!

"I-I suggested it, but unfortunately, we weren't able to produce any results..."

In other words, these two lovebirds were so pure-minded that they thought the wedding kiss was a major hurdle and needed to prepare for it? To think they haven't even kissed, though... What a clumsy courtship. How do you mess up this badly? That I'm even capable of such ineptitude is frightening.

I sat up properly, turning to face her. I took her unoccupied hand in mine and brought it to my face, letting her fingers brush my jawline. Upon realizing my intent, even the tips of her ears turned strawberry pink. Her large, limpid eyes seemed to draw me into their depths.

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"Elizabeth...No, Liza."
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"P-Prince Vince..."

The distance between us shortened to the point where I could feel the tickle

of her breath on my lips. I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before my eyes closed. Then, at the last moment, Elizabeth moved.

"I-I'm so sorry!"

She pulled herself free of my embrace, pointedly facing away from me. I'd expected as much, however, and caught her wrist before she could stand and flee.

"I won't let you go."

I enveloped her and her sweet, floral-smelling green frills alike in an embrace. If neither of us could kiss the other, that meant both of us were running. If I truly felt like it, however—

"V-V-Vin—"

I put a finger to her lips to silence her. "Hush."



Her eyes pleaded with me, but my mind was made up, and I closed my eyes. My heart beat wildly from the proximity to her. I willed my arms to stop quivering and wrap themselves around her waist. In moments, we were closer than before, our lips a hair's breadth from touching. Then—

## "SHAGYAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

With a hair-raising screech, something thudded heavily into my face. My eyes flew open to find nothing but shiny white scales.

"Prince Vincent?!"

By the time I realized it was Lars, I had already lost my balance and begun to fall. I attempted to release Elizabeth so that she wouldn't fall with me, but to my surprise, she wrapped one hand around my back and clenched my hand in hers in an attempt to keep me upright.

What happened next felt like an eternity in the blink of an eye. Elizabeth began to fall upon me, threatening to sandwich Lars squarely between us. Lars reflexively sprung off my face, digging his claws into my chest to use as a springboard. Luckily, his horns passed clear of the both of us. With nothing between us, Elizabeth was suddenly drawn closer once more, and unable to fight our momentum, we connected. I felt something soft against my lips.

...What?

Something warm passed into me from the point of contact.

Is this...mana?

A blinding light flashed before my eyes, and within the light, I saw Elizabeth as a young girl. Her eighth birthday party. Countless exchanged letters. A banquet we'd attended together. The painting of her I kept in my pocket watch. Day upon day in the Royal Academy. The day I confessed my love for her. I saw the first day she called me Prince Vince and the day she flubbed her confession of love pass each other by in a flash. It was back. Everything was back.

"M-My memories... My memories are back!" I shouted.

Elizabeth pressed a hand to her mouth in disbelief. "Really? Are you certain?!"

"Yeah... I remember everything, Elizabeth."

Lars' attack must have been the trigger—the metaphorical life-flashing-before-my-eyes was the natural culprit.

After carefully checking each other for injuries, I took her hand and helped her to her feet. I even brushed the creases out of her skirt. Then, with every bit of humility I could muster, I dropped a knee to the floor and begged for forgiveness as though my life depended on it.

**AFTER** a chaotic flurry of events, I found two men pleading on the ground before me—one Prince Vincent and one Lord Harold. Lord Lars fluttered above their heads, spitting and hissing insults.

"I'm so, so sorry!" my prince wailed. "My common sense must've left me along with my memories!"

"I'm dreadfully sorry for failing to restrain Lord Lars properly."

"Lord Lars! Leave them alone!" I scolded the dragon before hurriedly crouching before the kneeling pair. "Neither of you have anything to apologize for. Please, raise your heads." I touched His Highness on the shoulder, encouraging him to stand. "I was...startled, of course, but there's no need for all this."

I was half-grateful for Lord Lars' intervention, so there was nothing for Lord Harold to apologize for whatsoever. That must have been what granted Lord Lars the ability to break free at all.

"There are plenty of things I should've done better myself," I added frankly.

If only I'd been less bashful about, um, k-kissing, this never would have happened. I suppose there was no avoiding that, though...

I averted my gaze and blushed, and I could hear His Highness sigh.

"You're such an angel, Elizabeth..."

"Thank you. I'm flattered."

I was admittedly somewhat unsure what he was referring to, but it was likely my forgiving him.

He clamped his hands over his mouth. "I-I'm sorry... I can't believe I said that."

"No need to apologize."

They both finally stood, though Lord Harold's gaze was still dropped to the ground in deference.

"I believe some of Lars' magic must have flowed into me when he tackled me," my prince started. "Then, with the two of us so close after that, it must have affected the seal somehow." He grew progressively redder as he talked.

I wonder what he's so embarrassed about?

"Have you full command of your memories now?" Lord Harold asked him.

"Well... I'm not sure. I can remember Elizabeth, but it feels like some things may still be lost to me."

I recalled what Her Majesty said about forcing the seal open possibly confusing him. "Does that mean you've lost other memories?"

"That's the thing... My head feels oddly clear." He explained how he'd felt the same way after first awakening from the attack. "What memories I could be missing now, though, is anyone's..."

As his gaze passed about the room, something made him freeze. I caught him muttering in disbelief as he strode to the bookcase and removed a volume from the shelf. It seemed to be part of a 37-volume encyclopedia collection, and as he flipped through it, he grew visibly more confused. He returned the tome to its place on the shelf and faced me again.

"Could you ask me something history-related?" he asked.

"Of course. What was the name of the general who vanquished the Shudian army at the Battle of Noxheim?"

"I... I don't know. It sounds distinctly familiar, though."

"Do you remember what 'tekkel' means in the Old Tongue, and can you use it in a sentence?"

"...Try math."

"Please state Varisch's Formula and what it represents."

He shook his head. "Geography, maybe?"

"Please name the three largest veins of manacite in the kingdom."

Prince Vincent sighed again. A horrible sinking feeling gripped me as I realized what this implied.

"It can't be..."

He nodded sadly. "I believe so. It seems all my knowledge has been sealed from me now. I've even forgotten who I've invited to our wedding, let alone anything about them."

I was struck silent and watched blankly as he tried to take stock of the situation. He had been studying for a great many years now, and I was genuinely impressed he was still so composed.

Perhaps he would've been better off forgetting me instead...

He seemed to read my thoughts as he shook his head at me. "Don't be like that—er. Please. I'd much prefer it this way. I can study as much as I need to compensate for lost studies, but I can't remember you so easily. You know why you were the one I forgot, don't you?"

"Well...yes..."

It was because I was his greatest treasure. With that back in his grasp, he seemed willing to give up whatever else he needed to. As I blushed from the thought, he nodded, if a little awkwardly, and smiled warmly like always.

It wasn't long before his expression clouded again, however. "But, er... My earlier attitude was due to my love for you becoming too intense to bear. I swear that was nothing like me, so please trust that I'll never do that again."

He seemed almost limp and frail now, and his voice was scarcely above a shameful whisper. What he did not seem to notice was that whether he played the bold amnesiac or the weak, soft-willed man before me now, I loved him with all my heart either way.

Wait... I what?

Prince Vincent caught the surprise on my face and misconstrued it as a reply. "Ah, I'm sorry. Here I am, spouting nonsense... Forget I said anything. More

importantly, we have an evil feline to find."

With that, he spun around and hurried out of the room.

Again, that was far from the truth. I could feel heat spread across my cheeks once more as I thought back to my revelation.

I was hoping to tell him anything and everything, but I suppose this alone will be my little secret. I did enjoy how upfront he was in professing his love for me, and how he teased me was...well, it was incredibly attractive.

I saw both sides as him, but given how appalled Prince Vincent seemed by his actions, I supposed he wouldn't try to be so bold again in the near future.

As I tried to wrangle my arousal, my eyes met with Lord Harold's. His expression was as masked and indecipherable as always, but he raised his thumb to me—a "thumbs-up," as Lady Margaret called it. Supposedly, it was a symbol of approval.

I suppose that means there's nothing wrong with it.

I dipped my head to him, grateful, then hurried to catch up with my still-oblivious prince.

## **Chapter 2: The Past Catches Up**

**FROM** the doorway, I watched Elizabeth grapple with her intense embarrassment.

No. Absolutely not. I don't care how generous and forgiving she is; I could never do that again. It's more than embarrassing. It's...well, it's downright lewd. I'm simply glad she didn't dump me.

I was delusional when I did those things. I had coolly seduced her, locked her in my arms, whispered sweet promises in her ear, and made outrageous claims —that couldn't be me. Since we were children, I was smitten with her and chased her as she flew ahead on wings of perfection. I couldn't imagine treating her like any other woman, and I swore my seductive side was even more firmly sealed than my knowledge.

That odd overconfidence did make sense, however, given that Elizabeth was the only reason I could still maintain a decent façade. Now that I knew what I would become without her, I had proven that I would do nothing but embarrass myself on my own.

Gah, I wish I could crawl into a dark hole and never come out again... Never did I imagine I could embarrass myself so thoroughly at this age.

I took a deep breath, hand planted on the doorframe for support. That...thing wasn't me. It couldn't possibly be.

After a few more breaths, I turned back to face Elizabeth and extended my hand. I gave her my best princely smile to assure her that I was sane again and spoke in the same level, practiced tone I always did.

"Let's search the palace, then, shall we?"

I took her hand, noting that her face was only slightly pinker than usual now. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Harold sighing and rolling his eyes. I knew well what he wished to say—after all, it was his duty to watch my actions and

offer advice should I stray down the wrong path.

His icy gaze drew attention to improper antics and encouraged me to correct my misdemeanors. There was only one reason he had abstained from using said glare and held Lars back until the last moment. He wanted me to fix my vexingly inconsistent relationship with Elizabeth, and while I understood his intent, I couldn't believe he would condone such bawdry behavior to that end. I didn't care how many times he'd kissed Lady Margaret; his decision was highly improper.

The urge to run and hide from the shame rose in my chest, so I devoted my energy to searching for Plum instead. While it was possible to cram all the knowledge I needed in the time before the ceremony, it would be far easier to remove the blasted thing altogether.

"Let's start with the storeroom it first appeared in," I suggested.

Harold shot me a harsh look. "Are you certain? I fear your brain may yet be scrambled, Your Highness."

The events immediately before and after having my memories sealed were vague, granted, and I could hardly remember the guise of the villain itself. Perhaps it was a countermeasure to ensure I wouldn't seek it out to repeal the curse too readily.

"You may explore wherever you wish, but I must draw the line at that one room," he continued. "There may yet be residual mana. As such, I will investigate it myself."

I wanted to ask what he was on about, but the firmness of his glare made me think otherwise. I was better off obeying him for now.

"Fine, but take Lars with you, just in case."

He could dispel or purify any lingering miasma they found. Harold simply furrowed his brow, and there was a long silence before he curtly agreed.

What? Am I missing something?

Apparently, we had been arranging some of my personal belongings when the cait sidhe attacked. Upon our arrival, we did a cursory pass around the outside

of the room, but there were no signs of unusual mana flow, and it seemed likely Plum had fled elsewhere. Harold still went inside with Lars, just in case, and in a minute or so, they returned unharmed...or so it seemed, but Lars flew straight into Elizabeth's arms, crying and whining all the while.

"Oh, my! What happened in there?" she asked.

Harold shook his head. "He's unharmed, I assure you. Those are tears of envy."

"Envy?"

Elizabeth and I exchanged puzzled glances.

"More importantly," my manservant continued dully, disinterest in the topic clear in his voice, "our quarry was not present in the room, nor were there any signs of where it went."

Elizabeth scooped up the tiny hallowyrm in her arms and babied him for a minute, and soon enough, he was wagging his tail happily and chirping. He seemed more like a dog than a dragon.

Once we left the vicinity of the storehouse, we found ourselves directionless.

I sighed. "Even if we know it's in the palace, this place is too large to search at random." If we included the grounds, the palace was the size of a small village.

"It would be far more productive to search with some aim in mind," Harold agreed.

"Can't Lars trace its mana or something?" I asked.

"Possibly," Elizabeth replied before turning to the little creature. "Well, Lord Lars? Can you sense anything?"

It was an idle guess on my part, but Elizabeth and Lars seemed determined to give it a genuine attempt. He struck his chest confidently before taking flight, his nose working curiously to pick up the scent.

Well, it seems somebody wants to show off.

Lars closed his eyes as he gave off light, and Elizabeth swallowed hard beside me. His horns were shining like crystal beacons.

What an uncoordinated display. He's showing off on purpose, isn't he?

Finally, the dragon's eyes flew open. He flapped his wings once, gaining height before spiraling about theatrically. He stopped in front of me, staring directly into my eyes.

"Kyagh!" He stuck his blue-tipped tail pointedly out behind himself. "Kyawah!"

Lars gestured again toward the central courtyard. Then, with a sharp flap of his wings, he narrowed his form into a dive and rushed down the corridor away from us. We chased after him, and as we stepped outside, one of Mother's comically designed topiaries came into view. Nestled among the leaves lay something resembling a purple cat.

"Is that it?" I asked. Something about the form resonated with me.

"Indeed," Harold nodded.

"Excellent work, Lord Lars!" Elizabeth applauded the dragon giddily.

As we neared Plum, it made no attempt to flee. Its plush little toes hung laxly over the edge as Lars spiraled above it.

"Isn't it going to move?" I wondered aloud.

"Oh, it's the pretty boy," the cat mewled. "Looks like mew found me."

There was no telepathy this time. The monster instead moved its mouth in unsettling ways to speak aloud. It grinned, showing enough sharp teeth to send a chill down my spine.

"I sealed your meowmories, didn't I?" Plum continued in a lax tone. "There was too meowch of your love, so I ended up using all my meowna."

It did a big, full-body stretch before flopping lazily back down. Lars poked it in irritation, but Plum didn't move in the least. Its body was thin and scrawny, and its pelt lacked any significant sheen. It truly seemed weakened.

How is my love strong enough to make a monster, of all things, run out of mana?!

Despite myself, another shudder ran down my spine.

WHILE I was busy scaring myself, Harold easily apprehended Plum in its weakened state. He grabbed the feline by clamping its wings together, much as he'd done to Lars a short time before, and carried it with us. Elizabeth and I were careful to keep our distance, however, as it was making moaning and groaning sounds that suggested it was about to vomit the whole while.

Finally, we returned to my parents' bedroom, where Mother waited, and Harold handed the miniature menace to her.

"Apparently, sealing my memories took most of its mana," I explained.

Mother scrutinized Plum, hand glowing as she held it, while the pale-faced creature moaned.

"Mariabel!" Plum growled. "Hmph! You canneowt placate me with a mere trifling of meowna!"

It pointedly looked away from her, but its whiskers twitched with anticipation, and its tail swished to and fro excitedly. I wasn't sure whether to trust its actions or its words.

"You're giving it mana?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"I wouldn't want monster vomit on the carpet," Mother sighed. "Though, at this point, I doubt there's much I can do for it."

Granted, Plum wasn't looking any better, and despite its previous glee, it slumped in exhaustion, eyes shut again. It resembled Father to a remarkable extent.

"First, it wore itself out breaking the seal, then it spent its remaining mana all at once..." Mother sighed, resting Plum on the bed beside Father. "If it lost any more mana, it'd be dead by now. Honestly, first the sealer, now the sealed..."

"Gaius!" the cat hissed. "To think we would meet here, of all places... The hour of your death is nyaigh!"

Plum weakly swatted Father's face, and while there was virtually no force behind the blows, the king moaned in feeble defiance. There was no coyness or feigned aggression there; it seemed to loathe Father genuinely.

Mother unaffectedly watched as Plum ran out of energy, after which she turned back to face me. "The seal on your memories is like a box, in a sense. What you can't reach is locked inside, so the more memories it holds and the more potent they are, the stronger the box needs to be."

"That makes sense."

I spent ten full years thinking about Elizabeth nonstop, after all...

"But you messed with it, didn't mew?" Plum asked, narrowing its eyes slightly. "The flow of meowna feels all meowxed up."

"Well, we had no intention of altering it..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Harold's shoulders slump resignedly.

Plum's eyes narrowed further. "Come neow, pretty-boy Mariabel look-alike."

Gods, I hate being called that.

It beckoned me, and after I obediently drew my face closer, it scooted closer to me and smacked me on the face.

I'll abstain from forming any opinions on its evil toe beans, I think.

I felt eyes on me, and I turned to find Elizabeth staring at me. Something resembling jealousy was in her eyes. She was a cat lover, if I recall correctly. I noticed Lars was studying his talons in disappointment, realizing he could never compete in that regard.

"Mmrrr..." Plum closed its eyes. "It seems my seal was meowsdirected... Now, it only targets memories *related* to your greatest treasure."

"I'd feared as much," I sighed.

"You knew?"

"More or less."

My academic and political knowledge was the second most important thing to me, primarily because I needed to know those things to marry Elizabeth. That was the next most natural thing to seal.

"Can you unseal it?" I asked.

Plum twirled its whiskers. "Neowt possible. Some of this meowna isn't mine... it's white and sparkly, somehow. If I try when I'm neowt in top form, I'd just tangle it up mewre."

That would be Lars' mana, I guessed. A hallowyrm's mana was far more potent and difficult to deal with than a mere monster's, so it was no small wonder the magic was hard to unthread.

I frowned. "I'd rather not mess up my brain any more than it already is."

I glanced at Elizabeth, noting that she seemed just as frustrated. Worst-case scenario, messing with my mind further could erase her from my memories altogether.

Plum nodded. "Give me one meownth, and I'll have enough meowna to return you to neowrmal."

"A whole month?"

I'd have to be content knowing my memories could be fixed. It would be inconvenient, granted, but I would survive.

Beside me, the tension left Elizabeth's shoulders. The relaxation seemed to be spreading, even, as Plum had already rolled over onto its back with a grin, its fur spilling over the mattress' soft contours like melted butter.

"For that one meownth, I expect you to treat me like royalty. Then, and only then, will I help mew out of meowr mess. If you meownage to get on my bad side, then—mewrar?!"

Mother cut the little imp off by hoisting it aloft by the scruff of its neck. Its fur puffed out, and its pupils rapidly dilated in fear.

She faintly smiled as she swung the creature to and fro as if contemplating what to do with it. "If we were to get rid of you, the seal would disappear on its own...though I suppose you're a rather powerful monster. If something unfortunate were to happen to you, why, we might throw the entire monster world into disarray."

"E-Exactly!" Plum nodded furiously, rubbing its little toe beans together furtively, its panicked smile showing only hints of its fangs. "You were so

generous in sealing me away last time, Your Majesty! Myahaha..."

It was brownnosing, clearly, but profoundly failing to be cute. It lacked any of Lars' feigned uselessness and was never in a subservient position to her besides. Father gaped at the sight wordlessly.

Huh. I didn't realize he was awake.

"Did We ever tell you of your mother's reputation?" he finally said.

I nodded. "I knew what I heard was true... They call her the Dem— er, the Miracle of Urhalla."

"Very good. And what is Urhalla?"

I shot him a puzzled look. "It's the name of a country...our country."

It was odd for her appellation to include the name of the kingdom itself—but then, it all clicked. Father, noticing the realization on my face, nodded grimly.

"Mariabel once made herself known not only through this country but the entire continent. Even monsters grew to fear her on sight. She is the single bravest, most powerful woman in our country's history."

Mother sighed, something akin to embarrassment passing over her face. "Please, dear, don't remind me of those days. I was such a tomboy; people called me all sorts of horrible things, like the Exploder and the Goddess of Destruction..."

Father tenderly took her hand. "We count those days among Our fondest memories."

It was oddly touching, especially considering the brutal implications of Mother's past. The sheer number of names she had and the prevailing violence of them spoke volumes.

"I never would've guessed," I said with a shake of my head.

"Nor would I have," Elizabeth added.

"It was long before your time," Mother explained.

Father nodded. "We've issued a hush order on such tales, after all."

You really shouldn't deal with an embarrassing past with that kind of

suppression, Father... Though I suppose I've asked much the same of the palace's servants on my own bratty youth.

"Now only We will know of Mariabel's heroic past," Father beamed proudly.

Er... Apparently, I was wrong. Is Elizabeth okay with in-laws this crazy? I glanced at her, but my worries were unfounded. She was beaming, face bright as a star.

"The Goddess of Destruction... My, it's just like the old legends! I never knew your composure and capability came from such a young age. Could you please tell me more about those days?!" she asked.

"O-Oh... Er." Mother blushed a bit, averting her gaze. "There's nothing much worth telling, I promise you."

I was impressed that Elizabeth could rattle Mother so severely, but not as much as Plum or Father were. They stared at her in shock.

Er, Father? Why are you so surprised at this?

Still, it was amusing that Elizabeth was so interested in such stories. And a little unexpected. She went through quite the phantom-thief-loving phase as a young girl, however, and she was eager to collaborate with Lars and me to pull off our elaborate act in Orion. Perhaps it was similar to how the best students seemed attracted to the delinquents.

Mother cut off my contemplation with a harsh glare. "You were thinking something rather rude of me, weren't you, Vincent? It showed on your face even more plainly than it usually does."

"Wh-What?! Of course not."

I did my best to keep level eye contact with her. I'd always been scared of her on some level, but now that I knew she could kill me in an instant if she so desired, I was petrified. I was shocked I could defy her so openly as a child—not at my bravery but at my idiocy.

Frantically, I dug for some excuse, cold sweat drenching my brow and neck. She looked away before I could reply, to my relief. The steward knocked on the door a moment later, and without waiting for a reply, the door swung open.

"My apologies for interrupting, but a messenger has arrived from House Milford to the south! King Ricardo has crossed our border!"

"Ricardo?!" Father and Plum both exclaimed in horrified unison.

Why are they so surprised?

The pair continued to peer at the door dubiously, nervous to see what would happen next.

"Come in," Mother commanded the steward, and he obediently entered the room. All eyes were on him.

I knew only one King Ricardo, and he certainly warranted the steward's rush. Ricardo Louis Valeron was the king of our southern neighbor, Nieve. His skin was tanned with the sun, and he had strikingly long crimson hair that draped upon his sharp eyes and high nose. If I recall correctly, he was thirty-four.

Nieve was a large country nearly five times the size of our own, and they enjoyed temperate weather the entire year. That led to a wealth of crops and foodstuffs, which allowed the population to burgeon. They also had a robust communications network that encompassed the entirety of the realm, as well as industry refined enough to create and support such a network, making them the neighbor we could afford to ignore least.

As a child, I had often traveled there with my mother on diplomatic missions, and the then-prince Ricardo would likewise come to visit us on occasion. I was an only child, and as such, I looked up to him as a surrogate brother. That was likely the reason why I retained my memory of him alone. I also remembered that our relations with his country were fair, and that there was nothing that could warrant such an oddly-timed visit.

"King Ricardo crossed the border at House Milford's domain," the steward explained. "He plans to arrive at the palace soon."

Mother sighed, expression souring. "He must've learned I've begun to lose my strength... Always frightfully well-informed, that one."

I blinked. "You mean this isn't mere coincidence?"

"Ricardo has countless spies watching our border. Should anything amiss

happen, he'll know almost immediately."

"Scouts? He's not one of our enemies, is he?"

If Nieve were to declare war on us, we wouldn't last a month.

"Oh, he's no enemy," Mother assured us. "How could you say such a thing? After all the time he spent with you when you were a young boy? His visit is an annoyance, nothing more." She sighed as though her non sequitur were obvious. "Ordinarily, the mana barrier at our border keeps out the untoward types, ensuring that he can't visit without explicit permission."

"Er... You're sure he's not our enemy?"

Mother didn't reply, planting her hands on her hips and sighing. She was pretending not to have heard me.

Having a foreign king cross the border so frivolously was a serious issue and could even be considered a declaration of war. The steward had good reason to panic. From Mother's tone, especially how she referred to him so casually, I got the sinking feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

Finally, after a long moment's thought, Mother planted a hand on my shoulder, and my fears were confirmed.

"Vincent, I need you and Lady Elizabeth to meet him on the road."

I knew it.

I watched as Lars tugged on the hem of Elizabeth's dress and pointed toward the front foyer, pleading with her to leave and go back to her mansion. I didn't blame him.

"And you, Mother?" I replied levelly.

"I must stay here and care for your poor, ailing father."

"Not because this is an 'annoyance'?"

"...Were you not thinking something rather rude about me earlier?"

"I, er... I'll see you soon." I turned away from Mother's eerily friendly smile and locked eyes with Elizabeth. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. I will gladly accompany you wherever you wish to go, Your

Highness."

Her response was instant. Despite being called out to the palace on a whim and being embroiled in one disaster after another, she hadn't so much as hesitated to help once. If anything, she took them each on with dignity and grace. I was on the verge of breaking down in tears, thanking her.

"Lars and Harold should be all the protection we'll need," I thought aloud. "We'll leave immediately."

"I shall prepare the carriage," the steward said before leaving.

I moved to follow him but stopped at the door. I'd nearly forgotten an important detail.

"Should I attempt to conceal Father's ill health?" I asked.

Mother shook her head. "As soon as my barrier fell, it became clear that something went awry... Oh, and please try to remember that Ricardo isn't our enemy."

"Then is he—"

"He is *not* our ally." Mother's gaze dropped for a moment, and she sighed before looking back up at me. "You're a grown man now, Vincent. You'll understand when you meet him."

Great...



**ONE** hour after the steward's initial interruption, Elizabeth and I were rolling along in a carriage, heading to meet King Ricardo of Nieve.

Come to think of it, this whole situation is rather dire, isn't it? A strange monster revived and cast a strange spell, making the king collapse and taking half the queen's mana when she's our country's single greatest weapon. Combine that with me, a prince with crippling memory issues, and the country's future is in wonderful condition...

In that state, I was being forced to meet with the king of a foreign superpower who had set foot in our country without so much as a word of invitation. One small mistake could lead to a major international incident. Mother said I would

understand when I met him, but I frankly couldn't remember anything of the man except for the occasional times he would play with me. Rather, I was sure he hadn't ever lodged in the palace back then, as a proper guest would have.

From the carriage driver's seat, I heard an exclamation of shock. Moments later, a shadow crossed my window. I looked up. Harold had been sent ahead to inform King Ricardo of our intent, and I assumed he had ridden back to inform us of his success. When I peered out the window, however, my jaw dropped.

There outside the carriage was not Harold, as I had assumed.

"Hey, Vincent. I haven't seen you in years!"

The man riding apace with us was on my manservant's horse, but he was definitely not Harold. The King of Nieve waved cordially at me with one hand.

"K-King Ricardo?!"

"King Ricardo?" Elizabeth echoed wide-eyed.

"Stop the carriage!" I shouted.

No wonder the driver was in a panic. While he had no means of recognizing King Ricardo, anyone would be shocked to see a stranger suddenly appear on Harold's horse.

The carriage rapidly slowed to a stop, and without waiting for the driver to dismount and open the door, I threw it open myself.

The King of Nieve likewise dismounted and gave me a cordial wave. "Hey. How've you been?"

His long, uncut hair was tied in a loose ponytail, and his ornamented coat was nearly open at the front to reveal his tightly muscled chest. There was a gold chain about his belt, and unlike the last I saw him, he was sporting a goatee. When he smiled, dimples appeared on his cheeks. Though he seemed rather rugged, his attitude was that of a friendly uncle.

"King Ricardo. We welcome you to our humble country with great pleasure and pride." I moved to bow deeply, but he snatched my shoulder, nearly knocking the air out of me in the process. "Gwuh?!"

"What's with the formalities, friend? Why don't you just call me Ricky like you

used to? Did you already forget that time we threw horse manure in King Gaius' study?"

"K-King Ricardo! Enough about the past!"

Frankly, I'm surprised we got off as easily as we did back then.

"Oh?" He looked past me at Elizabeth, his smile taking on far too much mischief for my tastes. "Oh, I see!"

He was, for better or for worse, exactly the kind of man I remembered him as. While I wondered what Mother's cryptic warning could possibly mean, I finally realized that the two hadn't been introduced yet. Shooting the king what I hoped came across as a warning look, I moved to introduce Elizabeth.

"Ah, my apologies for the delay. This is the daughter of Duke la Montlivere, Elizabeth la Montlivere...my fiancée."

"Please, call me Elizabeth. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

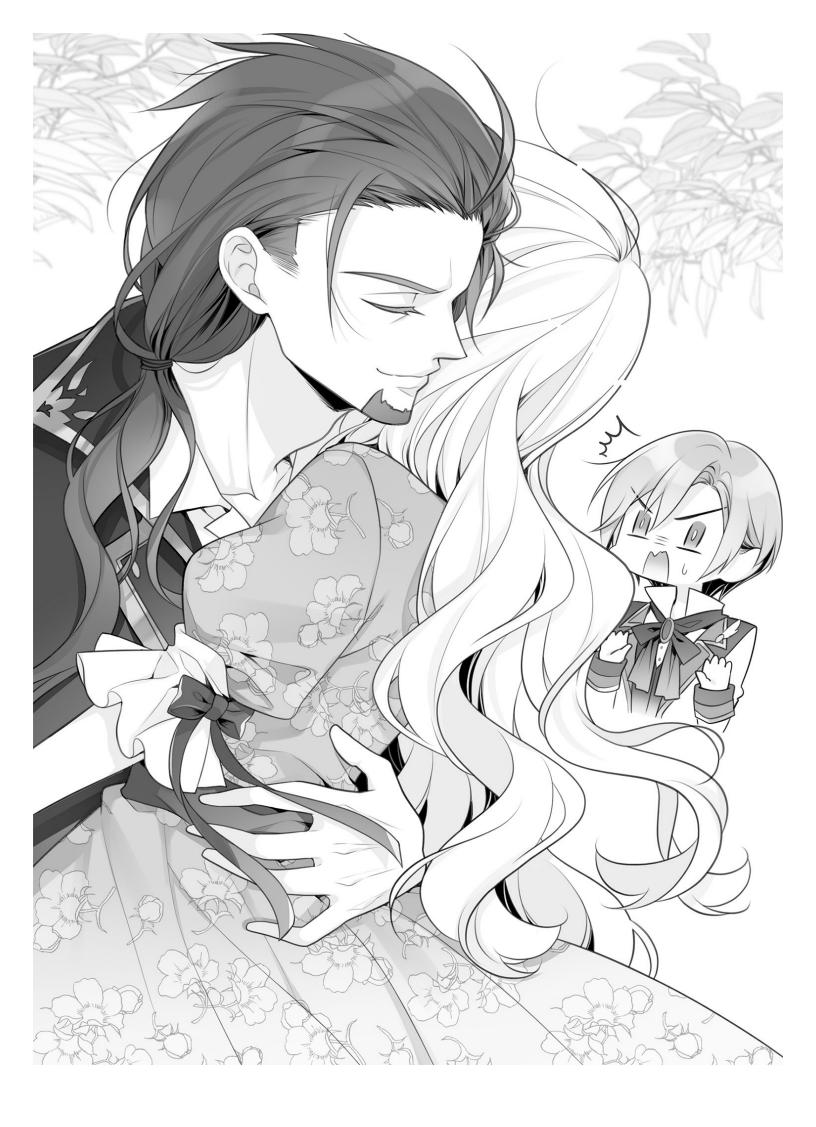
Elizabeth curtsied, and King Ricardo put a hand to his chest and bowed deeply.

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine, princess! I am Ricardo Louis Valoren. Nice to meet you."

With that, he elegantly hugged her close—and planted a kiss on her cheek.

## "GAH?!"

Ricardo turned at the sound of my voice and grinned.



I grit my teeth in irritation. I was so focused on hiding my past that I'd nearly forgotten that part of him.

"This is how we say hello in Nieve," he continued, rubbing his cheek against Elizabeth's in what rivaled the biggest hug I'd ever shared with her. I could only imagine how irritating that bristly mess on his face was to her.

"Please stop that," I asked as politely as I could muster. "I believe I mentioned she's my fiancée, didn't I?"

"I get it. You wanna play it cool for your girlfriend, right?"

The people of Nieve were said to be extremely friendly and made physical contact with each other frequently. They were also said to go too far at times, as evidenced by King Ricardo's presence there. With each of his accursed visits to the palace, he would practice his so-called Nievean greeting whenever humanly possible and placed countless women under his shameful spell.

I hope Elizabeth isn't too offended...

I tried to get a look at her expression, and while her eyes were spread wide with shock at first, she smiled reassuringly at me upon noticing my gaze. She was kind enough to absolve any sin, her lips curving like the plush wings of an angel.

"I'm quite flattered to have received such a personal greeting, Your Majesty," she said. "Allow me to greet you in the manner of our country."

With that, she grabbed the front of her skirt, sweeping one leg behind her and lowering her chin in one smooth gesture. It was no casual greeting—it was the most formal curtsy a woman could possibly offer another, indirectly asserting to him that he was merely a friend. King Ricardo's smile died on his lips.

"Well?" Elizabeth asked after a long pause, raising her face again with a pure smile. "What do you think?"

I was struck speechless.

King Ricardo opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it, smiling softly instead. "Hahaha, I get it, I get it. Do as the locals do, right? I'll behave... Sorry."

With his apology finished, he pointed back into the carriage we'd ridden in. For one heart-stopping second, I feared he was pointing at Lars' basket and that the dragon had emerged furious, given the king's exchange with his mistress. Luckily, my fears were unfounded.

"Go on, now. Take me to the palace."

At his bidding, I held the door open. I offered Elizabeth my hand and tenderly helped her inside, after which I gestured as rudely as I felt I could get away with to bid King Ricardo inside. He stopped in front of me, and his broad hand patted me roughly on the head.

"You sure have grown. Back when you were just a rowdy little shi—er, when you were a kid, I never thought you could be such a good man. You're Mariabel's kid, all right, and your fiancée's a fighter just like your mom. Then you got Harold... You'd think the guy's got a mask glued on with how little his emotions showed, but when I ordered him to get in my carriage and give me his horse, he obeyed just like that."

I didn't say anything and watched him. I'd heard something similar about me being a Mariabel look-alike, and from Mother's assurance that I'd know once I met him, the pieces were slowly coming together. I only hoped I was wrong.

"King Ricardo," I finally asked him. "How do you know my mother, exactly?"

"What, she didn't tell you?" His eyes widened in surprise. "Man... Eighteen years old, and you don't even know what your mom really is."

He was making her sound like some monster in disguise, but from the way Father kept almost calling her the Demon of Urhalla, perhaps she was. I considered asking for more details, but my instincts told me that wasn't a subject I should know more about. The secrets surrounding Mother had increased yet again.

"No, I don't know," I readily admitted. "Step aboard, please. You can tell me all you wish along the way. How hot is Nieve this time of year, if I may ask?"

Despite my attempt to change the topic, there was a mischievous glint in the king's eye. He was begging to tell me something.

"Why talk about Nieve when we can talk about Mariabel? There's still quite a

ride to your palace, isn't there? Listen well, then, to the tale of Mariabel's and my romance."

"...Romance?"

I knew it. He loves Mother, too.



**WITH** that, King Ricardo told us about Mother's past, including his attempts to court her.

Mother—or rather, Mariabel was born as the oldest daughter of Marquis Darling in Urhalla. The country had fallen on hard times back then, and between the wavering resolve of the royal family and plots by other families to seize the crown by force, it was a dangerous and unpredictable time.

Chaos championed the realm, and the ambitious Marquis Darling raised the young Mariabel with little love. Then, it was discovered that she was a magical prodigy. It was a rare gift in those days, and as such, it went almost entirely unregulated by the royals. The marquis was no doubt pleased at the discovery, but she was beyond his control even at that age.

Young Mariabel used her gifts however she pleased, even sending her tutor on an emergency trip to the infirmary once. That made it clear who I took after with my persistent refusal to stay in my lessons as a boy. The marquis, faced with a trump card he couldn't control, eventually had his daughter exposed to the royal family by a political rival who'd caught wind of her talents. Supposedly, the marquis was so upset by that turn of events that he hacked up a great gout of blood and collapsed.

Unable to handle the girl any longer, House Darling resolved to send her out of the country. Her lessons had been strict enough to allow her to flourish abroad, and time apart would assumedly allow both parties to cool their heads. Personally, I thought the decision was a tad cruel.

When Mariabel arrived in Nieve for her studies, she was allowed free rein and showed a degree of self-control for the first time in her life. House Darling was relieved—and yet Nieve posed its own challenges. Two powerful families were struggling for succession of the throne, and when Mariabel happened to save

young Ricardo from a plot on his life, she found herself in the heart of a shadow war. Ricardo's supporters begged her for more long-term assistance, and unable to turn them down, she agreed.

The issue then proved to be her status as an exchange student. The lack of political power meant nothing to her—it was the fact she would be forced to return to Urhalla in two years. "I couldn't sleep at night if this issue stayed unresolved," she reportedly said and took action in a way not even Ricardo's supporters could predict. She broke into the enemy faction's stronghold single-handedly, secured proof of their assassination attempt on the prince, and drove their leader to total failure. That was when she ran into Plum, the King Cait Sidhe, and despite it possessing enough power to obliterate the entire capital, she effortlessly vanquished the fiend.

While the Kingdom of Nieve's political turmoil disappeared overnight, she decided it was best to return home before proof of her involvement in the affair arose. Little did she know that young Ricardo had already fallen in love with her.

Upon seeing the chaos in her home of Urhalla, Mariabel recalled how easily she ended the turmoil in Nieve and decided to do the same. With that, she resolved to beat the lax young king into shape and reform the country. That king was, of course, Gaius von Weissworth—my father.

"Of course, there were no remains of the Cait Sidhe to be found," King Ricardo continued. "Nobody could've known who was responsible."

That meant the King Cait Sidhe had followed Mariabel back to Urhalla and subsequently would be sealed in the palace's basement.

"Right, that reminds me," Ricardo said, "I heard you folks finally dealt with the dukedom that was aiming for the throne, right? I remember Mariabel being broken up that they were so quick to cut their losses and run, and they ended up escaping with their crimes."

I assumed he was referring to Lars' house back when he was human, House Drewleid.

"They weren't very powerful or competent, but they somehow had more ambition than most."

Yep, that's House Drewleid, all right.

In other words, when they attempted to wed Lars to Elizabeth all those years ago, they had intended to use the union of the houses to accrue more power and oppose the royal family. Only when that failed did they attempt to go after the crown more directly. I'd always known that their proposed marriage was political in nature, but I never assumed it was *that* political.

I suppose Lars was the most successful of their family in the end, even if he's hiding in a picnic basket at the moment.

"I won't pretend to know about Urhalla's internal affairs," King Ricardo added. "When I heard rumors of a Goddess of Destruction or the Exploder, though, I knew it had to be Mariabel. I never asked her about it directly because I wasn't keen to get destroyed or exploded myself."

He was right on every account there. To Mother, I got the distinct impression that her grand, heroic phase was nothing more than embarrassing stories from her youth to her now.

"This is my first time hearing of any of this," Elizabeth muttered, hand on her cheek.

She was exactly right. The only thing preventing me from enjoying the tale fully was the knowledge that it was literally about my parents.

"I've learned plenty of our country's history over the years," she continued, "and I recall hearing the kingdom used to be rife with corruption and injustices. The textbooks always said King Gaius was responsible, and Her Majesty was never so much as mentioned..."

King Ricardo chuckled. "Mariabel insisted that the books be written that way. She said it was so that in a few short decades, nobody would know the truth."

And now Mother sounds like some kind of villainess... Great.

I'd always known Father was scared of her, but this was far beyond anything I could've imagined. Frankly, I wasn't sure Elizabeth should be marrying into such a problematic household.

"Anyhow, I wouldn't even be alive without Mariabel," he concluded. "That's

why I've sworn allegiance to her—secretly, of course."

He tapped his breast just over his heart to drive the point home. There was a faraway look in his vermillion eyes as he did so, as though mulling over ancient history that was still far too fresh in his mind. I had no idea the king was harboring such feelings. All I remembered of him was the little things like him throwing me into the air as a young kid or throwing me into a lake and making me cry when I was slightly older. I wished I'd never heard his story.

"I suppose that explains why you keep coming to Urhalla with no reason in particular," I reasoned.

He nodded. "All it took was a little...persuasion to convince King Gaius to let me come alone to his country whenever I pleased. It's all in secret, of course."

I never would've guessed. It was incredibly dangerous for a king to be alone at all, let alone travel to another country. No wonder why Mother erected the barrier—it was, in a sense, to ensure the world I inherited wasn't too thoroughly ruined by that secret contract. My discomfort must've been showing on my face as King Ricardo nodded at me with a smile.

"Don't worry, the secret contract has some 100 indemnity clauses. Nieve isn't allowed to whine if I die in your country; if I cause trouble, you can banish me without political ramifications—the works."

In other words, Father was desperate to prevent any international incidents over this.

If King Ricardo was willing to accept such circumstances, however, it proved how strongly he felt for my mother.

"That's why I forced—er, entrusted all my work to some ministers, so I'll be sticking around here for a while," he said.

"About that," I began. "Father has recently fallen ill and is quite bedridden."

I knew the words were a mistake before I opened my mouth, and sure enough, King Ricardo's smile widened significantly.

"No worries. I'm here to see you, Vincent, and make sure you're fit to take the country over from Mariabel. You better treat me like royalty!"



BY the time we'd nearly arrived at the palace, King Ricardo was so beside himself with excitement that he didn't seem the slightest bit tired by his journey. It was also abundantly clear he didn't care at all for Father and was purely anticipating seeing Mother. The more I thought about the foreign king's obsession with my mother, the more uncomfortable I felt about the whole situation.

Upon our arrival, the steward requested that we wait a half-hour. While the facilities to host a foreign king were available, he was apprehensive that our hospitality was not yet perfect. The look in his eyes as he requested the great king to wait was distant and fatalistic. On top of that, it was nearly evening, so I left with Elizabeth to see her home. We were, in effect, leaving King Ricardo to wait alone. The steward seemed so appalled by this turn of events that he was on the verge of passing out.

King Ricardo thumped the steward heartily on the shoulder. "Don't worry, my man! I was the one who barged in unannounced."

From their interaction, I gathered there was a clause or two on the indemnity contract that made it clear King Ricardo could not complain about being made to wait. After giving the steward an encouraging nod, Elizabeth and I left the palace.

The la Montlivere mansion was only a short distance away, such that we could comfortably fill the time with small talk without it seeming strained or awkward. Today, however, I was in no mood for such pleasantries, and Elizabeth seemed to notice as we rode in silence, her eyes fixed out the window. I likewise looked out the opposite window. The bustle of the distant streets failed to reach the palace road, and we encountered no other carriages as we rode. It was a much-appreciated gift of peace from Elizabeth.

As we dismounted the carriage, she turned to me. "Please call me if anything else happens. I shall be there as soon as I'm able."

She gestured to the basket, which still contained Lars, as she said so. He was both her familiar and her protector, which was precisely what enabled her to leave on such short notice earlier. She trusted the pest a great deal, I gathered.

"Thank you."

I was not keen to call on her, however. It would be wrong of me to trouble her, let alone King Ricardo's "testing" of my fitness for the throne and the fact that this was a royal problem through and through.

"Please, don't worry about me," I told her as confidently as I could with my specially practiced princely smile.

In response, Elizabeth smiled, a hint of sadness in her eyes.



**AS** soon as I returned from the duke's mansion, I was summoned to the parlor. Upon my arrival, I found King Ricardo seated in the room's center, dressed in his fine red coat with the same giddy look of anticipation as when I left nearly half an hour ago.

Did he even blink while I was gone?

On the far side of the parlor was the door to Father's private chambers, and it slowly eased open as I entered. Through it, I could see my parents—no, Mother was standing facing me, the usual predatory glint back in her eyes. Father was nestled in her arms like a baby, with Plum perched on top of him.

"...What?!"

I hurriedly clamped my hands over my mouth. I didn't know what to make of the sight and glanced at Harold, hoping for some aid. His eyes were fixed on the wall as though refusing outright to acknowledge what he was seeing, as was the steward. Mother was staring directly at me, but instead of glaring as she normally would at such a reaction, she seemed to understand the peculiarity of her appearance.

"My apologies for the lack of hospitality," Mother told King Ricardo coolly. "I had my hands full with my poor husband's sudden illness, but you wouldn't listen to reason and came anyway."

In simpler terms, she was annoyed at his visit. She didn't spare him so much as a glance as she strode inside and set Father to rest in one of the plush

armchairs. Plum, from its perch on Father's stomach, began to retch as if to vomit.

Notably, my parents were clad in a matching blue jacket and dress with near-identical wave patterns in the fabric. They even had matching cut gemstones on her necklace and his cufflinks, accentuating that they were very much a united front against the foreign red-clad king. I had no words.

No wonder they sent Elizabeth home... They didn't want her to see this.

"Mariabel is correct." Father nodded weakly. "We scarcely had time to dress Ourselves adequately."

I doubt that's the issue at hand here, Father. Is this really how they want to proceed?

He nonetheless appeared intimidating from his manner of dress alone.

"You showed great insolence in coming here, Ricardo. It seems you've made something approaching a proper king of yourself."

Er, Father? You mean "initiative," not "insolence," don't you? Try not to wear your heart on your sleeve like that.

I couldn't recall what Father was like during King Ricardo's visits when I was a child, though I doubted the memories were sealed from me like the others. Perhaps the foreign king had even timed his visits to avoid meeting Father. His gaze was sharp even through his weakness, but after hearing their history, it seemed more like showboating than his usual kingly mien.

I turned to see King Ricardo's reaction, but there was no need.

"Oh, sweet Mariabel!"

His deep voice seemed nearly shrill, attesting to his excitement. I saw only a red flash as he dashed for Mother, ignoring my father's insults. What happened next took only a scant few seconds.

"What a pleasure it is to see you again! Ah, you're every bit as beautiful as the first time I—"

Before he could wrap his arm around her waist and kiss her, however, she vanished.

"Have I not made myself clear?" came Mother's frigid voice. "This is Urhalla. Such greetings are highly improper here."

She was a few steps out of his reach, arms folded imperiously. A wave of her hand left an odd trail of sparks in the air, and in the same beat, a monstrous gale struck King Ricardo square in the chest and sent him crashing heavily into the wall.

Wait... Mother can cast incantationless magic? Since when?!

The King of Nieve groggily picked himself up off the ground, his cheeks flushed bright red. "Mm-mm-mm... Delightfully strong, as always."

He seemed unharmed—his muscles were more than just for show, it seemed.

Mother could stand to hold back a little...

"King Ricardo!" Father's voice rang, his feet stomping on the floor in irritation. Plum bounced and moaned on his lap. "How many times must We tell you that Mariabel is Our wife?! We've been married twenty years now—twenty years! It's high time you cease your miserable cloying for her affections!"

King Ricardo stuck out his tongue. "I've loved her for twenty-four years, and I've already begun to plan our quarter-century anniversary! I met her first, so stop bringing up your pathetic 'marriage' like it means something! You don't know the first thing about her heroism in Nieve!"

Mother bit her lip hard from where she stood between the pair, hissing. "Enough. There's no need to dredge up ancient history."

Their exchange reminded me of a certain blue-haired young man I knew and his own dubious romantic endeavors.

To think I'd live to see your match, Leohardt...

I couldn't pretend to be interested in the exchange.

Finally, King Ricardo noticed the bundle of purple fur in Father's arms. "Wait... Are you the monster that tried to kill me all those years ago? My, how you've shrunk!"

Is that really how you should greet the creature that almost killed you?

Plum glanced resolute silence.	the	foreign	king	and	turned	away,	its	lips	sealed	tight	in

## Chapter 3: Further Tribulations and Secret Dates

**AT** the signal to start, Lord Dominic channeled his mana into his muscular arms. His rugged, chiseled body grew obediently to his will, waves of power causing the air around him to waver.

"Firebolt!" he called in his deep voice.

A sphere of compressed fire manifested in his hand, blasting toward its mark, flames rolling off it as it went.

The knight opposite him made no move to retreat, leaping headlong into the projectile instead. He shifted his grip on his great two-handed sword with nimble ease, unleashing a mighty swipe and batting the explosive away.

I swallowed hard as Lord Dominic batted the fireball out of the air, but the knight unleashed a follow-up stab at the mage's shoulder. He stepped back out of the tip's path before it reached him. His opponent matched his retreat, swinging time and again.

"Wind Wall," the mage calmly incanted.

A translucent barrier manifested at his fingertips and absorbed the impact of the incoming blade to bring it to a perfect stop. I could hear the knight grit his teeth, his gauntlets slightly clanking as he strengthened the grip on his blade.

It was a battle of sword against sorcery. At a glance, the knight had the advantage, as not even Lord Dominic could use magic with the same defensive efficacy of a shield. He could only accept the blows, and the knight kept his guard up as he pressed Lord Dominic into a corner. Slowly but surely, the wall of wind was crumbling to the warrior's onslaught.

I could see victory alight in the eyes of the knight—of young Edward Norden.

"Hahh!!"

Edward mustered all his strength into a finishing blow, but Lord Dominic extended his offhand to the youth's side.

"How careless... Twister."

At his words, a cyclonic blast of wind entirely different from his prior barrier erupted from his hand. Edward, caught completely off-guard by the attack, was sent sprawling awkwardly to the ground several feet back.

"I-I concede," came a weak voice from the heap of metal.

"Never forget," Lord Dominic scolded with a smile, "that mages have two arms."

The mage helped Edward to his feet. Now that they were side by side, the sheer size of Lord Dominic was even clearer. I got chills looking at him.

Beside me, King Ricardo gestured at Lord Dominic. "Is he a guardsman?"

I shook my head. "He's the head of our Ministry of Magecraft."

While the marquis was technically wearing a mage's robe, it was easy to overlook such a detail for his bulging muscles. His biceps seemed to dance as he turned to face us.

"Well, King Ricardo, Prince Vincent? Was that to your liking?"

The king nodded with a grin. "Yeah, that was fun."

The two of us were in the observation area of the training grounds, where we stumbled across the pair's practice bout.

Marquis Dominic Marshall and Edward's father, the knight captain Count Zachary Norden, had decided to explore the possibility of training knights to take on mages. Currently, they were testing the use of manacite-imbued weapons and armor. Given that Edward had deflected the fireball, it seemed possible.

Last night, Father had gotten too worked up and fainted again, and Mother was still dutifully at his side. That didn't change the fact that I would be seeing to King Ricardo's needs, and I was in the process of showing him around the palace.

King Ricardo thought about the project for a moment. "We've been looking at means of combating monsters, but we never considered enemy mages."

"Mages are indeed rarer," the hulking mage nodded. "Most would count them a nonfactor in warfare, but we cannot guarantee it will always remain that way. The recent prevalence of manacite may well change that."

"Yeah... If we had to fight a mage like Mariabel, well..."

Lord Dominic visibly tensed at the mention of the queen's name, but he seemed intent on pretending he hadn't heard.

King Ricardo shot me a broad smile. "Urhalla has all the best soldiers, doesn't it?"

I could tell he wanted more information on our military. It would be rude to ask directly, so he was hoping I would get the message and offer the information proactively, no faux pas required.

"Yes, I suppose so." I paused before I could say anything else.

The Royal Knights were in charge of palace and capital security, and each domain had a battalion of knights on top of that. The size, composition, and outfitting of each force was a military secret, though the official number did not always reflect the reality of the situation.

I frankly didn't know how much or how little information I should be revealing. I was trained in what to say should a foreign power ask that question, but the details were eluding me at the moment—not to mention I doubted I could recite the details of each individual force in the first place. While I had attempted to memorize that information before bed last night, I was far from the point of perfect recitation with my mind addled as it was.

What mattered most, however, was that this was a test from King Ricardo, and I had to avoid being branded an ignorant child at all costs.

"Well?" he smiled amicably. I knew that expression well from my childhood—he'd smiled in just the same way when we sparred, trouncing me until I cried. My smile strained.

"If I may be so bold," came a proud voice and a clatter of metal from beside me, "allow me to explain the glory of our fair knights!"

I turned to find Edward standing at my side. There was no way for him to

know my present circumstances, but the sight of the Nievan king had him greatly enthused.

I readily nodded. "Yes... Please do."

"Excellent. I shall start with the founding of the Royal Knights. It was some 150 years ago, and at the time Urhalla was..."

I let out a sigh of relief, retreating behind the knight's broad, metal back. I didn't know if my ease was warranted, however. If King Ricardo aimed to test me, such an intervention could count against me.

While I remained composed with my topical remarks and additions to Edward's tale, that feeling of inadequacy continued to haunt me.



**AFTER** a full day of accompanying King Ricardo through many such dubious successes, the end of dinner saw me scuttling desperately back to my room, whereupon I fell face-first into bed. Harold was at my side, where he had just returned from the Royal Academy to inform them of my absence under the guise of "royal duties." No lecture I attended now would carry any meaning to me, after all, so I was glad for the excuse—but that was not my primary reason for doing so.

"I'm exhausted," I muttered weakly into my pillow.

"Shall I accompany you from tomorrow?" Harold asked.

"As much as I'd like to turn you down, please do."

Harold had deduced the source of my stress. Without my memories, every move I made around King Ricardo required great caution. Even touring the palace grounds alone, there were moments in the Mineral Parlor and the like where I was pressured to reveal the history of the Glass Lazulite, information that was lost to my memories. I had stayed up late the night before committing such trivia to memory, but there were definite limits, such as my failing at the training grounds. The way the king repeatedly attempted to change the topic to Mother was equally exhausting.

I considered revealing my memory issues to King Ricardo outright, but I

decided against it. For instance, what if the guest were anyone other than him? If a "guest" arrived, determined to glean information on how to ruin our country, I would be forced to deal with them, given the circumstances. I could not hide behind my title forever—no, I had to take charge of the country and step out from my parents' shadow. I could not possibly become worthy of Elizabeth's love otherwise.

Harold fixed me with a troubled look. "Perhaps you should learn to rely on others a tad more?"

"That's why you'll be accompanying me tomorrow."

"Aside from me?"

"Well... Who do you suggest?" Granted, Edward's aid had saved me. "Come to think of it, do you know where Raphael is?"

During his studies, he gained his full qualifications as a mage, and after graduation, I heard he immediately began work at the Ministry of Magecraft. Only his father, Marquis Dominic, had seen him since.

"He's presently on an expedition to our country's northern extremes," Harold replied. "He detailed his and Lady Yulisse's presence there in a rather aggravating letter."

"What? He didn't send me anything."

"He's no doubt attempting to be discreet."

It was a shock nonetheless. He was on absolutely horrible terms with Harold, and I couldn't imagine either contacting the other of his own free will... though perhaps that was precisely why he reached out to Harold.

"What of Lucas?" I asked.

"He is presently working under the chancellor. Both the chancellor and the head of espionage are conducting a coverup campaign to prevent word of His Majesty's condition from spreading abroad."

"I imagine he's busy, then." I let out a heavy sigh. "I can't ask any of them to divest time from their duties to cover for me."

He nodded, and from the shift in his expression, I realized he must have

reached the same conclusion as I. "There is one individual, is there not?"

Harold glanced at the mantle and the small portrait of Elizabeth perched atop it. She had received all the tutelage necessary of a future queen, and just as Mother was undertaking Father's duties during his illness, Elizabeth was equipped and prepared to direct the ministers and take control of the nation in my absence. She was, in all respects, the person I should rely on.

"I should be relying on her, yes, but...but that would mean exposing her to yet another embarrassing side of me." I pulled my sheets up about my face to hide my flushed cheeks. Not even Harold needed to see my embarrassment.

I can't ask her now, what with all that touching and flirting, and... Gods, I nearly kissed her! In fact, when Lars barreled into me at the end, I distinctly remember something brushing against my lips... I imagine only Harold saw enough of that ordeal to say what happened for certain.

"But Your Royal Hi—"

"Wait," I interrupted him, peering furtively out from my blankets. "Th-There's something I need to know first..."

It was part of my duty as a royal to kiss her at the wedding and pledge both love and longevity to one another for political reasons, both domestic and international. Emphasis on "at the wedding."

"Yesterday, did Elizabeth and I... er... k-kiss...?" Before I could even finish, Harold's expression soured with exasperation. "Wait, we didn't?"

"What you felt against your lips," Harold said with a roll of his eyes, "was Lady la Montlivere's cheek."

"Her cheek?"

"Your head was sent upwards at an angle when you were separated from her, correct? It wouldn't make sense for your lips to touch in a direct collision. In fact, given how your balance left you—"

"Enough... That's all I needed to hear."

So, since I didn't fall straight back, my lips only grazed her... I suppose true love's kiss didn't break the spell on me, after all... Though her mana certainly

triggered it, so that may still be true in a sense.

"Yes... That's right," I nodded to myself. "Our first kiss should be a lot more romantic... The mood was all wrong."

In other words, since the circumstances weren't perfect, it didn't count. Though I considered myself a realist, I was too smitten with her not to believe in fate or true love.

"Still, that can't have been a pleasant experience for her," I reasoned. "I can't possibly ask her to take time from her studies at the Academy for my sake."

Just as I drew my conclusion, someone pounded on the door, prompting it to glide open. Standing there in my doorway was King Ricardo.

"Vincent! Get Princess Elizabeth over here. I already got permission from King Gaius, and we'll spend all day tomorrow out on the town!"

He held forward a piece of scrap parchment with "I allow it" scrawled curtly across it in Father's hand. Beside the signature was a nearly identical message from Mother. Beside me, Harold's face lost all emotion.

"Don't worry about bodyguards," the king continued. "It clearly says in paragraph 93 of my treaty that I'm to have no guards with me. Nieve can't complain! Make your soldiers cover only you and the princess!"

"Er... That's far easier said than done..."

A second later, I realized the full context of the situation. This was a formal request. There was little I could do against written permission from Father himself.

Mother, Father, be honest. You want me to keep this thoroughly irritating man away from you, don't you?

I hesitated. "Do you promise to concede graciously if Elizabeth refuses?"

He solemnly placed his hand over his heart. "Of course. The last thing I want is to trouble the poor princess."

But you don't mind troubling us in old House Weissworth, do you?

Without any means of protesting left, I sent a messenger to find Elizabeth

with the news.

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**THE** royal capital was known for its temperate climate and middling humidity, but this year, it was markedly hotter than the last, and many passersby wore lighter and looser clothes to escape the heat.

I had not been on a stroll through the town proper since my last date with Elizabeth, and not only was it early spring then, but nobody was aware I was royalty. This time, however, King Ricardo had requested we pose as sociable lower nobility, mingling amongst the populace without armed guards buffering us from the common folk. It was a tall order, to be sure.

We utilized House Abarakoff's heirloom techniques for our disguises. I had my hair dyed a darker hue, was forbidden from managing my unruly bedhead, and was given a rough burlap shirt to wear. Apparently, at that point, I only needed to hold Elizabeth's hand to remove any royal poise I'd accumulated.

Elizabeth was given thick glasses to hide the color of her eyes and covered her hair with a muslin hat, after which she only needed a simple, undyed dress to complete the look. As that charming elegance of hers was too difficult to hide, she would be posing as a noble's daughter with us men as her bodyguards. It was a fitting guise to its core.

King Ricardo needed only remove his opulent coat and ornamentation, and his guise as a bruiser in his lady's service was complete. It was an odd feeling, as he was the highest-ranking of us all, but he was so naturally intimidating I couldn't argue. Harold was very firm and asserted that "a unibrow is all you need to make you lose any majesty," giving the impression that he was upset at the king's many unreasonable requests. King Ricardo was seriously considering it as well and would have incorporated that into his disguise if I hadn't intervened. His contract wasn't perfect, after all, and I wanted to avoid diplomatic issues that arose from giving a foreign ruler an unflattering unibrow.

In the end, our band of an heiress and two bodyguards was a bit of an odd one. Harold was positive we would not be discovered as royalty, but I was far less sure. Harold would be with us as well, with Lars tucked away in a picnic basket in his arms. Should the need arise, he was told to meow loudly to allay

suspicion.

"Just relax!" the Nievan king assured us. "Urhalla's a hundred times safer than my country, I promise."

He moved to push ahead through the crowd, but grunted and was held back by the rope tied about his waist. The other side of the leash was wrapped firmly around Harold's arm.

"Lord Ricky, you would do well to remember to protect milady."

"Oh, right... Sorry." He obediently returned to the rest of our little group.

I looked at Harold, eyes wide with surprise and horror alike. "H-How can you...?!"

"I consulted His and Her Majesty last night," my manservant replied flatly. "They encouraged such treatment of him."

That would mean this whole outing was under House Abarakoff's official jurisdiction. For the first time, I noticed the heavy bags under Harold's eyes, and I was likewise sleep-deprived from all the information I tried to cram about the town.

I'll try to keep the burden on him as light as I can.

Harold turned back to King Ricardo. "I realize you are strong enough to handle yourself, but I must insist you stay with the group."

"I can do that," he nodded readily.

That would be for the best since if he were to leave us, our protection would be divided. Contract or not, that was unacceptable.

But isn't Harold being a little too rough with him? He's still talking to Nievan royalty.

It was then that I noticed the odd vacancy behind Harold's eyes. He likely hadn't slept last night, and the stress was rapidly getting to the poor man.

Our odd group walked up the main street. Harold was at the front with Lars' basket in his arms. I followed, leading Elizabeth by the hand, and King Ricardo took up the rear of our formation. The finely maintained noble gardens grew

sparse as we went, and large stores took their places amongst them, until we finally found ourselves upon a market proper. Storefronts burgeoned with fruits and meats on display, and eventually, we found ourselves among street food vendors and hawkers. The road grew in vigor with each step we took.

"Ohh, yes! This is it! Over here!"

We turned to find King Ricardo waving us over to a stall on the roadside, notably still close enough to the group to obey the letter of Harold's command, if not the spirit. The stall seemed to be an extension of the kitchen behind it, with a serving counter facing the masses. It was no place any noble, let alone royalty, should be eating.

I suppose he is a king, though... I doubt he has much freedom to do as he pleases back in Nieve.

My expectations were thoroughly betrayed when the middle-aged woman at the counter looked up from the meat she was grilling, and at the sight of King Ricardo, her face split into a broad grin.

"Well, if it isn't Ricky! You've sure grown up smartly!"

My jaw dropped.

"You're looking fine yourself!" he returned amicably.

"Oh, honestly, you're such a flatterer!"

She laughed and gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. Her toothy grin was as white as the bandanna tying back her hair, and it was clear she meant him no harm, but I couldn't keep myself from gasping.

"I'm working for a noble now," he boasted, jerking his head back at Elizabeth.

"So you finally got a job, then." She sighed, relief on her face. "My hubby and I were getting pretty worried, y'know."

King Ricardo would often go missing during his visits to the palace in the past, but I never thought he was out making a name for himself in town.

I take back everything I thought about him before. Nobody can control this man, hence why Mother resorted to a physical barrier to keep him out. I can only imagine the stress his poor aides must be under...

"I've been dying to have your meat again," King Ricardo said, drooling at her grill. "I'll take one."

Before King Ricardo could finish rooting the change out of his pocket, the lady shook her head firmly at him. "Tell you what, it's on the house to celebrate your new job." She pulled the meat she was cooking off the grill and wrapped it in something breaded, similar to a crepe. The smell of the thick slab of charred meat mingled with the sweet-and-spicy sauce, filling the air in a heartbeat. She peered around him to look at Elizabeth and me. "Want to try, miss? My name's Amelia, and I run this here eatery."

Harold dipped his head to her as he accepted three more portions, handing two of them to Elizabeth and me. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

Because of our status, we had both been taught never to accept food from strangers, much less to eat it, but this was an exceptional case. Besides, the king was already several bites into his meal.

"Ahh, that's the good stuff!" he exclaimed, wiping the dribbling sauce from his chin.

Elizabeth and I looked to Harold, who eyed the kitchen carefully and took a bite of his own steaming steak.

"This is quite good," he said levelly.

Amelia puffed her chest out with pride. "Isn't it?"

Harold's compliment signaled that it was safe to eat. Our meals were charcoal grilled in the same way that King Ricardo's was and used the same sweet sauce. King Ricardo and Amelia seemed to have known each other for several years, and neither of our companions had reported anything amiss. Having passed the peer test, the preparation test, and the poison test, we were fit to eat at our leisure. It was a pain to go through, but such was the fate of royalty. King Ricardo was frankly reckless beyond belief.

I took a bite of my bread-wrapped meat. The crepe was made from some manner of white flour and had a faint sweetness to it, which complemented the sauce's deep scent and flavors well.

"What do you think, milady?" I asked Elizabeth as politely as I could muster.

"It tastes great," Elizabeth replied with a thumbs-up and a wink. There was a wooden quality to her speech as she tried to lose her noble accent, but not only did she do a decent job of it, she was adorable as she did so. I couldn't even muster the will to wipe the sauce from my lips.



Amelia reached across the counter and gave me a hardy slap on the back. "She may be a noble, but don't give up, sonny!" she told me in a whisper so Elizabeth couldn't hear.

"Um... Th-Thank you."

I'm higher ranking than her, but we're already a perfect match on that front...

Amelia sighed. "Ah, youth! I've forgotten what it must be like for you kids."

"Oh, c'mon, you've got your hubby!" King Ricardo replied with a grin.

"That old oaf's about as sensitive as a slab of rock. Why, he didn't so much as bat an eye at the news of His Royal Highness' wedding parade!" She turned to Elizabeth. "You'll be attending, won't you, miss?"

I nearly spewed the meat I was chewing and had to forcefully swallow it prematurely. I hadn't anticipated the change in topic, much less such a question. Elizabeth seemed equally troubled.

"I believe I'll be there, yes," she cautioned.

Amelia sighed. "Of course you will! I wouldn't miss it for anything myself. I've never seen them before, but I can only imagine how charming the prince must be, much less the beauty of his bride! Why, it'll be wonderful!"

Stop grinning at us like that, Ricky! I get it!

Amelia looked past me as I fumbled for a reply, smiling warmly at Elizabeth. "If I may be so bold, miss, I imagine you'll be quite beautiful without those glasses in the way."

Elizabeth stiffened, a blush tickling her cheeks. "What? Y-You think so?"

"And you," Amelia continued as she turned to me, "if you got your hair a little more in order..."

I hurriedly grabbed Elizabeth by the hand and led her a few steps back. "Thank you for treating us! It was very good!"

So she's the nosy, overly helpful type...not that she's wrong. We're drabbing down on purpose—especially sweet Elizabeth.

"Later, ma'am!" King Ricardo called with a wave as he followed us away. "I'll

be back!"

Amelia waved amicably to us, paying no mind to the strangeness of our retreat. "See you later, Ricky!"

At least the capital's people are friendly...

We continued down the main street, peeking in at stalls of herbs and potpourris and admiring the street art as we went. Harold had released King Ricardo from his leash as we walked, but the two were still arguing at the front of our group.

"Oh, relax! The contract says—"

"If the contract truly covered everything, my life would be a hundred times easier. You must consider your position more."

King Ricardo grinned. "You sound just like Mariabel... I think I like that."

At least someone's enjoying himself... Harold? Maybe you shouldn't be looking at a foreign king with such malice?

"C'mon," King Ricardo continued, "isn't it important to get to know your people? Y'know, letting go of all that stuffy formality, trusting your gut... My country nearly split in half because the nobles didn't do that enough."

Harold's eyes narrowed. "I know playing hooky when I see it. Do they not call you the Prodigal King back in Nieve?"

"Man, you've grown up smart!" the king grinned, running his hand roughly through my manservant's hair. "I wish I had an aide like you!"

From the pleasure on his face, I gathered that he was enjoying their interaction.

Er. They've really hit it off, haven't they?

I had little time to mull it over, however, as King Ricardo whipped about to look at me. There was a mischievous hint of a smile on his lips.

"Now, here's a question for you. How long has that stall been in business?"

He pointed down at my hands, and I looked down to see the name of the store marked on the wrapper—Mother Polka's Meat Meet.

How long has it been in business? I've checked the dates on all historic buildings in the area, but none have a built-in kitchen like that, and even then, I have no way of knowing about that particular store.

"[..."

I started to say I had no idea but stopped myself. Something was tapping at the back of my hand, soft as an angel's feather. It was one of Elizabeth's slender porcelain fingers.

Wh-What? Why here, why now?!

My eyes went to her in surprise, but she was pointedly facing away as though she hadn't heard our conversation. I was overcome with joy that she would do such a thing, even if subconsciously—but no, of course, there had to be a reason for such immoral touching. Now that I was paying greater attention, I realized she was tracing a consistent pattern—first six, then seven. It was the answer he was seeking.

"Er... Sixty-seven years, was it?" I ventured.

I'm rather impressed they've been in business so long.

"What about the palace?" the king prompted. "When was it constructed?"

Even in my current state, I knew that answer.

"If I recall, twenty years ago."

He nodded. "Excellent. This humble store, then, is far older than the so-called center point of the capital itself!" he announced, snapping his fingers emphatically.

I remained nonchalant, even though my mind continued to spin. I couldn't fathom how Elizabeth knew such a thing.

"It's rather famous as the supposed beginning of the capital's street food culture, isn't it?" Elizabeth questioned. "Supposedly, they've used the same barrel of sauce since the stall's inception. The building was left intact during the city's reconstruction and is famous to this day as a remnant of the old city."

So it's that famous amongst the people, is it?

I listened attentively to her explanation. That kernel of knowledge once had a home within my head, and I found myself grateful she was so attentive in her queenly studies.

King Ricardo smiled warmly at her. "An excellent answer, but there's a very real limit to what books can tell you. A king does not a kingdom make, after all. You need to connect with the people, see the places they love, the sights they see, the food they enjoy. As far as I'm concerned, that's a critical part of being a ruler."

Elizabeth nodded. "I suppose I've never had it before now."

She seemed to believe his words. Harold seemed to half doubt him still, but even he seemed to concede there was some wisdom to it. I had to agree myself. He had his own ambition and his pride as ruler of his country.

I paused in my tracks. I didn't have any such pride myself. In fact, I hadn't spared so much as a thought to my future reign, as I had been focusing on Elizabeth's happiness.

"Ah!"

I snapped out of my reverie and looked up to find King Ricardo ahead, staring intently through the window of a store. His hand was on his chin in a gesture of modest observation, but he was trembling with joy. The signboard had the mark of a winged rabbit against a laurel motif—the mark of Mother's house. We had arrived at a general store that specialized in wares of Mother's design, it seemed.

"Here! We've got to go inside. Please, we have to!" The king fervently tugged at Harold's sleeve while pointing exaggeratedly at the door, much as an impatient five-year-old might.

Harold raised an eyebrow. "Haven't you been to this store before? You seem more than familiar with the capital."

"Yes, but Mariabel always had a protective spell cast around her stores, so I could never get inside. Look, I can finally see the door!" His eyes grew dewy with tears.

That would explain his shock. I almost began to pity him. I could relate to his

persistent, one-sided love on an extremely personal level.

Harold glanced at me, deferring to my judgment. The king had his hands clasped as if in prayer now, his large body seeming at desperate odds with his puppylike quivering.

I extended my hand to him. "Shall we drop by?"

Despite the fine ornamentation of the store, it was open to the public, and we were free to enter as we wished. Even if our identities slipped, we could likely trust the staff to keep our secret.

He looked at me with open adulation. "Really?! Thank you!"

Openly ignoring my offer, he skipped inside ahead of us.

I stared blankly down at my open hand, grappling with the disappointment of my empty offer. A moment later, a second hand met my own—a far smaller one with an unmistakable elegance to it. I looked up and into Elizabeth's opalescent eyes.

"I'd love to go inside with you, Vince."

"Let us enter together, then, milady."

I reverently accepted her hand, softly chuckling at the odd shift to our usual dynamic. She giggled, no doubt at the same novelty. I found myself dreaming of buying a matching set of something small and charming to commemorate our first date as proper lovers.

We stepped inside to find King Ricardo rushing about, eyes bloodshot as he bought virtually everything in sight. All thought of his cover as a bodyguard gone from his mind.

All the employees are servants of Mother's house, so hopefully, he's fine to let his cover slip a little... I hope. There may be others who worship Mother with the same fervor, after all.

"Oh, I wish I could buy this whole store!" the Nievan king muttered to himself. "Wait... You have to pay to have your hedges trimmed into official Count Marsh Mallow shapes?! Why don't they have international service?!"

"Why not simply purchase a catalog for today?" Harold suggested coolly. "You

would surely be able to come later for further shopping."

"Right... I have free rein for this entire week! I can come again tomorrow and the day after! You've got one hell of a head on your shoulders, staying cool and collected in a place like this!"

Harold bowed. "You flatter me."

"You really should work for m—"

"Absolutely not."

From the rapidity of the response, I felt sure King Ricardo wouldn't succeed in swaying him.

Elizabeth and I perused the section for new releases. Small sculptures and everyday objects with character motifs comprised the bulk of the collection last time, but it was significantly different this time. I could understand the custom monocles or other accessories, but there was a wealth of shirts, shawls, and other articles of clothing that practically demanded diehard fans shell out for them.

I watched as King Ricardo picked up a pair of tinted glasses with trembling hands, muttering about how, with them, he could feel Mother's presence at all hours of the day or something to that effect. It was frankly unsettling, and I didn't want to know if it worked like that.

"What do you think of this, Vince? Perhaps you could wear it tomorrow?"

Elizabeth's quiet voice freed me from my thoughts. I turned to find her eying a shirt, though thankfully not one of the full-decal ones. It had character motifs only about the hems and cuffs, and while the character was a flashy rabbit with a good deal of bedhead, it was modestly designed not to stand out too much.

She really wants me to wear this?

Before I could even consider it properly, she averted her eyes, blushing fiercely. "Y-You don't have to if you don't want to. We could only wear them at home in the future..."

Wait, she'd wear one as well? As in... matching outfits?!

"Of course! Let's buy them," I announced softly.

She squeezed my hand, proof that she'd wanted this for a while.

"Lady Lecia will be at the wedding, won't she? We weren't able to take her here during her studies, but perhaps she—or rather, she and Prince Malius could wear these matching pendants?"

The necklaces in question had a rabbit-ear motif. They were a tad on the cute side, but I thought Prince Malius would be willing to consider it—if anything, I was more worried for Leohardt's reaction to the sight.

Ah, well. He's trying to wean himself off of his brother, anyway.

"I think they would look quite charming," I replied.

"Oh, and look at this!"

She pointed at the limited-edition section, at the top of which read "The Return of a Decade-Old Legend! Phantom Thief Mewlman!" The shelf was packed with picture books framed by colorful popouts.

Right, Mother designed him, too.

It was a tale of a handsome thief in a silk top hat and cloak who traveled the world stealing treasures for some reason or another. He was secretly a cait sidhe in disguise, and whenever he got in trouble, he transformed into a cat and slipped away. Elizabeth loved those picture books as a child.

I squinted at the character on the cover, a purple-furred cat that walked about on its hind legs.

That isn't Plum, is it?

"So Her Majesty didn't forget about Lord Plum, after all," Elizabeth muttered at the book in her hands.

"It would seem so."

If Mother had gone through the full process of another run of Mewlman merchandise, she and Father must have known Plum's seal was beginning to weaken. They knew Plum was growing stronger and would soon be freed, begging the question of why they did nothing to stop it. Granted, House Weissworth greatly emphasized self-sufficiency, but a second possibility came to mind.

"Her Majesty clearly found Lord Plum to be rather charming, didn't she?" Elizabeth wondered aloud.

I nodded. She likely couldn't bear to keep the little scamp sealed away any longer.

We called an employee over to pay, and while their eyes widened in shock at the sight of us, they didn't breathe a word. They respected that we were there incognito.

Meanwhile, King Ricardo was chuckling over the catalogs he'd bought. It was the kind third-party sellers ordered from instead of the usual variety, and there was a stack of at least a dozen in his arms.

"I won't be getting any sleep tonight," he chuckled to himself.

At least he's pleased with his findings.



**AFTER** dropping Elizabeth off at her mansion, we returned to the palace and changed out of our disguises, marking the end of an incredibly long day.

"I had a ton of fun!" King Ricardo had told Elizabeth with an eager wave as we saw her off. "See you tomorrow!"

The exhaustion that had built up over the day felt especially heavy at that moment.

We're going through this again tomorrow? Oh, joy.

Just before I turned to board the carriage again, Elizabeth shot me an exhausted look, only able to muster a faint smile herself. I smiled warmly and waved, signaling that I was okay, and her eyes brightened somewhat. The anxiety did not fade, however.

This is no time to make her worry over me.

We had survived King Ricardo's manic plans only because of Harold's preparations, and I had done close to nothing myself. Simply considering what I did do—stroll through town, eat crepe-wrapped meat, buy matching shirts with Elizabeth—it was an excellent use of a day, but my duty was not to have fun.

"Harold. Bring me a guidebook to the capital."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Perhaps you would prefer to rest?"

"It feels like I lost. I can't sleep like this."

Besides, from the sound of it, King Ricardo would stay up all night with his catalogs.

"You seem rather pale," he remarked.

"I'll make sure to sleep later."

"One book only," he said before turning and leaving the room.

I knew I was being selfish and stubborn, but I was thoroughly justified. I refused to make Elizabeth keep telling me the answers forever—even if she could accept that, I would never forgive myself. I had to answer King Ricardo's questions on my own merit, and to that extent, I would push myself as hard as it took.



THE hallowyrm frankly could not understand the problems his mistress's fiancé was facing, but he knew she was greatly troubled by it. That red-haired man Ricardo took Elizabeth and Vincent (and Harold, he supposed) out on the town, throughout which Lars was more than content to sleep in the manservant's wicker basket. On occasion, he caught a whiff of some tantalizing aroma, and a scrap of meat or dessert would slip through the lid a moment later. His mistress knew how boring it was inside the basket and was an angel in the truest sense.

He frankly couldn't complain about the arrangement. The little drake spent most of his time home alone while Elizabeth was at school anyway, so this change was akin to lounging about in a nice den instead of a sunny windowsill. Better yet, Elizabeth was even more charming than usual in her disguise, and the red-haired man seemed to torment Vincent with every word. He dragged the irritating prince about every which way, asking for an odd fact or after piece of trivia, and it was clear the man wanted only to be a nuisance. Lars enjoyed that immensely.

"Do you suppose Prince Vincent is in more trouble than he lets on?"

Lars looked up at Elizabeth at the sound of her voice. Night had freshly fallen, and his mistress talked to him with the kindness and softness she always did at this hour. He loved this time most of all, even if she almost always talked about that deplorable Vincent.

He dutifully nodded. The prince was suffering, no doubt. He could feel the prince's mana quiver and waver, and three other traces of mana within the royal were straining him in ways unknown to the prince himself. It was patently obvious he was hellishly stressed.

"I keep trying to think of ways I might be of use to him," Elizabeth continued. "He hasn't properly smiled in far too long, but no matter how I ask, he never tells me."

He wrapped his little clawed paws about her hand as she sighed in melancholy. Admittedly, he did not understand what Vincent's hardships had to do with her. Lars was never good at such things as a human, and as he changed into a fellwyrm, then hallowyrm, his confusion with others' emotions only grew.

She gazed idly into the distance, no doubt remembering the prince. "Do you think that Prince Vincent... Has he been playing the part of the perfect crown prince all these years?"

"Kweurgh." Bingo, in other words.

In his faint memories of his human life, Lars remembered young Vincent as a selfish, simple-minded brat. Even now, he took on that same attitude whenever Elizabeth's back was turned. The prince was trying, as infuriating as that was to admit, but why worry about such things now?

He cocked his head to the side, and his mistress sighed and looked away.

"I wish he'd rely on me if he needs help... Does he think I'm unreliable, or perhaps that I can't be trusted to support him?"

"Kwee?"

"He's always smiled so composedly, with that clever glint in his eyes... but now, it feels like he's using that look to reject me. I don't want to doubt his love for me, but..."

"Kweoogh?"

Lars didn't know where those words led, not as a human and certainly not now. His head spun as he tried to puzzle out her meaning.

At his core, Vincent was barely different from Lars; he was simply far better at acting. It wasn't to genuinely improve for her but to charm her with superficiality. Clearly, Elizabeth wanted him to trust her, and Lars could recall with horrific clarity how she wanted them *both* to support the prince after their contract was first forged.

Lars sized up his mistress carefully. He could see glimpses of light within, though she never spared him a proper look as a human. Vincent's light was the brightest, as much as he hated to admit it. That was it—the reason why Elizabeth was bound to Vincent, and he could never have hoped for the same. They strove for each other to improve and grow for each other. From somewhere deep within the recesses of his brain came his own voice, the human mind laying dormant and feeble within the hallowyrm.

I was always taught I was the best, superior to everyone around me. That wasn't enough to earn Elizabeth's love. I was never the best human. That's why she dragged me off my high horse herself.

Elizabeth never thought of herself as better than others. Even Vincent had faith in his bloodline and nobility but never in himself. That's what drove them to grow. They lived in vastly different worlds, to the point Lars could never have come to understand them. It was a cruel realization but one that made plenty of sense.

If I hadn't messed up so badly, then perhaps Elizabeth and I could have been different.

"Lord Lars? Are you all right? You aren't ill, are you?"

He snapped out of his reverie to find Elizabeth looking at him concernedly. Having her say his name was enough, his dragon side reasoned. The human heart was too complex to waste time fretting over.

"Kweee!" Lars raised his head, then stood and spread his wings to take a lap

around the room, flexing his little claws theatrically. "Kwirp, kwee, kweeoooo!"

The sight of his little feet balled up as he flew and spun finally made her laugh.

"Oh, you're trying to cheer me up! That's so sweet! You're right; we can't lose hope." She blushed faintly. "We must continue to support Prince Vincent however we can."

Lars nodded firmly. He could never be her partner, but he could be at her side, and that was enough. She could never go to Vincent on matters of the heart, and if the fool learned about how Lars was supporting her now, he'd die of jealousy. The thought alone made Lars purr with delight.

She tenderly stroked his horns. "Thank you, Lord Lars."

He narrowed his eyes blissfully, leaning into the scritches to enjoy them to the fullest.

There remained one problem, however, that even Lars could see as clear as day. The harder Elizabeth worked to support the prince in his current state, the more stressed Vincent would become. Vincent would hold onto his manly pride in the worst way, attempting to put on a strong front for his beloved that would only grow firmer the weaker he felt. For once, Lars felt he had a grasp on the human heart, if only a little.

When they arrived at the palace several mornings later, Vincent's steely-eyed manservant greeted them. There was only a touch more exhaustion in his eyes than before as he announced that, as they all had feared, Prince Vincent had collapsed.

## **Chapter 4: Hand in Hand**

**THE** next several days saw nothing but more of King Ricardo's nonsense tours. We left at lunch, ate street food, and took in the sights. At night, I crammed as much knowledge of the town and country into my head as I could. I knew I was running myself thin—but if I didn't push myself now, there would be no point. My beloved Elizabeth, my tormentor King Ricardo, and my classmates and aides were relying on me, and I couldn't let any of them see weakness.

Thinking back, that was all a mistake.

I awoke to find my eyelids leaden like I hadn't slept a wink. The ceiling seemed oddly far away. I considered the possibility I'd fallen asleep on a chaise with a history book, but Harold would've carried me to bed if that had happened. I blinked, doubting my own eyes, and finally recognized the canopy. I was in bed, all right.

When I tried to sit up, I realized how befuddled I was. My sight swam, and my breath felt disturbingly rough and hot on my lips. I finally managed to concentrate on the sky outside my window to find the sun was beginning to climb past the horizon. Harold would be by to wake me soon.

Oh, no.

He'd warned me several times to take better care of my health, and now I was paying the price. I stood to find a mirror and ascertain how pale and sickly I looked—or rather, I tried to stand. I should've known from the way my head spun that my feet wouldn't work properly. I lost my balance almost immediately and tried to support myself on a nearby chair, but only succeeded in making more noise as I fell.

"Prince Vincent?!"

Harold flew into my room immediately, his usually immaculate hair out of sorts. He must not have finished grooming.

"I'll be okay," I muttered. "This is nothing."

Nothing hurt, but as I attempted to stand up, I almost lost my balance again.

Harold's glare grew sharper. There was a blur of motion, and before I realized it, I was lying on the bed again. I didn't feel anything until just then, and I couldn't fathom the trick he'd pulled to achieve that.

"You have a fever," he muttered disapprovingly.

Drat. He figured it out.

"It's nothing," I reassured him. "It must be like a developmental fever, what with all the studying I've been doing. We can't leave Elizabeth wait—"

I attempted to stand again, but he forced me back into the bed. "I'm canceling all your plans for today. I shall explain the situation to King Ricardo."

"But-"

"Her Majesty has designed the palace gardens herself, so I'm certain he will want to explore them. I shall have him seek out the hidden Count Marsh Mallow topiary."

I blinked. "What hidden topiary?"

"I had one prepared for this eventuality."

Is there anything Harold can't do? He knows King Ricardo better than I do... I can't even keep up with our conversations without my memories.

The thought was depressing to the point that I collapsed into bed weakly. That was a bad idea. The more I relaxed, the more I became aware of my poor health, and the entire room spun about my head, even from the mattress.

"I'm not that sick, am I?" I mumbled.

"Of course you are. Harboring three discrete sources of mana puts a significant strain on your body, hence why I insisted you rest."

"Three what?"

Harold's eyes widened. "Were you not aware?"

"I guess not."

It was a shock, but it made more sense the longer I thought about it. In addition to Plum's seal on my memories, there was the interference of Lars' mana conflated with Elizabeth's mana. I thought having Elizabeth's mana inside me would raise my spirits on the spot, but I still didn't grasp my condition enough to feel much of anything.

Harold bowed his head. "My apologies. I should have said as much sooner."

"No, it's my fault. I should've realized it myself."

He turned to leave. "I shall retrieve water for you. Please, you must rest."

I lay face-up on my bed, staring blankly at the pattern on the ceiling. Memories of the past few days passed in a fevered haze. I came onto Elizabeth and troubled her deeply. I messed with the seal on my memories and only made the situation worse. I'd made no progress planning the wedding in ages, I couldn't answer any of King Ricardo's questions, I caused more trouble for Elizabeth, and now I couldn't even get out of bed.

I'm worthless.

Deep down, I was nothing and meant nothing. I had perfect looks and could act like a decent partner to Elizabeth, but I was a miserable wretch without that shell. I didn't have even a single redeeming quality. I thought back to the day I met Elizabeth. I recalled that night when I cried myself to sleep with the realization I would never be good enough for her.

The door creaked faintly, signaling Harold's return. He picked his way across the floor with carefully muted footsteps, but guilt overshadowed my gratitude.

Who could ever love a problem like me? Did Elizabeth truly accept how I treated her without my memories? Surely, I was imagining the trust I glimpsed in her eyes. I could hardly think straight through my fever. The more desperately I craved love and acceptance, the more I seemed to spiral. I let my eyes flutter shut.

"Elizabeth's probably only nice to me because she can't break off her engagement to me," I muttered blearily. I was only half-seeking validation. Some part of me figured Harold would tell me I was wrong and reassure me.

A voice like a bell broke the silence of the room.

"Huh?"

I opened my eyes to see Elizabeth standing at my bedside. The morning sun hit her golden hair, making it glow with otherworldly light. Her face, however, held sorrow the likes of which I'd never seen.

Oh, no. I'd better apologize.

The urge to prostrate myself before her hit me, but my limbs were far too heavy to move. All I could muster was a blank look from where I lay.

She met my gaze for only a moment before looking away. Her fine brow was knit, and her mouth hardened into a tight, thin line. I made her angry—no, she was *hurt*. My heart screamed in my chest.

"E-Elizabeth," I finally choked through dry lips.

She looked up once more, and I realized she was crying. My apology withered on my tongue.

I made Elizabeth cry. I didn't entirely mean those words, but I said them.

My head throbbed with agony, and though my entire body screamed at me to apologize, I couldn't muster the strength to do so.

She leaned down and whipped her hands out. I thought—rather, I hoped she was going to slap me. The impact never came, but there was a different pinch of pain, one on either cheek. She was pinching me hard and pulling as hard as she could, which was admittedly still extremely painful.

"E-Ewithabeth?" I sputtered.

"What is it, Prince Vincent? If you have an excuse, I should hope you'll give it now."

There was an unfamiliar sharpness to her tone. I looked up to find her frowning gravely.

She's cute when she's angry...



"What exthcuth?"

She only glared.

I couldn't think clearly. All these years of playing the perfect prince, all for nothing. She knew now that I wasn't the pure prince charming I'd led her to believe I was. There was no salvaging that act—but just in case she was crazy enough to forgive me, there was one thing I needed to say.

"I lovth you."

I had to make it clear that wasn't a lie. The words felt almost frivolous in the dire air, and I couldn't enunciate them clearly, but she seemed to understand me. The furrows of her brow only increased. Of course they did—I hadn't so much as apologized. And yet, before my eyes, I watched as her cheeks flushed so deeply that even the tips of her ears were tinted pink. She released my cheeks, which felt oddly barren as I rubbed the feeling back into them.

"That's cheating," she finally said.

"Sorry." The apology flowed far more freely now that I knew she would forgive me. "I'm really sorry about what I said before, too... I didn't mean it, but I still hurt your feelings."

She didn't reply for a long moment, lost in thought. "Tell me this, Prince Vincent."

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"Y-Yes?"

"Who are you, really?"

"Who... what?"

"Come on."
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She spread her arms wide. There was no anger in her eyes now, only sadness—and, more importantly, forgiveness.

There was no denying her. She wanted to know me, understand me, and grow even closer to me. My hands trembled. I was terrified, but a tiny part of me was hopeful.

"I'm not cool or composed... I always thought you'd leave me. I... I was

scared."

The words spilled out, one after the other, and as they did, something hot streaked down my face. It was only a single tear, and I managed to hold the rest in, but it was the same tears I'd shed all those years ago.

I hurriedly wiped my face on my sleeve. "N-No, forget I said anything."

Crying was a far worse offense than anything else I'd done that morning, and honestly, it was the most miserable I'd ever looked. It was the accumulation of ten whole years of being an absolute mess, and any chance I had of her truly loving me was gone. The perfect prince she knew was dead, and with that—

"Prince Vincent."

Elizabeth called my name, and before I could reply, something soft enveloped me. The dark shape before my eyes was lithe, with elegant frilled ribbons draping off her. Time itself froze.

Is she...hugging me?

Before I could process this turn of events, I heard the angel's voice in my ear.

"I must apologize to you as well." Again, a voice brimming with mercy and tinged with sorrow. "You've done so much... You spent so many years trying to be perfect, all for me."

She raised her face. I could only imagine how miserable I looked, but her face was just as contorted with emotion. It was not a look of disappointment—her eyes were full of regret. Finally, I realized how deeply I had hurt her.

"I've always wanted to support you and worked so hard," she said. "At the same time, however, I was convinced that you were too perfect to ever need my aid."

Of course she was. I'd planned for exactly that. I didn't even know how to greet her properly, and I needed to hide how unfit I was for my title. I needed to be nothing shy of absolute perfection to have Elizabeth as my queen.

"That's why I was so overjoyed to glimpse your true self the other day," she continued. "But you keep wearing yourself thinner and thinner, and finally, I understood how hard you were pushing yourself every day. Worse, all of it,

everything you've been doing, has proven you don't trust me."

"That's not... Of course I trust you!" I exclaimed. "I was just too proud of myself! I wouldn't be so pathetic otherwise..."

"You're *not* pathetic." She pulled herself away from me to meet my eyes. "You've been acting for the good of the country, haven't you? You've been trying your best...no, you've been pursuing an even loftier standard for years."

"Elizabeth..."

"If you wish to take on such a hefty burden, however, I wish you'd let me help. That's why I'm at your side, to support and protect you should you ever need it."

I knew that—or rather, I thought I knew. That's why her training to be queen was every bit as vigorous as mine to be king and the reason for our engagement all those years ago. Until we became lovers, however, I was convinced that Elizabeth was focused on the good of the kingdom and the kingdom alone. Even after we admitted our feelings for each other, I maintained my façade so as not to distract her from that goal.

Perhaps there was no need to worry. After all, we're—

"W-We're...um...lovers, aren't we? If we're lovers, it's only natural to rely on each other." Her expression was confused as she spoke—frustration, anger, loneliness, and embarrassment on top of it all. My face turned red, and not only from my fever.

"O-Okay," I stammered.

I frankly wasn't sure if it was, though. Elizabeth had experienced what would happen if I approached her with total abandon, and I almost admired her bravery. Not that I would go so far—courtship was a matter of careful forays into acceptability, and there was decorum to adhere to, even between lovers. There were boundaries to maintain, and no matter how badly I wanted to embrace her again, I could never tell her as much. Despite that, however, she leaned over me again.

"I'd best not be all talk," she declared, resting a slender hand upon my shoulder. "I must take the initiative."

Er... What?

"It took me so long to realize my feelings for you," she continued, "that I caused you no shortage of discomfort."

That may have been true, but not to the extent she seemed to believe.

"E-Elizabeth?" I stammered.

There was a serious look in her eyes, the same expression she got whenever she'd drawn the wrong conclusion but had already made up her mind. She was fixated on my lips.

Oh dear.

Her golden eyelashes beautifully curtained her luminescent eyes, and her soft rose-pink lips were already close enough that I could feel the tickle of her breath on my face. This is what Elizabeth must have felt during my lapse of sanity, I thought moments before my brain cut out altogether. I had dreamed of this moment and mentally prepared myself for years, but I never imagined she would be the instigator. I was overjoyed, and yet—

Er... Um... Oh, no.

"I-I can't!" she moaned. "You're far too handsome, Highness!"

"Gods, you're unreasonably adorable!"

We broke apart a few short seconds later. Elizabeth covered her face with her hands and curled up in a fetal position just out of reach, and I pulled the sheets up over my head.

"Y-Your Royal Highness, please believe my feelings for you are genuine..."

"I know," I reassured her. "This is a different issue altogether."

I loved her to the point that I'd been a mess for a decade. I smiled bashfully.

Come to think of it, I haven't been "acting" these past few minutes, have I? If she can accept me as I am now, then perhaps that's for the best. Even if we fail to progress our relationship, we'll at least fail together.

"I think I'm getting sicker again," I moaned.

"Oh, dear!"

"I'll need another hug if I'm to recover."

Her eyes widened with surprise, but she smiled and nodded warmly a moment later. She wrapped her slender arms around me and brought my head to rest against her neck as she tenderly stroked my hair. I was honestly feeling worse in light of the sheer amount of new information I'd been subjected to.

I suppose I'm mentally two years old now.

"You've still got a fever," Elizabeth muttered.

"I know you said I can rely on you as much as I need, but we can't stay like this forever."

She chuckled. "You may not be particularly handsome at the moment, but you're incredibly cute."

"Gods, that sounds like a pick-up line."

She gave me only a puzzled look.

So she isn't even aware.

Even with my true nature exposed, she was the same pure-hearted, airheaded angel she had always been. I almost regretted pointing out the appeal of her last remark.

"I'll always be here for you," she whispered. "Please, rest for today."

She wouldn't listen to my reservations, pushing me back down onto the bed and tucking my sheets up about me. Once I'd obeyed, she dragged a chair closer to my bedside without relying on a servant to aid her and sat. She gripped my hand tightly in her own.

"Thanks," I muttered.

There was something seductive about her warmth that made the tension leave my body and assured me I wouldn't be blamed for resting.

So this is what Harold meant by canceling today's plans... Where is he, come to think of it? And where's Lars?

Just as I looked for them, I heard a reserved knock at the door. Harold stepped in a moment later with little Lars cradled in his arms. The dragon was

curled up in a gesture of apparent affection.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"He was so affected by the pair of you that he threw up most of his mana."

He opened the basket on the crock of his elbow to reveal a small fortune's worth of manacite. Apparently, Harold had retreated into the corridor with Lars when he realized Elizabeth and I were having a heart-to-heart. He stroked Lars' curved horns, and the drake let out a sound halfway between a growl and a purr.

I'd nearly forgotten he existed...

Once, Lars was a romantic rival of mine, so desperate for Elizabeth's hand he would've given anything. It was clear now that I could take a page from the needy little dragon's book and rely on Elizabeth more.

"Thank you kindly, Lord Harold," Elizabeth said.

"I only did what was natural," he replied with a bow. "With His Royal Highness so close to falling into despair, I was prepared to utilize any means necessary as his humble aide."

That explained why his entrance was so perfectly timed, and he'd even somehow quelled Lars to boot. He was talented to an extreme. Lars seemed so utterly sated that he watched Elizabeth and I calmly now, even with my hand still in hers.

I recalled how King Ricardo advocated for intuition. It seemed I'd been overthinking things for a great long time, and with my heart lighter than it had felt in ages, I drifted into slumber.



I left Harold to deal with King Ricardo for several days while I continued to recuperate. Elizabeth was often at my bedside, and while Lars sulked at first, he quickly learned there were advantages to the situation. He sat on my pillow and prodded my forehead smugly for hours, and while I wasn't thrilled with his behavior, Elizabeth's love was more than enough to help me recover.

At this point, there was no point in hiding my condition from King Ricardo, but

when we told him, he just shrugged.

"Figured as much," he said.

"You noticed?"

"Soon as you saw me, I could tell you thought I was a pain. You did a decent job of hiding it, but Mariabel's given me that look a hundred times, and I wouldn't mistake it for anything. I figured that there was more going on than the barrier dropping—and that was 'cause of Plum, right? I figured there was something else going on."

Really, Mother?

"But I gotta admit," he continued, "I never noticed you lost your memories. Good thing you got your aide and fiancée! You put up a great front yourself."

Even as he gave me a too-hard slap on the shoulder, I looked up at him in surprise. He'd taken the explanation of my ordeal incredibly well. I'd only told him because the secret was too large to hide at this point, but I would have thought he'd at least have more questions for me.

"You pass," the king announced with a grin. "I'll get out of your hair now."

I blinked. "I...pass? What?"

"What's that look for? I told you, a country's not run by one man alone. You've got a whole system of folks who accept you and who wanna support you. You'll bring happiness and glory to Mariabel's country; for that, you pass." I still didn't know what to say, and he dropped a large hand on my head. "You take care of Princess Elizabeth now."

With that, he turned and asked Harold to prepare his carriage. He intended to leave, it seemed, especially since he practically forced his way into my parents' room to see Mother earlier and made her give him a prototype pendant.

So that's all it takes to get rid of him...

"King Ricardo, I—"

He cut me off. "No need to say a thing. Just keep growing, and you'll be a great king in no time."

"It's not that. You were really only here because of the hole in the barrier, right? This was never about any test."

"Live happy, now! See you at the wedding!" He whipped about and made for the door but stopped to grab Harold by the arm. "I still think you should become my attend—"

"Absolutely not," Harold replied firmly. "Your carriage is prepared. May I suggest you make use of it?"

"Right. See you, then!"

With one last vigorous wave, the Nievan king left the kingdom with the same sudden force with which he came.

$$\triangle \triangle \triangle$$

"SO, he's gone."

Mother sighed with relief as she looked up from her bedroom work desk, which was barely visible under the massive stacks of paperwork. With the king still bedridden, someone had to do the work.

"These are all for your wedding," she said with only a fleeting glance at me. "Your father's in no state to work, and you're unreliable at best."

Please stop reading my mind, Mother.

For the first time, I noticed that Plum was curled up on her lap. She idly scratched behind the cait sidhe's ears as she read through the papers, and the cat purred loudly in turn. Mother smiled warmly at the little monster—and then Plum seemed to come to its senses.

"M-Mariabel?! I was sleeping! D-Don't get the wrong idea nyow, I still hate you!"

"Of course. Why wouldn't you?"

She paused, rifling through the papers, only resuming once Plum had curled up on her again. Father watched the entire exchange intently from the bed, and I noticed that they were wearing matching loungewear again. It likely originated as a means of deterring King Ricardo, but they even did so in front of me at times, seemingly on purpose.

Mother looked up at me while I was still taking stock of their outfits. "We'd finally gotten out of the practice of matching, but of course, Ricardo *had* to visit."

So she's not even doing it on purpose anymore.

"Your father often has the chambermaids ask what I'm wearing so he can match it on purpose."

That was surprising, to say the least, and an odd thought. He must love my mother even more than I'd thought.

Mother gave me a serious look. "Don't become a husband like him. Understand?"

On the bed, Father was breathing heavily, pretending to be asleep. I didn't blame him. At this point, I wasn't sure if Mother was extremely unlucky in her suitors or if she was incredibly fortunate to have two different kings pining after her. Nonetheless, I nodded; the last thing I wanted was to trouble Elizabeth.

"Oh, and about Plum," Mother began.

"Yes?"

"I've decided to set it free once your memories have been returned."

"Are you certain?" I looked down at the feline on her lap, who was pretending to be asleep. Its ears flicked idly.

"The poor thing has been sealed for two whole decades, and its summoner's geas has long since worn off. It's merely a cait sidhe now, and as such, it doesn't belong among humans."

What I was asking, however, is whether or not the pair had talked to each other about the topic since they seemed fairly attached. I noticed loneliness in the way Mother looked at the creature.

I finally nodded. "Understood."

Father's "snoring" grew louder, and not wanting to wake either man or cat, let alone risk another troublesome pet coming to live with us, I kept my lips sealed.

**WITH** King Ricardo back in Nieve, I eased back into my duties by preparing for the wedding. Since Mother was right in that I was useless currently, I devoted my time to preparing Elizabeth's private chambers. There was plenty of furniture and daily essentials to go over, which made the process feel like we were newlyweds already.

There was already a list of most of the furniture to be moved from the la Montlivere mansion, most of which were Elizabeth's personal possessions. There were several instruments, for example, as well as rare books, heirloom accessories, and articles of furniture alike. The question was where we'd put her things.

"We can't simply put everything in the parlors," she reasoned. "It would get too cluttered for our guests."

"We could keep it at the villa?"

The small villa at the back of the palace grounds—Elizabeth and my temporary home after our marriage—was plenty large enough for extra furniture. Our current issue, however, was that my parents wanted us to live in the palace eventually. We had to ensure that the room adjacent to mine was ready for her. With the idea to keep it at the villa, however, we stood a chance at managing it.

With that, Harold, Elizabeth, and I left for the small villa to confirm the space we had available. I hadn't been there since our search for Plum. We surveyed a few rooms, laid out areas for storage, and returned to the front door. That was when Lars reared his head from his perch in Harold's arms. He'd gotten so attached to Harold that the basket was barely used now—and precisely because of that, he was free to take flight and dive down a corridor. He seemed to be headed directly for the room in which Plum had appeared.

"L-Lord Lars!" Elizabeth shouted after him.

"What's wrong?" I called as I ran. "Is something there?!"

Don't tell me there's another demon sealed there... Even enough of Plum's leftover mana could be trouble.

Upon arriving at the door to the room in question, Lars tackled it, shattering the lock with his tiny body and sending it shrieking open. Inside were countless motes of drifting light. I could tell it wasn't mana; however, upon closer observation, the sunlight coming in through the window was hitting the polished picture frames assembled in the room and sending reflections dancing throughout.

In the middle of the room, Elizabeth... no, a thoroughly off-putting number of Elizabeths looked back at me. She looked at me from every corner of the room, from young to old, as if it were the chronicle of her maturation. Countless paintings lined the walls, and it was then that my scrambled memories of Plum's attack finally became clear.

That's right... When Plum appeared, Harold and I had just finished moving all this art here—because Elizabeth would probably be disturbed by it. Gods, I'm no better than Father, am I?!

"Oh!"

I heard a gasp from behind me and froze. Then, with a slow, uneasy turn of my head, I looked back at Elizabeth, who was now taking stock of my full collection.

This is the end.

"This is it," she muttered to herself.

That... didn't sound like a cry of revulsion.

"Prince Vincent, there's one thing I avoided telling you about. I wanted to bring it with me to the palace, but I couldn't find the place for it."

"You couldn't?"

"Please, let me put it here. I believe it would be perfect in this room."

She smiled at me warmly. There was no trace of disgust or anger on her face.

Right... She didn't react when she saw the portrait of her I carry in my pocket watch, so this reaction makes sense.

"Mind if I ask what it is?"

"It's a life-size portrait of you, of course!" she told me enthusiastically. "I couldn't bear to leave it behind, but at the same time, I would feel rather uneasy to hang it up in front of you."

I seemed to be in the clear. She was too accepting.

"Of course, you can put it here."

Elizabeth beamed back at me before walking forward to retrieve Lars. He had stopped to hover in midair, slowly turning to take in the room as if he'd suddenly found himself in heaven.

Right. I suppose he's had a crush on her ever since she rejected him all those years ago. I imagine he thought every dinner and event with her was a blessing, even if he could only watch her from afar.

"Lord Lars?" she called to him.

At her call, his tail drooped, and with one last, long look around the room, he obediently flew to her side.

Elizabeth sighed. "If only I'd commissioned more portraits of you when you were younger..."

Though she'd not intended for me to hear, Harold and I whipped about to look at her in shock. Harold, however, seemed more frustrated that his earlier efforts to keep the room's contents secret were in vain.

Is it just me, or are Elizabeth and I actually an ideal couple?



**THREE** hands reached out to rest on my head. The first was Elizabeth's, soft and warm. The second was Lars' taloned paw, complete with scaly paw pads. The last was Plum's plush little kitty mittens.

"Neow, let's start the ritual!" Plum declared imperiously.

If all went well, the spell should restore my sealed memories. Plum had been lazing about for two weeks and finally had enough mana to do it. It had spent the past two weeks napping on Mother and watching her work, as well as annoying Father as often as it could manage. The rest of its time was spent wandering the castle gardens. It reminded me a lot of having a tiny King Ricardo

around, but Mother was ever vigilant about any possible delinquency. Plum also took a bit of a liking to Elizabeth, and Lars saw it as an existential threat. That made it seem almost Lars-like, and it even slept on Mother's bed in much the same way.

Perhaps there's more to its stay than it'll admit... not that I'll breathe a word about it to Plum.

Though my eyes were closed, rainbow lights began to flicker and dance before me. Then, a new light appeared that seemed to outshine the others.

"Neow I've got it!" came Plum's voice.

I felt lightheaded all of a sudden—no, clear-headed, as though the fog on my mind had lifted. My memories were finally back.

I could feel Plum's mana recede from my body, and Elizabeth and Lars' mana did the same, though I wouldn't have minded the former staying. They each pulled away from me, one by one, and finally, Elizabeth and I sighed with relief.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

I took a moment to stretch. "I think I'm fine. I feel...well, normal."

Only now that the seal was lifted did I realize the weight the memory loss had placed upon me. A little under half of my memories were gone, and the foreign mana in my system had affected me more than I realized. I was impressed I'd been able to function at all in that state. Of course, studying so much in that state would make me ill.

"The seal's all gone neow!" Plum announced, giving me two thumbs-up. It was an impressive feat, with its little kitten paws, but it succeeded nonetheless.

Who even taught it to do that?

"That's so adorable," Elizabeth muttered beside me, and I noticed Lars trying to move his little claws similarly.

"With that, my work here is done! I'm free!"

The cait sidhe floated into the air, its cape billowing imperiously around it. Sure enough, the seal on my memories was the one thing keeping the cat bound inside the palace's barrier.

Does it really want to leave, though? I think Mother and Plum should at least try to tell each other how they feel.

Before I could make up my mind to say something, Plum turned about to face the queen. It looked lonely, almost hurt.

"Mew are the only human to have bested me, Mariabel. When mew hit me all those years ago, I saw nyothing but sparks, and I couldn't think straight... That's why I tracked mew all the way here."

Er. It's not talking about being hit in a metaphorical sense, is it?

"I suppose a cat sidhe could nyever love a human..."

Love... as in, the romantic kind?!

The longer I listened, the more confused I became, and I watched as the cat flew to the window, paused for just a moment to catch a breath of fresh air, then left for the open sky. It didn't turn back to look at us once—in all likelihood, it couldn't have.

Elizabeth drew closer to me as we watched the monster leave. "Perhaps staying would have been a more painful fate for poor little Plum."

"Yeah... Maybe."

Its chief romantic rival was sitting in Mother's bed with matching pajamas, after all. Not even I could be that cruel to Lars... probably.

It seems love does more than simply drive people mad.



**WITH** my memories restored and all my other issues finally put to rest, we set the date for our wedding. It would be just after graduation. The spring air would still be chill at that time of year, but it would be the start of a busy marriage season since many influential nobles were slated to be wed.

Among them were my foster brother, Harold Abarakoff, and fellow bodyguard and count's heir, Margaret Falming. Their engagement had been common knowledge for two years now, and given the overwhelming support from myself and the other royals, their ceremony was to be held almost immediately following my own. Supposedly, other nobles were waiting to be married, but I'd

yet to hear of them.

Not long after, however, Harold arrived with Edward Norden in tow.

"Prince Vincent, I come bearing grand news!" the knight shouted.

"Y-Yes?"

There was a piece of parchment in his hand—a declaration of marital engagement, it seemed. Before any nobles could be married, the royal family had to receive copies of that document from both families.

"I got engaged the other day," he explained. "I figured it would be best to do it as soon as possible, so I've come to receive your blessing."

"Oh, that's great news."

Small wonder he was happy, then. Being engaged was a rush of emotion, especially when it was a recent development. I could only imagine Lord Zachary was in a similar state of elation.

He nodded enthusiastically. "I'm to be wed to Lady Selena Haven!"

The princely grin instantly faded from my face. "What?"

Lady Selena, marry him?

She was the original author of *Star Maiden*, and while I'd thought that they would get along well due to Edward's love of the novels, I didn't expect my guess to be that true. Rather, I had the impression that Lady Selena disliked the trappings of high society in general, and marrying the son of the knight captain in light of that was an interesting choice, to be sure. However, one question outstripped all others.

"Do you mind if I ask how you met?" I ventured.

"I met her in the palace late last spring. I caught her when she was on the verge of tripping, and we hit it off splendidly from there. We got to know each other until finally we fell in love."

Ah, so it was during the whole Leohardt debacle when I asked her to pen Star Maiden's sequel!

I had no idea they'd met at all during that time, and in a way, that made me

something of a matchmaker.

I flashed him a genuine smile. "I'm glad you were able to find love at the palace. Thank you for letting me know; you have my full support as your prince and as your friend. I'm looking forward to the wedding already."

"Thank you so much!" Edward was practically in tears as he reverently bowed several times, then took his leave.

House Haven was likely in disarray from the sudden offer, but it seemed like a match made in heaven as far as I was concerned. Lady Selena was generous and good-hearted, and I believed she would get along well with Count Norden and the estate's servants. Admittedly, I was concerned she was a little too weak-willed, but as long as there was love, there was a way.

Edward will be married soon... So will I, for that matter. The number of newlyweds will only increase, I imagine. I couldn't be happier for them.

Before I could think on the topic too long, another knock came at my door, and Raphael burst inside with outstretched arms.

"Hey, hey! It's been ages! Why, I've been so lonely this past year, I—"

The man vanished a moment later. I peered over my desk to find that Harold had him in an arm lock, immobilizing the slender mage.

Raphael let out a strangled cry and slapped the ground, but there was a joyous glint in his eyes. "G-Give! I give!!"

Harold released the mage and returned to his post composedly. Raphael stumbled to his feet a moment later, beat the dust off his robe, and sighed happily.

"Guess what? I'm here to ask for your permission to marry! You're my first stop after coming home from the northern border~!" He winked as he flashed a declaration of engagement at me.

He sure recovered quickly... Wait, marriage?!

"With whom?" I finally managed to reply.

"Oh, don't play coy with me! You know who I mean~~!"

He made a heart shape with his hands, and I got the distinct impression the number of tildes in his speech had already doubled. From that, it was clear enough who the bride-to-be was.

"It's not Lady Yulisse, is it?" I ventured.

"Who else could it be"?"

"You can't be... How did you get her to agree?!"

Lady Yulisse Merryfield was prosecuted a few years ago for acts of treason against Elizabeth and me and was taken in by Raphael after her house abandoned her. Even now, I could recall the mortified look on the marquis' face at the news. Given Raphael's intensely frivolous attitude, however, I'd thought Lady Yulisse had always turned him down.

"Did you hypnotize her?" I asked. "Brainwash her with magic, perhaps?"

"Perhaps he rewrote her memories?" Harold wondered aloud.

"Oh, relax, you know mind control magic is illegal!" he tut-tutted us. "Besides, brainwashing is so dull. If I'm going to woo a girl, I've got to make her crave me from the very depths of her soul~!"

The more concerning aspects of his dating ideology aside, he'd been patiently courting Lady Yulisse for two years. There was no need to press the matter at this point, so it only made sense that this development was uncoerced.

"I'm just impressed you got a yes," I muttered.

"Haha, yep! And on only the second attempt! I told you she's a sweet, straightforward little thing. Father readily agreed, as did His Majesty."

"I mean, yes, from Lady Yulisse."

Raphael was nothing if not a clever man; he no doubt prepared all manner of tricks to convince the marquis sooner or later, and I didn't think Father would put up anywhere near as much of a fight. From the beginning, the single greatest obstacle to his love was Lady Yulisse herself.

Raphael, sensing the skepticism behind my words, gave me what was supposed to be a cheerful smile. I could feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

"There's no hurdle the power of love can't overcome~!"

Your love overcomes a little too much. That's what worries me most.



**WITH** the coming marriage of not only the crown prince but most of his closest aides as well, all of high society was buzzing with excitement. Young lords-to-be were announcing their engagements left and right, and those who were already engaged began planning their big days with renewed vigor. The palace bureaucrats were awash with declarations of engagement.

"Love drives the masses mad," Father remarked with a smug grin, but as a man drunk on love for twenty years running, he wasn't at liberty to throw stones.

He was wearing matching robes with Mother despite not having any rivals to intimidate, and I could tell the two trusted each other unconditionally, given how comfortable he was letting Mother handle all the kingdom's official business while he was ill.

Elizabeth and I, however, were a different story altogether. While we had made definite progress in our relationship, we'd made no progress on practicing for the wedding kiss despite how close our wedding was.

Even now, Elizabeth and I were alone in a small room, solemnly standing facing each other. She was nervous but trying earnestly not to let it show—her back was ramrod straight, but her hands were clasped tightly before her chest, and she struggled to meet my gaze. Most notably of all, she seemed to believe she was being perfectly confident, which was endearing. It took every bit of resolve I had to keep up a strong front, and I was convinced she could tell what a nervous wreck I was.

I hesitantly stepped forward as she plaintively waited for me. She held out her hand, and I readily accepted it, peering into the depths of her eyes. She blushed, her smile widening.

My gods, she's an angel... A literal angel!

Even now, I could envision her in her snow-white gown, with her makeup and hair done up to perfection. That meant the day of would be a far greater hurdle

to address, and thus, I had to be able to overcome her everyday beauty with ease.

I mimed lifting her veil. As my fingers traced her golden curls, she breathed a sigh of ecstasy, eyes closing as she tilted her fine jaw up toward me. My hand alighted on her arm as I moved to pull her into an embr—

Nope, she's too cute. I can't do this.

If losing my memories had taught me anything, it was that I loved her with all my heart, to the point that even Plum ran out of mana when sealing her from me. Finally, those feelings were bearing fruit, and we would be wed soon. Her returning my feelings was nothing short of miraculous.

Thank you for being born, my dearest... and thanks to your family for taking such good care of you all these years.

I could feel my vision blur with tears.

Elizabeth finally opened her eyes a crack, then balked in surprise. "P-Prince Vince? Are you all right?!"

"O-Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. It's just...when I thought about finally marrying you, I was so beside myself that I didn't know what to do."

I dropped my gaze, trying to hide how hard I was blushing. My embarrassment was contagious as she followed suit. While I could no longer see her face, the tips of her ears that poked up through her hair were bright red. Though we'd failed to kiss yet again, anyone could tell we were a loving couple at a glance—not that there was anyone else to see us, of course.

"I feel the same," Elizabeth finally replied. "I can't wait for the day we finally become husband and wife."

"Liza..."

"But we'll never get the practice we need as we are now... Could you please close your eyes, Highness?"

I suppose she's right, as much as I hate to say it... What's she planning to do, then? Slap me at full force? That's a horrifying thought—or at least, it would be if I wasn't so excited by it.

"Please don't think me too crass," Elizabeth muttered to herself, and I heard the rustle of her dress a moment later.

After a few moments of silence—something soft touched my lips.

What?!

My eyes sprung open, but she'd already pulled away and dropped her gaze, leaving me with only her red ears to tell me what she'd done.

"Was that ...?"

"Consider it a good luck charm...something to calm your nerves, my prince."

"Th-Thank you... I promise that when the time comes, I'll see this through."

My nerves were anything but calm, of course, but there was nothing now that could dampen my resolve.



**ELIZABETH** was growing more beautiful by the day, to the point where even the faintest smile forced me to look away in flustered embarrassment. We proceeded with preparing for the ceremony, reserving inns for the guests, and planning tours of the capital for our foreign visitors, with special attention paid to the diets and specialties of each guest's home region. Mother was still at the head of the operation, but Elizabeth and I, as well as the rest of the palace's residents, had no shortage of work to do.

In the busyness, I had hardly any time to spend with my bride-to-be. Worse, I had nobody to consult on the matter, as Harold had for once been absent for that tender day.

No... She's trying to encourage me, not add weight to my shoulders.

Now that I knew what kissing her felt like, I could effectively do image training. I'd start with a thousand mental simulations of that critical kiss—and if that wasn't enough, I'd make it ten thousand times.

With that, days turned into months, and before I knew it, the day of our ceremony had arrived.

## **Chapter 5: Kissing the Bride**

THE solemn chime of the bells rang throughout the city, but not to mark the hour. This was the crooning of the liturgical bell, a grand affair atop a tower that predated the palace. Its purpose was to tell the people it was a special day—the wedding day of their crown prince. It was a day of grand celebration, and anyone could see the capital's streets were packed. Flowers dyed the cobblestone roads with spring hues; even the most humble dwelling was decked in flags and blossoms.

An opulent carriage pulled by handsome white stallions slowly proceeded down the capital's main street. Spectators caught only glimpses of the bride within, and her ephemeral beauty struck them speechless.

I watched the procession from the castle tower.

"The time has come," Harold informed me politely.

I sighed. "I wish I could get a glimpse of her..."

"We have several court painters on location throughout the town. You will have paintings of every part of the proceedings shortly."

I hadn't arranged for such a thing—no, it was the work of my parents, no doubt.

As Elizabeth's carriage finished scaling the slope of the main street, I nodded and straightened my jacket. "Very well. Let's go."

We walked through the palace and into the courtyard, where my bride's four white horses would soon arrive. Here, she would disembark the carriage, accompanied by the duke and duchess la Montlivere. I handed my spyglass and binoculars to Harold and proceeded to fix the collar on my stark white suit.

The ceremony would be held in the palace's main hall, the very place Elizabeth and I had met all those years ago. The guests were assembled and awaiting our entrance.

The bells rang again, signaling the start of the ceremony. The carriage door swung open, and the red carpet unrolled from the open portal down the central aisle. I savored the feel of the plush fur beneath my feet as I strode to the front of the aisle.

Closest to the hall's entrance were the assorted nobles of Urhalla. Among them, I spotted Raphael with Lady Yulisse at his side and Edward accompanied by Lady Selena. That proved they really were engaged, more than anything else. The pair seemed nervous with unease rather than the anticipation the other nobles showed—in fact, they were downright pale.

Closer to the front of the hall were the visitors from abroad. I noticed Malius there, accompanied by his fiancée, Lady Lecia, on one side and Leohardt on the other. Even King Ricardo was sitting as naturally as though he'd never left our borders in the first place.

I finally reached the altar and turned back toward the assembled guests. The liturgical bells rang for a third time, and the organ began playing. The distant double doors swung open to reveal Duke la Montlivere with Elizabeth on one arm.

She was in a dress with several tiers of frills and lace, behind which trailed a great train of fabric. It was like watching a spun-sugar cloud in motion, with her immaculately styled hair serving as a garnish. I barely glimpsed her tranquil smile through the veil that covered her face. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life, and no amount of rehearsal could have prepared me for the burgeoning I felt in my heart. She was not of this world and was missing only her soft-plumed wings.

All eyes were on the bride, but she kept her gaze resolutely lowered, her footfalls unwavering and precise. I felt a wave of relief that she was the one approaching me. Had I been expected to walk toward her, my knees would have betrayed me by now.

The duke seemed beside himself with joy, his eyes brimming with tears that easily surpassed Elizabeth's joy. I could understand him all too well; not only was he witnessing the culmination of his daughter's years of hard work and growth, but there was the sorrow of giving her away. His emotions so moved

me that I nearly began crying myself. Thankfully, none of the guests in the front were looking at me, and I blinked the shameful moisture from my eyes.

After what felt like an eternity and the blink of an eye, Elizabeth finally arrived before me. Duke la Montlivere moved to pass her hand to me, and she looked up at me. Our eyes met through the veil. No words passed between us, and the softness of her tears echoed the bliss on her lips.

I warmly smiled back at her. "Elizabeth..."

"Prince Vincent."

She laid her hand in mine, and as naturally as we breathed, I led her up onto the altar. We looked out upon our audience, eyes passing over the hundreds of guests who had come to witness our union. Even Lars poked his head up from the gold-ribboned basket innocuously placed by the wall. Everyone in the hall was smiling warmly at us, but my joy outshone all the rest.

"Thank you kindly for gathering to celebrate this blessed day with us," I announced to the assembled guests.

"We have gathered here today to make formal our vows," Elizabeth continued.

"With my bride Elizabeth at my side, I vow to love and cherish her and grow alongside her to better fulfill my duties as crown prince."

"I vow to love Prince Vincent as I do our fair land of Urhalla and to show undying devotion to both."

I turned to face my bride. All eyes were on us—it was time for the symbol of our love, the wedding kiss. I tenderly lifted Elizabeth's veil. Her violet eyes blinked warmly at me as the hall fell silent, to the point that I could scarcely believe a crowd of hundreds was observing us. Most watched with eager anticipation, though there was an undercurrent of unease, likely from my closest friends and others who knew of my condition.

I wrapped an arm around Elizabeth to support her, and my lingering doubt melted away. The lingering sensation of her lips from all those months ago filled my head, filling my heart with fervor and dulling my unease. We drew closer. The entire hall held their breaths. Our lips drew within a hair's breadth of each other, and finally—

"What?!"

Blinding white light flooded the room, making it impossible to see anything. Two, then three thunderclaps rang through the room, followed by fireworks crackling. It was the unmistakable sound of mana clashing with mana. I whipped about to see the source of the explosion.

"SUFFER MEOW WRATH, MARIABEL!!"

The shrill cry tore through the hall, and Elizabeth looked at our attacker in shock. A ripple of unease ran through the guests.

That has to be Plum.

"Lord Zachary, rally the perimeter guards!" I shouted. "Lord Dominic, Raphael, we need barriers! Protect the guests!"

"Allow me to help!" Lady Lecia called. "Divine Wall!"

"Divine Wall!" the mages echoed.

Count Norden hurried out of the hall, accompanied by a small group of the hall guards. The mages' barrier was erected a moment later, covering the entirety of the cavernous room.

Wait... the entire hall?!

I did a double-take. Malius was holding Lady Lecia's hand to lend her his mana, and beside them, Leohardt was contributing directly to the spell. He hoped to earn the favor of his beloved brother, no doubt. On the opposite side of the hall, Lady Yulisse was emitting a halo of mana light alongside her fiancé and father-in-law-to-be, though she was still pale as a ghost. That skill contributed to her return to the capital.

"More importantly, where is Plum?" I returned my attention to dealing with our King Cait Sidhe assailant. "The hall is secured. Remain calm, everyone! The Urhallan army and I will bring the situation under control!"

Elizabeth readily turned to me. "Prince Vincent, let me come with you!"

"It'll be dangerous...but I suppose I can't stop the future queen. Thank you."

She turned. "Lord Lars!"

The little dragon barreled through the air toward us as we made for the balcony to take stock of the situation outside. What we saw defied all our expectations.

"I, King Plum, am reborn! Let us settle the score once and for all, nyahahaha!"

A familiar bipedal cat strode up the main street, coat billowing about it just as it always had. The issue was the sheer size of the monstrous feline, now an impressive three stories tall. Not only that, but several dozen other cait sidhe trailed behind it. Fortunately, traffic had been effectively curtailed for Elizabeth's ride. The colossal clowder hurt no innocents as they advanced, but the crowds about the streets were still clustered about to watch the procession. Despite the guards' efforts to evacuate them, they seemed to believe the attack was a prelude to the parade to come and applauded the invaders.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised... It's a giant cat with a full horde of felines, after all.

"Meow you'll pay for your transgressions! Thunder Stooooooorm!"

Plum held out its little paws, and its horde of followers let out a fierce chorus of caterwauling as the king's fur crackled with electricity. A flurry of innumerable lances of lightning shot out a moment later, smashing violently into the protective barrier around the palace. Several broke through, scorching trees and shrubbery in Mother's garden.

I cursed under my breath. "We need to hurry... Elizabeth, can you make Lars giant again?"

She nodded. "Of course. Lord Lars, lend me your power!"

"Gwearrrgh!"

The tiny dragon clamored up onto the balcony, trembling with anticipation. Mana flooded into his little body, wreathing him in ephemeral fog. When it finally cleared, the mighty dragon's wings were extended to their fullest, his scaly neck craning high over us. I leapt onto his back, then held out my hand to

help Elizabeth up after me. Once she was aboard, I cast a spell around us.

"Divine Wall!"

She started in surprise as the dome of light enveloped us. "You can cast that, too?"

"Yeah. It'll be enough to deflect a few of those lightning bolts, at least."

I couldn't envelop Lars in the barrier as well, but I was far less worried about the hallowyrm. He let out a growl of discontent but obediently took flight, soaring above our foes on the main street below.



I'd never ridden on a dragon before, though I was glad Lars wasn't a fellwyrm anymore. The now-smooth scales were far more pleasant than his old barbed spines.

"Hey!" the king cait sidhe called out to us. "Where do mew think you're going?!"

The cait sidhe horde realized they were outclassed at the sight of Lars, scattering and fleeing. Plum hissed at them, urging them to keep their formation, but to no avail. Those who attempted to flee down crowded alleyways found their paths cut off by town guards.

We stopped to hover beside the colossal cat.

"Plum! Stop and listen to us!" I shouted.

"Please, Lord Plum!" Elizabeth pleaded.

The fur on Plum's back rose confrontationally. "Nyah? Is that mew, pretty-boy prince?! And you, princess, why are you so white and glittery nyow?! This has nyothing to do with either of mew!"

"Of course it does!" I shouted back. "You came on my wedding day—no, this is my kingdom, that's why! It's my solemn duty to protect the citizenry and safeguard them from misery. That I swear on my name as crown prince and future king of Urhalla!"

If I didn't do as much, Elizabeth would be miserable—and that would break my heart in turn.

"That's why everything in this kingdom is my business!" I continued. "You won't lay one paw on all the lovely people gathered here to celebrate us! Rather—I believe I can relieve your misery as well."

"My meowsery?"

I nodded. "Mother sealed you away all those years ago so you might live."

The King Cait Sidhe's eyes flew open in shock.

Judging from what Mother said, its summoner had ordered it to kill her and Ricardo. That's why she sealed it away, trapped and drained, until the geas

compelling it faded. It would have been far easier to slay the monster, but she couldn't bring herself to do such a thing.

"Go to Mother! Talk to her, and—"

"Oh, enough out of mew!!"

Plum's massive purple body quivered, and I saw something in its eyes that spoke to me on a deeply personal level—a deep, desperate loneliness. It let out a low growl, unsheathing its massive claws. Lightning several times that of what we'd seen before sparked between the points like great electrical coils.

## "GWEAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!"

Lars let out a war cry and released a mighty fireball at the feline. The two magics clashed explosively, the gale-force wind from it sending every window in the street rattling in its frames. I wrapped my arms tightly around Elizabeth to ensure she wouldn't fall.

"Are you all right?!" I shouted to her over the din.

She nodded, hand on her veil so it wouldn't fly away. "Y-Yes, I believe so... The barrier you raised seems to be shielding us from the worst."

Elizabeth seemed at relative ease despite the discomfort of the ride. That was Mother's teachings at work—she believed that elegant posture came from core body strength.

"Just admit it, Plum!" I called.

"Enyough! Outta my way!!"

It released another crackling electrical attack, and Lars dodged the lethal claws by a mere hair's breadth. The discharged lightning arced past us with the brilliance of a second sun, colliding with Mother's barrier surrounding the palace. This time, however, the blow was enough to destroy the barrier entirely, leaving it defenseless.

Plum's golden eyes gleamed. "Mariabel... I hate mew, Mariabel!!"

The feline unleashed a second burst of electricity indiscriminately in all directions. The bolts scorched the buildings and mansion rooftops all around us, and though Elizabeth's water magic prevented any harm to the civilians at the

titan's feet, it was only a matter of time.

"Wait!" I shouted.

"Lord Plum, you mustn't!" Elizabeth leaned closer to Lars. "Lord Lars, please take us closer to it!"

Lars flapped his mighty wings, drawing even closer to our opponent. As more lightning collided with my barrier, however, it cracked until it shattered altogether.

"Look out!" I shouted as a stray arc of lightning left a long, straggling char mark across Elizabeth's veil.

She barely flinched, her gaze never drifting from Plum's face.

"Lord Plum! Look at this!"

In her hand was the last thing I would've expected—a child's picture book. The world seemed to hold its breath for a long moment.

Plum and I read the title aloud in unison. "Phantom Thief Mewlman...?"

I had to twist around a bit to see it, but there was no mistaking the book from Mother's boutique.

"Her Majesty drew this in your image," Elizabeth explained. "This cat is you."

"Me?" Plum leaned in more closely, studying the cover carefully.

"Why do you have that with you?" I asked her confusedly.

"I hid it in Lord Lars' basket. I was planning on showing Lord Plum in the event he came to our wedding."

He wasn't exactly there as a guest, but I was glad she had the foresight to pack the book. He'd stopped his assault for the moment, at least.

"Her Majesty made this when we were still children," my bride explained. "She never forgot about you, not for an instant. I've no doubt she intended to befriend you as soon as you broke free of your seal."

"Really? Are mew sure?"

Its wet nose twitched, and the fur on the back of its neck began to lower.

Elizabeth flipped the book open, turning to the page where Mewlman returned to its life as a simple cait sidhe and curled up on its mistress' lap.

"But I've returned to mewtilate Mariabel!" Plum protested. "Even she—"

"Mother has no desire to fight you now," I asserted. "She claimed she forgot to strengthen your seal, but she would never make such a mistake, and that still wouldn't account for the other circumstances. Mother *knew* I would run afoul of you."

The present danger to the guests and townsfolk had to be unintentional, granted, but even then, she had the strength to shield the innocents from harm should the need arise. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd already erected barriers—and as my gaze dropped to the ground, I saw the shimmering gleam of magical shields on either side of the main street.

Plum's tail hooked in the air, whiskers bristling curiously. "That's Mariabel's meowna!"

So she's helping us after all!

With the barriers in place, there was no danger of the cait sidhe harming the gathered crowds. The peasants, meanwhile, cheered and applauded what might've been the first display of magic they'd ever seen. Plum's eyes scanned each happy face in the crowd in turn.

I turned back to the cat. "See? Nobody's afraid of you."

"Her Majesty values you dearly," Elizabeth added.

"Mariabel... likes meow?"

I nodded. "Our being here is proof of that. If she truly saw you as a threat, she'd have ridden out and eliminated you long before I could do a thing."

"M-Mew..."

Plum's ears drooped, and the maelstrom of magic whipping about it died down. It finally seemed calm—more likely out of fear of Mother than genuine understanding, but results were results. Its purple fur faded into a calming blue as tears welled in its great, slitted eyes.

"B-But Mariabel never told meow," it pouted. "What does she want from

meow? Why'd she let meow come back at all?"

The tension left my shoulders as I realized it was being earnest. I couldn't bring myself to hate Plum despite the hell it had put me through because we held the same fear. We were both terrified of not being accepted by the one we loved.

"I get you, Plum... I'm just like you."

Plum raised its face to look at me, confusion in its eyes. I chuckled half-heartedly. Plum and Mother both were a little too guarded and afraid to show their true feelings.

"She wants to patch things up with you, too."

That, finally, was too much for the cat.

"Mariabeeeeeeeeee!!!"

The King Cait Sidhe cried rivers of tears, its golden eyes shimmering all different colors as it sniffled, wiping its nose. It rapidly shrank as it cried, its desire to fight draining rapidly. When it was back to its tiny, kittenlike size, it leapt into my chest.

"Son of Mariabel! I meowst thank you for your words... I'll win over Mariabel for sure neow!"

"My name's Vincent," I corrected it.

Elizabeth watched the entire exchange with a pleased smile on her lips. She didn't seem the least bit upset by this sudden diversion from our wedding plans, and frankly, I loved her for that.

"Thanks for bringing the book," I told her.

She shook her head. "I'm simply glad it was of use."

"I suppose it's time we got back, then... To the palace, Lars."

"Gweorgh."

After one last lingering look of confusion at the cait sidhe, he obediently took to the sky. The townsfolk beneath us cheered. Elizabeth and I smiled and waved in turn, and the cheering only grew. The children and younger folk in particular

seemed enthralled by the one-two punch of cait sidhe and dragon, waving both arms enthusiastically at us as we flew.

While scanning the crowd, I spotted Amelia. I yelped a little and turned away, and Elizabeth similarly was muttering something under her breath. Amelia recognized us as well; I caught a glimpse of her, slack-jawed, as she frantically shook her husband's shoulder.

"I wonder how surprised she'd be if she learned Ricardo's a foreign king," I mused.

"Oh, I can imagine!" Elizabeth giggled mischievously.

When I finally overcame my embarrassment enough to wave at her, she ecstatically waved back.

Lars took us leisurely up the main street before finally landing on the same balcony we'd taken off from. Quite a few guests were there, all concerned for the barrier and the two of us alike. We obviously couldn't allow Plum to roam free after the debacle, so it shared Lars' basket and remained squarely within Lars' arms.

"Everything is fine," I assured the guests. "Our apologies for the commotion."

Elizabeth bowed her head apologetically at my side. While little to no actual damage was done, the threat of harm was real. It took me a few moments to realize that the entire room was still quiet enough to hear a pin drop. When I looked about for the reason, all eyes were still on Lars' basket.

"...Oh."

While we had little choice but to enlist Lars' aid, the dragon's existence was a closely guarded secret, even amongst our own nobility. We'd shown him off quite plainly to them all.

The assembled foreign royals' gaze drifted from the basket to Mother and back again. They were doing the math—should war break out between their kingdoms and ours, they'd have Mother's demonic strength and a literal dragon to deal with. Though Mother kept denying it, her violent and checkered past was a poorly kept secret even abroad.

Finally, King Ricardo broke the silence. "That was the King Cait Sidhe that terrorized Nieve many years ago. Such power is akin to a natural disaster. You've no reason to apologize for protecting your own."

He smiled courteously, and from the other guests' reactions, I doubted any of them would contradict him.

"Calming a monster is far more difficult than slaying it," he continued, standing and proceeding toward our balcony. "More than that, you have the blessing of a real hallowyrm. Your marriage has been blessed, and an enlightened reign is sure to follow. Nieve would like to form a peace with you that will hopefully last forevermore." He turned to address the crowd. "Applause, now, for the young hero who will be king! Shower them with your prayers and wishes anew!"

Nobody would dare speak against the Nievan king at that point. The crowd took a collective breath, and the celebratory mood filled the great hall once more.

"Thank you kindly, King Ricardo," I told him.

"No need to thank me. I told them what I felt, no more and no less." He paused. "Wait, but we're still missing one critically important thing!" The king held up a single finger to Elizabeth and me. "We're still waiting on that kiss."

Oh, drat. We didn't get to that part, did we?

From the balcony, we were visible to the guests of the grand hall and the civilians gathered below. All eyes were on us, and a singular emotion shared amongst them—eager anticipation. They were all impatiently awaiting our kiss.

I grimaced a little as I turned to Elizabeth, and a wave of oohs rose from the peasantry. I would've much preferred a more romantic mood. The musicians tried to answer my plea, but they were all but drowned out by the sounds of the crowd.

I did my best to smile at Elizabeth, and that was the moment I realized a crucial fact. Despite the physical distance between us being the same as it was before, her face seemed somehow more distant. I was sure she'd somehow shrunk.

Sensing my confusion, Elizabeth smiled at me. "I didn't want to risk harming poor Lord Lars, so I removed my heels before mounting him."

I turned around to find her wedding heels on the edge of the balcony, just as she'd said. Despite being noticeably shorter, she met my eyes with the same frank resolve.

That brought me back to when we met ten years ago. She was slightly taller than me in heels despite my own low heels. That, paired with Mother's insistence that picky eaters wouldn't grow up big and strong, prompted me to change my diet almost overnight. That was only the beginning—I sculpted my studies, my manners, and even how I tended to my health and parts of my personality. The latter point wasn't perfect, as Plum had demonstrated, but Elizabeth accepted even my less savory parts in her infinite warmth.

All around me, I spotted the friends, aides, and tutors who had accompanied me on this decade-long journey. I'd butted heads with them at times, especially those closer to my age, but they were my dear friends nonetheless. Not only that, but I had the support of allies from abroad, and outside, the citizens looked upon us with love. Our success together was all but guaranteed. This wasn't the end—no, it was the beginning. We were on the threshold of the loving life I'd always dreamed of.

"Elizabeth, I solemnly swear that I'll love you until the end of time. I'll be a king and a man worthy of you, and I shall never stop improving to that end."

Hints of tears formed in the corners of her amethyst eyes. "I, as well, swear to keep my place at your side, regardless of what comes our way."

I gingerly rested my hand on her arm, and she pliantly leaned into my touch. Then, I leaned down to match her shortened stature. My heart was racing, and my cheeks grew red hot—but before I could lose my nerve, my eyelids fluttered shut.

The onlookers below saw as my figure overlapped with hers, and all of Urhalla erupted in celebration.



PRINCE Vincent and Lady Elizabeth's wedding loomed large in the mind of

every Urhallan citizen, especially those lucky enough to be in the capital. Two full decades had passed since the current king married his bride, and it was still talked of to that day. That was reason enough to drop everything to see it, Amelia reasoned to herself.

Beside her, Amelia's husband, Dym, sighed.

"Can't we watch from the window?" he grumbled.

"We can barely see main street at all from our shop!" Amelia retorted. "We'll need a spot much closer to the palace... I need to see His and Her Royal Highness myself!"

"That's my wife, never able to resist a party."

"That's my husband, boring and with no sense of romance!"

The two continued bickering on the path to the palace, the sun still barely over the horizon, until they arrived at a spot just outside the gates. There was already such a crowd that Dym had to hunch his broad shoulders to fit.

Dym felt privileged to have a warm, cheerful woman like Amelia for his wife, and he was rather impressed by the vigor and excitement with which she served the guards and their noble masters. The source of her boundless joy, however, was ever a mystery. It was unusual for anyone to show such care and empathy for others, much less to celebrate a stranger's fortune. Perhaps the problem was him for following her but not sharing her joy.

The two waited patiently for the ceremony to begin, and they had an excellent view of the duke's daughter as she rode through the palace gates. Four expensive-looking white stallions pulled her carriage, and even Dym's jaw dropped at the sight. As for the bride herself, he caught only the faintest glimpse of her through the carriage's lace window, and she wasn't even looking out at them.

"We came all this way for that?" he grumbled.

"Oh, don't worry, the wedding proper hasn't started yet. Once the prince and princess finish saying their vows in the palace, they'll appear on that balcony up there. The parade will start after that."

That was enough to shut Dym up. It was clear he wouldn't get to go home for some time. He idly looked up at the sky, but as he did, an odd sound filled the air. As he looked around, a rippling murmur traveled through the crowd from somewhere up the street. The crowd pushed at them like a wave, and it took Dym a moment to realize everyone was facing away from the palace. Dym and Amelia craned their necks.

"The hell's that?" Dym murmured in disbelief.

What they saw defied all explanation. Standing there was a colossal cat with purple fur and a crimson cape. Clustered all around the titan's feet were countless smaller cats in an unfathomable range of colors. The herd seemed visibly agitated, but there was no clear reason for the change.

"This part of the parade, too?" he asked.

"It might be," Amelia remarked. "It's large, but it's just a cat. I don't think it's dangerous."

The crowd around them reached the same conclusion and applauded enthusiastically. Dym noticed the guards scramble, which was a little worrying —but before he could think about it too much, a different shadow passed overhead.

Looking up, however, the thing was anything but shadowy. Its scaled hide shimmered with divine light; it had curled azure horns and a mesmerizing pattern of gold across its back. It was a live dragon, the kind that was said to be long extinct—and a blessed hallowyrm at that, a holy bearer of blessings. On its back were two figures in white—an auburn-haired young man with piercing emerald eyes and a blonde young woman in a trailing veil who looked like she'd stepped out of a fairy tale. She was still clutching a bouquet that matched her wedding dress as she rode. She looked similar to the princess they'd glimpsed earlier—no, it had to be her. That meant the pair had to be the bride and groom, the prince and his princess.

"This a part of the ceremony, too?" Dym asked confusedly.

Amelia slowly nodded. "Well...dragons are in all the old legends, aren't they? Maybe they save their dragons for special occasions?"

In front of them, the giant cat began shooting off bolts of lightning, spreading and bursting above their heads like countless blooming flowers. Clearly, this was some celebrative stunt. A few stray bolts arced toward the crowd, but the guards vigilantly swatted the electricity away. More interestingly, rings and pendants throughout the gathered citizenry began to glow—including Dym's glasses. They were all from Her Majesty's store, it seemed, and the otherworldly shine grew to surround the crowd like a shield.

"Oh, I recognize it!" Amelia suddenly exclaimed. "That giant cat must be the Phantom Thief Mewlman!"

It had taken a while to remember the old picture book from her youth, but there was no mistaking it. The feline had to be harmless, then—though she didn't understand the appeal of Mewlman fighting a hallowyrm, of all things.

Memories of twenty years back revived in Amelia's mind, of the day the country changed forever. The king showed his face for the first time, standing before the assembled masses to declare he would be a great ruler to them all. Politics were beyond her, but true to his words, the capital took on a new vitality after that day, and the country prospered. This had to be a message—a declaration that no matter what danger befell Urhalla, the royal family would always be there to defend them...probably. That was the only way to construe the nonsense unfolding before them, and the crowd seemed to reach the same conclusion.

Finally, just as the people predicted, the giant cat stopped its attacks and surrendered to the pair on the hallowyrm. Its body became small enough to nestle in the prince's arms, and the crowd erupted into cheers. Then, the bride and groom flew back to the balcony.

As they passed, the prince met Amelia's eyes.

"Oh!"

She recognized the youth. In disbelief, she turned to the bride, thinking she had to be mistaken, and met eyes with a similarly familiar young woman. Amelia grabbed at her husband, enthusiastically pointing them out.

"Look, dear, up there! It's the young couple Ricky was protecting!"

"Yeah, right. I'm sure it's them," he replied with a sigh and a shake of his head.

Amelia didn't get angry with him, however. She didn't have the time, as she was staring single-mindedly at the couple, trying to burn them into her retinas. Though the princess had different hair and had lost her glasses, she had a similar feel to the noble girl. Similarly, the prince's hair was a different color from the young guard's that day, but his face was the same. She'd encouraged the pair to pursue their love despite the apparent difference in their ranks, but clearly, that wasn't necessary.

"I'm sure Urhalla will only continue to improve!"

Saying so, she eagerly waved back at the bashful newlyweds.

# Epilogue: The Newlyweds' Lives

**ELIZABETH** and my wedding marked the beginning of a proper marriage fever, and, of course, everyone wanted their prince and princess present to bless their unions. We spent a great amount of time traveling throughout the kingdom to visit nearly every wedding in the land. When I'd asked my bride if she was tired, she'd shake her head.

"This is almost like a honeymoon!" she replied sweetly, and that was enough to change my ennui to eagerness.

Harold and Lady Margaret's ceremony was held in the palace gardens, with rose arches and heart-shaped topiary. As Harold was my foster brother and best friend, and Lady Margaret was Elizabeth's best friend and bodyguard, no expenses were spared for their marriage. Lady Margaret officially became Elizabeth's lady-in-waiting and bodyguard in earnest, prompting her to move into the palace with us. Harold had clearly been anticipating this day for many years, as he smiled more on that day than he had in all the years I'd known him.

I was admittedly worried about Edward and Lady Selena's marriage, but it went as smoothly as could be expected. Though the bride stepped on her dress and slipped on steps at every opportunity, Edward's reflexes and strength ensured he always covered for her. I doubt any of the other guests noticed a thing the whole time. Perhaps they were made for each other, after all.

Lord Zachary and his wife were in tears from start to finish, and I spotted their servant, Walter, crying his eyes out with our steward in the corner of the reception hall. Hardly anyone from House Haven was in attendance, so the majority of the guest list was House Norden's servants and guards. They were practically family, after all, and many of them had known Edward from the day he was born. They endeavored to keep their emotions in check, but that didn't stop the entire hall from saturating with enthusiasm. In a sense, it was far more intense than even Elizabeth and my ceremony had been.

Raphael and Yulisse had no ceremony; they simply submitted their

registration with the palace and called it done. Even Lord Dominic seemed content with such an abridged celebration. It also happened that Yulisse's proclivity for holy magic shown at our wedding was no fluke, and she was officially recognized as a saint-in-training. Her recent repentance led to her being pardoned for her old crimes as well—which meant Raphael must have made it abundantly clear she had no choice in the matter. The feeling was clearly mutual on some level, however, as she would've never agreed to marry him...I hoped.

Still, Lady Yulisse and Raphael had worked hard to hone her talents to such heights. We visited them the day before last to find Raphael beside himself with joy, though he had the same steely glint in his eyes that I knew him for. There, he revealed the trick.

"Little Yulie spent many days praying to that fake manacite, and those prayers grew her magical talents more than she knew."

Clearly, she'd wanted to be queen quite badly back then.

"Of course," he continued with a chuckle, "it was *pure coincidence* that it bore fruit."

I snorted. "Liar. You've been planning this for ages."

He only chuckled and held a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture.

Right... He took Yulisse with him on his investigation in the northeast, didn't he?

"Do you remember how Lady Lecia's powers awakened when Prince Leohardt fell off the balcony? Well, I had a near-death experience of my own on my little expedition!"

He rolled up his shirt. I would've sprung across the table to stop him if Elizabeth were there, but luckily, she was at tea with Lady Margaret. Harold raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything—or rather, he couldn't. Despite the cheery smile on Raphael's face, there were jagged scars across his abdomen, presumedly left by a monster.

"That looks like it could be fatal without immediate treatment." Harold frowned.

"Oh, you pervert!" Raphael sniggered at Harold. "No, relax, I'm joking. Though it's true, I wouldn't have had the mana to save myself on my own."

I shuddered. "I'm glad you got Yulisse to care for you."

"Right? Honestly, I can't thank her enough!"

She'd been terrified of him in the beginning when her fate was placed squarely in his hands, but evidently, his genuine feelings for her had shone through.

"Of course, she's still a former felon," Raphael added. "We'll be minding our own business in Father's lands for the next while."

I nodded. "That'd probably be for the best. What exactly is a saint-in-training, though? Can't say I've ever heard of the position."

"Well, there's only one Saint recognized in the country at a time, and she doesn't possess all the qualifications yet. So Yulie—no, my wife is still in training."

"You don't need to correct yourself; I didn't forget," I sighed. "And er. We have a Saint?"

It wasn't in any history books, though tales of Saints were common in old legends.

Raphael cocked his head to the side, confused. "You didn't know Queen Mariabel is a Saint? Of course, sainthood is a position appointed and kept by the Ministry of Magecraft, so their very existence is something of a secret. But you know she maintains the barriers keeping our country safe, don't you? She was also the one who arranged the purchase of the wild lands to the northeast."

To think Mother had even more secrets...



**THE** warm spring sun shone through the window, gently falling upon my cheek. I heard the faint shuffle of movement from the window to my bedside. It seemed Harold had arrived to wake me.

"A little longer," I moaned, shifting my head on my pillow. "I think I was

dreaming of Elizabeth..."

"Hehe, is that so?"

The bell-like voice was definitely not Harold's. I leapt to my feet faster than I ever had.

"E-E-E-Elizabeth?!"

My wife curtsied. "Good morning, Prince Vincent. I've asked Lord Harold to allow me to perform your daily wake-up visits. I do hope I didn't scare you."

She held out a hand to me, offering to help me change. I could feel my cheeks flush as I frantically shook my head no.

"I-I can dress myself?"

"Is that so? I shall wait for you outside, then."

She seemed to read the panic in my voice, but not the reason for it, as she thankfully left the room. My breathing was still rapid and strained, so I took one deep breath, then another. Partway through the third, however, I recalled that adorable chuckle she'd made earlier and sputtered and coughed with the newfound mental strain.

Still trying to catch my breath, I reached for the clothes Elizabeth had so generously laid out for me on the side of my bed. It was a simple jacket and matching breeches in a muted, comfortable color. I'd asked Harold for more mature clothing, as I was now a married man, and it seemed he did just that. I washed up and dressed, then took a few more deep breaths.

"Good gods," I muttered, "being married is hell on my poor heart."

The endless stream of weddings was finally at its end, and the two of us had returned to the palace. We'd both been freed of all duties and were told to take a while to relax. Sometime soon, however, we'd have to talk about a proper honeymoon. The thought had kept me awake late last night, but I never thought we'd be totally alone as early as the next morning.

With one last glance at the mirror to ensure I'd returned to my usual relaxed smile, I stepped outside.

**BY** the time Elizabeth and I arrived at the dining room, Mother and Father were already seated there.

Elizabeth curtsied. "Good morning, Your Majesties."

"Morning, Elizabeth," Father replied with a curt nod.

"Good morning." Mother smiled compassionately. "I hope you slept well."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Wait. Did Father just call her "Elizabeth"?

I shot him a questioning look, but he pretended to ignore me. Elizabeth chuckled calmly at the exchange.

"We will address you simply as Elizabeth henceforth," Father declared imperiously. "You may, in turn, address us as Father and Mother."

"Oh, how generous!" She dipped her head. "Thank you kindly, Father, Mother."

Despite her addressing them as I did, I noticed both my parents casting smug looks in my direction.

It's not normal to refer to your in-laws like that, is it? They're trying to force her into getting closer to them, aren't they?

I turned to my wife. "Can you call me Vincent from now on?"

"H-Huh?"

Her cheeks went strawberry pink in a heartbeat.

Did you see that, Father? See that, Mother? That's how she reacts to the man she loves!

As I continued to jockey for position over my parents, Elizabeth's fidgeting increased before she finally met my gaze again. I'd assumed she'd have no problem with it since she called me Vince when we were in disguise—and yet her mouth flapped open and shut, not a sound emerging. Apparently, my proper name held a different gravity than her pet name for me.

"V-V-Vin... Vin..." She sputtered and repeated herself like a broken music box. I couldn't back down at this point, so I smiled and encouraged her. "V-Vince—"

### "KISHAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!"

Unfortunately, before Elizabeth could finish saying my name, Lars swooped in and flapped noisily in her face, cutting her off completely.

"Kweeeahh!! Kyagh! Kyayahhh!!"

From how frantically he was asking, I had to assume he wanted to be addressed without his title as well. Elizabeth didn't seem to understand, however, offering a mild "What's wrong, Lord Lars?" as she watched him, concerned.

"Can you nyot?" came Plum's voice as it flew into the room. "It's too early for this."

While Elizabeth and I were on our wedding tour de force, Plum's relationship with Mother had evolved quite a bit. Specifically...

"I heard that, Plum," Mother replied poutily. "I knew it; you hate me after all, don't you? Oh, my poor broken heart!"

"Nyah?! Th-That's nyot it at all! I-It's your country, so whatever makes mew happy..."

The two were close enough now that any conflicts resulted in that sort of mush. I'd also been pressuring Mother to see if anything else from her past risked rearing its head now. The last thing I needed was more trouble with powerful monsters or foreign nobility.

"I was in the garden!" the feline continued. "The squirrels told meow that there's tons of bugs around nyow that it's getting hotter."

"Ah, I see. I'll tell the gardeners to take care when they tend the flowers."

They both moved on to new topics as Lars continued to throw tantrums. Plum had asked me earlier why Mother was so generous and kind to it, but I'd blown off its question in irritation. She'd never treated me with such kindness, after all. I felt I understood after seeing them now, however. Mother's youth was quite turbulent. Even as an adult, she had to have been under immense pressure to marry. It must've been difficult to suppress her mana and emotions for so long. Father glared at the feline enviously even as it curled up in Mother's

lap.

"You can talk to animals?" I asked it.

"I am a monster," Plum replied. "We can talk to most animals."

"Wait... Does that mean you can talk to Lars?"

Plum scrunched up its furry face. "He doesn't even try to talk. He's just yowling. He *is* a powerful monster. And a dragon, so with enough manya he could talk to humans just like meow."

"He what?" My eyes darted to Lars in surprise.

Finally, Lars picked himself up from where he was throwing a tantrum on the ground, now silent. He reared up on his back two legs, trundled over to Harold, and tugged on his pant leg. Harold, of course, readily complied. There was almost a sullen, guilty air to the little drake, particularly from the droop in his wings.

I suppose this means Lars and Plum won't get along that well after all.



DURING dinner, we received wonderful news from abroad. Prince Malius and Lady Lecia of the Kingdom of Orion had finally set the date of their marriage. With that, Elizabeth and I began hashing out plans for our honeymoon in earnest. The plan was to visit Orion first for our friends' wedding. Then, we'd continue to tour the continent and take in as much of it as we could. Elizabeth and I had just retired to my chambers to discuss our plans.

"Prince Malius and Lady Lecia are bound to have a wonderful wedding, aren't they?" Elizabeth asked me dreamily.

"I'd imagine they will."

I was still concerned for Leohardt's mental state, but Lecia was already all but living in the palace during her studies to become queen. I hoped that gave him a chance to adapt to his brother's relationship.

"Let's plan to stay in Orion for one week," I suggested. "We'll continue north to Ankreiss from there. I'd like to find out if their royal family is still at odds with their prime minister or if it's just a rumor after all."

"I've also heard that they're swimming in gold."

"Exactly, and as long as their royals maintain their hold on the mines, they'll remain dominant...or at least, I would expect so. I've heard they've been exporting increasingly less gold lately."

I glanced up to find Elizabeth staring at me and likely had been for some time. It took a moment for her to regain her composure and awkwardly avert her gaze.

"I was a little smitten at how seriously you're taking this," she admitted awkwardly.

"Oh. Er... Good."

It was extremely direct of her but par for the course at this point.

I'm so glad I remembered all of my political knowledge... It's officially worth it now.

"That's my only diplomatic concern," I announced. "Is there anywhere you'd like to see?"

"I'd like to see the Angel's Canyon in Varmon... I've wanted to visit since I was a little girl."

Why go anywhere? There's a true angel before my eyes.

I didn't say that; instead, I consulted the map to figure out what the travel times and duration of our stay in each place would look like. We resolved to visit Nieve as our last stop, after which we'd return to Urhalla from the south. It'd be a three-month trip in total. We had many foreign kings and the like to visit, specifically the ones unable to attend our wedding, but we'd have ample time for sightseeing as well.

By the time we'd finished, evening had melted into nightfall, and it was nearly time to prepare for bed. As we were married, however, it only felt right that we should plan to spend some time alone, as a married couple should. A kiss on the cheek would surely be enough—but on the other hand, I didn't want her to think it was too sudden.

Before I could plot a course of action, however, she stood up.

"I bid you good night, my prince."

"Er, um...yes, good night."

Drat. I missed the timing.

Normally, after we said our good nights, she'd curtsy cordially and leave. This time, however, she stepped closer to me instead of the door.

"Good night, Vince."

She rested her hand on mine, then stretched her neck toward me. I felt her lips graze my cheek like the wings of a butterfly.

"Fr..."

"His Majesty—no, Father and Mother gave me some advice earlier. They told me that any time we're alone together is an opportunity to grow closer to you." She chuckled bashfully, but I could barely process it.

Mother, Father, what manner of obscenities are you trying to teach my wife? Thank you so, so much.

Elizabeth stepped back to leave, but I found myself shadowing her and wrapping my arms tightly around her slender body. I could feel my face go red hot, a fever unlike any I'd ever felt. Guilt rapidly built within me, and I tried to release her, but before I could, she wrapped her trembling arms around my back. Her grip was weak, growing just slightly stronger as we held each other. My heart was beating so wildly she had to be hearing it.

"Do...do you remember that good luck charm you gave me before the wedding?" She didn't reply, but her body language strongly suggested she did. "I interpreted that as your having strong feelings for me... It gave me courage. Courage enough to kiss you then, in front of all those people."

Before I could thank her, she pulled her head off my shoulder. Her eyes swam around the room.

"U-Um... That was Lady Margaret's idea. Her 'killing blow,' she called it."

"Lady Margaret's what?"

"I knew I should have told you beforehand... I'm dreadfully sorry."

She pulled out of our embrace, then raised her right hand a little and made a fist.

Wait. Killing blow?!

Elizabeth extended her fist slowly, turning her hand so that its back was toward me. She moved so slowly and deliberately that I felt no danger whatsoever from her. Finally, she pressed her hand into my lips, then bashfully dropped her gaze.

So her "good luck charm" wasn't a kiss after all?

I continued staring blankly at her, and she shifted her weight uncomfortably.

"I told Lady Margaret that our practice sessions weren't going well, so she taught me this."

Didn't Harold say Lady Margaret kissed him?

"She said that if I did this," Elizabeth continued, "even the surliest of lovers would be putty in my hands..."

Oh, so she did it all out of love, after all.

I got the feeling Lady Margaret's advice gave me a little too much info about her love life with Harold, but I tried not to dwell on that. There was a more important question I had to ask.

"Do you mind if I get a little mushy? Saccharine, even?"

She blinked in surprise. "Eh? U-Um..."

Her gaze slowly rose to meet mine, and after swallowing hard, she briefly nodded yes. I'd never seen anything so cute before in my life.

I took her by the hand and bowed deeply, kissing the back of her hand again but of my own volition.

"At the ceremony, we swore undying love and fealty to our country and each other. Allow me to pledge my love once more, here and now. Elizabeth, will you swear to stand with me forever?"

I watched as her blush traveled to the tips of her ears. As I looked into those brilliant amethyst eyes, however, I could see the joy in them. I'd never seen her

so happy before.

"Yes! Of course I will, Vincent."

Her eyes fluttered shut, and I leaned into her.

With that, the happiest man in the world became the happiest husband in the world. In time, he would become a great king, beloved across the land.

And they lived happily ever after.

# Side Story 1: My Savior Loves Me So Much It's Scary

#### THUD!

The carriage rocked and bumped its way to a stop. Yulisse opened her eyes to the sound of conversation somewhere close by and immediately wiped away the trail of drool in the corner of her mouth. She hurriedly looked about, hoping nobody had seen her unsightly display, but instead found herself alone in the carriage. That was almost worse.

"Oh no, I overslept!"

She threw open the door and stepped out, the ground crunching beneath her feet.

#### Crunch?

Her second boot came down before she processed what had happened, and it plunged even deeper into the ground with a more impressive sound. Whatever was happening, it was freezing cold. That was the first time Yulisse looked around and realized there was nothing but a crisp silver sheet, as far as the eye could see. It was snow, and an unimaginable amount of it at that.

"What ...?"

"Oh, Yulie, you should see the look on your face!"

"L-Lord Raphael?!"

Her surprise was cut off as the prissy, spoiled wizard—or rather, her savior and master, Raphael, extended a hand to her. Raphael Feith Marshall was the son of a marquis and had characteristically long purple hair and a monocle. Though he seemed gentle and proper, he was an incorrigible playboy and sadist. Yulisse considered pointing out that a noble shouldn't be taking the hand of a mere servant, but he hadn't listened the last hundred-odd times she reminded him.

"Where are we?" she muttered instead as she pulled herself out of the snow.

She was sure they were in Urhalla when she fell asleep. She'd felt the gentle sunlight on her cheek despite it being the middle of winter and had drifted off at some point.

"We're in northeast Urhalla, just past the Mimier Mountains," the noble chimed. "The royal family controls this region by rights, but they've left House Marshall to maintain it. Now, guess why that is!" He winked coquettishly at her.

"I have no idea," she instantly replied.

"Oh, come now, put a little thought into it!"

"It's too cold to think." Yulisse wrapped her arms tight around herself and shivered.

How is he not freezing in those robes? Let me guess, more magic?

"Ah!" He suddenly reached out to her, squeezing her hand tightly once more. "I forgot. Let's head inside first."

"U-Um... You don't need to hold my hand; I can walk."

"Don't be like that!" He tightly interlaced his fingers with hers, making it impossible for her to break free. "Come, let's walk together!"

She swallowed her discomfort and followed after him. His hands were always oddly bereft of warmth. That wasn't to say they were cold, but rather, they were so oddly temperate it felt strange more than frightening.

Oh, and my hands are still warm from my nap, too... Would he think I'm lying if I said I was cold?

The two walked at the head of the group, with the other servants trailing behind them. House Marshall's staff always seemed indifferent to her at best and no doubt resented her for her special treatment. Yulisse tried hard not to think of the eyes on her back as they walked in silence.

Many well-maintained hearths kept the sleepy, snow-laden mansion warm. Yulisse knew better after her two-odd years of manner studies than to rush to the nearest one to warm herself.

"My name is Yulisse Merrifield. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Paula Tyler," came the curt reply.

Before her was the head maid, an older woman with sharp eyes. Paula studied her carefully, from head to foot, eyes disapproving behind her glasses. Yulisse tried her best not to draw attention to the hem of her skirt, only half of which was soaked through by melted snow. The woman knew Yulisse's past, no doubt—how she was born the daughter of a baron but was complicit in a plot to incriminate the crown prince's fiancée, how she was stripped of her titles as a criminal and was now serving House Marshall to earn the forgiveness of the crown. After a long moment, Paula snatched up Yulisse's hand in her calloused palms, pulling her attention away from her skirt.

"Eep?!"

She's going to punish me, isn't she?!

Yulisse had no idea what she'd done to deserve it, but she must've committed some faux pas. Nobody could possibly be kind to a criminal.

Paula grinned. "You're beautiful...just wonderful! What a charming young miss! If the young master brought you all this way, surely you'll be married soon, won't you?!"

Yulisse blinked the tears out of her eyes in shock. "Um."

"Ah, a love beyond your status... Reminds me of when I was your age! By the way, has anyone ever said you look just like my favorite book's heroine? *Star Maiden*, it's called."

"U-Umm... Excuse me?"

"Well!" Paula's eyes gleamed eagerly. "It's the story of a peasant girl who receives the stars' blessing, becomes a baron's daughter, and enrolls in the Royal Academy!"

The older woman continued to give a surprisingly detailed synopsis of the book. It was clear she'd read it a good many times, but to Yulisse, the book was nothing but a cruel reminder of that miserable coming-of-age ball. She resisted the urge to run for the door.

"Then, you see, young nobles confess their love for the heroine, and—"

"I-I think I understand what it's about now," Yulisse interrupted. "Did... Were you not told about me?"

"Why should I have been? All I know is that the young master would be bringing his bride-to-be. Why, we've all been beside ourselves with anticipation!"

Paula didn't even touch on Yulisse's crimes, instead gesturing opulently around the entire hall. Yulisse strained her ears, but there wasn't so much as a murmur from the neighboring rooms.

"That's not true," Yulisse flatly denied.

"No need to be so humble, now. That's more of the *Star Maiden* right there!" "N-No, I'm serious. I..."

Yulisse's cheeks grew hot. She lived on praise like that during her year at the Academy and prayed daily to that strange sphere of manacite that she would be queen. When nobles far outstripping her paltry rank tried to court her, she was convinced she was the luckiest girl in the world. Then, at the last possible moment, everything collapsed, and she was branded a traitor against the crown. She wound up in a cell in House Marshall's basement, where she cried and lamented her fate for days on end. The entire time, Raphael sat just outside her cell with a cheerful smile on his lips. He was a true sadist.

"Hahaha, no need to get so bashful now!" Paula guffawed. "I've got your back, promise. You heard how some baron's daughter in Orion's marrying their crown prince, haven't you? There's no wall love can't scale." She paused to circle about Yulisse, studying her carefully before nodding firmly. "We can't have the young master's bride staying so wet, can we? Go get changed; your room's on the third floor. I'll show you around when you're done. Make sure you tell the pageboys where you want your things left... Oh, and since you'll be going to do mana canvassing, I'd better tell you where we're keeping your gear, too."

"Mana what?"

"Be careful out there. We don't want you getting hurt—though with the young master at your side, I doubt you'll have anything to worry about."

Seriously, what am I supposed to be doing?

She'd heard of mana before but nothing about canvassing it. All she knew about the trip was what Raphael told her—that he had somewhere to go and that she'd be going with him. She had no idea what they'd be doing, and since getting hurt was apparently a genuine concern, she was starting to become genuinely frightened. For all her goosebumps, however, she had no right to refuse her master's will.

"Please do," she finally managed to say, bowing her head in resignation.

Yulisse arrived to find she had an entire private room to herself. A nice one by servant standards. As she unpacked, she recalled Paula's ominous words.

"Raphael's future wife?"

Impossible. Marry him? Never.

He'd proposed to her jokingly many times, even when she was chasing after the crown prince. That was just one of the things he'd proposed to her, as he'd also asked if she'd be a guinea pig for his latest spell, if she'd cry for him, or even simply that he'd hunt her for the rest of her life. It was the stuff of nightmares. She'd learned to avoid him like the plague leading up to the coming-of-age ball, but when her ambitions came to light, so, too, did his true nature.

Raphael had enjoyed toying with her and her emotions long before he could've possibly known of her guilt. He had countless schemes in store for her, a hundred ways of crushing her dreams. There was no way a marquis' son could marry a criminal, after all—it was even more impossible than a peasant shopkeep's daughter marrying the crown prince.

Despite that, however, he kept up the same saccharine lies. She couldn't understand him for the life of her. All of House Marshall was an enigma, really, and she still struggled to understand them after two full years of living under their roof. Raphael seemed to be the only child, and she'd seen neither hide nor hair of the marquis' wife. Some doors she'd never seen open, beyond which she could occasionally hear screams or mournful wails. The marquis himself treated Yulisse with all the care and tenderness of a festering boil and kept contact with her to an awkward minimum. That was the most reasonable part of it all—no

father would be pleased to welcome a traitor to the throne as a daughter-inlaw.

"It's not your fault, Yulie," Raphael had told her before. "I must be the cause of his shock. He finally learned I've been putting on an act in front of him for years, after all~!"

She'd simply shaken her head back then. He would shower her with empty praise—that he loved her, that she was beautiful, any lie that would feed her fears. In a way, he was like a stray cat that refused to leave her alone.

Maybe I should try trusting him?

Yulisse closed her eyes and imagined the smug wizard's grin—the same look, she realized, he'd shown her when he gleefully locked her in that basement cell for the first time, chuckling that she was "his forever."

Ew! No, no way, I can't trust him! It all has to be a trick somehow!

She hurriedly shook her head, dispersing those ugly thoughts. Sure, he'd saved her life, as she would've been stripped of her title and banished or imprisoned for life. However, that didn't mean she could trust his twisted smile, as she'd learned the hard way. Should she buy into his lies, he'd cackle and reveal that he'd deceived her again. That'd end her life with House Marshall, and she'd lose everything again. She couldn't afford to be greedy.

This is how things should be... That's right, I don't need anything more, she told herself for the thousandth time.

She quickly changed into dry clothes and put her things away. Just as she finished, a knock came at the door.

"Yulie?" came Paula's warm voice. "Are you ready?"

"I'll be right there!" she called back.

With that, she put aside the worries haunting her and got to business.



**YULISSE** never hated to work. As a girl, she often helped out in her parents' store until Baron Merrifield took her in. She did everything from cleaning to sorting merchandise to serving tea and snacks for guests, and while training to

learn all the rules and manners of nobility was exhausting, it was more familiar to her than the Academy's textbooks. That was why she headed to the kitchen first thing to help prepare Raphael's meal, and when he told her they'd be leaving for "canvassing" right away, she obediently checked the supplies given to her.

Soon, she found herself in a rabbit onesie, hiking along the ridge of a snowcapped mountain. She could barely hold anything because of the fluffy pink mittens on her hands, and floppy ears hung down cutely in front of her exposed face.

"What the heck?!" she cried.

Beside her, Raphael chuckled. "I do love how your eyes gloss over, and you start spouting obscenities." His face had a distinctly smitten look, and a second pair of fake rabbit ears looked even more ridiculous on his head.

"I-I'm sorry," Yulisse quickly apologized.

"It's okay. Feel free to be yourself around me," he said with a loving stroke of her fake ears. Despite the ears not being physically attached and her inability to even see them on top of her head, a chill ran down her spine. It was a thoroughly trained reaction by now.

She shook her head. "No, I... What are these outfits even for?"

Raphael pursed his lips and withdrew his hand. "Mountaineering equipment. It's easier to walk in than a dress, isn't it? They also help hide us from wild animals or monsters. That's why I have a pair, too," he added, gesturing to his ears.

He had a point. The suit was warm and surprisingly waterproof, and even her feet remained toasty and dry.

"No, I can't let this impress me," Yulisse muttered before turning to the wizard. "There are monsters around here?"

"Of course"! This mountain is practically oozing with mana, meaning monsters are often either born here or mutated from wild animals. That's why our family is handling it."

"B-But that's so dangerous!"

Mana made little sense to her, but she was familiar with monsters—violent beasts that wielded magic.

"Don't worry, Yulie. I'll protect you to my dying breath~!" He gave her a thumbs-up and a wink.

"No, nuh-uh, no way! If you die, then I'm dead for sure, out in the middle of nowhere like this!"

"Ahaha! Maybe you would be!" He smirked and patted her head between her ears. There was a more solemn look in his eyes. "I will protect you, though."

"L-Lord Raphael?"

Something about his tone made her feel he was making a more general statement than just their current situation.

"Oh, it's nothing!" He grinned before turning away, pointing at the incline ahead and striking a comedic pose. "Just a little further, now. We're nearly at the summit!"

She followed his gaze to find a steep cliff where no trees or shrubbery grew. Snow whipped by on the wind around it, and the visible rock face was cracked as though the slightest disturbance might send it all crashing down. He was, of course, pointing to the most precarious-looking edge of the whole affair.

Yulisse did very little thinking after that.

The wind whipped about them from all angles—kicking up snowy cyclones here, rattling there, winding every which way until it would suddenly cease. The snow danced upon the silver landscape, indistinguishable from everywhere else they'd been, save the barely visible thread of silver light leading them onwards. According to Raphael, the thread was full of his mana and would lead them to their destination. It was an ephemeral sight, but Yulisse's indigo eyes were nearly closed from exhaustion.

"Here we are!"

Yulisse barely registered his words as her thoughts drifted to the hike home. Every step to the summit had been laced with the fear that there was ice or loose stones under the snow that could send her to her death. Her legs trembled even when she stood still, half from exhaustion and half from fear.

We have to climb down again? Is that even possible? I'm going to fall to my death for sure, aren't I? That's it; he brought me here to kill me.

She gazed at the horizon, preparing to accept her fate, but Raphael stepped in front of her—immediately in front of her.

"Yulie? Are you planning on helping me or not?"

"Gah?! T-Too close!" She struck without thinking, her fluffy mitten hitting him in the face.

"Hmphph!"

Oddly enough, she felt him laughing through her glove, so she hurriedly withdrew her fist.

"M-My apologies! What do you need my help for?" she asked.

"I'm going to investigate the water here," he said as he pointed at a nearby spring. "You just need to count up all the animals you see!"

"Animals...? If you say so."

She couldn't imagine anything living in a place so cold and inhospitable, but as Raphael tended to the water, she dutifully turned to the path they'd just come from. Her expectations were soon upended. Two rabbits hopped up the trail first—perhaps husband and wife. More joined them, however, and she counted eight more soon after. Thinking she was somehow one of them, many rabbits sniffed interestedly at her boots before bounding toward the spring.

Before long, squirrels, foxes, and even boars joined the bunnies, all of whom drank from the spring before rushing back down the mountain. Their pelts seemed somehow glossier on the way down.

With her odd onesie, Yulisse didn't feel the slightest bit cold. The counting break helped her regain some energy, and she finally had the chance to take in the scenery around her. There seemed to be a village at the foot of the mountain beyond all the snow, with buildings tightly huddled together as if for warmth. Further away, she could spot the opulent roof of the mansion where

she and Raphael were staying. Speaking of Raphael, he had a hand in the spring water, and both eyes clamped shut. He was muttering words in some unknown language, and as if in reply, glinting lights gathered about him on the surface of the water.

That's beautiful.

The lights flickered and bounced, brushing plaintively against Raphael's palms. Slowly, his eyes opened, and he solemnly took stock of the light motes around him. Yulisse had never seen him look so serious; it set her heart aflutter. As long as he stayed quiet, he was handsome and wealthy and had already sworn to love and protect her forever.

No... I can't.

She shoved those too-persistent thoughts back deep inside her and refocused on the slope she'd been tasked with.

"Eh...?"

Burning crimson eyes glared back at her. It looked similar to the deer that had visited the pool moments before. Ordinarily, she would feel safe enough near the herbivores. This stag, however, had abnormally large antlers that split into countless razor-sharp spikes, reaching further into the sky than Yulisse was tall. The horns glowed with an unsettling pale blue light.

"L-Lord Raphael?" she called as loudly as she felt safe, her gaze still locked with the creature's.

He must've heard her and turned around, as she heard the soft crunch of boots on snow behind her. When he put his hand on her shoulder, she realized for the first time she'd been holding her breath.

"Looks like it's a monster now," Raphael told her softly.

His frivolous tone was almost reassuring now. Yulisse looked away from the monster stag and at her master as he stepped between her and the beast.

"What's got you all bloodthirsty, big boy?" He cocked his head to the side, fake ears flopping. "I'm just a harmless little bunny, see?"

Oh, he's got to be kidding! It's too late for that!

The monster, unfortunately, shared her opinion.

"KYIIIIIIIII!!"

It released a menacing roar, and its horns glowed with far greater intensity than before. The light quickly gathered in the tips, turning to flame as the stag crouched and shook its mighty head to and fro. Then, with a shrill whistling sound, the flame pulled itself free and exploded into the ground, blasting snow into steam. Yulisse could only watch in horror from behind her protector and screamed a wordless warning at him.

She'd never seen real magic before. While the manacite supposedly had a Charm spell that rubbed off on her—whatever that meant—she had no concept of actual magic outside of Raphael's offers to try his latest spells on her.

That would kill anyone, wouldn't it?! I knew it; he took me out here to get me killed, after all!

In response to the roaring flames, Raphael extended his hand. "Drago Rainia," he intoned calmly.

The words were gibberish to Yulisse, but as she watched, the snow around him rose and reformed into a thick, silver-scaled body.

"A d-dragon?!" she gawked.

"One made of water, but yes. Don't worry, it's on our side."

Sure enough, the wave of blasting heat dissipated as it collided with the dragon's body.

The monster recoiled. "GWUH?"

Raphael chuckled. "See? We may be cute little bunnies, but we're far stronger than you, even in your monster form. Drago Firia!"

A spout of flame shot from the wizard's hand, forming a dragon nearly identical to the first. The scaled twins loomed over the monstrous elk—and the fury in its eyes died before their eyes. After a moment, it shook its head in frustration, though it was clearly a gesture of surrender instead of a new attack. It turned from Raphael and bolted back down the slope and away from the pair.

So that's magic!

Yulisse's eyes were still wide with awe. Her mother had always told her about the elite magic-using nobles, and after witnessing Raphael's miraculous feat of animism, she knew it to be true. Raphael's eyes lingered on the monster a few moments longer, but as soon as it passed out of sight, he spun around and made a heart shape with his hands.

"So, Yulie? What'd you think? Fall in love with me all over again, did you?"

She didn't grace that with a response.

"No?" he continued. "Why, you look like I just ruined the moment."

"What?! N-No, I never said that!"

She shook her head frantically. He didn't ruin anything—rather, she was taken back by the difference in his attitude. Raphael was in a league of his own, the kind of nobleman she could never otherwise approach in a million years. Despite that, he kneeled—no, fell to the ground to try to pull her out of the swampy mess that was now her life.

What's so good about me that he'd go so far?

Raphael noticed the consternation on her brow and chuckled. "Oh, I love how freely you wear your heart on your sleeve! I appreciate it almost as much as your brazen greed or the way you glare at me with such concern for your safety!"

"Th-That, um..."

Those aren't compliments.

Raphael tousled her hair and chuckled coyly. "You were so eager to reach for the throne, but you're too scared to seize control of one tiny marquisdom, aren't you?"

"L-Lord Raphael, I don't..."

Before she could ask what he meant, he'd already turned and begun to walk away, his symbolic wizard's robe billowing in the wind behind him. Fearing she'd be left behind, she hurried after him.



**THE** night outside the window was nearly black without the light of the moon, with only the faint illumination of the mansion's windows to shine on the falling snow. The once-dominating mountains were now invisible. Raphael was poring over a map while Yulisse carefully brushed his hair to avoid disturbing him.

Seriously, what's up with this situation?!

His hair frankly didn't need any tending to. It was already perfectly silky with his usual routines. No, the issue was Raphael. He was lying sprawled on the sofa with his head in her lap, of all places. None of the servants had said anything yet, smiling warmly at them if anything.

Is everyone in this place crazy?!

"Yulie?" Raphael suddenly said.

"Y-Yes?!"

"We'll need to go surveying again tomorrow."

"Whatever you please."

She didn't want to go but had no real say in the matter.

"There was an unusual influx of miasma in the capital last year," he continued. "Free-flowing mana and miasma are vastly different substances, but each strongly influences the other. The leylines in the area have been unusually active, and that fragile balance has been destroyed."

"The...what?"

"The spring we visited today was so rife with activity, it should've reshaped the very geography of this region—but it didn't. The water was normal, and the animals hadn't turned into monsters."

"But there was a monster."

"Only one of them, though. A different spring must have mutated it. Our mission, then, is to locate that spring and remove all the excess mana."

"Er... Okay."

"So, why do you think I'm telling you this?"

Yulisse returned a blank look, and Raphael smirked.

"Where we're headed tomorrow has a much higher chance of harboring far more dangerous monsters."

"Are you trying to scare me?!"

He snapped his fingers. "Excellent! I knew you'd figure it out."

I wish I was wrong.

"You see, I have an excellent reason for wanting to push you to such desperate extremes." He gazed off into space and chuckled. "It's tremendous fun~!"

I knew it! He's punishing me somehow! He's trying to get me killed! There's no way this is love!

"Hehe, don't worry, I'm joking~!" he trilled.

As if! Does he really think he can gloss over it that easily?!

He shot her an impish look. "I wasn't joking when I said I have a reason, though!"

Why does it feel like we're talking, even though I'm not saying a word? What possessed me to flirt with him in the first place all those years ago?! No, wait, he approached me... This is all a trap. He's definitely trying to punish me.

Raphael winked at her. "My love for you may be twisted, but it's love all the same!"

"Ew."

"I know I'm a far cry from Prince Vincent, but I'm still quite the catch if I do say so myself."

He laughed in the way that only a man with complete confidence in himself could. It was honestly unfair.

"Thank you for the brushing. That's enough for now."

The weight suddenly disappeared from her thighs, and Yulisse dutifully stood up. She couldn't linger in her master's quarters now that her work was done.

"I'll take my leave, then."

She curtsied deeply. When she looked up, the sight of him in that opulent chamber made her chest ache. Everything in the room was fancier than what she'd had as a wealthy merchant's daughter, or a baron's for that matter. It was proof of his bloodline and that he was in a different world from her altogether. He knew that, but he still wanted a filthy criminal like her at his service.

"Yulie?"

"Um... Yes?"

"Do you hate working for me?" he asked. "If you do, I might know a few other mansions you can work at. You're not a dangerous offender, so if you're truly sorry, some would be willing to overlook that."

"No, I don't hate—"

Wait. I don't hate it here? What's wrong with me? Now that she thought of it, she had no idea what she wanted.

"Ah! I'll have to ask you again later, then"!"

His voice was as floaty and flirtatious as always, but his smile was off. It was kind, serene even, in a way she'd never seen him before.



**YULISSE** was still rubbing the sleep from her eyes when she and Raphael left the mansion. The look on Raphael's face when she retired last night had stuck with her, and she'd gotten so fixated on it that she barely slept the whole night.

The trees around them were thick with snow, and the leaves had frozen fast to their stems. On occasion, the branches would lose their strength and let drop some snow, plodding on the top of her fuzzy rabbit suit's head. Yulisse's feet felt heavy for more reasons than just her lack of sleep.

Her heart sank when Raphael pointed out an impenetrably dark cave as their destination. The vines around the entrance seemed frozen solid, jangling like discordant chimes whenever the wind blew by it.

Raphael led the way, parting the vines around him.

"It's beautiful in here!" he declared.

Yulisse hesitated to follow, but as the wizard's robes rapidly dissolved into the shadow of the depths, she had no choice but to jump through after him. The inside was just as dark as it had appeared. A moment later, she felt Raphael's hand wrap around her own, so she had no choice but to press on. With every step came the tinkling shattering of what had to be ice. If she were alone, she'd likely have slipped and ended it all soon enough.

Before long, they saw light ahead—not the light of an exit, but something far less distinct. With every step, however, the illumination's source came into view.

"Wow!" Yulisse breathed. She got the feeling Raphael smiled at her reaction.

The ceiling above them was flecked with countless tiny lights, any of which seemed so precariously balanced they could fall at any time. The oddest part, however, was the singular rhythm with which all the lights slowly strobed.

The illumination reminded Yulisse of the manacite she'd once had. She'd been told it would grant her the stars' blessing, and it would glow and flicker with the same brilliant, otherworldly light.

That was when the chill ran down her spine.

"L-Lord Raphael?" she whispered. "What is this place?"

Raphael had already bent over to examine the ground nearby. Dried leaves, fruits, and branches were there despite an obvious lack of trees or water.

Is this some kind of nest?

If it were, its owner would have to be huge. There was more than enough space for Yulisse to lie down and stretch out fully. The horrible deer thing came to mind. However, what emerged from the cave's depths had short legs and a body covered with shaggy fur. It let out a low, rumbling growl.

"Wha-?!"

"Hush, now." Raphael clamped his hand over her mouth before her scream could escape. His hand was every bit as temperatureless as before, but now Yulisse could feel her own hands go cold. "We don't want to go riling it up now."

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"Mmph? Mmhmm!"
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#### A monster!

Before them was a creature bigger than the both of them put together—a monstrous bear. Its shoulders rose like twin bluffs, and its massive claws dug into the cave floor in a display of territorial dominance. This place had to be its den, and they were trespassing. Yulisse felt the overwhelming urge to flee, but she knew it would attack if she turned her back on it, and she wasn't confident she could outrun it to the cave's entrance.

"Growrgh!"

The behemoth picked up on her uncertainty, lunging forward with a carnal roar.

"W-Wah!"

Her legs gave out beneath her, and her mittened hands hit the ground behind her. She groped for some means of escape, but her knees were far too shaky to cooperate. She could only watch in horror as the monster closed in.

I knew it! I'm dead!

She clamped her eyes shut—but the fatal blow never came.

Finally, she found the courage to open her eyes just slightly. All she could see was a familiar robe. Raphael had somehow gotten in front of her, and a strange mass of ice crystals enveloping his arm took the brunt of the horror's gnashing bite.

"Hey, Yulie~!"

"Y-Yes?!"

"I'll hold this little guy back. You go back to the mansion and get backup, okay?"

The bear narrowed its eyes in irritation, jaws scraping shrilly at the ice. It let out a deep growl of discontent. She knew Raphael was plenty strong enough to keep it at bay, but—

"I-I can't stand up," she whimpered weakly.

"Oh. Of course." The wizard's shoulders slumped. "All right, then. I don't know how long I can hold this, but it deserves a shot."

He extended his free hand, and a shimmering wall of light enveloped the pair.

She blinked in shock. "What?"

"You see, I can use magic without an incantation. That'll be our little secret, though, okay"?"

Before she could ask what exactly that meant, the monster let out another bellowing cry. The stalagmites around it noisily cracked, growing into mighty spears of ice.

"Oh, so you're ice elemental?" Raphael mused.

Flames manifested in his palm, growing and elongating into the form of a great dragon, baring its teeth at the monster.

"Don't worry," he reassured her. "I promise I'll keep you safe~!"

As he said so, the serpentine drake coiled through the wall of light and lunged. The icicle spears readily melted as the dragon coiled tightly around the bear. The flames only lapped at the edges of its fur, and with one mighty swipe, it put out the sputtering flames and extinguished the dragon. Raphael conjured a second, this one made of pale, ethereal flames, but it was wiped out just as easily with a roar and a swipe. The melted ice water rapidly flowed together at the bear's feet and refroze, and the monster lifted it as if to crush the barrier through sheer power. Raphael's fireball collided with it before impact, shattering and melting it again.

### C-Can Raphael even win this?

The hairs on the back of Yulisse's neck rose. The wizard was on the back foot, and she had an awful feeling things were about to get worse.

#### "GRAAAAAAAAAWRRR!!"

The beast's roar reverberated throughout the cave as it tore through Raphael's latest barrier of flames. Lethally sharp icicles welled up from every floor, wall, and ceiling, only to be melted away by the wizard's fire, but not quickly enough.

What caught Yulisse's attention the most, however, was that the icy spires had begun to pierce the wall of light around the pair. She had to be increasingly careful to avoid the spikes looming up all around her. That distracted her just enough that she missed the bear raising its boulder-like paws to crush her until the blow was nearly upon her.

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"Wha...!"
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"Yulie!!"

She heard Raphael's voice—panicked, which was a first. The beast's mighty paws snatched her up, pinning her arms to her sides and throwing her off to the point she was little more than a limp doll. The air around her grew increasingly thick with flames, but so did the tight grip on her.

Then, all at once, she was assailed by a floaty feeling and fell to the ground. Above her, she could still see the monster, bathed in flame and howling with rage.

This is it. This time, for sure, I'm dead.

The bear took one, two steps toward her—then its massive body swayed and fell to the ground with a mighty crash. The tremors from the impact sent her bouncing briefly up from the ground. Its limbs lay weakly about it, and it showed no further sign of movement.

She heard Raphael sigh. "Finally... Ran out of mana, did it?" He leaned down and tenderly helped her sit up.

"Lord Raphael! I'm so glad you're—"

She cut herself off. There was something wrong—horrifically so. Even though the cave was only weakly lit, she could see that Raphael's entire torso was slick with dark blood. His very life was seeping away from him.

"Y-You're bleeding!"

He nodded, smiling faintly. "Yep. I couldn't quite dodge that last swipe."

That last tremor... That was when he got hit, wasn't it?

"You can heal this, right?" she asked nervously. "You can do anything with magic, can't you?"

The wizard's shoulders fell. "If only I could. Unfortunately, I'm out of mana myself... I won't be moving anytime soon."

He stuck his tongue out playfully, but that only made her angry. That wasn't the kind of face her master should make, ever. This was serious.

"Hehe, I like that look on your face, Yulie~!" He stroked her hair, neglecting the gaping hole in his chest entirely. "The monster's going to be down for a while, okay? Promise me you'll run as soon as you can."

"B-But what about you?"

"Aww, are you worried about li'l old me? Maybe if you kiss me, I'll get better!" His hand alighted on the side of her face, this time so cold he may as well be frozen.

"Y-You can't be serious!"

"Of course I am... There's nothing love can't do."

His hand slipped down her face, then parted from her altogether. His eyelids fluttered, then covered his eyes completely. Raphael stopped moving with all the suddenness and serenity of falling asleep.

"...Lord Raphael?"

No reply.

"Lord Raphael?"

She called his name again. Her tears felt hot as they slicked their way down her freezing cheeks. He was still smiling, with all the lightheartedness and tinge of mischief she knew him for. Still, his eyes remained softly shut.

"L-Lord...Raphael...?"

The heat was draining rapidly from his face. His remaining complexion was too pale, as though he were made of ice.

"Wake up! You said you'd protect me, didn't you?! You promised you—"

I'll protect you to my dying breath, were his words.

She'd thought he was joking. She'd retorted that she'd be dead anyway in this harsh wilderness, and he paled a little at her reply. It had come to pass,

however, and Raphael had fought to the bitter end to keep her safe as he'd promised.

"Nooooooo!"

Her voice echoed horribly through the cave, and as it returned to her, it sounded even more harrowed and alone. Her head spun, and she couldn't put two thoughts together if she tried. Yulisse cried and cried, screaming until her throat was raw, and when she fell silent, there was nothing but the cool calm of the grave. Raphael, her, the monster—nothing moved, nothing made a sound.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, a flash of light.

"What ...?"

Yulisse looked up to find the motes on the ceiling had brightened. Then, like ripe fruits falling from branches, they fell from the rock face and drifted down toward her. It felt like the night sky had descended to meet her, silently enveloping her in their glow. In the light, she could see her younger self—she'd heard of a person's life flashing before their eyes, but this was more literal than she'd thought.

Does this mean I'm dying, too?

She felt oddly warm, however, far more so than before. She extended her hand as her younger self watched on.

**YULISSE'S** mother was the daughter of a wealthy merchant's family. The woman wanted for nothing, and if she desired anything, she would almost always get it. Her mother would say that she deserved all that was within her reach—Yulisse had heard that countless times, and she thought that was how she was born.

Her father was Baron Merrifield. Her mother loved him with all her heart, and she—despite all her hubris—consigned herself to being the noble's mistress. That was all that she could manage, after all, as nobility was and would always be beyond her reach. She contented herself with the baron's seed alone, as that was the one thing within her reach. With that, Yulisse was born.

Young Yulisse was spoiled rotten by her mother and grandparents alike. They bought her whatever she wanted and delighted in sating her childish greed. Her mother insisted Yulisse deserved all the world had to offer—though looking back, perhaps her mother's true intent was to give her as many happy memories as possible so that her unobtainable desires would be easier to bear. Child as she was, however, she had no means of understanding such nuance.

When her mother passed, Yulisse's father, the baron, took her in. Baron Merrifield claimed to love her mother truly, and he begged her grandparents to give the child to his house. He failed to mention the overwhelming appeal of the dowry that came with her from her wealthy merchant grandparents, and how he only slept with her mother at all because she was beautiful. From the way he disowned Yulisse, as soon as he heard she was guilty of treason, she could tell he was something of a coward.

Yulisse didn't mind. She would break past that impenetrable wall that her mother had ruined herself trying to scale. Better to be the daughter of a noble, she thought, than the daughter of a merchant. Her grandparents agreed and turned a blind eye to her greed. When she was handed *Star Maiden* for the first time, she tried not to think too deeply about it. A noble's daughter was better than a merchant's, but being a king's daughter would be best of all.

How did I end up with both Mother's and Father's worst parts?

She had her mother's cowardice covered by the same veneer of greed. She had her father's shallowness as well. Yulisse was compelled to be loved by whoever would have her, and like her mother, she succumbed to the honey-laden trap of noble life.

No... Lord Raphael is different.

He knew just how sick she was but swore to remain at her side regardless. He waited until she arrived at her own answer—but what did she truly want?

"I... I want..."

She didn't care if her feelings were betrayed. She didn't care if this, too, was some cruel trick of fate.

"I want you to live, Lord Raphael!"

Heart burgeoning with that singular desire, she embraced the fallen noble. Light flooded out from their bodies. Yulisse could feel her emotions becoming her strength, flowing freely between their interlocked lips.

I never wanted to be queen, after all. This must be what love is like.



"—AND that's how we decided to get married!"

Raphael brandished the parchment emblazoned with the Royal Crest above his head. It was a marriage application, apparently.



After Yulisse's flashback, Raphael stood up as though nothing had happened, healed his wounds with magic, and returned to the mansion with a skip in his step. He explained that her love had awakened stores of mana within her that rivaled even his own, but that made no sense to her. Apparently, the fact that they shared magic was "proof" that their hearts were one.

"Didn't I tell you?" he beamed. "I pushed you to the brink, and we're all the better for it, wouldn't you say?"

She slapped him hard across the face for that, but she couldn't deny her feelings for him either way.

Dominic watched in horror as his son danced about the room with the application. When Raphael returned with tales of how he nearly died, Yulisse awakened to her true potential as a saint, and on top of that, the pair were getting married, of all things, he'd been bedridden for nearly half a day.

"N-No matter what Lord Raphael says, I promise I'll remember my place," Yulisse hurriedly reassured him. "I know he far outranks me..."

"I've only got one son, and it took everything I had to raise him well. Or rather, I thought I'd raised him well, but..."

Yulisse clenched her fists as she waited for the inevitable condemnation to come. Of course, he wouldn't be proud of his son marrying a traitor to the throne.

"I never thought he'd turn out just like his mother," the marquis muttered.

"He what?" Yulisse didn't have the time to ask what he meant as the door flew open a second later.

"Oh, Raffy, I heard the news! Why didn't you tell me you were getting married?!"

The voice was high-pitched and flirtatious yet oddly soothing to the ear. Dominic's head slumped at the sound, letting out a heavy sigh.

"There she is," he muttered.

It was the door on the second floor that Yulisse had never seen open. A

youthful and strikingly beautiful woman in a long purple dress stuck her head out. She had thin lips and sharp eyes like Raphael's and looked young enough to be his older sister. She couldn't be past her mid-twenties.

Wait... I thought Lord Raphael was an only child?

She darted across the room to Dominic's bedside and grabbed hold of one of his barrel-like arms. The marquis bit his lip hard.

"I suppose I'll introduce you," he finally said. "This is my wife, Merylluda."

"It's a pleasure!" the beauty chirped with a wink.

Yulisse's jaw dropped. "Your...what?"

Merylluda chuckled. "Oh, Yulisse, you should see the look on your face!"

"Nice to see you again," Raphael said with a nod.

"It's been so long!" she trilled. "Congratulations on finding yourself such a beautiful young bride!"

Mother and son bumped fists with each other, exchanging impish chuckles.

"I'm confused," Yulisse said. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, to think you'd interrupt us to ask! You have real promise!" Merylluda giggled. "You almost remind me of young Dominic!"

She put a hand to her cheek and sighed dreamily. She was far too young and pretty for Yulisse to think of her as her future mother-in-law; that much was certain.

"Mother was born a commoner," Raphael explained. "She's actually from the village at the foot of the Mimier Mountains. You saw how easy it is for mana to get caught up in that land, and it influences its residents as much as it does the wildlife. She's always had a knack for storing mana."

Merylluda nodded eagerly. "They used to call me a succubus' daughter. Isn't that awful? It's not my fault I'm so young and beautiful! That's why I had a bit of a wild streak as a young woman, and a certain marquis brought me home because he simply had to have me as his wife~!"

Dominic made himself a little smaller—an impressive feat, given his herculean

stature—and blushed bashfully.

Oh. So I'm like Lord Dominic in a way, then.

"You visited the villa, didn't you?" Raphael's mother pressed. "Did you meet Paula?"

"Paula...?"

Now that she mentioned it, the housekeeper did say something about Yulisse and Raphael's situation reminding her of the old days.

"That's why it couldn't matter less that you're not as 'noble' as I am," Raphael said with a smile. "Make sense?"

Dominic nodded bashfully. "Sorry for acting so indifferent. I didn't want to get my hopes up too much so as not to pressure you."

"Pressure me?" Yulisse echoed.

"I know my son," he replied with a grimace. "That, and you already seemed terrified." He continued to say that he'd issued the same request to the servants. They weren't giving her the cold shoulder. Rather, they'd already accepted her. "I've supported you marrying my son from the start," the marquis continued. "His Majesty seems to agree as well."

I... I guess that means I'm in the clear, then?

"Er... Okay," she managed to reply.

Her feelings still hadn't caught up with the sudden turn of events, but Merylluda barely noticed as she draped herself over the girl and rubbed her cheek against Yulisse's affectionately.

"You're so lucky, Yulisse! You're packed full of mana, and with Dominic and Raphael already so talented, I'm sure nobody will pay any mind to me!"

"Mother stays inside to avoid drawing attention to her condition," Raphael explained. "It's too bad; it'd be wonderful if she could go outside more."

Merylluda nodded eagerly. "That, and sometimes I wind up taking in a little too much mana. Dominic and I have to blast each other full force when that happens."

So that's why I kept hearing all those strange sounds from behind that door.

"Dominic's trained his body for my sake, you know," she continued. "If that's not love, I don't know what is~!"

Raphael nodded. "With love, anything is possible~!"

Behind the pair, Dominic was already signing the marriage application as their witness. There was no way for Yulisse to escape now—not that she wanted to, of course.

Just what is love, anyway? Yulisse wondered as she gazed at the lofty vaulted ceilings of the Marshall manor.

## Side Story 2: A Tale of Ten Years Hence

**THE** summer breeze danced through the field, rustling the violets and dandelions as it blew. Only one patch stood out amongst the flowers—the top of a pigtailed auburn head, just like her father's.

"There she is! Capture her!"

"Yes, sir!"

A second shape darted toward the brown-haired figure, easily cutting through the rain-soaked grass. As it reached its target, it wrapped its arms around the petite form.

"Excellent work, Rosemary!"

I slapped my knees eagerly from my perch on the stone steps. I watched as Rosemary seemed to convince the other child, which nodded. They both walked back through the grass. Rosemary grew tired of the smaller girl's pace, however, and before long, she scooped her up and broke into a run toward me.

"Good, they're going to make it!" I announced.

"Oh, thank goodness!" exclaimed one of the aides at my side. "I was so worried!"

"Is it just me," mused the second, "or has Her Highness lost her ribbons?"

The former was Sasha Norden, a somewhat odd daughter of Count Norden. Michel Marshall was beside her, with his long purple hair and narrowed gaze. We watched as Rosemary Abarakoff carried the girl toward us with a stern expression. The girl was, of course, Sophia von Weissworth—my, Louie von Weissworth's, little sister.

Rosemary soon arrived and gently set Sophia down on the ground. My sister's shoes and dress were immaculate. Despite being scarcely five years old, she'd been born with a wealth of magical talent and had evidently cast a spell on herself to keep clean. Unfortunately, the protection didn't extend to her

accessories, as her ribbon had flown off somewhere.

"Have Lord Raphael teach you a spell to keep your ribbons on next," I told her.

Sophia shook her head. "But Lord Raphael said it's a secret that he taught me any magic. He's got nothing to do with this."

I sighed. "You just blurted out your 'secret.""

"Oh!"

She clamped her hands tightly over her mouth, her amethyst eyes blinking in surprise. It was as charming as the violets that swayed in the wind, but that made her no better at keeping secrets.

"What are you even doing out here?" I asked.

While we were still in the palace gardens, we were at the most remote corner of it. We were so far away that we'd ordinarily have to come by carriage.

"I wanted to get some of the herbs the Academy uses for medicine."

"How'd you break out of the palace?"

"I gave the maid watching me a nice, good sleep since she seemed so tired...
The guard at the gate, too."

I sighed deeply. "Oh, Sophia!"

She'd been under such strict watch specifically because we couldn't afford to let her break out. It felt like only a matter of time before she brought the whole country to ruin, and I nearly fell off the stairs in despair, prompting Sasha to panic again.

Perhaps we could marry her off to a rival nation and have her destroy it from within? No, Father's too protective of her to do such a thing.

"Right, Father." I stood up, grabbing my sister by the hand. "We need to go now. Lord Lars!" At my call, the hallowyrm descended from the heavens, landing in front of us. "We'd like your help returning to the palace," I explained. "It would take far too long to walk."

He watched me with his large blue eyes before lowering his head. Being

contracted to obey Mother didn't mean he would listen to me, after all, and it was more a matter of his mood. Mother often reminded me to be polite to him.

"Gyeagh."

"I owe you one!"

I led Sophia by the hand onto the dragon's back, with Michel, Sasha, and Rosemary following dutifully behind us. As soon as we were all seated, Lord Lars took to the sky with a languid flap of his massive wings. He was odd through and through. Just last year, before he was knighted for his loyalty to the kingdom, he was tiny as a newborn and had a shrill little shriek.

We flew low to avoid being spotted from outside the palace walls, weaving between trees and buildings until we arrived at the palace's front foyer. The nobles assembled a short while before we left were gone—they must have already advanced to the great hall.

"Thank you, Lord Lars!" I called as we dismounted. "You've been a great help!"

"Gyeeeag!"

With a nod of his head, he returned to the detached mansion, where he'd turned one of the rooms into his nest.

We rushed up the stairs, but Michel called us to stop at the top.

"Wait! I have something for Princess Sofia~!" He smiled warmly, leaning down to show the girl the colorful flowers he held. "Please, use this as a replacement for your ribbons."

He combed them through her hair, leaving just a few such that they'd catch the eye but wouldn't seem overdone.

"Thank you, Michel," she said with a little curtsy.

I hate to admit it, but she's pretty cute.

I came to my senses a moment later, quietly pushing open the door. Finally, we were all ready. Father's stress headache would soon be cured.

The great hall was full of people, both nobles from our realm and

representatives of our closest allies. My grandparents were there, in addition to my friends' parents. The capital city, visible only from the balcony, was packed with commoners eager to celebrate. I could hear their cries even from beyond the closed doors.

Sophia's eyes passed over the assembly in awe. "What's everyone doing here?"

"How could you not know that?!"

She was terrifying, a true menace. Sophia was incredibly clever and insightful when she wanted to be, but her refusal to acknowledge anything that didn't immediately interest her gave Father no end of trouble.

For the time being, however, I grabbed her by the hand and led her to where Mother and Father awaited us. They were seated on thrones a step below my grandparents'. As soon as the four of them laid eyes on Sophia, they all smiled.

"It looks like you're ready—and you're not even late," Father remarked.

I gave them both a princely smile. "My apologies for making you all wait."

I respected my parents more than anyone else in the world. They'd thought of nothing but the good of the kingdom even in their youth, and their accomplishments were legendary. Mother, in particular, was still smitten with Father, and she'd tell us about his adventures any chance she got. He'd diligently worked since he was young to excel in every princely art, even mastering magic, and had a brilliant smile that could win any heart. She often lamented that she didn't have enough portraits painted of him in those days.

The most impressive part, however, was how the stories seemed to slip out of her at the oddest moments, as though it were perfectly natural to think of him every waking moment. Lady Margaret, one of Mother's best friends, said she'd been like that even during their time at the Academy. Father would always turn bright red and mutter something about the past staying in the past. He was a reserved, dignified gentleman, so he was undoubtedly embarrassed to hear about himself.

The royal couple had overwhelming support even from abroad, stemming from how they'd fought off a fierce King Cait Sidhe during their wedding. They

were frequently said to be the best of the best, both as a couple and as individuals. Fortunately, they understood the weight that would inevitably place on their children and let us live as freely as we pleased, showing us nothing but care. Of course, in Sophia's case, I was afraid she was a little *too* unrestricted.

To make a long story short, they were both perfect—though, of course, they had the occasional troubling conversation.

"My heart aches with how similar Louie's keen perception is to yours," Father would say.

"Then you should be yourself around him, Vincent," Mother would reply.

"But I'm his father!" he would continue. "I'm supposed to look cool around him."

Even if Father wasn't his true self around me, I tried not to let it bother me. I put all my focus into my studies to become a prince worthy of inheriting the kingdom. For now, my main duty was keeping tabs on Sophia and making sure she didn't get into too much trouble.

I strode across the marble, leading Sophia to our place at our parents' side—beside Vincent von Weissworth and Elizabeth von Weissworth.

"Allow Us to begin!" Grandfather announced with a clap of his hands.

The trumpeters played a resounding fanfare, and Father turned to face Grandfather. The elder removed his crown and extended his arms as if to pass it to his son.

At that moment, I remembered that I had yet to answer Sophia's earlier question. I turned to her.

"Today's the day—the day of Father's coronation!"

Lovestruck Prince! I'll Fight the Heroine for My Villainess Fiancée! Volume 3 Fin

### Extra: Elizabeth's Circumstances

#### "KYE00000000RGH!"

That horrible sound, like metal grinding on metal, reverberated through the palace's halls. I cast aside the papers I'd been looking at to chase the noise. That was Lars' cry, but without any of the cutesy posing he'd usually do. He only made such an utterly draconic sound when there was some dire issue—most likely concerning Elizabeth or her safety.

I knocked at the door that Lars was crying behind but didn't wait to throw it open.

"What's wrong?!"

It was a parlor designed for the queen to hold salons or tea parties. Elizabeth was lying prone on one of the large plush sofas.

"Elizabeth?!"

I dropped to my knees and peered into her face. She was breathing, fortunately, and her complexion was fairly normal. It seemed she'd just passed out. I looked around for Lars, finding him sprawled in a pile in a far corner of the room with Plum. They were both crawling weakly under the sofa, having noticed my arrival.

I wasted no time grabbing the pair by their tails and yanking them free.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"M-Mew..."

"Kyigh..."

Their gazes wandered, and both refused to look at me. That implied there was no direct danger to Elizabeth, which was a relief. Lars would never be so relaxed otherwise.

"Nngh..."

Elizabeth moaned, waking up before I could get either familiar to answer me. She shakily looked about the room as she came to her senses. She had an odd expression, however, and as soon as she spotted me, she froze. She let out a cry of surprise and leapt to the far end of the sofa, away from me.

Wait... I recognize that look...

"Er... Might I ask whose room this is?" she asked dazedly. "To think I'd fall asleep beside a gentleman I've never seen before..."

That was all I needed to hear. I glared down at Lars and Plum with a frigidity that would put even Harold to shame. Hallowyrm and cait sidhe stared at the floor.

"If you know, could you please tell me?" Elizabeth asked. "And if you don't mind, who might you be?"

I could see her try and fail to remember me, but my name never emerged from her lips. Instead, I caught her sighing slightly, her amethyst eyes fixating curiously on me. She was quiet and hadn't "introduced" herself, despite her dedication to proper manners. Then, she hurriedly dropped her gaze, cheeks blushing faintly.

Wait... Is she having a love-at-first-sight moment, too?

The thought made me shy, in turn. I never could've imagined becoming the kind of man she'd fall for at a glance.

"I'm Vincent."

"Lord Vincent," she repeated softly to herself.

Given the circumstances, I had to assume Plum had hit her with the same "loss of one's most precious treasure" affliction that he'd struck me with. That meant I had to catch her up on our relationship and convince the cait sidhe to unseal her memories as well.

I wonder how she'd react if she heard she lived here and that we're already married?

My pulse quickened, half from anticipation and the other fear. Despite her first impression of me, the news would come as a shock. If she hated me in the

slightest, I'd break down crying. That, if nothing else, was proof that my love for her was real.

No, this isn't the time for thinking.

I needed to tell her everything, smoothly and confidently—how much I loved her, how much she loved me, and how worthy I was of her affections. Before I could tell her, there was a subtle shift in her expression—half confidence and half disbelief.

"Wait... C-Could we perhaps be...um..."

She looked up and stared into my eyes as though peering through them and into the depths of my soul. I met her gaze squarely and realized her eyes still had the same wit and determination within.

"A-Are we lovers...? No, I recognize some of these things. We couldn't be... married, could we?"

I could only stare.

"...Am I wrong?" she muttered.

I shook my head. By then, my face was beet-red. "No. You're right."

The tension left her shoulders all at once. "Oh, I knew it."

Her memories couldn't have returned to her. While I was mulling over what to say, she'd arrived at the correct answer on her own.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I may be reading too far into the situation, but it was your eyes. They're as deep and blue as the ocean, and I could feel love in them. There was empathy, gentleness, and worry. But more than that..." She chuckled. "I could tell from the way you smile and how you hold yourself that you put a lot of effort into your appearance. That, and you had the eyes of a puppy desperate not to be abandoned, the kind that made me want to embrace you on the spot. I was hoping so dearly that I was right—that you truly cared for me as much as I hoped you did."

"E-Elizabeth..."

### Drat, I'm still embarrassingly red, aren't I?

Just like when my memories were erased, everything about me and the years we'd spent together was wiped from her memory. All she had to go by was the man standing before her now. She was different from her usual self, granted, but she still accepted me and my feelings as I was and smiled. She was the same angel I knew and loved at heart. I had to cover my face with my arm.

I spent all this time and effort trying to be perfect for her, and she likens me to a sad puppy?!

"I can't imagine you would feel so strongly for anyone you had a passing interest in. There must be a reason." She paused. "Come to think of it, I've heard of a very similar spell to this..."

She looked down at my feet, where Lars and Plum were watching our conversation unfold. A somewhat ill look was on the dragon's face as though he were about to vomit another manacite. Plum was yawning, ignorant of this new development in our relationship.

Elizabeth got up from the sofa to crouch in front of the familiars.

"Lord Lars, Lord Plum, please return my memories to me now."

With that, Elizabeth's memories were restored as quickly as they were taken from her. As for the cause of the problem, it seemed that Plum had a quarrel with Mother. It flew about the halls angrily searching for her when it barged in on Elizabeth by accident, which prompted Lars to leap to her defense. The situation rapidly escalated from there, and Elizabeth ended up on the receiving end of the memory-sealing spell instead.

Ultimately, Plum was forbidden from using magic in the palace again, and Lars was thoroughly reprimanded. He sat with his head drooping throughout the entire lecture—though from the way he wagged his tail from start to finish, I doubted he learned his lesson.

Elizabeth and I sat on the parlor sofa as we put the second memory dilemma behind us in so little time.

"That was a disaster," I muttered.

Elizabeth giggled. "I wouldn't say so. That look in your eyes was no different from when you had your own memories sealed. It's because of that I was able to regain my senses so quickly. You saved the day yet again."

I grimaced a little. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

To be fair, I'd fallen in love at the very sight of her when it was my turn. According to her, she felt the same way back then—even though I'd changed, I was the same man she loved deep down. That was what kept us falling in love with each other, time and time again.

I chuckled. "At this rate, we'd fall in love with each other even if we were reincarnated."

I put my hand in hers, and our fingers entwined. I feared I'd waxed poetic a little too much, but her cheeks were pink with agreement, and she nodded silently but firmly.

**AWAY** from the others, Lars whispered for only Plum to hear, "Looks like no matter which of them loses their memories, they will always fall in love at first sight with each other and not run into any real issues..."

Plum patted the melancholy hallowyrm's white back to console him.

### **Afterword**

**HELLO,** my name is Shakushineko, and I'm the author of this series. Thank you very much for reading the third volume of *Lovestruck Prince!* I certainly hope you enjoyed it. When I saw Yukiko's illustrations for this volume, I nearly cried with happiness at having come so far. Thank you, Yukiko, for such wonderful art! Even I nearly doubted that Vincent and Elizabeth would see eye-to-eye in the first volume, but you helped sell their love in the best way possible.

For the first volume, I emphasized Vincent's actions behind the scenes and his perceived coolness. In the second, Vincent confessed his love but maintained his usual cool-and-composed façade. This time, however, I tried to break him free of that persona in every way I could.

Both the second short story and the inner illustration at the front (where Vincent falls asleep reading a book and Elizabeth finds him and thinks he's adorable) were done with the couple's post-marriage lives in mind. I also wanted to share how Yulisse and Raphael got engaged, as well as the characters' children, so I'm glad I got to include parts of that.

The novels will end here (for now, at least), but the adventures of Vincent, Elizabeth, and their odd friends continue in the manga. I believe that, at the time of writing, new manga chapters are slated to be released on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month in Japan. My thanks go out to Mimu Oyamada, who drew the manga version of Vincent with such ease that even I was surprised he was so capable! There will also be a prose bonus story on the next Japanese digital edition of the manga, so please keep an eye out for that!

Time has flown by in the two years since I began writing this story. I would like to thank my editor, Narabi, and the rest of the editorial department for helping make this series a reality. Also, many thanks to the readers, without whom I wouldn't have been able to write so much. Thank you for bearing witness to Vincent and Elizabeth's (though mostly Vincent's) tale of love.

I hope to see you again someday!

Shakushineko, March 1<sup>st</sup> 2022



## Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

#### By Hiironoame

Illust Misumi

Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?

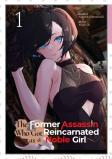


Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

#### By Syuu

llust Muni

Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



# The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By Satsuki Otonashi Illust MiRea

#### High Society Is Rough For Assassins!

A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!









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