

NOVEL 8

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THE MOST  
**HERETICAL**  
LAST BOSS QUEEN  
FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR



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WRITTEN BY  
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*Seven Seas Entertainment*



# Characters



## ❧Pride❧

The firstborn princess of the kingdom of Freesia. At age eight, she realized she'd been reborn as the last boss queen from an otome game called "ORL" that she played in her past life. Pride is determined to do all she can to prevent the tragedies the love interests experience in the game, as well as work tirelessly for her country and people. Her wit and combat skills endow her with such extraordinary power, it's like she's cheating. Pride possesses the special power of precognition.

## ❧Stale❧

The firstborn prince and Pride's younger adoptive brother. A love interest in the original otome game. Stale possesses the special power of teleportation. He signed a subordination contract with Pride.

## ❧Arthur❧

The vice captain of the Eighth Squadron of the Freesian royal order of knights. A love interest in the original otome game. Arthur possesses the special power to cure all diseases. He serves as one of Pride's imperial knights.

## ❧Tiara❧

The second-born princess and Pride's younger sister. Delicate and beautiful, Tiara is also the heroine of the otome.

## ❧Rosa❧

Pride's mother and queen of Freesia. Rosa possesses the special power of precognition.

## ❧Albert❧

Pride's father and prince consort of Freesia.

## ❧Vest❧

Pride's uncle and the queen's adoptive younger brother. Serves as the Freesian seneschal.

## ❧Gilbert❧

Prime minister of Freesia. A love interest in the original otome game. Gilbert possesses the special power of age control.

## ❧Roderick❧

Commander of the Freesian royal order of knights and Arthur's father. Possesses the special power to nullify all attacks with bladed weapons.

## ❧Clark❧

Vice commander of the Freesian royal order. A good friend of Roderick's.



### Alan

Captain of the First Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

### Eric

Vice captain of the First Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

### Callum

Captain of the Third Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

### Harrison

Captain of the Eighth Squadron of the royal order.

### Val

A former thief who entered into a fealty contract with Pride. Currently works as a delivery man. Possesses the special power of earth sculpting.

### Khemet

A former orphan. Possesses the power to amplify others' special abilities. Sefekh's little brother.

### Sefekh

A former orphan. Possesses the power to produce water. Khemet's older sister.

### The Kingdom of Anemone

### Leon

The firstborn prince of Anemone. Pride's ex-fiancé. One of the love interests in the original otome game.

### Rajah Empire

### Adam

Crown prince of Rajah. Has conquered many lands and expanded the empire's domain.

### The United Hanazuo Kingdom

### Cedric

The prince and younger brother of the Cercian king. A love interest in the original otome game. Cedric came to Freesia himself to first propose the alliance.

### Lance

King of Cercis. Cedric's older brother. A good friend of Yohan's.

### Yohan

King of Chinensis and a very religious man. A good friend of Lance's.

## Vocabulary

**The Kingdom of Freesia:** A great kingdom ruled by queens with the special power of precognition. The only country in the world where people with special powers are born.

**The Kingdom of Anemone:** A neighboring country of Freesia. One of the biggest trading hubs in the world.

**The United Hanazuo Kingdom:** A country founded by the union of Cercis, a land rich with gold, and Chinensis, a land famous for its minerals.

**Rajah Empire:** The largest slave-producing country. They expand their territory by enslaving people and invading other lands.

**Our Ray of Light (ORL):** The otome game Pride played in her past life. This title was so popular, it was expanded into a series.



Higeki no Genkyoutonaru Saikyou Gedou Rasubosu

Joou wa Taminotameni Tsukushimasu. Vol. 8

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## Chapter 1:

### The Shunned Princess and the Birthday Party

“LET’S GO, Elder Sister.”

“Big Sister! Everyone’s waiting!”

After preparing nearly all day long, I took my first step forward in my extravagant dress. My adorable little sister, Tiara, with her wavy golden hair arrayed around her, awaited me—as did my equally adorable adoptive brother, Stale. We’d only recently celebrated our victory in the war with a delightful dinner, but we intended to surpass that by leaps and bounds with tonight’s party. A large crowd anticipated my arrival, including Mother, Father, and all the others I’d met along this journey. As for the occasion...

“Okay, let’s head out!”

Today was my eighteenth birthday party.

“Happy birthday, Princess Pride.”

I thanked each guest in turn as they greeted me with well-wishes and kind words. I, Pride Royal Ivy, was the firstborn princess of Freesia, a woman with wavy crimson hair and purple eyes that curved upward at the corners. But I was also the wicked and cruel last boss queen from the first installment of the *Our Ray of Light* otome game series. At the age of eight, I regained my memories of my past life. That moment felt like only yesterday, yet here I was turning eighteen years old.

Intricate embroidery spilled down my red dress, the embellishments even more elaborate than usual. I could wear a more mature style of gown now that I filled out the bust better. Only two years ago, my dresses had looked so sad and empty in the front—but no longer. The matter of busts aside, there was an



important reason why I held my head high tonight. My kingdom would soon implement a brand-new public school system.

“Elder Sister, are you feeling all right?” Stale whispered as he sidled up to me. The firstborn prince was one year younger than me, with jet-black hair and eyes to match. He wore a pair of black-framed glasses, but only for looks.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied, which made him smile.

After my birthday party two years ago, when Leon first appeared in my life, Stale began checking in on my health and mood during large, formal gatherings such as this. He told me he was determined to notice the next time something was wrong with me. Leon’s appearance back then not only flustered me, but it also led to events that impacted the people in my life. To this day, those events weighed on Stale’s mind, leaving him even more impressively vigilant than ever. Despite everyone around him pulling him in different directions as the country eagerly anticipated him stepping up into the role of seneschal, he never failed to make time for me.

“Call me if you need me at any time,” he told me before heading back to the other guests. His elegant strides and confident posture truly embodied the poise of a firstborn prince.

I was still reflecting on Stale’s growth when more guests arrived to greet me. I smiled when they wished me a happy birthday.

“By the way, Princess Pride...is there anyone special in your life at the moment?”

I’d answered this question far too many times, yet I still didn’t quite know how to respond to it. The man asking this time, the second-born prince of Veronica, hadn’t inquired with any ill intentions. In fact, his cheeks flushed red as he spoke even though we’d spoken at plenty of previous gatherings. He didn’t strike me as someone trying to antagonize me, especially given how tense he was. Either he was simply making conversation or he was genuinely worried about my future.



My smile went taut. “I’m sorry, but I can’t speak on that matter.”

The prince’s shoulders sagged. Perhaps he was feeling disappointed at having touched on the wrong topic. He politely took his leave.

*I genuinely am sorry about that.*

One by one, a string of men greeted me, then left with those same slumped shoulders. Mother had forbidden Tiara and I from speaking on the subject, so I truly couldn’t entertain such talk at all, even if these poor men were desperate to find a topic of conversation with the crown princess... *Oh, Stale just ended his chat with a guest to smile at me.* Was he bewildered by my poor conversational skills? No, his smile looked oddly sinister.

“Happy birthday, Pride.”

I gasped and spun toward the familiar voice. There stood Leon, firstborn prince of Anemone, the kingdom bordering ours. The man had blue hair, jade eyes, and androgynous facial features. He was also my sworn friend. I relaxed at the sight of my trusted companion arriving to break up the barrage of party guests. Leon grinned at me, a glass of wine in one hand.

“Tonight’s wine is delicious,” he said after I thanked him for his birthday wishes. Only then did I realize I’d completely ignored my own glass during the flurry of introductions. Leon was looking out for me. I thanked him again, and the two of us sipped our wine.

“You’re as popular as ever, Pride,” Leon said. “You sure there’s no one out there who’s caught your eye?”

My smile stiffened yet again. I gave Leon the routine response I’d given every other guest, which seemed to surprise him.

“I see,” he replied, easing back into his usual smile. “You’re busy, I know. Though not overexerting yourself, I hope?”

Leon was truly a perfect man. He worked his appreciation for me into the conversation like it was the most natural thing in the world. With gratitude still



at the forefront of my mind, I told him I was perfectly fine.

“Do you think you’ve spoken with everyone by now?”

“Yes, I’ve finished with most of the guests. I believe Mother will be speaking soon.”

The majority of Freesia’s allies were gathered here for my birthday. Mother had also noted on each invitation that she would make an important announcement tonight, so the event was much more crowded than last year. Leon scanned the room when I brought up the announcement.

“That reminds me...did you already chat with the guests from Hanazuo?”

Thinking of our dear allies from the kingdoms of Cercis and Chinensis—now united under one nation of Hanazuo—I shook my head. I’d had to contend with an overwhelming line of guests myself, but Hanazuo’s representatives had amassed quite a crowd of their own. Leon and I searched for them, but we couldn’t find them among the sea of people. All I caught were glimpses of gold hair that probably belonged to King Lance.

Hanazuo had allied with our kingdom in particular, but nations throughout the world had waited a *long* time to establish trade agreements with them due to their abundance of gold and minerals. Even from where Leon and I stood, I could hear the other guests petitioning the two kings for formal talks.

“What about you?” I asked Leon.

“I haven’t been able to speak to them either. I figured they’d rather talk to you first...and since Anemone already has a trade agreement with Hanazuo, it just felt wrong to interrupt all the other kingdoms’ negotiations.”

Leon went on to tell me that immediately after Anemone abolished institutional slavery in their country, they’d entered into discussions about an alliance with King Lance and King Yohan. Anemone still recognized slaves from other countries, but Leon had a wonderful reputation within the United Hanazuo Kingdom after he saved so many of their people during the war. I’d



heard many of those civilians now idolized him. As I recalled, Val had accompanied him during those efforts. Sadly, I never heard any talk of Val gaining fans the way Leon did.

The Anemonian prince had spent the past year... *No, it must have been two years by now.* He'd spent the past two years frequenting social events outside of his kingdom and accruing more popularity. His personality, his political acumen, and his sense for matters of commerce captured the hearts of royals and nobles from all around the world. He was widely praised by women, of course, but even men fell to his charms.

Leon had gone his whole life without attending many foreign events until just recently. His kingdom explained this away by saying they were merely reluctant to part with him. Even now, several young ladies watched us from across the room, blushes on their faces. It seemed Leon had lost none of his popularity with princesses and young noblewomen. He'd long since grown accustomed to this experience, so he stood casually, unaffected by all those inquisitive eyes.

I'd once heard that Leon had no intention of searching for a fiancée until it was time to take the throne. He even told me that he refused to get engaged before I did. Frankly, that put a lot of pressure on me, though it *was* nice of him to keep Freesia and his former fiancée in mind. His kingdom supported this plan, so perhaps it was only natural of him to be so considerate. Too often, women were the ones left with stains on their reputations when marriage plans fell through.

"I do want to talk to them," Leon went on. "I'd like to greet King Lance, but it would be nice to speak with King Yohan...and Prince Cedric too."

A keen light glinted in Leon's eyes. I couldn't help remembering how Leon had supposedly been the victim of poor treatment by Cedric, but I didn't know any of the details. Ruling out the time when Cedric ate the food and cookies I'd made for someone else, I felt bad that his reputation still earned him enemies behind the scenes. Not that he was entirely innocent.



“All right... It’s time I resume making the rounds,” Leon said. “We were engaged once, so rumors might spread if we spend too much time together.”

With that, Leon stepped away. As I said goodbye, he murmured, “Oh, one more thing.” A smile spread across his lips. “That dress looks lovely on you. Without a doubt, you’re the most beautiful person in the room...almost too beautiful for my heart to take.”

His charming smile, his natural allure—it made my heart skip a beat. Leon’s pale skin flushed as my own face grew hot. He was only being nice, of course, but he seemed to have embarrassed himself as well with that one. His bashfulness transformed into a beguiling aura so strong, I nearly dropped my wine. I barely managed to catch myself before I made a scene.

Still a step away, Leon glanced around, then leaned toward me to whisper, “Don’t make that cute face at any other young noblemen or princes, okay? You’ll take their hearts captive.”

*Again with that?!* He was really laying it on thick tonight. My face burned as hot as the sun. His sheer sensuality overwhelmed me, rendering me mute and motionless. But Leon, who was no longer blushing, simply smiled and gave me a lighthearted “until next time” before leaving me where I stood. *Someone so charming should be just as worried about taking hearts captive!* Though, come to think of it, I’d never seen Leon dial up the charm like that in front of any other woman. Maybe he let his guard down around his inner circle.

I fanned my face, took several calming breaths, and gulped down some more wine. My next visitor was an archduke from the kingdom of Clematis, and I regained my composure in time to greet him properly.

\*\*\*

“Oh man, Princess Pride looks so pretty tonight.”

Captain Alan tugged at the collar of his uniform as if to let steam billow out. Vice Captain Eric and I nodded in agreement and drank our wine. We’d greeted Princess Pride a while ago, but even a glance across the room at her heated me



up all over again.

My name was Arthur Beresford. I had blue eyes and silver hair bound in a ponytail—both of which I'd inherited from my dad. My service to Princess Pride as one of her imperial knights had secured me an invitation to her birthday party. The man beside me with short, golden-brown hair and orange eyes was Captain Alan, leader of the First Squadron. As for the man with the chestnut-colored hair and matching eyes, he was Vice Captain Eric. Just like me—the new captain of the Eighth Squadron—they served as Princess Pride's imperial knights.

"Didn't you say the same thing at her birthday last year, Alan?" asked Clark, the vice commander of the royal knights. "I don't remember you acting so nervous then."

Clark's eyes glittered with amusement as he watched Captain Alan. A bit farther away, my dad—the commander himself—was still busy greeting party guests. Times like these made me realize how hard his job could be. He seldom smiled or chatted with anyone other than Clark, but tonight he had to take on a whole ballroom of people eager to speak with him.

"Well, a lot's happened," Captain Alan said to Clark. "Don't you agree, Callum?"

Captain Callum, leader of the Third Squadron and a fellow imperial knight, muttered, "I guess..." He brushed his reddish-brown bangs aside, his matching eyes sliding over to Princess Pride.

"We've been to a few of her parties now, but I still can't believe I get invited to such formal events," Vice Captain Eric said.

I nodded in agreement. I didn't feel like I fit in at events like these, even in my current capacity. These sorts of things were way out of my league.

"You're Her Highness's imperial knights," Clark said. "Hold your heads up high."



He'd directed his comment at both Vice Captain Eric and myself, but his words only made me feel *less* worthy of personally guarding Princess Pride—even if it was my job. That said, I wasn't going anywhere. No matter what, I would remain staunchly by her side.

Princess Pride's popularity did not flag the entire night. Both before and after we'd greeted her, an unending line of royalty and nobles were waiting to get her attention. It did seem like they were wrapping up their chats a lot faster than normal tonight, however.

Two years had passed since Princess Pride's engagement was annulled, and I hadn't heard a peep about her seeing anyone else since. She attended all sorts of social functions, but as far as I knew, she didn't have a special someone in her life. And she still received tons of letters that she never responded to.

*Yeah, letters...*

*"No matter what happens..."*

My whole body flushed as a memory flashed through my mind. I hung my head so the others couldn't see me, which backfired when Captain Callum asked, "What's wrong?"

I told him I was fine and downed the rest of my wine. After a few deep breaths, I said I was only flushed because of the booze. Then I followed Captain Callum's gaze and caught sight of Pride, who practically glowed even from a distance.

She looked so pretty when she smiled, sometimes even covering her mouth to laugh. It was hard to believe I got to serve a woman like that. Her bright-red dress complemented her elegantly styled hair. Gazing at her left me wondering how she could possibly be an ordinary human like I was.

*"Captivating, isn't she?"*

*What?!* I jumped when a voice called out to me.

*"I believe the man next to her is Lord Ackroyd from the kingdom of Yaburan."*



Though I managed not to shriek, my jerk of surprise sent the last few drops of my wine flying out of its glass. Caught off guard by my reaction, the man beside me flashed a charming smile and apologized for scaring me. He even asked a waiter to bring me another glass of wine. Burning with embarrassment, I straightened so I could respond. *Damn. I've really got my head in the clouds.*

"I sincerely apologize, Prince Leon."

I'd seen him greet Princess Pride just a bit earlier; now he'd come to say hello to us knights. He looked me up and down before letting out a little sigh of relief. "Good. You didn't get any on your uniform."

He greeted Clark, Vice Captain Eric, and the others—all of whom seemed just as startled as I was—before turning back to me.

"I just spoke with Captain Roderick, and I was hoping to talk to you too."

Prince Leon handed me the new glass of wine as it arrived, offering me an effortless smile. I took it, thanked him, and met the prince's gaze.

"Me?"

"That's right, *Captain* Arthur. You."

Tension gripped my body at the sight of his wide smile. We'd had our differences two years ago, but these days, I thought of him as a great prince. In fact, it was good to see him smile from the heart instead of the creepy fake one he usually wore...just not when he was coming to talk to *me*, for whatever reason.

Princess Pride had told me that Prince Leon was the one who'd supplied the ingredients for the party celebrating my promotion. I'd thanked him during one of his visits to Freesia, to which he'd replied, "*The party went well, didn't it? That's great to hear.*" That, and he'd congratulated me on my promotion to captain. He had even been the one to provide weapons from Anemone and defend Hanazuo's border gates during the defensive war.

"It's very impressive how you've climbed to vice captain and then to captain,



all in the less than two years I've known you."

"Thank you. I still have a lot to learn, but it's an honor to receive your praise."

I bowed, and Prince Leon smiled softly. The prince was a year younger than me, yet so much more mature. I'd expect nothing less from Anemone's crown prince...though I knew he'd gone through his own fair share of struggles. Rumor had it that he and Princess Pride might even get back together, since to this day neither of them had entertained any other marriage proposals. Both of them tended to laugh off the gossip and insist it wasn't true. They *did* look good together when I saw them chatting earlier, though. All the other guests, men and women alike, couldn't help noticing when they stood side by side.

"Pride, Prince Stale, and Princess Tiara all boast about what a brilliant knight you are." Voice dropping to a whisper, he added, "Even the other imperial knights brag about you when you're out of earshot."

How mortifying to hear it directly! His honest smile suggested he wasn't just being polite, that he meant what he said. I had to look away before my joy spilled out.

"Have you always dreamt of being a knight, Arthur?"

"Oh, uh... No, I haven't. I thought I'd like to be a knight someday, but I only got serious about it when I was thirteen. It's a little embarrassing to talk about, though."

I'd been asked that many times in social settings. It was a simple question and easy enough to answer appropriately...but right now, I didn't feel like dancing around the whole truth the way I usually would. Prince Leon seemed surprised, but his warm tone suggested he was also impressed.

"Wow, you must have put in an extraordinary amount of effort. I deeply respect you for that."

His smile softened even more, and my jaw dropped. The man before me barely resembled the person I'd met two years ago. It wasn't like people hadn't



praised me and told me I was a prodigy before, but this sort of compliment was pretty unusual.

“It’s the truth,” he said once I thanked him.

He extended his glass toward me, and I timidly clinked my own against it. Interacting with a firstborn prince made me nervous, but then I remembered Stale was one too. *How come I get to talk to so many amazing people all the time?*

Prince Leon took a drink from his glass, then smiled at me again. “That reminds me. Just between the two of us, how many times have you officially celebrated Pride’s birthday, Arthur?”

“I only got invitations to her birthday parties once I became an imperial knight, so—”

“That’s not what I mean.”

As I puzzled over his question, he gave a bemused shrug. He swept a quick glance over the room before leaning close to my ear.

“Apologies, I should rephrase,” he murmured. “I’m asking if you give her birthday presents every year.”

“What?! Wh-what are you...?!”

My face flushed bright red. *What the hell is this guy talkin’ about?!* I recoiled, but Prince Leon blinked, apparently as startled as me.

“My, you don’t get her anything?!”

Maybe he couldn’t believe his ears, but that only left me at more of a loss. I didn’t want to lie to a prince, so I asked why he wanted to know about this in the first place, and his smile turned shy.

“I’ve never been able to send Pride a personal birthday present due to my position. But I have something in mind, you see. I tried to go to Val for advice, but he told me to ask you or Stale about this sort of thing.”



*So this is all his fault?!* Blood rushed to my head. I knew Val had been in communication with Prince Leon for the past two years, but now he'd gone and made a mess for Stale and me to clean up. *Why'd he even mention my name?! It's not like I've got a lot of experience givin' presents to women. Stale's the one who knows a lot about social conventions, so why did he think I'd be any help?!*

I'd be sure to give Val an earful the next time I saw him. I sighed. Why would Prince Leon go to Val for advice in the first place? None of this made a lick of sense.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know much about this sort of thing."

It wasn't much of an answer. Prince Leon deflated a bit, replying simply, "I see."

I felt like I'd done something wrong, so I hurriedly added, "Princess Pride will probably love whatever you pick."

Prince Leon cocked his head, his jade-green eyes going wide. Once his shock subsided, his usual cheer returned. I looked away, unable to shake the feeling that I'd only said whatever he wanted to hear—but I was certain the princess really would feel that way.

His hand settled on my shoulder, and I looked up to find Prince Leon staring straight at me with that charming smile of his. An oddly entrancing glimmer lit up the prince's bright eyes when he thanked me.

"I'll send her my present soon," he said. "And something for you too."

I couldn't contain my shock. "What?! No, you don't have to! That's too much!"

Yet Prince Leon, his hand still on my shoulder, just said, "It's a late gift to commemorate your promotion."

Before I could understand what he was giving me, he revealed that he was planning on finding a gift for "everyone." He donned a boyish grin as he made this pronouncement, and it immediately put me on guard.



“I think you’re just the sort of people who will enjoy it,” he said.

There was no denying it: this wasn’t the same man I’d met two years ago. His joy had even wormed its way into my heart. I couldn’t ruin this for him, so I told him it was an honor.

“By the way, when’s *your* birthday?” Prince Leon asked.

I let him know the date, too confused about how that was relevant to withhold it.

“Got it,” he said, then asked Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric for their birthdays too. “I can’t give Arthur special treatment, you see.”

The prince’s smile curled at the corners as he took in our bewilderment. He looked a little like Stale when he was hatching a scheme.

Prince Leon exchanged a few pleasantries with Clark before he left. As soon as he slipped away from us, nobles and royalty swallowed him up in a swarm. A single thought broke through my daze: the prince was truly an incredible person.

\*\*\*

“Hello there, Prince Stale. I want to wish Princess Pride the happiest of birthdays this year.”

I turned to face Prince Leon as he addressed me. I’d been too lost in my conversations with guests to notice his approach. Prince Leon himself had been overwhelmed by the other guests, but he must have fended them off long enough to greet me. We said hello and toasted with our wine glasses.

“Time sure flies, doesn’t it?” he said. “It’s hard to believe Pride is already eighteen.”

“Yes. I doubt it will be long now before Elder Sister’s coronation.”

“She’s so impressive,” Prince Leon replied with a smile.

Uncle Vest had told me that it was only a matter of time before Prince Leon



took the Anemonian throne. Word of his skills and good character had already spread throughout their neighboring countries. By any estimation, he'd soon become the face of Anemone. I understood why everyone thought the country was reluctant to part with him, believing that was why he'd been absent from social events until two years ago.

"Your birthday is next month, isn't it, Prince Stale? I'd be honored to celebrate that occasion as well."

"Thank you. You're more than welcome to attend after the wonderful parties you've invited us to."

Anemone had started holding lavish birthday parties for Prince Leon. As Mother was Freesia's queen, she'd been invited to Anemonian ceremonies many times throughout the years, but Prince Leon was always "feeling unwell" and never in attendance. The second-and third-born princes had also gone without large-scale birthday parties, keeping the celebrations strictly to their own countrymen. This was all because of the rampant, malicious rumors surrounding Prince Leon at the time.

These days, Prince Leon enjoyed a far better reputation. Women couldn't hold in their squeals whenever he appeared at a big event such as this. I'd even heard of royalty and nobles who struck up social or business relationships with the kingdom just to get closer to Prince Leon. The same went for Freesia because of our own firstborn princess.

"Pride is incredibly popular," Prince Leon said. "I'm so proud of my former fiancée."

He chuckled and quietly added that he was only joking, but it kind of felt like he'd read my mind. I followed his gaze to the line of men waiting to greet Pride. She frequently ended up in lengthy conversations during these sorts of events, but she was doing a good job of turning guests down to keep the line moving. A smile tried to creep onto my lips each time yet another man slouched away from her, shoulders hunched in defeat. It was their own fault for thinking they



could claim her for themselves after only a few brief meetings.

“Indeed,” I said. “As her adoptive brother, I’m happy about it too. She’s a blessing to me and the entire kingdom.”

“I’m jealous,” Prince Leon murmured, that fetching smile still gracing his lips. His jade-green eyes wavered, but I couldn’t pinpoint why. Was it because of my elder sister’s popularity? The princes and young noblemen boldly flaunting their interest in her? Or was he reacting to Pride as someone her brother boasted of so proudly?

“Ah, that reminds me...”

Taking note of my probing look, Prince Leon downed the rest of his wine and snatched up a new glass from a waitress. He asked me if I wanted one too, but I had plenty of wine left. He raised his glass, lips quirking upward, and shifted the subject of conversation.

“Have you already spoken with the guests from the United Hanazuo Kingdom, Prince Stale?”

My eyes drifted to the opposite end of the room from where Pride stood—to the area occupied by the representatives of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. This was the first official event they’d attended, which garnered them a staggering amount of attention.

Hanazuo’s representatives proved even more popular than Prince Leon. They were second only to Pride, the star of the event. The once-closed kingdom had formed a trade agreement with Anemone and an alliance with Freesia, and now it was preparing to open its borders. Of course the guests would see this as an opportunity to seek trade and alliances with Hanazuo.

Freesia’s reputation had also become more favorable since we secured an alliance with Hanazuo. Our participation in the defensive war and our peace treaty with the Rajah Empire boosted our homeland’s fame further still.

“Not yet, unfortunately,” I said. “But they’ll probably speak with Elder Sister



soon, so I hope that provides an opportunity for Tiara and myself to greet them.”

As I spoke, I realized the crowd had finally started to move on from their current targets. King Yohan skillfully evaded the guests while King Lance, the tallest of the bunch, had them part so he could pass. Prince Cedric followed, responding politely to every guest who called out to him.

Cedric Silva Lowell. He was the second-born prince and younger brother of King Lance. Recently, he’d been given the formal title “royal prince.” His brother was impressive enough, but Prince Cedric drew every eye in the room with his red eyes and shoulder-length golden hair that fluttered as he walked. But it was his handsome, masculine features that *really* made him stand out. Every woman he passed stopped to watch him, their cheeks heating as they were rooted to the spot. Cedric had cut down on the noisy accessories he used to wear and started styling his hair more neatly as well.

As we observed Hanazuo’s royalty, Prince Leon replied, “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Then he seemed to remember something else. “Oh, thank you very much for your...*cooperation* during the war. I hope the two of us can continue our amicable relationship.”

His words were laden with implications. A bewitching light glinted in his eyes. I knew what he was referring to, and I told him I agreed before shaking his hand. Prince Leon may have hailed from the kingdom of Anemone, but I wouldn’t mind having him as an ally. Pride had rescued him just like she’d rescued me and Arthur, so I hoped from the bottom of my heart that Leon would continue to find his own happiness in his homeland.

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“Happy birthday, Princess Pride.”

The guests from the United Hanazuo Kingdom, our newest ally, had finally broken free from the crowd swarming them and come to say hello. I thanked them, returned the trio’s greetings, and shook their hands. When Cedric placed



a kiss on the back of mine, memories flashed through my mind and made me stiffen. Yet he held both my hand and my gaze with full composure.

“The United Hanazuo Kingdom is such an attraction at this party,” I said. “We’re very proud to see our ally flourishing.”

“We owe it all to you, Princess Pride,” King Yohan responded with a smile. The king of Chinensis, a deeply religious nation, had sleek white hair and golden eyes partially hidden behind a pair of thin-framed glasses.

Most of our allies disapproved of slavery within their borders, and next to none had their own institutions promoting the practice. For that reason, I hoped Chinensis would be able to find other nations to form friendly relations with.

“We’re making steady progress on opening up the country again, thanks to Freesia,” King Lance chimed in. “We owe Seneschal Vest our gratitude for his help.”

It was heartening to receive such praise from a strong figure like King Lance. His long, golden hair spilled over his shoulders, and his eyes burned a fiery red. He was as striking and distinctive as Cercis, the country he ruled.

After being closed off to the outside world for almost a century, Hanazuo had suffered extensive damage during the war. Mother had done everything in her power to support them. She ordered Uncle Vest, her right-hand man, to guide them and provide any aid they needed as they worked to open up their country anew. Even Stale got involved in the process, writing correspondence in his capacity as Uncle Vest’s protégé, but King Lance and King Yohan probably didn’t know that. I was so pleased to hear them say they’d received the help they needed.

While the three of us enjoyed a pleasant chat, King Lance cast a look at the man waiting behind him. Cedric had already wished me a happy birthday, but afterward he did nothing but stand behind the kings and smile. Now he finally stepped forward with King Lance’s permission.



“It’s good to see you again, Pride,” Cedric said. “I hope you’ll stay on friendly terms with my brothers.”

Cedric’s bow was hardly more than a nod. A faint flush blossomed on his cheeks. Judging by his calm smile, however, it seemed like he’d finally become accustomed to proper etiquette. More importantly, I was grateful that he’d done away with the exaggerated formalities.

“I’m happy to see you too, Cedric. Thanks for talking with me like you used to.”

“Sorry for the bother...but I still feel as though I ought to converse with you as I did when last we spoke.”

I chuckled at his increasingly stilted words and raised my glass to Cedric. “That’s not true. You’re a royal prince and I’m a firstborn princess. Shouldn’t I be the one speaking more formally, Prince Cedric?”

“I beg you cease... No, I mean...don’t do that...or I’ll have to talk like you too.”

He averted his gaze, embarrassment burning in his cheeks as he fumbled his response. King Lance and King Yohan couldn’t hide their laughter. They were still brothers, no matter what lofty social status they reached.

Their interaction jogged my memory.

“I’m relieved,” I said. “It looks like you’ll be able to speak to Tiara properly now that you’ve calmed down.”

*Fwoom!* Cedric lit up like a torch. He slapped a hand over his mouth and looked down at the floor to hide his blush.

“Um, Cedric?”

I could hardly believe this reaction. Yet I managed to control my expression and keep my gaze fixed on him.

“I’m sorry!” came his muffled reply, but he was red all the way to the tips of his ears.



King Lance and King Yohan were trying their best to smile, but to no avail. They were definitely aware of Cedric's feelings for Tiara. If he was already acting like this just from hearing her name, there was little hope of him speaking normally to her. Tiara had told him to drop the formal speech the last time they met, so now I was worried she might scold him again. *Come to think of it, what will happen when he hears Mother's announcement later tonight?*

"Is something wrong, Elder Sister?"

Stale's voice broke through my musing, and I turned toward him. I assumed he'd come to check on me, given his smooth entrance and the smile on his face. Before I could respond, Stale greeted the kings and the prince. Cedric was still red as a beet, but he pried his hand from his mouth and acknowledged Stale. Then Stale looked at me again, a question in his eyes.

"I'm perfectly fine," I told him. "We're just enjoying our conversation."

"So you are. And what sort of conversation would this be?"

The harshness in his voice left me lost for words. I glanced at Cedric, hoping for some help, but he looked even more desperate than I felt.

*Okay, I probably shouldn't say anything.* How could I ever tell Stale that Cedric was in love with his dearest, adorable little sister? *Love... Oh no! Now I'm blushing just thinking about it!*

I'd now lived two separate lives up to the age of eighteen, yet experienced romance in neither. Not only was this a love between people close to me, but one party was also the heroine of an otome game—and, more importantly, my younger sister! Heat flooded my body as I contemplated witnessing a real-life love story play out in front of me.

"Elder Sister, what are you...?!"

Stale's eyes went wide, but the more I thought on the matter, the less I could stuff down the embarrassment burning me up. When had I begun fanning my face? I looked around for a distraction, only to lock eyes with Arthur in a corner



of the ballroom. He looked even more stunned than Stale. I considered waving to him, but I could tell this wasn't the time.

"I was just telling Cedric...that I'm really glad he's talking to me like before," I said at last. Stale would believe this; it wasn't even technically a lie. "Remember how stiff he was when we last met?"

"No, I daresay I ought to speak to Princess Pride with due respect at all times!"

"That's just not true! I *want* you to talk to me like we're friends. I much prefer you this way."

The flustered Cedric had defaulted back to overly formal speech, but at least his willingness to play along helped me cool down. Still blushing, he thanked me...somehow turning even redder as he did. Tiara wasn't around, so I couldn't fathom what had caused this. I searched his face for an answer, only for him to hang his head. I followed the path of his eyes and realized what he'd seen.

"Just *what* is the matter, you two?"

Stale's smile turned sinister as Cedric and I struggled to navigate this conversation. Perhaps he realized we'd been discussing Tiara. Either way, that bone-chilling smirk turned Cedric's face an even deeper shade of crimson. I almost wondered why he'd turned red instead of white—but I had a pretty good guess.

Cedric was referred to as "God's Child" in Hanazuo due to his impeccable memory. He'd probably just recalled a time when he disrespected me and provoked Stale's wrath. Stale had been the one to yell at him in my place when Cedric ate my cookies, and his fury had flared up just as hot when Cedric tried to apologize. The memory of that moment would have returned to Cedric with every last detail intact, forcing him to replay the mortifying ordeal with perfect clarity. That would certainly make it hard for him to conquer parts of his past.

Still, this was a public setting, so Stale made sure to smile pleasantly enough at Cedric, though I knew that grin would turn more vicious if Stale didn't have to



worry about prying eyes. I couldn't see why Cedric focused so much on Stale instead of me, the person he'd actually disrespected. *Not that I want him nearly dying of shame whenever he looks at me.*

"Forgive me! I've acted disgracefully before you, Prince Stale..."

Cedric finally found the determination to lift his head. He did redden a little more when he laid eyes on Stale, but he held his nerve and met Stale's gaze. It was actually kind of heartwarming to see him trying so hard.

"No, that's all right," Stale replied.

He'd already managed to check in on me, which I figured was his objective in coming over here, but that didn't mean he could slink away while in the presence of three members of royalty. Maybe he'd continued to talk to them because he knew I was tired and needed a break.

"Now that you've spoken to us, you'll want to see Tiara next, correct?" Stale went on. "I'm sure speaking with my elder sister alone won't be enough. Our country is very proud of our second-born princess as well."

Stale smiled, but Cedric's poor flushed face burned all over again. This time, there was no doubt that he was reacting to Tiara's name in particular. Did Stale know how he felt? Smile never faltering, Stale offered to lead Cedric to Tiara, but Cedric politely refused. He said he didn't want to leave me in the middle of our conversation—though he had to know Stale had seen right through him. *It'd be cute if he was trying to wait for an opportunity to talk to her alone later.*

Swaying on his feet, Cedric thanked Stale and took a sip of wine. His eyes sought Tiara all on their own, and he blushed again. This whole time, Tiara had been busy greeting guests. On her next birthday, Tiara would turn sixteen, but the adorable and dainty princess was already popular with men. After greeting me, the star of the show, most of the young noblemen and princes lined right up for Tiara. Soon enough, they all trudged away with the same dejected posture they left me with. She was probably answering their questions the same way I had.



As Tiara smiled and struck up a chat with a young man, Cedric's blush disappeared and his brow furrowed deeply. *What are you, a lovestruck maiden?!* It was hard not to shout at him. He was as irritable as ever, but he whipped back around to Stale and me, as we were in the middle of a conversation.

"My brothers and I would be delighted to greet Princess Tiara after this," he said.

Cedric sounded calm, and it gave me hope that he could manage the situation with his big brothers alongside him. But if Tiara yelled at him and he turned red in front of all the other guests... Well, that was a risk he'd just have to take.

"Actually, I just remembered I have something to discuss with her too. May I join you?" I said.

I was the only one who really understood what was going on between Tiara and Cedric, so I couldn't walk away. I felt bad about interrupting Cedric's plans to be alone with her, but the whole situation made me too nervous. There were a lot of ways he could screw this up.

Stale was a little taken aback by my suggestion. When he offered to join us, Cedric's eyes darted around, but the two kings smirked. They knew to take Stale up on his offer.

"All right, Cedric. Let's get going! We'd better be quick, before Mother begins her announcement."

Cedric was too anxious to take a single step, so I put my hands on his back and gave him a push. He stumbled forward, his face bright red. It wasn't unusual for men to blush when they spoke with Tiara, so it wouldn't cause much of a fuss if people saw his feelings for her written all over his face. Then again, if *Tiara* was the one with her feelings on display, that would be a different story.

"Wait, Pride!" the blond prince pleaded in a whisper. "I'm not ready!" But it was now or never. I wasn't planning something silly like pairing her up with a man she hated just to send her down the Cedric route. I didn't really ship them



at all. I only wanted to clear up the misunderstandings so Cedric could cure himself of his chronic blushing.

*It's not like I enjoy playing the role of the old maid who's always trying to set up the young people in her life!* Grumbling internally, I wove through the party with graceful steps to hide that I was dragging Cedric against his will. King Lance and King Yohan walked beside us, with Stale following behind.

“Big Sister!”

Tiara beamed as she spun toward us, though her eyebrows scrunched when she spotted Cedric with me. *Is she really still mad at him?* Then I feared that I was the true target of her anger, since I'd brought someone she detested over to talk to her. The man she'd been speaking with turned and smiled at me. Shocked as I was by the uncanny timing, I smothered it as I addressed them directly.

“Tiara, Leon—I'm sorry to interrupt your chat. King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric were just telling me how much they'd like to say hello to you.”

I'd arrived right when Tiara and Leon were in the middle of a conversation! The pair assured me it was no trouble and stepped away from each other. They exchanged handshakes and greetings with Cedric, King Lance, King Yohan, and Stale. This was quite the group I'd accidentally assembled.

I scanned the room. We'd attracted the attention of nearly every attendee. To be fair, we *had* gathered the most noteworthy people at the party into one group. Be it nobles and royals from countries like the kingdom of Lilac or Freesia's own nobility, everyone was trying their best not to lean forward to get a better look at us.

“I was hoping to meet the representatives from Hanazuo,” Leon said. “But I'm sure you'd prefer to speak with the Freesian royal family first, no? I'll come back some other—”

“N-no, please stay here, Prince Leon! The more the merrier!”



Leon's offer was polite, especially with all of us in the spotlight, but Tiara's panicked plea stopped him from leaving. She definitely preferred a larger crowd in this situation, though she didn't seem especially angry when she greeted Cedric. Still, if he broke out into that formal speech she hated so much, I was afraid a scolding was looming in his future.

"If your company is all right with it, then stay I shall."

No one objected, and our lively group of seven launched into a discussion. King Lance introduced Leon and King Yohan, who hadn't formally met before, and the two hit it off right away. Despite Anemone's recognition of slavery and Chinensis's deep religious beliefs, the two men were perfectly pleasant. They were similar people in a lot of ways, certainly, but I was just glad to see them getting along.

Meanwhile, Cedric and Tiara—the most important pairing of the bunch—had failed to exchange a single word since greeting each other. I understood why Tiara might want to avoid Cedric, but that didn't explain his hesitance. Maybe he didn't know what to say first? I couldn't really force them together any more than I already had, so I stayed out of it. Cedric clearly saw that it would be wrong to chat up his brothers in a setting like this, so he stuck to talking to Leon and Stale. Once Leon and King Yohan met, Cedric was reduced to speaking only with Stale—and he managed to sound normal enough when Stale wasn't glaring at him. Thankfully, Stale seemed content to peacefully and calmly answer Cedric's questions about Freesia.

Cedric had truly grown into a model example of royalty, as his conversation with Stale demonstrated, so why was the slightest interaction with Tiara enough to send him spiraling? At least he wasn't turning bright red from every meager glimpse of her.

I spoke with Tiara a bit before listening in on the kings' exchanges with Leon. Tiara and I eagerly jumped into discussions of their respective countries' futures, relations with other lands, and present-day policies.



When our conversation wound down, we shared a knowing look, silently signaling that it was time to move on to other guests. Cedric was just about to say something to Leon...when Mother's long-awaited announcement finally began.

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"Thank you all for attending the birthday party of my beloved daughter Pride."

Despite being the Freesian firstborn prince, I let my thoughts drift while Mother spoke. I glanced at Prince Cedric beside me. He wore a serious expression, listening intently to Mother.

I'd known from the start that he would speak at length with Pride tonight; he *was* royalty. He had looked calm enough when the three Hanazuo representatives first struck up a chat with her...but then he'd abruptly turned bright red. That wasn't unusual in itself. Most of the young men at this party blushed when they talked with Pride—she was just that beautiful.

But observing Pride and Prince Cedric had jogged my memory, and before I knew it, I'd raced over to her side. She seemed completely unfazed when I checked in on her. King Lance, King Yohan, and Prince Cedric were perfectly polite as well, though the prince's cheeks glowed pink from his interaction with Pride.

Pride told me they were enjoying their conversation, but I asked what they were discussing, just to be safe. The last thing I expected was Pride turning red and stumbling over her words instead of answering me. *I don't understand*, I'd thought then. *Why is Pride rattled too?!*

I couldn't find anything inappropriate in Prince Cedric's behavior. The two kings would have chastised him if he'd done something wrong. Still, none of this solved the mystery of Pride's red face.

*"I was just telling Cedric...that I'm really glad he's talking to me like before. Remember how stiff he was when we last met?"*



Surely she wasn't saying that Prince Cedric being casual was enough to make her blush? Or maybe she was reflecting on that strange, unnatural manner of speech he'd tried before. Either way, it was hard to imagine that such a small thing could have such a drastic effect on her.

That left one possibility: She was hiding something. Prince Cedric was acting perfectly polite, but that only deepened my suspicions. What could Pride and these three men want to keep to themselves so badly? Prince Cedric was more nervous than the situation called for. Had he tried to seduce Pride with his honeyed words? No, the kings would have put a stop to that. They were reasonable enough to scold Prince Cedric for his misdeeds when they witnessed them. *Then what else could have happened here?!*

My thoughts had spiraled out of control, turning my confusion into irritation. Even I hadn't understood why I was so vexed, but then Prince Cedric had gone and made it worse.

*"That's just not true. I want you to talk to me like we're friends. I much prefer you this way."*

Her words brought that annoying blush right back to his face. I smiled, but that only revealed my anger, judging by the way Prince Cedric broke eye contact. Or maybe he was afraid that I'd uncovered his secret feelings for her. The way he was blushing, anyone could have seen through him.

I had no opinion on the prince developing feelings for Pride. At least, I *shouldn't* have. There were as many men attracted to Pride as there were stars in the sky. It wasn't something to raise a fuss over after all this time. In fact, I wanted Pride to be loved by many; she deserved recognition for her capabilities and her wonderful personality. Prince Cedric was officially the royal prince now, and I wanted him to admire Pride just as the two kings did. *So why do I feel this way?*

The royal prince hailed from an allied nation. He had both an outstanding mind and respectable personality. Pride didn't dislike him as she once had. Yet



for some incomprehensible, undeniable reason, the fact that he had feelings for Pride filled my chest with a prickling resentment. Maybe I had yet to forgive him for his disrespectful treatment of her, or the idea of having to serve him if, unthinkably, he became Pride's prince consort was upsetting me. But frankly, that was too trivial an offense to warrant this level of spite.

I'd never been so irritated over another man having feelings for Pride—not even Prince Leon two years ago. Prince Cedric had merely fallen for the woman who saved him. He possessed the qualities required of someone who wanted to share a life with her even though he'd disrespected her in the past. These were simply the facts of the situation.

And yet, none of them helped me rein in my anger as it threatened to swell out of control. I wanted to get him away from her. When I suggested he might want to greet Tiara as well, the blood rushed to Prince Cedric's face anew. He even insisted on staying with Pride. *He's so easy to read...and how rude of him to look down on my younger sister like that.* To make matters worse, Pride *insisted* on going with Prince Cedric.

*"Actually, I just remembered I have something to discuss with her too. May I join you?"*

She placed her hands on his back, guiding the blushing prince forward. After greeting Tiara and Prince Leon, Prince Cedric chose me as his conversation partner. He was eager to learn about Freesian culture, our history, our way of life, our laws, future plans, policies, politics, and trade...exactly like Prince Leon when he came to be Pride's fiancé. I didn't understand why he was asking me these things instead of Pride, but it was hard not to get a favorable impression of him when he listened so earnestly. *Then what has me so irritated?*

The truth was that I had yet to forgive him for eating Pride's cookies and the other ways he'd insulted her, even now that he was proactively trying to learn whatever he could about our country. If it wasn't for his past indiscretions, I would find him as respectable as Prince Leon. It just didn't make any sense. *It all ends with the same uncertainty.* Why did I keep asking myself the same



questions? Why, after so much thought, did it always come to the same conclusion?

“I would also like to announce that a decision has been made regarding the future spouses of the Freesian princesses.”

I let out a muted cry at Mother’s shocking declaration. Blinking rapidly, I swiveled toward her. A wave of commotion rippled through the crowd. My back prickled under someone’s stare, so I turned to find an aghast Arthur gaping at me. *Did you know about this?!* he seemed to ask. I shook my head. Of course I didn’t know. If I’d learned of something so crucial, I would have told him about it—or, at the very least, he would have seen right through me along the way.

Pride and Tiara stiffened when the crowd made an uproar, both chewing on their bottom lips. Prince Cedric and I watched them, but my sisters kept their postures rigid and their eyes fixed on Mother. She went on while the rest of us reeled from her words. Uncle Vest and Father stood on either side of her. Their unwavering gazes told me they’d known about this in advance.

“It was customary in this country for the queen to choose a fiancé for any princess who reached the age of sixteen,” Mother said. “Now, upon the sixteenth birthday of any princess...”

I gulped. The ballroom fell silent in anticipation.

“...she will be provided with a list of three marriage candidates to choose from. This list will be finalized with her approval.”

A howl rang through the ballroom. *Marriage candidates?! Not a fiancé but candidates?! And three of them?!*

Paying no heed to our confusion, Mother motioned for Pride and Tiara to join her. I followed Pride, trying my best to keep my composure and serve as her steward, but my thoughts tumbled around my head like marbles scattered



across the floor.

Mother finished her speech, and Uncle Vest expanded on the finer points of the arrangement. Pride and Tiara's marriage candidates had been selected according to the same criteria as fiancés for all previous Freesian princesses. The queen, prince consort, and seneschal came together to create a list of names. Before each princess turned sixteen, the three of them would choose from that list and finalize three fiancé candidates.

The candidates' identities were kept strictly confidential, with only their families in the know. These potential marriage partners didn't know each other's identities either—a measure put in place to avoid disputes or sabotage. After each princess's sixteenth birthday, she had until her coronation—or one year after her birthday, for a princess who wouldn't inherit the throne—to pick one man from the list.

I finally smoothed out my turbulent thoughts as I listened to Uncle Vest's explanation. *I see. That allows the princess to choose a desired partner from a pool of people who fulfill certain requirements. Having a set timeline prevents their engagements from falling apart like Pride's did.* With this system, Pride and Tiara could marry a partner of their own choosing, at least to some extent.

"Now that Pride, our crown princess, has turned eighteen, she has two years to finalize a list of three candidates," Mother said, picking up where Uncle Vest left off. "Tiara will have one year to finalize her list starting on her sixteenth birthday."

Putting this system into place today meant Pride and Tiara would have less time to decide than all future princesses, but this special measure gave them a bit of an extension on the typical deadline future princesses would face. Indeed, without this, Pride would've had to choose her candidates the moment the rule went into effect. Tiara would've had to do hers in less than a year. They definitely needed this special postponement.

If I could have, I would have nodded in agreement with the plan. When I



searched for Arthur in the crowd, I saw that he, the imperial knights, the commander, and the vice commander were all looking between Mother, Uncle Vest, and Pride.

“However...”

Mother trailed off. As I returned my attention to her, her rosy lips pulled into an elegant smile.

“Both Pride and Tiara have already finalized their three candidates.”

The crowd erupted with confusion.

“Pride will still have two more years to make her decision, in accordance with the rules. Tiara will have until her seventeenth birthday.”

It took everything in me to maintain my composure in front of the guests. The special extension period wasn’t for coming up with their lists but rather for choosing *one* of the candidates! Pride and Tiara could use the time to weigh their options in case anything changed or came to light, but who had they chosen? I racked my brain for every eligible bachelor I could think of.

“While I cannot name the six candidates at this time, I’ll say one last thing on the matter.”

My mother’s voice rang out strong and resolute. Likewise, Pride held steady, her expression unwavering and gaze pointed forward. She and Tiara blushed faintly, presumably in anticipation of what they knew Mother was about to announce. It seemed Prime Minister Gilbert and I had been out of the loop.

“All six men are currently here in the ballroom at this very moment.”

Mother’s measured declaration drew the loudest cries and cheers of the whole evening.

“I expect I’ll be speaking with those of you who have been selected very soon,” she concluded. “I do hope we’ll have productive conversations.”

The crowd wasn’t listening. They roared, drowning out her words as their astonishment built up like a tidal wave set to flood the castle.



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The room stirred. Amid the chaos, I, the firstborn prince of Anemone, remained silent, deep in thought. Freesia had a unique way of selecting fiancés for royal children. This latest method placed a lot more power in the princesses' hands. If something went awry this time, like it had between Pride and me, Freesia could replace whichever fiancé with another candidate and the wedding could continue as planned. Three candidates meant backup options if one proved unqualified, and the kingdom could keep this whole business of marriage on a tight schedule.







“It’s all happening at once...”

My voice was barely a whisper. Both Pride and Tiara had already finalized their candidates. The pair must have skipped past the trial period because they wanted to make a point to the guests at this party: *We can’t delay our engagements any further*. Pride was looking to heal the scar I’d left on her royal name when our engagement fell apart.

A pang of remorse lanced my chest. I’d forced not just Pride but Tiara to rush into this. Giving in to the guilt wouldn’t fix anything, though. Instead, I considered my options as the other guests listened closely to Her Majesty’s speech.

I took a deep breath. It helped me put my emotions in order. Once Her Majesty finished and attendees could speak again, I turned toward the man closest to me—who looked completely lost for words—and whispered into his ear.

“Who do you think it could be, Prince Cedric?”

“Huh?!” He jerked and spun to face me, revealing the pallor of his face. “Oh, Prince Leon...”

The prince gulped and took a moment to catch his breath. Little by little, the blood returned to his cheeks.

“You mean the candidates for Princess Pride and...Princess Tiara?” Though flustered, he tried his best to keep his eyes on me. “I haven’t the slightest idea.” His gloomy tone undercut the arrogance I’d expected of him, but I opted to press him a little harder.

“You weren’t able to become *acquainted* with Pride?”

Prince Cedric burst into a coughing fit, hacking and heaving until his face looked like someone had slathered it with red dye. It took a moment before he addressed me, tears in his eyes.

“About that...” he began, lips trembling. Evidently, he knew just the incident I



was referencing.

*“I’d like to become acquainted with Princess Pride in particular.”*

Prince Cedric had given me that message when I was eleven days away from my next visit to Freesia. Maybe he didn’t know I was her former fiancé, but the way he said it felt like a challenge. Even more offensive was his blithe conviction that he could order around a crown prince like a messenger.

“I wanted to apologize to you in a more private setting.” Cedric inched away, hiding behind the backs of his brethren and a nearby pillar. He hung his head. “I was *incredibly* disrespectful of you as the Anemonian crown prince! Please forgive me! I should’ve never asked another country’s heir to deliver a message for me!”

Shame had turned him red all the way to the tips of his ears. Frankly, I was shocked. I was sure he would’ve forgotten such an exchange during the hectic and demanding war we’d just fought. I remembered, but not well enough to carry a grudge about it. *If anyone should hold a grudge, it’s Pride...*

I stopped that train of thought in its tracks. I needed to extend grace to Prince Cedric now that he was apologizing so profusely for his past—but he beat me to the punch.

“To tell you the truth, I went on to be extremely disrespectful toward Princess Pride even after doing that to you...”

He rattled off an explanation, confessing that he’d already apologized to Pride. I could tell he didn’t want to attract any onlookers; he kept his voice hushed and his words rapid. Luckily, the party guests were still weathering the aftershocks of Her Majesty’s announcement. They didn’t care about the likes of us. Even so, Hanazuo’s royal prince apologizing to a representative of Anemone could start fires neither of us wanted to put out. Prince Cedric wasn’t trying to cover up his shame—he kept things discreet because he didn’t want the two kings or me to have to deal with the fallout from this interaction.

I asked him to raise his head and told him that the past was in the past. It



wasn't as if I'd sought an apology from him in the first place. I simply wished for him to understand my perspective and promise he'd never hurt Pride again. He was trying so desperately to fix things, I couldn't help but smile when he stood up tall.

I offered him a reprieve, pivoting back to our original topic. "More importantly...what do you think of this new system?"

"What do I think? I'm sure they've chosen the most suitable candidates. Whoever they are, they're very lucky men." Melancholy glinted in those burning eyes of his, yet he kept his gaze fixed on me.

"Well, I imagine a second-born prince like yourself could make the list for either princess," I told him. "Don't you want to be a candidate...or get added to the list later?"

It wasn't an unreasonable possibility. Perhaps at some point Pride and Tiara would return to square one and have to reconsider their options. Her Majesty *had* mentioned that the princesses themselves had sought this outcome, so they might very well be satisfied with things. But the princesses had ample options; there were plenty of people in this room who wanted to marry Tiara and Pride, regardless of whether they'd made the cut.

Prince Cedric must not have considered himself a possibility, given how quickly he blushed. Yet that same blush revealed his interest in marrying one of the princesses more clearly than words ever could.

"It's not implausible," I added, watching him cover his mouth to contain his surprise.

He apologized, even as I smiled at him, but I wasn't about to let up. It was time to ask the biggest question of all.

"So, which girl do you prefer? Is it Tiara or—whoa!"

No sooner had I said Tiara's name than Prince Cedric blushed so furiously that I thought he might set his hair aflame. He dropped his gaze to the ground and



bit his lip. Softening my voice, I pushed him a little bit more.

“It’s not Pride you’re interested in...but Tiara?”

He’d merely looked at me curiously when I mentioned Pride, but name-dropping Tiara made him light up all over again. Prince Cedric knew I was onto him, so he covered his whole face with his arm, spun around, and murmured an apology.

“Please...I beg you, keep this between us...”

His pleading was almost cute. “It’s all right. I won’t tell anyone. Tiara’s pretty cute too, isn’t she?”

I chuckled as Prince Cedric stood frozen to the spot. The whole display amused me, compelling me to lean into it.

“I’ve only known her for two years, but I think she’s a great princess. She’s feminine, gentle, and cares for her siblings a great deal. Tiara’s very well read too. I’m sure her future husband will be a happy man.”

I was only trying to agree with him about Tiara’s many positive qualities, but for some reason all the color drained out of his face. He lowered his arm and faced me, ghostly pale.

*What’s the matter with him now?*

King Lance and King Yohan finally noticed Prince Cedric’s spluttering and stuttering, and they came over to put their hands on his back and shoulders.

“What’s wrong, Cedric? Still in shock from Her Majesty’s speech?”

“Nothing’s set in stone yet, Cedric.”

Though I joined the kings in trying to cheer him up, Prince Cedric was shaky as he responded, “No! It’s nothing...” I tilted my head inquisitively, prompting the prince to add listlessly, “May I inquire about something?”

I nodded, the kings and I waiting for his question with bated breath.

“I understand it’s impolite to ask such a thing, but...if given the opportunity,



which princess would you choose?”

“If I had that ‘opportunity,’ I think I’d go with Tiara. She’d make a great queen for Anemone.”

It would also make more sense for Tiara to marry into our family, since I was the crown prince of Anemone. Pride, on the other hand, was herself the heir to her nation. At the same time, there was no chance of me marrying Tiara when I was the one to call off the engagement to her older sister.

Despite my sound logic, Prince Cedric’s face clouded over. “I-I see...”

*What’s the matter? I thought he’d be happy to hear such high praise for the girl he has feelings for.* I would have to ask Val for his opinion the next time I saw him.

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“Aww, man... Aaargh! Princess Pride’s really gettin’ engaged?!” Captain Alan groaned as he slammed his beer mug down on the table. His face was red, though I suspected my fellow captain’s flush wasn’t from the alcohol alone.

“That’s your third one now. I’m not helping you clean up any more broken glass,” Captain Callum said. The remnants of what were once beer mugs sat in a bag in the corner of the room.

“At least this time Princess Pride will be selecting the man herself. I’m sure he’ll be great,” Vice Captain Eric said.

“Of course he’ll be great!” Captain Alan snapped. “What the hell’re we supposed to do if he’s a bad guy?!”

Captain Callum sighed. “Don’t say ‘we.’ This doesn’t concern us.” He peered into his beer, eyes glazed from drinking.

Vice Captain Eric wore a superficial smile. He was indulging in more booze than usual.

“Seriously, who gets to be the luckiest man on the planet?!” Captain Alan said. “If he was in that ballroom, we might’ve even greeted him at the party!”



Isn't that right, Arthur?!"

He faced me across our table, demanding an answer. Somehow I'd gotten dragged into yanking him away to a private room once he started running his mouth at the party.

I took a swig. "I-I guess so. It doesn't sound like Stale knows the candidates either...and it's not like I have any guesses."

"No one told Prince Stale?" Captain Callum said. "They were really careful with all this."

I was equally surprised. Keeping this from Stale meant that only a select few people had been privy to this whole new system of marriage candidates.

I plopped my head down on the table. "I'm so damn curious..."

At my weak warble, Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum patted me on the back. I hadn't overindulged, but I was limp as a drunkard. Captain Alan poured me a glass of water. He seemed to be sobering up a little, while I was only getting more worn down. Resting his head in his hands, he surveyed all three of us.

"Princess Tiara will probably marry into a foreign family," he said, "but Princess Pride's fiancé will either be someone from within the country or a prince who's lost his chance at inheriting the throne, like Prince Leon when they were engaged."

My thoughts drifted to Tiara. I'd met her around the same time I met Princess Pride and Stale, so I considered her a very close friend. It was inevitable that she would have to leave Freesia someday, but thanks to this new system, that day was a year off. The relief came tinged with sadness. Tiara was not only Princess Pride's little sister but also my partner Stale's, so I cared about her like she was my own sibling.

*I just hope she doesn't go somewhere far away as all hell.*

I wouldn't be able to see her whenever I pleased once she was married, but at



least we could exchange letters if she was close enough. Stale's teleportation was another option, though he couldn't use it for official visits. Something about the way Tiara's smile had changed since that announcement left my stomach twisted up in knots. She wasn't going to marry anyone horrible, since she still got to choose her husband in the end, but she probably had complicated feelings about all of this. The thing was, Tiara camouflaged her burdens with a smile.

*She's just like Princess Pride and Stale in that way.*

Much as I wished I could help her, Tiara had to marry into a foreign royal family to lose her right to succeed the Freesian queen. There was nothing I could do about that, but I hoped she wound up somewhere close by—ideally, with a friendly neighbor of ours. Her big brother and sister would be even more saddened by her departure than I would. That said, the thought of her going away made my stomach sink.

I looked at my fellow imperial knights. Captain Alan's words had left the other two deep in thought. Clearly Princess Pride occupied their minds too. As her imperial knights, the four of us regularly accompanied her to both Freesian and foreign events so we could keep her safe. We'd seen for ourselves that many men had feelings for the crown princess.

"I can't really think of any men Princess Pride seems interested in," said Captain Alan.

"Me neither," Vice Captain Eric said. "She never shows any favoritism, so—hey, Arthur! What's wrong?!"

I'd slammed my forehead down on the table with all my might. Unlike my previous slump onto the table, this blow was strong enough to send our beer sloshing.

"Nothing. I just wanna sober up a little... Sorry."

My face burned; no doubt it was bright red. Captain Callum asked if the booze had hit me, then urged me to drink some water.



*A man she's interested in...*

That brought me right back to Princess Pride and Prince Cedric's exchanges back at the party. I couldn't hear them from my side of the ballroom, but Princess Pride had obviously been enjoying herself. It was written all over her face, in her sunny smile. Even after Stale joined them, she'd blushed over something Prince Cedric said. And she spent the rest of the night grinning at him. I'd even seen them walking around together in the ballroom, looking like a picture-perfect couple.

The other knights continued to discuss who Princess Pride's marriage candidates might be while my head boiled. I only tuned back into the conversation when Captain Callum got tipsy enough to drop names.

"As far as unmarried noblemen and princes go, she's close with the Ackroyd family from Yaburan, the second-born prince of Veronica, the firstborn prince of Lilac, and Lord Nepenthes's—"

"Wait, 'Nepenthes'...? Are you talking about Blair from the Second Squadron?"

"No, the guy from that Freesian dukedom."

"Hey, there was an Anemonian knight with the same last name! He helped me out when we were doing group exercises."

"She'd never marry someone from Anemone! People would be pissed if she replaced their crown prince with somebody else."

"I never said she would!" Captain Callum shouted, a bit harsher than before. Vice Captain Eric apologized, but Captain Alan just grinned. Our fellow knight quickly realized they were messing with him over the common last name.

Despite their joking, they were right about one thing. It was highly unlikely that any of Pride's candidates would come from Anemone. In that case, she had to pick a prince or nobleman from somewhere even farther away—or from Freesia. Many candidates who fit that criteria had come to Pride's birthday



party.

“More recently, there’s that second-born prince from Hanazuo...Prince Cedric.”

*Crack!*

Another beer mug shattered, but it wasn’t Alan’s this time. It was mine. I’d slammed my mug down with my head still resting on the table. I jumped out of my seat with an apology, just as shocked as they were, and made sure I hadn’t hurt anyone. Thankfully, the other knights had good reflexes and had jerked back as soon as they heard glass breaking. I’d also made it through unscathed, though a few bits of glass clung to my long hair, sparkling amid the silver strands. Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric plucked it out of my hair with their gloved hands.

Captain Alan stood with a chuckle, saying, “That one was a show-stopper.” He then gathered up the shards scattered across the floor. “Do you really hate Prince Cedric that much, Arthur?”

The bluntness of his question jolted me. “Oh! No, uh...” I squirmed with discomfort, but Captain Callum commanded me to stop moving while I still had glass in my hair.

“Pipe down, Alan. Do you want Arthur to be charged with treason?”

“Well, he’s had his fair share of run-ins with the prince,” Vice Captain Eric said evenly. “There was the cooking incident, his disrespect toward Princess Pride, and even the violence.”

Hearing him back up the captain’s theory left me slumping over again. He chuckled and patted me on the back. Honestly, I suspected the other three were still upset with the prince too, even if they didn’t show it as much as I did. The guy had disrespected our crown princess and even gone as far as eating the cookies she’d baked just for us. But we all knew it was our duty as knights not to hold such grudges. If asked whether they’d like to give Prince Cedric a good punch, they would say no—and they’d be lying. I was sure of it.



“I’m still mad about the cooking incident, but beyond that, I just feel like he’s...the most likely candidate...” I said, my voice petering out at the end.

The others asked me to repeat myself. I tugged out my hair tie, brushed the rest of the glass away, and shook my head. My long silver hair fanned out to shroud my face.

*The only person who’s ever made Princess Pride smile and blush like that is Prince Leon.* But those smiles never came from the heart until their engagement ended. That meant it was Prince Cedric, not a flawless prince like Leon, who had stirred feelings within her.

*He treated her terribly, made her cry, ate her food—and now he’s stolen her heart?*

“It’s not *fair*...”

My hair still loose around me, I set my head back on the table, groaning and kicking my legs. Vice Captain Eric gave me another good-natured pat. While I knew for a fact that Prince Cedric had changed, that he had a good side and had caught Princess Pride’s attention, I couldn’t accept it. I would’ve been less bothered if she and Prince Leon got engaged a second time.

“That reminds me,” said the vice captain. “Prince Cedric is staying at the castle tonight.”

I flinched, and the other knights chimed in to confirm. I combed my hair back, raised my head, and fixed Vice Captain Eric with a grimace. He chuckled, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and assured me it would be all right.

“He’s just here as a guest this time, not to negotiate any alliance. He’s not gonna stay at the royal family’s residence.”

Freesia’s castle contained multiple residences. The royal palace housed the queen and prince consort, the throne rooms, and the royal office, but it was also home to the seneschal and prime minister’s offices and personal rooms. A short hallway connected the palace to the residence where visiting princesses,



princes, and important guests spent the night while here on business. The complex included a few other palaces as well. One was for royal family members to live alongside their betrotheds, and another was for royal and titled nobility. Various facilities accommodated guests from afar. Collectively, all of this comprised the “royal residence,” so named for the main occupants.

Prince Cedric and the others from Hanazuo would spend the night in the palace meant for guests from afar, which was a decent ways off from the palace where Princess Pride and her siblings lived. It was closer than the areas where the kingdom’s top officials and nobles resided, but separated nonetheless.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, true...”

Captain Alan smirked and put his arm around my other shoulder. “You’re thinking about it too much! You don’t even know if Prince Cedric is interested in Princess Pride, right?”

I groaned when he gave my shoulder a shake. “I guess...” Though I said as much, I was still thinking about Prince Cedric’s state of mind. Princess Pride had saved his country, which then went on to form an alliance with Freesia. In some ways, Prince Cedric was the one who’d managed to save his beloved United Hanazuo Kingdom by approaching Pride for help.

*I can’t think of any reason he wouldn’t be in love with Princess Pride after all that.*

This only made me more depressed. If he really *did* have feelings for her, it would mean their love was mutual. And that only led to one conclusion.

“It’s just not fair!”

This time, I was a little too loud. The other guys had definitely heard me, though they appeared to find my fixation on Prince Cedric baffling. They patted me on the back and shoulders, trying to reassure me.

“Prince Cedric, yeah...”

“I suppose so...”



Captain Alan and Captain Callum exchanged glances. When they noticed Vice Captain Eric's eyes on them, they drank from their big mugs to avoid giving him an explanation. They were being strangely cryptic, but it seemed like they could read each other's minds.

"You think the one he's actually after is..."

"I thought it was obvious."

Whatever else they had to say got swallowed down with their next big gulps of beer. Captain Callum was a sharp man who was good at reading his fellow knights' troubles, and Captain Alan was socially adept. I had a strong feeling they understood what was really going on with Prince Cedric.

"I'm still really curious about who's on Princess Pride's list," Captain Alan said, changing the subject.

"I bet those guys are the happiest men in the whole world," Captain Callum said.

I groaned again. "I said I don't want to talk about it!"

My co-captains let the matter drop and silently drank more beer. Vice Captain Eric took us all in for a moment, forced a smile, and sucked in a breath. "What matters most to *us* is how the princesses themselves feel," he said brightly, putting a peaceful end to the discussion.

We all nodded in agreement. As knights, and as men who adored Princess Pride, we would have no greater joy than seeing our princesses smiling as they stood beside their future husbands—regardless of whatever political factors were involved.



**ORL:**

## **Scenes from the Knight Who Could Have Been and the Adoptive Brother**

**“A**ND THESE are rumors?”

Around me, the other knights were gossiping among themselves. It was the dead of night, but the royal residence was alive with a lavish party—a celebration that obviously wasn’t for us. Instead of enjoying a feast, we assessed piles of bandages, antiseptic, and medicine in our now-decrepit training grounds. Exhaustion clouded every face, and some of the knights dressed their open wounds with bandages just to shield them from view. There weren’t enough knights left with the power to heal injuries, nor were there sufficient doctors or Seventh Squadron members to handle first aid for the royal order.

Upon completing missions, the dwindling squadrons returned to training grounds where we received no fanfare. Only the gravely injured got treatment via special powers in the infirmary. Anyone with less severe wounds gathered in one spot to trade the few bandages and bits of medicine the royal order possessed.

“Yeah, just rumors and nothing more. They say the screams of dying men can be heard coming from the royal residence night after night, and that the queen enjoys tormenting people like they’re her playthings. Supposedly, she has men kidnapped and presented to her like offerings.”

“I’ve heard that too. How she uses men up in a single night and then throws them away.”

“Well I heard they last a month in that hellhole until they finally beg for death.”

“Someone told me it’s not kidnapped men she tortures but—”

“Let’s stop talking about it,” I snapped at last, my hatred for the queen leaking



into my voice. “The order will pay the ultimate price if anyone catches you spreading nasty rumors about the royal family...especially if that person’s the commander.”

Everyone fell silent. I must have looked severe. The knights who’d finished bandaging themselves took this as their cue to go.

“Apologies.”

“We’ll get ready for tomorrow and go to bed.”

An older knight set a hand on my shoulder along the way, offering a few words of appreciation. I bowed in thanks. Then I donned my armor, having completed my own meager first aid.

Vice Commander Kenneth watched our exchange. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was comparing me to the boy I’d been—the spirited son of the late Commander Roderick—before I grew up in this wretched situation and changed so much. “You’re always strict, but you do know right from wrong, Arthur.”

“I didn’t mean to boss my seniors around. Was I being too much like my dad? Sorry about that.” I dipped into another bow.

“But you were the highest rank there, as vice captain,” he responded, giving me a supportive pat.

I threw my uniform on over my armor. The fabric, stained red in some places, fluttered in the wind as I stood. “The commander told me what happened. He said the queen executed the previous commander and vice commander when they defied her.”

My short silver hair rustled in a light breeze. I kept my face blank as Vice Commander Kenneth hung his head.

“Did you know the previous commander and vice commander too?” I asked him.

“I did. They were both brilliant knights. No one in the royal order these days



can hold a candle to...actually, no one could hold a candle to them in the royal order's heyday either."

The vice commander's reply made me realize how little I'd interacted with Alan and Callum when I was a rookie knight. But I remembered clearly how, even from afar, the pair radiated dignity and honor.

*Even the finest of knights like them questioned what the queen was getting up to?*

Many knights were overcome with grief upon learning of their execution. Not a single soul had a disparaging word for either man, in life or in death. Our current commander and vice commander had been promoted immediately after the execution. The queen told them that the royal order would be punished appropriately should they allow further rebellion to go unchecked.

"Your father was no different. He was an outstanding knight," Vice Commander Kenneth said.

My chest tightened. I thanked the vice commander, but my mind was filled with memories of my own foolish rebellious streak back in those days.

"By the way..." I began, changing the subject. The vice commander deserved a reprieve—he'd shouldered much more pain than the knights returning from that previous mission. "How was the queen's birthday party?"

Vice Commander Kenneth and Commander Harrison had come home from their mission looking worn-out, so the other knights had gathered at the infirmary to welcome them back.

He tried his best to smile, but to no avail. "It was probably exactly how you're picturing it," he said simply.

There'd been a decrease in guests at the palace ever since the current queen came into power. Of course, many still attended the queen's parties for fear of drawing her ire. These parties constantly grew in scale and featured more lavish decorations, but in comparison to the former queen's events, the number of



guests was steadily dwindling. The current queen's unpopularity was blatantly clear.

Knowing this helped me read between the lines of what the vice commander had said. The queen wanted her own country's officials and nobles to fear her, and for foreign royalty and nobles to keep their distance.

"Princess Tiara and Prince Leon didn't attend this year either," he added.

He took out a key so he could lock up, but I wasn't paying attention, too caught up in my own thoughts at the mention of Prince Leon. He was the queen's fiancé and future prince consort. The former prince of Anemone had lived at the royal residence for two years, but very few people had laid eyes on him since his engagement.

No one knew why he'd vanished after moving here, but the Freesian people spoke of him as a prince in name only—living off of their taxes while he made no attempt to take on the public duties expected of the next prince consort. He hadn't even arrived at the Freesian castle at the scheduled time, and once he was finally here, he shut himself away and abandoned all responsibilities. What were the people supposed to think?

Some said that the queen treated him as a plaything because of his beauty, while others claimed Prince Leon had seduced the queen behind the scenes to gain control over the country. There were even whispers that he was already dead.

*Wish that was true. The country would be better off.*

I locked those words away in my heart. As a knight who worked myself to the bone for the sake of the Freesian people, I had nothing but contempt for Prince Leon, a member of royalty who served no purpose.

*I've even heard how the jealous queen locked Princess Tiara away in an isolated tower for years.* I sympathized with the girl who'd been cut off from the outside world against her will, but Prince Leon was different.



The royal family lived in luxury thanks to the taxes they collected from citizens, and they offered absolutely nothing in return. As one of those citizens myself, I couldn't think of a better match for the queen than her incompetent fiancé.

Seven years ago, the knights had met with an ambush. The Anemonian knights were scheduled to come to Freesia for joint training exercises, but they never arrived. It was my father who led the rookies out in search of the Anemonians, never to return.

Anemone refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing in the affair. They went as far as blaming Freesia, accusing us of leading our own knights to their deaths as we traveled to attend the joint exercises. This devolved into needless strife until their prince was engaged to our queen as a gesture of peace between the two countries.

The whole thing left a bitter taste in my mouth. I detested the country that had indirectly caused the death of my father and many knights, as well as the decay of the Freesian royal order. This bitterness certainly extended to Anemone's firstborn prince. His engagement to that wretched queen only turned my hatred and loathing of the prince into a thick sludge that stuck to my insides, where it would likely remain for the rest of my life.

I returned the key to the storage room and regrouped with the vice commander at the infirmary. While he intended to return to his office, I planned to head home and help my mother with the restaurant for a while. I thanked the vice commander for his good work, but rather than saying goodbye, Kenneth laid his hand on my shoulder once more. He looked around to ensure we were alone, then leaned in close.

"Don't let your guard down," he whispered. "There's not a place in this country that's truly safe from eavesdroppers. You're...you're the one person we can't lose, like we lost Callum and Alan. I'm saying this for your father's sake too."



I could barely hear him, but I flinched all the same as a tangled web of emotions knotted up my guts. He said no more before leading me to the front gates of the training grounds.

During my walk home, I wondered aloud, “You still think about Dad too, don’t you, Vice Commander?”

Ever since I joined the royal order as a rookie, many of my superiors had offered their advice and looked out for me. They wanted to take care of their late commander’s son, but it was more than that—they wanted to repent. After all, they’d been powerless to stop my father’s death out on that battlefield.

“The order’s not to blame for that. Even I know it.”

*Am I just going to be the late commander’s son for the rest of my life?*

Accolade after accolade, day after day spent improving my skills, and none of it changed things. The knights kept me at arm’s length, seeing me solely for my connection to my dad. They called me “Arthur,” but I could see the way their fragile smiles wavered. I’d grown numb to it by now, but that didn’t make the odd looks stop. They regarded me not as a knight but as a grieving son.

I shook my head to disperse those thoughts. I had no right to protest after I’d asked for this. My hair, my words, my behavior—all of it was modeled after my dad.

Until the day I lost him, I was weak. Definitely not knight material. It took a lot of hard work to get where I was now. Like my dad, I’d been assigned to the First Squadron and eventually promoted to vice captain as the number of knights in the royal order dwindled.

“It won’t be long now.”

During the exam to join the order’s main forces, I’d missed first place by a hair. There were few other opportunities available to me, including the investiture ceremony and victory banquets, but the eyes of the other knights—and Commander Harrison’s in particular—never left me. I couldn’t approach the



queen when I first met her either.

The next rank above mine was captain. And the captain with the most outstanding achievements of any squadron attended royal events alongside the commander and vice commander of the order.

“I’ll get revenge for Dad. I’ll finally do what I should have done that day.”

*I know it’s wrong for a knight to hold personal grudges. Dad’s death threw me into a pit of never-ending darkness, and I know I’m not fit to be a knight because of it. But still...*

“I’m gonna look that queen dead in the eyes and...”

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“Boo, what a dull party.”

The queen twirled her wavy red hair around her finger as she paced and complained. From my perspective as seneschal, the party in the ballroom had been a whirlwind of ornate decorations, colorful flowers, expensive liquor, and the finest cuisine—something the villagers living closest to the castle could never even dream of. This woman, the guest of honor, had demanded we spare no expense.

She was no fool. She knew that fewer and fewer guests were attending her parties as time went on, and that these people were merely filling the space rather than making merry. All she ever did at these events was sit on her throne with her legs crossed, nibbling at the food and sipping some wine over the course of the night. I was certain the idea of entertaining her guests or making sure they enjoyed their night never crossed her mind.

“Oh, you can leave now, Stale.”

She flicked her fingers over her shoulder to shoo me away. As she continued walking, her heels clicked against the floor. When I noticed her heading away from her bedroom, I spoke up for the first time.

“Where are you going, Your Majesty?”



My voice was dull, my face devoid of life. I spoke like a doll, completely still aside from my mouth, my jet-black eyes vacant behind my glasses.

The queen stopped in her tracks. She stared ahead for a beat before slowly turning to face me, revealing the repugnant smile on her face. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to see my beloved fiancé.”

Her unnatural grin widened like it was ripping her face open. Keeping my voice flat and dispassionate, I apologized for asking and let the matter drop. The queen cackled as though she’d remembered a joke, then continued her march forward. I remained stoic even as she skipped a little, suddenly in a much better mood.

*She’s using Prince Leon to amuse herself again.*

Once she exited the room, I raised my head and loosed a quiet exhale. I was well aware of the queen’s regular visits to her fiancé ever since the prince had shut himself away in his room, his appearance gradually changing. I also knew what happened when the two of them were alone in that room.

The queen had murdered Anemonian citizens in the castle’s torture chamber. My job was to get the room in working order for the first time in its existence and fill it with all the Anemonians who’d “deceived” Leon. That day had shattered Leon’s heart, and he could no longer fulfill his purpose at the castle. The queen’s new favorite pastime was reopening those wounds again and again.

*It’s fine. Just as long as she doesn’t go after Tiara.*

Leon’s pain was trivial in comparison. I couldn’t spare him a thought when I knew the queen wanted to target Tiara, my younger sister. That was why I’d asked the queen about her destination. As soon as I found out it didn’t concern Tiara, I lost all interest.

*I almost pity the prince. The hell she puts him through is worse than death.*

Nevertheless, I buried that thought. Leon’s screams echoed past the door and



all throughout the royal residence, night after night. They began the moment the queen stepped into the room. The more people heard his anguish, the more terrifying the palace rumors became.

Some said the queen had acquired Leon for his looks and was treating him like her pet. Others said she kept him as a living doll and an outlet for her anger. There was even gossip that Leon's screams weren't screams at all, but cries of pleasure from however he and the queen were amusing themselves in there. The guards and maids were constantly exchanging contradictory rumors and theories.

I didn't bother correcting anyone or revealing the queen's actual treatment of Leon. Instead, I ordered strict silence from the maids who cared for him to ensure the truth never escaped that room.

Now that the queen had disappeared down the long hallway, I moved in the opposite direction. *This is what Leon gets for being a womanizer.*

Leon, himself a firstborn prince, had angered the queen by drinking with civilians the night before his visit to Freesia. There had already been rumors about his womanizing ways, so perhaps he'd wanted to enjoy his final night of freedom before getting engaged to the queen, or maybe he'd merely wanted to indulge in pleasure without any concern for the consequences. I never bothered investigating the incident to find out.

Freesia's relationship with Anemone had devolved into a needless war that only a political marriage between the two countries could end. I could hardly imagine a better match than the sleazy prince and that demon of a queen. Anemone rid themselves of their troublesome prince, and Freesia gained a sacrifice to entertain our wicked leader. It was a good arrangement for both sides.

*But then that scumbag went and ruined everything.*

Leon had let his carnal desires get the best of him and nearly tore apart the bond Anemone and Freesia had finally started to patch up. We were lucky that



the queen was satisfied with torturing the Anemonian people to death. She could have easily escalated this into another war.

He disgraced himself as royalty when he abused his privileges and indulged in pleasure without any foresight. Now he was paying the price for making all those women cry. It seemed to me like the natural outcome of his philandering ways.

I returned to my room and locked the door behind me. I shut the window and curtains before extinguishing the lamplight. Finally enveloped in darkness, I let out the long, long sigh I'd been holding back all day. I pressed the black frames of my glasses up as the thoughts that had chased me all the way back to my room kept on swirling. But before I could muse any further, a familiar, distant scream tore through the halls as though torn out of my own thoughts.

"Aaahhh! No, noooo! No more people, no more! Aaaaahhhh!"

At first, the screams had irritated me, but now they blended into the background. Sometimes the queen's laughter joined the pained howling, seeping in through my window. I'd teleported to her on one of the earliest occasions, curious to see if she was actually torturing the prince. I'd also accompanied her as her attendant. But the queen only ever tortured Leon with words—in fact, she seemed to draw particular glee from wounding him without sullyng her hands.

"I'm not exactly opposed."

I kept my voice hushed as my lips tugged upward. Hopefully the darkness hid what I knew to be a heinous grin. I couldn't help it. Leon's screams were the best reassurance I had that the queen's attention wasn't on the person I held most dear.

With a deep breath, I teleported to her. My pitch-black chambers transformed into a well-lit bedroom. Before I could even focus on the figure in the corner, I spoke in a gentler manner than I would with the queen.

"Goodness... Reading books until dawn again, Tiara?"



The woman on the sofa in the corner sprang to her feet. “Big Brother!” She raced up to me, this sweet girl who was the only family member I had left in the world. No one was as precious to me as her anymore.

“Were you good while I was gone? Sorry I’m late tonight.”

I smiled and stroked Tiara’s soft blonde hair, every muscle in my body relaxing as the strands glided between my fingers.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m just glad you come and see me every day.”

Her voice, sweet as the tinkling of a bell, washed the sickening screams from my ears.

“But aren’t you tired, Big Brother? I thought you’d be busy with Her Majesty’s birthday party.”

“I’m fine. It ended without incident. I wanted to see you as soon as possible.”

I looked down to find her smiling up at me, and I hugged her slender body against mine. She leaned against me, arms around my back. “You always work so hard.”

*The only light in my life.*

I focused on her weight in my arms like it could prove she was real. Tiara was the one person in this world I’d sworn to protect. Yet in eight months, she would turn sixteen and be married off to someone in a foreign country.

*Somewhere so far away that the queen can never reach her.*

The thought of Tiara leaving was a knife in my chest. I could still teleport to her if she was somewhere near Freesia’s border, but I couldn’t stray too far from the queen without permission. Tiara wouldn’t stay in my arms forever—a loss which nothing in the world would be able to replace—but she’d be safer out of the country and away from the queen. Most of all, she would escape this isolated tower where Pride imprisoned her. So however I felt, whatever happened to me, I had to ensure this marriage went through. Her happiness trumped anything I might endure.



Unfortunately, the queen was the only person with the right to pick Tiara's fiancé. The woman who'd sealed her own sister away in a tower would never choose a good partner for her. I squeezed Tiara tighter in my arms, determined to find a way to keep her safe.

I only hoped the queen would select a man at random, and that man would turn out to be a good husband. If he wasn't, I was prepared to use anything at my disposal to rid Tiara of him. It didn't matter that I was also a slave.

"What's the matter, Big Brother?"

Tiara sensed the tension in my arms. I told her I was tired in an attempt to keep holding her a little longer, but I was silently making a vow to protect her—some way, somehow.

*It all comes down to Leon Adonis Coronaria, future prince consort in name only...and the queen's outlet for her anger.*

She'd started using him as a way to get her thrills ever since she took him on as a pet. That source of release used to be the Freesian people. With a bit of luck, she might lose all interest in Tiara and delegate the burden of choosing her fiancé to me, the seneschal. Regardless, the queen would never lay a hand on Tiara so long as she had Leon to amuse herself with. She'd found a much better, closer toy than the princess in the isolated tower.

The invasion of Chinensis and domination of Cercis had likewise lifted the queen's mood, and she remained jolly for some time after. With those countries had come two brand-new toys: the former King Yohan and Prince Cedric.

*Please keep being the sacrifice, Leon. Your misery will nourish Tiara's happiness.*

His suffering bought Tiara a life of continued peace. Our citizens no longer had targets on their backs either. Besides, this was what Leon deserved for indulging in his lust, making so many women cry, and disgracing his royal name. It was only fair that the corrupt prince rot away to save an innocent like Tiara.



Greedy, I hoped the queen would keep Leon until the end of her days, never destroying him or growing bored. I wished with all my heart that Leon would live a long, distressing life—his days spent in that lavish prison he'd been blessed with as future prince consort.

*All for the sake of the Freesian people and the girl who means the world to me.*



## Chapter 2:

### The Ostracized Princess and the Gift

**“B**-BIG SISTER! Come quick! This is incredible!”

The morning after my birthday party, Tiara’s flustered voice and stomping feet caused a ruckus outside my room. I’d just finished reading that day’s batch of letters and was yearning to get up and stretch. Her shouting drew the attention of Arthur and Vice Captain Eric, as well as my guard Jack, who jumped and reached for the door. The guards outside it tried to convey that I was busy and asked what had her so animated.

“Hello, Tiara,” I called out. “What’s the matter? It’s okay, come in.”

The door creaked open, and Tiara rushed over to me. “I’m sorry to bother you!”

Recently, she’d been speaking with Prime Minister Gilbert and Mother about making some kind of announcement or holding an event for her own birthday. She must have just returned from one of those discussions.

“Um, can you come to the main entrance? Big Brother is there too!” The words were still flying from her mouth rapid-fire. “It’s just so amazing!”

At her urging, I left my room to see what all the fuss was about. The moment I entered the hallway, a sweet scent tickled my nose. I invited Mary and Lotte, my personal maids, along with my guards and knights to accompany me.

Tiara dragged me along, taking deep breaths to calm herself as she rattled off more information. She had finished her discussion and been on her way to my room when she heard familiar voices coming from the front entrance. She went to take a look and was met with a shocking delivery sitting right there by the main doors. That could only mean one thing: A certain *someone* had probably run into more thieves or slave traders and brought them directly to the castle.



When we arrived at the front entrance, I was completely overwhelmed by what awaited me.

“Elder Sister! I’m sorry to interrupt your work.”

“Well, well, well. You got here quick, didn’t you, Mistress?”

Stale must have just arrived after wrapping up his official duties with Uncle Vest. Beside him stood a man with a mean face, dark-brown hair and eyes, and brown skin. Freesia’s deliveryman, Val, was a common-enough sight—but never before had I seen him surrounded by rosebushes.

“Stale, Val...um, what are these for?” I asked, dumbstruck.

“Isn’t it great?!” Tiara chirped next to me.

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric looked as baffled as I felt.

“He says they’re a gift from Anemone...from Prince Leon,” Stale said.

“Something about it being a symbol of your sworn friendship and not a birthday present.”

Stale held up the letter and card from Leon. The letter was unopened, so Stale must have either read the card or heard about this from Val.

Val scratched his head and muttered, “I just wanted to go out drinkin’, and he sent me here with all this crap.”

*Why is Stale here with Val in the first place?* The sea of roses had distracted me from that pertinent issue.

Stale explained that he and Uncle Vest had gone out to say goodbye to the noble and royal party guests who were beginning their journeys home this morning. Val and the children had just so happened to arrive with the delivery at the same time.

“They even managed to startle Uncle Vest with all these roses,” Stale finished, trying and failing to put on a convincing smile

I huffed a laugh and took another look at the flowers. Indeed, there were



nearly enough to fill the entrance hall. It was like a funeral—or perhaps an indoor rose garden, as the bushes had been kept in dirt during transportation to keep their roots intact. I would have to get Mother’s permission to plant them in the castle garden.

The guards and maids had tried their best to set up the plants in an orderly manner, but there was nothing they could do other than add to the mountain of roses filling the room.

“The smell in here is incredible...”

Arthur’s words seemed to slip out involuntarily. Vice Captain Eric rubbed his nose, while Val clicked his tongue and grumbled, “I’d rather smell a trash dump.”

I enjoyed the scent, but the men in the room seemed a bit overwhelmed by it, aside from Stale.

Khemet, the boy with messy black hair, smiled and said, “I think it smells nice!”

Sefekh, the girl with dark-brown hair, said, “Me too!” Her head bobbed as she excitedly took in all the roses.

These two children assisted Val with his deliveries. They should have already seen the roses when they brought them here from Anemone, but it was probably even more overwhelming to be surrounded by them in a room. These weren’t typical roses either.

Every last flower was a shiny, lustrous blue.

Blue roses were a rarity, even in my past life. I’d never seen a real one during those dull days of mine; something like that would’ve left a lasting impression. Yet they struck me as somehow familiar...

“Here, Elder Sister.”

Stale approached me and handed over the letter and card. Tiara leaned close and asked what they said, so I started by opening the card for her to see.



*“May this be proof of my friendship. To my sworn friend, Pride Royal Ivy, from Leon Adonis Coronaria.”*

Leon’s lovely script flowed across the card. I felt guilty receiving another massive present just a day after getting my official birthday gift from the kingdom of Anemone. I opened up the envelope with the letter next and began to read more of Leon’s nice handwriting...only to balk at the contents. Leon stated that this was his gift to me in place of a birthday present, and he had specific instructions about the roses.

“It says they’re for Arthur and me, but others can have some, if we’re all right with that.”

“Why me?!” Arthur yelped.

Stale came up beside me. “Were you expecting this, Arthur?”

Pinching his brow, Arthur replied, “Uh, sort of...”

“That reminds me,” Vice Captain Eric said. “You and Prince Leon had a conversation about something last night, didn’t you?”

Arthur nodded. “H-he said everyone would really like it... B-but I never expected him to send *these*!”

Accepting a gift of roses from the crown prince of Anemone required courage, so I couldn’t fault Arthur for his fluster. Even I, Leon’s sworn friend, hesitated over the lavish present. Any other young lady would have probably shrieked in delight and considered it a surprise proposal.

I read the letter again and finally realized what was tugging at my memory.

“He says these are blue roses native to Anemone,” I told the others. “They used to be extremely rare, but the country has cultivated them and plans to export them as goods.”

As ever, Anemone’s thriving trade left me in awe; they could start selling entirely new products at the drop of a hat. Demand for these blue roses would surely soar the moment they hit the market.



“He also says there’s an old legend about these. If you pluck a rose from the bush and give it to your soulmate, the flower will change from blue to red.”

The men started looking between me and the roses. They were so open about it that I couldn’t help but laugh. It was natural for them to jump to conclusions after last night’s announcement about my marriage candidates.

“How lovely!” Tiara cried, delighted.

I knew Tiara would like this sort of thing. I told the others to take however many roses they pleased—including Mary and Lotte, who were already trying to divide the roses up so they could decorate my room. Their eyes sparkled at the offer. It seemed women particularly appreciated a gift of blue roses.

Another glance at the flowers sent my heart racing with anticipation now that I’d read the story in Leon’s letter. The roses were fragrant and beautiful, an indirect birthday present from my sworn friend, but there was another reason they were so special to me.

“Hey, Mistress. We can take ’em too, right?” Val said.

I turned toward him. Khemet and Sefekh had taken me up on my offer for everyone to partake. They reached for the roses, but Val stopped them before they pricked their fingers on the thorns.

“Absolutely,” I answered.

Val swept his gaze over those present. When I did likewise, I realized they were all looking at their nearest roses and then back at me. Maybe they felt bad picking the roses after all the effort that went into transporting them here, soil included.

I understood why it felt like a waste to pluck something so beautiful. I wouldn’t mind them carrying entire bushes home, roots and all, but that was probably too much work. Perhaps I should ask for the gardeners’ help pruning them. *No, that would just ruin what makes them so perfect.*

As I mulled it over, I noticed that the faces around me had gone ghostly pale.



Wondering what had spooked them, I whirled back around.

Val was holding out a single rose for me.

I froze at first, then accepted the offering. As soon as the rose touched my hand, the shining blue transformed into a deep crimson.

*Oh my gosh. What a beautiful red!* These would *definitely* be popular among consumers. What better gift could a woman receive?

It took me a moment to see that no one else was as charmed as I was. I tempered my excitement before they could see me getting giddy like a little kid. That was when I got a better look at their expressions.

Vice Captain Eric and Tiara had turned red. Mary and Lotte covered their mouths with their hands. Jack's eyes were as wide as saucers. So they *were* impressed after all. That was a relief.

Arthur and Stale were deathly pale for some reason. I couldn't imagine why. Two men with formidable special powers shouldn't have been so shaken by something as trivial as a color-changing rose.

Khemet and Sefekh, the youngest people in the room, cheered.

"It's so pretty!"

"Val! I want one too!"

My eyes finally landed on Val, who smirked as he took in the others' reactions. Just what was so amusing about all this?

"So? Who's gonna get a rose from you, Mistress?"

He sneered at the others instead of looking at me, but I didn't understand what he meant by that. I was already providing roses to everyone in the room, but if he was asking about people who weren't present...

"I'll give one each to Captain Alan and Captain Callum," I said. "They'd make nice presents for Mother, Father, and Uncle Vest if I put them in vases. I'd love to donate one of the full plants to the royal order if possible. I'm sure Prime



Minister Gilbert would like a rosebush as well.”

His wife, Maria, would be delighted. As would his daughter, Stella. I wished I could see the moment when Prime Minister Gilbert presented them with roses. I knew Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark had wives as well, so I would have to send them bushes of their own.

“The roses will only turn red after you cut their stems, so it’d be best to give entire plants away in one piece... But that would be hard to—”

“I-Is that how it works?!” Arthur blurted out, visibly shocked.

Vice Captain Eric and Stale watched me closely. They must have wanted to take the roses home in their rarer blue forms.

“Yes, they turn red when they’re taken away from someone’s body heat,” I said.

“R-regardless of who gives them to you?!” Stale said. His face was etched with concern, though both he and the vice captain were a bit less red than before.

At that very moment, Val howled with laughter.







I spun to find him clutching his sides and pointing at Arthur, Stale, and Vice Captain Eric. I had no idea what had him doubled over and downright breathless. The trio glared at Val, who continued cackling in the face of their ire.

*Oh no! Even the gentle Vice Captain Eric is clenching his fists!*

“Did you know about this?!” Stale demanded.

Val had finally gotten his laughter under control. He chuckled a few more times as he smirked at Stale. “Leon wouldn’t shut up about the damn things, but at least I got to see those stupid looks on your faces!”

He cackled again, provoking more scowls from the other men. Val met their angry gazes and cut off two more roses, handing them to Khemet and Sefekh. As soon as the flowers left his hand, they gleamed a brilliant red, eliciting cries of delight from the children.

“I’m sure you haven’t forgotten that I have the right to order you around too...” Stale said, sounding frigid even with the heat in his cheeks.

Arthur backed him up by cracking his knuckles. At this display, Sefekh dropped into a battle-ready stance beside Val, although a flustered Tiara rushed over to stop her. Khemet looked nervous, but he never let go of Sefekh’s hand.

“What, you want a rose from me too, Mister Prince?” Val said with a smirk, the challenge clear in his voice and expression.

A cloud of bloodlust seemed to billow around Stale.

“D-did you already know how the trick worked, Big Sister?!” Tiara asked me as she continued to pacify Sefekh.

“Yes,” I replied. “Leon mentioned it in the letter.”

I held it out for her to see. Leon had written down so many details, I would’ve gone hoarse if I tried to read them all out loud. He’d included everything—recounting the legend of the roses, detailing how to care and propagate them, and describing their known ecology. Leon explained that once someone picked a rose, any change in the stem’s temperature would cause the change in color.



Perhaps the others had never imagined flowers were capable of such a dazzling feat. That would explain their dramatic reactions. I rushed to explain the details Leon had included in the letter. Ecology and such aside, the legend of the roses was very romantic.

The story spoke of a young man who fell in love with a goddess at first sight. He offered her a blue rose and asked to spend the rest of his life with her. The man's proposal ignited the flames of love within the goddess' heart, turning the rose a blazing shade of red to match. Other legends revolving around the flowers took on a similarly romantic tone.

Tiara calmly nodded along, whereas the men flushed even deeper. Even I had to stuff down a blush as I discussed a love story like this. Truth be told, I'd learned of these blue roses from their source material.

The cause of their nagging familiarity was ORL, the otome game I played in my past life. I remembered them being a very rare species of rose growing in the palace gardens during the first game. In every route, you could get a scene where the love interest tenderly handed Tiara one of these roses. Tiara's blush as the rose turned red in the love interest's outstretched hand was a highlight of the game...at least as far as I was concerned.

However, the roses turned red for all of the love interests, completely contradicting the idea that only a "soulmate" could spark the transformation. Leon's explanation and Val's demonstration had proven that the rose's legend was just a romantic myth.

Tiara was lost in thought, so I asked my maids to fetch pruning shears from the gardeners. Lotte informed me that Mary had already gone to do so.

"Oh, how exciting!"

Val used my distraction with the flowers to antagonize the other men some more. "What's the matter? Who else is gonna give a rose to Mistress?"

*I don't need any more roses! The gardeners and servants are going to prune*



*enough to fill my room!*

The others, probably angry that Val was using my name to order them around, turned red and glared at him.

“Val, how many can we take home with us?!” Khemet asked.

“Come on, get some more! There’s plenty to go around!” Sefekh said.

The children, unsatisfied with a mere one rose each, tugged on Val’s arms and pleaded with him for more. Annoyed, Val grimaced and spat, “You wanna walk around carryin’ a buncha flowers?”

“You can just use your special power to carry them for us!” the girl shot back.

Stale, Arthur, and Vice Captain Eric hadn’t let up their glaring. If Sefekh and Khemet weren’t here, the men might have been angry enough to hurl entire rosebushes at Val. Fortunately, Mary returned just then with the pruning shears and told us the gardeners would arrive shortly.

“Ah, wait! Mary!” Tiara called out.

Right as Mary was about to start dividing up the roses for everyone to take home, Tiara took the shears herself and brought them to me. *Why is that big grin on her face giving me déjà vu?*

“They’re just so lovely this way!” she said. “If we’re going to turn the flowers red, we should have Big Sister do it for everyone!”

I took up the shears and passed my rose from Val off to Lotte. While these roses were a gift from Leon, they *were* meant for me, so maybe it made more sense for me to be the one in charge of handing them out. I had to ensure the quality of the roses Leon had prepared for me. That being said, cutting entire bouquets for everyone would probably be too much work for my poor hands, so I’d have to stick to one rose per person.

Tiara had convinced me. I approached one of the bushes and reached for the nearest rose.

“Wait one moment, please!” Vice Captain Eric said, rushing over. “Here, use



these. You don't want the thorns to prick you!"

Looking paler than usual, he removed his gloves and passed them to me. He apologized for having nothing better to offer me, his concern for my well-being clear.

"Thank you very much, Vice Captain Eric. I'm more than happy to use these."

I smiled at him and put his gloves on. The vice captain stiffened, a hint of pink on his cheeks. Lending a member of the royal family his personal pair of gloves was bound to make him nervous. But I had to admit it was a little annoying—no, *very* annoying—that the big knight gloves made me feel so secure. I'd never compared hand sizes with a knight before. It was kind of amazing how much space men could take up with just their hands. *Or maybe mine are that puny. Either way, I'm jealous of people with big hands!*

"Forgive me, Your Highness! Are they too large?!" the vice captain asked fretfully, and I shook my head.

"I think it's nice that you have such large hands. They're not like mine at all. It's very manly!"

I held up my hands clad in the large gloves. For whatever reason, Vice Captain Eric's cheeks began to blush. I feared I'd said something rude, or maybe he was embarrassed to receive a compliment from a member of the royal family. I'd feel awful if it turned out he was sensitive about the size of his hands.

That done, I wasted no time in clipping the first rose. I looked at the flower in my hands, still its original blue color, and held it out to the man in front of me.

"Here, Vice Captain Eric."

His throat bobbed. I imagined he was anxious to see the rose's transformation up close. I couldn't help but chuckle at the image of the mighty vice captain so timid about a color-changing flower.

Vice Captain Eric hesitantly reached out and took the rose. As soon as it left my hands, it flushed a deep red...as did Vice Captain Eric's face.



“Th-Thank you so much!”

He clutched the rose and bowed. I was glad to see him so pleased with the gift.

I cut another flower and gave this one to Tiara, warning her to watch out for the thorns. She took the rose and watched it transform before her eyes. “It’s like a magic spell!” Like any good otome game heroine, Tiara seemed born to carry roses.

Next, I snipped off flowers for Khemet and Sefekh. Since they’d already received roses from Val, this was their second time watching the transformation up close, but they were no less delighted by it.

“So pretty!”

“Thanks a bunch!”

They cheered, clutching their roses. Their reactions made me really happy, though I was a bit concerned about them pricking themselves on the thorns. I told the children that we could turn their flowers into bouquets to take home once the gardeners arrived, but they insisted on cutting the roses themselves. I understood why they wanted to be the one to give the roses instead of receiving them this time, so I allowed it on the condition that the gardeners could help them.

“Here, Val.”

I trimmed off a flower and presented it to him. Val stood with his arms folded tightly over his chest and a scowl twisting his face. He refused to budge for my offer.

“You don’t want it?” I asked, tilting my head.

Val clicked his tongue and reluctantly took the flower, though he didn’t so much as turn his head to watch it change colors. Maybe he really *didn’t* want a rose. He hadn’t seemed to enjoy their scent. He’d even told Khemet and Sefekh he had no need for such things. Worried, I began to ask if he really didn’t want



it, but he waved me away without looking at me. Then he trudged over to slouch against the wall.

Sefekh and Khemet seemed tempted to follow him, but they were still waiting for their turns with the pruning shears. They'd grown so much in the time I'd known them. At the start, the pair would hardly leave Val's side.

I cut more flowers for Mary, Lotte, Jack, and even Tiara's personal maids. They were all delighted with the gifts, which made me want to go around giving roses to all the knights and castle workers...but my hands were already wearing out. They'd probably be sore tomorrow, but I raised the shears again anyway.

"Here, Arthur."

Arthur stood frozen beside Stale, but he gave a start at my voice. He recovered quickly and hurried up to me. His nervous expression and earlier fluster left me wondering if he was actually scared of the roses somehow.

He stood before me as stiff as a statue. In my past life, he would have been the superstitious sort of person who thought things like cameras could capture your soul. He reached out to accept the rose with trembling hands, his trepidation inadvertently charming. I wrapped my hand around his.

"Pr-Princess Pride, why are you...?!"

He lurched even more dramatically than when I'd called his name. I smiled. It was like he thought the rose was going to lash out and bite him or something.

"It's all right," I assured him. "It's going to turn a beautiful color."

Arthur was still sputtering, trying and failing to squeak out words, so I kept my hand over his with the stem between my fingers. Arthur twitched as I removed my other hand, causing the blue rose to turn red from the loss of body heat.

"What do you think? Isn't it lovely?" I said.

Smiling, I brought my eyes up from the lustrous crimson rose to Arthur, who had turned even redder than the flower itself. He slapped his hand over his mouth, eyes flickering between me and the blossom. Maybe the transformation



had frightened him, or maybe I'd upset him by forcing him to take the rose.

When I called his name, he recoiled and answered, "Yes?!" He was so stiff with tension that I worried he'd snap the rose's stem off.

"Oh! No, um...it's really pretty... I-I could hardly look away..."

Arthur's voice withered away with each word. His cheeks blazed. Surely he'd secretly enjoyed the transformation, considering he was too embarrassed to even make eye contact with me.

"I'm just glad you like it," I said.

I beamed at the wide-eyed knight, who responded with an enthusiastic nod. When I suggested sending a whole plant to his home, he said, "I could never ask the royal family to make a personal delivery just for me!"

Eventually, I convinced Arthur to take one of the bushes back to the training grounds, though it took reminding him that Leon had addressed the gift to him as well. He agreed to take them home with him that very night. *It's incredible how much weight knights can carry. They're so strong!*

Stale offered to help Arthur bring the plant to the training grounds as a donation to the royal order, but Arthur insisted that he wanted to do it himself. That didn't surprise me in the least.

Heartened by their exchange, I clipped another rose from the bush.

"Here, Stale."

I held out the rose to Stale, who snapped to attention. He approached me with hunched shoulders. It reminded me of how startled he'd been by Val's first demonstration of the color change. He raised his hand like a rusting robot in need of an oil change before taking the rose. Stale wasn't as nervous as Arthur had been, but it was unusual to see him with his lips squeezed shut and his eyes open so wide. *And to react like this to a plant, of all things...*

I found myself staring at Stale and the rose—which remained blue as it sat between our fingertips. Releasing the part of the stem I'd first touched would



cause the rose to transform, but it seemed that touching other parts of it had no effect. Well, it was only natural for an otome game item to function however was most convenient...

“Ahem... Elder Sister?”

His voice yanked me out of my thoughts. Stale’s jet-black eyes watched me from behind his glasses.

“Is something wrong? You’re not letting go...”

I’d accidentally kept him in suspense all this time despite how nervous the rose made him. I apologized, gently released my grip, and marveled again as the rose turned red. Though I’d wanted to see if the rose would transform on its own, that was too childish a desire to express. Acting like a little girl around Stale was deeply embarrassing, so I simply held on to my smile.

“I just...couldn’t seem to let go.”

Out of nowhere, Stale’s face flashed bright red, a transformation even the roses couldn’t rival. It was like he’d just caught a cold or something.

“Stale? What’s wrong?!”

“I-I’m sorry, I haven’t been getting enough sleep lately.”

Stale pressed his glasses up to recover his composure. He must have really been exhausted after last night’s birthday party and then seeing the guests off this morning with Uncle Vest.

“Are you really all right?!” I pressed. “You should get some rest. The guests have gone now, so you ought to ask Uncle Vest for—”

“I-I’m completely fine! I feel better already! Besides, there are still more!”

Rose in hand, Stale stumbled backward. I stepped forward in pursuit, but he insisted he was fine despite his flushed complexion. I placed my hand on his red neck and considered having Arthur cure him if he had a fever. Instead, Stale stopped mid-sentence and jerked back like my hand was ice on his skin.



He definitely felt warm. Stale was now as still as a statue, perhaps ashamed to have nearly smacked my hand away. I felt bad for startling him, but I kept my hand pressed to his neck to help cool his fever—not that it appeared to be working.

“Pri—I mean, Elder Sister...”

Stale showed signs of lightheadedness as he struggled to get words out. He squeezed his eyes shut. Then, just as I was about to question him about his plummeting condition...

“Y-you’re going to crush the rose!”

His yelp brought me back to my senses. I pulled my hand back and stepped away, then checked on the rose he was clutching. *I really messed up. I was so close to him, but I completely forgot about the rose!*

“I’m so sorry!”

I apologized, but the rose appeared intact. Stale assured me it was okay—though he took three quick steps away from me. He remained flushed and out of breath. Was he really that worried about keeping the rose safe? Well, at least he didn’t look *quite* as sick as before. Relieved, I asked him once more if he felt all right.

“Yes, and I’m sorry for my behavior,” he said after a deep breath. “I’ll be sure to rest in my room as soon as I’ve said goodbye to the final guests. I’d also like to thank Prince Leon the next time I see him.”

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric nodded vigorously.

“I look forward to seeing him again!” said Tiara.

That was when the gardeners arrived with cries of, “Apologies for the delay!” They carried all the tools they’d need to prune the roses and craft bouquets, so they wasted no time diving into the task. Soon, they’d divvied up roses to send out and crafted bouquets for the rest of us to take with us. I was about to ask them to add the single roses I’d already cut to the bouquets, but for some



reason, everyone nixed that idea. I didn't see the issue, since all the roses turned red when cut, but my maids insisted on wrapping up my single roses separately from the bouquets. *I feel bad that I made more work for all the servants.*

"Can we cut some now too?!" Khemet asked.

He and Sefekh were itching to experience the gardening process themselves. I asked one of the gardeners to teach them the correct method. Sefekh grabbed Khemet by the shoulders and crouched behind him, a bit wary of the gardener, but eventually they both managed to cut their own roses without incident.

All that remained was to deliver flowers to the others who weren't here in the entrance hall with us.

"That reminds me," I said, turning to Stale. "Which guests haven't left yet?"

Plenty of time had passed since last night's party. Usually, overnight guests would have departed by now.

Tiara also awaited his answer.

"Right, about that..." Stale said in a low voice. His face had returned to normal, his general aura noticeably grim.

That was when the front doors flew open, and a guard rushed inside. "Pardon the intrusion!"

He faced us and launched into a formal introduction of his charge.

"Prince Cedric of the United Hanazuo Kingdom is here for a visit! Her Majesty has granted him permission to come to the palace!"

The guard seemed flustered to find all of us at the entrance. I waved for him to bring Cedric in, and he dashed back outside to summon the prince.

"The United Hanazuo Kingdom has a reason for staying late," Stale said, voice lowering even further.

He was never going to let that cooking incident with Cedric go, was he? Even



Arthur and Vice Captain Eric passed off their roses to Lotte and Mary and stood at full attention behind me.

“Mistress, we’ll be takin’ the parlor if you’re not gonna use it,” Val said.

He shot a menacing look at the front doors, but Stale stopped him before he could leave. Unable to refuse orders from royalty, Val bared his teeth at an entirely unimpressed Stale.

“You should be thankful,” Stale said with a chilling smile. “We’re going to let you meet the second-born prince of Hanazuo.”

*This is definitely payback for how Val mocked him earlier.*

“Shut your damn mouth!” Val spat. He spun around, probably to ask my permission to leave, when the doors flew open for the second time.

“Forgive my sudden visit, Princess Pride, Prince Stale...and, um...Princess Tiara...”

Ignoring the mountain of roses cluttering the entrance hall, Cedric locked eyes with Tiara. He instantly flushed red.

At the same time, Val’s face twisted and he crumpled to the floor. “Ngh...Aaaaagh! I won’t forget this, you royal pain in the ass!” From his knees, he made a small bow. All of this played out according to Val’s fealty contract—his punishment for his former life of crime.

Fealty contracts typically consisted of nothing more than obedience toward the contract holder. But that contract holder could impose further stipulations on their subject, such as following the orders of and showing respect to any member of royalty they encountered. Hence Val contorting into a full-body bow in front of Cedric.

Val trembled from his efforts to resist, but he had no say in this matter. Sand poured out of the mailbag on his shoulder as he bent over.

“Who’s this, Pride?” Cedric asked.

Val’s irate prostration drew Cedric’s attention away from Tiara. He cocked a



brow at the man on the ground, whose words and actions were so dramatically opposed.

“His name is Val, and he makes deliveries for Freesia,” I said. “There’s a lot more behind it, but you should give him permission to be disrespectful to—”

“No, Elder Sister, there’s no need. Val is making an honest pledge of respect to Prince Cedric.”

Stale wore a sinister grin I hadn’t seen in quite a while. His resemblance to the scheming Stale from the otome games sent a shudder up and down my spine. Val couldn’t disobey royalty, but my orders always took priority. I could make him ignore Stale’s orders and disrespect Cedric, which was exactly why Stale stopped me.

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric, sulking from the fuss Val had caused earlier, didn’t interject to help him. I hesitated, eyes flickering back and forth between Stale and Val. Arthur wouldn’t put a stop to Stale in front of Cedric. Khemet and Sefekh raced over to Val and asked him what he was doing.

“Don’t act like a child, Big Brother!” Tiara said.

“Sorry, but he already treats Arthur and our elder sister like children, and they’re older than me,” Stale said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Big Sister! Ignore him and—mmph!” Stale covered Tiara’s mouth from behind, and she smacked his arms in a futile attempt to free herself. It was all pretty adorable. Meanwhile, Cedric’s eyes looked like they might pop right out of his head. I thought the sight of his darling Tiara had enchanted him again, but he wasn’t blushing in the slightest this time. I poked his arm and asked what was wrong.

“If I recall...isn’t Prince Stale Tiara’s adoptive brother?!” Cedric whispered back.

I confirmed his suspicion, but this only caused him to drop his head into his hands and cry, “Not again! It’s an outrageous declaration of war against me!”



*Are his mortifying memories of his past rearing up again?*

Wondering as much, I caught a muffled grumble of, “I don’t think I can beat him!”

Cedric could be rather restless, so I attributed his strange behavior to that. I didn’t get a chance to pry, as Val interrupted us with a scream.

“Hey! Mistress!”

“Um, Stale?” I said, trying my best to heed Val’s plea. “Val is very sorry for his actions... Well, maybe not, but I think you’ve gotten your revenge by now...”

“If you say so.” Stale smiled at me and released his hand from Tiara’s mouth... which freed her to puff up her cheeks and give Stale’s ear a good tug.

This time, I received Cedric’s approval and told Val clearly, “I permit you to be disrespectful to Cedric.” Val instantly jumped to his feet and glared wickedly at Stale, baring his sharp teeth like he wanted to sink them into Stale’s neck.

“I’m not gonna forget this, you princely little brat.”

“What’s this about? I thought you said you were eager to meet Prince Cedric.”

“I’d rather drop dead than be around more goddamn royalty!”

Khemet and Sefekh tugged on Val’s arms to calm him down.

Cedric recoiled, startled by Val’s abrupt shift in tone. “What a frightening attitude, and in front of royalty...”

It took great effort not to point out Cedric’s own hypocrisy in this matter.

Just then, Cedric took a closer look at the children clinging to Val. He gasped. “Could it be? Are you Prince Leon’s attendant whom I’ve heard so much about?!”

*Attendant?! What is he talking about?*

I pressed Cedric for details. He explained that the people of Hanazuo said Val, the children, and Leon patrolled the country together during the war and rescued those in need. They must have assumed that the prince wouldn’t travel



without an attendant and therefore assigned the title to Val. Cedric recounted descriptions he'd heard of a man with two children—descriptions that sounded an awful lot like Val.

“You better not be callin’ me his servant,” Val replied, which was answer enough.

Cedric tried to thank him for his help in the war, but Val turned away and refused to listen. He probably didn’t want another prince getting attached to him. Cedric took a step forward, but Val grabbed Sefekh and Khemet’s shoulders and pulled them close. Then he used his special power and the sand in his mailbag to craft a long, thin wall between him and Cedric. Of course, this only delighted Cedric more, since he’d never witnessed anything like it. He ran closer to get a better look, oblivious to Val’s rejection.

“Wait, you’re Hanazuo’s second-born prince?!”

No sooner had Val loosed this shout than the wall collapsed back into sand, startling Cedric into retreating a step. With the barrier removed, Cedric got a clear view of Val glaring at him. Khemet and Sefekh, still clinging to Val, curiously asked, “Hanazuo?!” and “A prince?”

The sinister smile had crept back onto Stale’s lips.

A menacing glint flashed in Val’s eyes. “So you’re the one who...”

Cedric stumbled even farther backward. Thanks to his perfect memory, he couldn’t have anticipated such a reception from a man he was meeting for the first time. After all, Cedric remembered Val only as a mysterious figure who’d helped to save his country. Caught off-balance and off guard, Cedric was like a frog cornered by a hungry snake.

“Pride, what is he—”

Without warning, the sand transformed into a mass of needles. They surged forward, aiming right for Cedric.

It happened in the blink of an eye. My two imperial knights lurched forward,



but I stood frozen with my mouth hanging open. Val's contract barred him from using violence, so the sand needles stopped just inches from Cedric's face, shuddering in the air.

After a moment of shock, Cedric stumbled backward, preferring the prick of the roses at his back to those fearsome needles. And they really were fearsome! If it weren't for the fealty contract, Val probably would have killed Cedric. *Did he just cause a diplomatic incident?!*

Snapping to my senses, I shouted at Val, and the needles collapsed into harmless piles of sand.

Val clicked his tongue. "Stupid prince." He sent the sand back into his mailbag and sat on the floor. The lingering glint in his eyes was the only trace remaining of his desire to throttle the prince.

"I-I'm sorry, Cedric!" I cried, running over to the dazed prince's side. "I'll apologize for this disrespect, but Val has a contract with me, and he isn't allowed to cause any harm! Please allow me to explain!"

Maybe I shouldn't have asked him to allow Val some leeway in the first place. Cedric dared not take his eyes off Val.

"No...I'm not hurt. It's fine."

Cedric's ghastly pale face told a different story. Clearly he was struggling to make sense of all this.

"Does he have some sort of grudge against me...or against Hanazuo?"

"You moron of a prince," Val muttered. "Can't find your own food, you damn thief?!"

I rounded on him again. "Val!" He had to stop being so hostile toward Cedric. *Why are you adding fuel to the fire I almost managed to put out?!*

Cedric balked. "What?!"

"Val! Please stay quiet for a while!" As a last resort, I ordered his silence. I grabbed Cedric's arm to drag him to a parlor room, away from Val—but the



moment I touched him, I realized how much Cedric's body temperature had spiked.

*Huh?* I looked up at Cedric to find him blushing furiously. He hung his head and covered his mouth, his skin all but boiling. I wondered if he'd caught a glimpse of Tiara again, but she was on the opposite side of the room with Stale. Concerned, I released his arm and waited.

"I...I'm so sorry!"

*Oh dear...*

My lips twitched. Now I understood why he was blushing again. It was his *affliction*. His red-faced apology had surprised Val along with the rest of us.

"Cedric, we shouldn't stand around and talk all day. Why don't we move to the parlor?"

I tugged on his arm to get him to follow me. This process felt all too familiar by now. The embarrassed prince managed to keep up, but it was obvious that memories of his own misdeeds plagued his mind.

Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and Jack followed us as I led Cedric away. I left the roses in the care of the maids and gardeners and called for Tiara and Stale to join us. Stale maintained a smile, but I knew he was displeased with all this. Tiara stayed glued to his side; perhaps she didn't want to join Cedric and me in the front. It was pretty cute how she hid from him behind Stale's back.

"M-my apologies, Princess Pride, but might I request that Val and his associates be allowed to join us as well?" Cedric said, covering his flushed face with a hand.

He'd gone back to that annoying formal speech of his. I searched the room for Val and found him glaring at me, his lips pressed into a hard line.

It wouldn't be long until he could speak again, given that I'd only told him to stay quiet for "a while." Still, I had no reason to deny Cedric. The whole arrangement made me nervous, but I heeded Cedric's request and asked Val,



Sefekh, and Khemet to join us. Val didn't need to speak—his expression alone conveyed his annoyance. Those complaints would have to wait until we were in the parlor. Khemet and Sefekh followed Val, each holding one blue rose and a bundle of four red roses. I worried they would prick themselves on the thorns, but then I noticed that the gardeners had removed them before the children clipped the stems.

Stale, Tiara, and even Arthur and Vice Captain Eric were keeping their single roses in their pockets or belts, having sent the rest back with the maids. This strange assortment of royalty and commoners all carrying roses in some way would have made quite the sight for anyone outside our group.

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"I sincerely apologize for my actions!"

Cedric practically folded in half the second the parlor doors closed. His red-faced apology drew a scowl from Val, who couldn't speak yet. He retreated to the wall with Sefekh and Khemet at his sides, his body language warning Cedric to stay away. He used his bag of sand to draw a line between himself and the prince.

"I was... I had no idea I was eating food meant for the rest of you!" Cedric said. "I caused a grave inconvenience for Princess Pride! I take full responsibility for disgracing myself as a member of royalty!"

Cedric's eyes darted around the room, and he struggled for breath like he'd just run a race. Even Vice Captain Eric recoiled. Arthur and Stale shared a perturbed glance—they'd both known Cedric when he was a cocky troublemaker—but they didn't do more than furrow their brows.

Tiara hid behind my back to get away from Cedric. I turned to see her glaring at him, her cheeks puffed up. Her anger from the incident hadn't subsided quite yet, and none of us could force her to accept his apology.

"Um, Cedric...let me explain everything while we're here," I said.



Cedric had bowed to Val the second we retreated to the safety of the parlor. I tried to reason with him, but as soon as he looked at me, he spotted Tiara and turned even redder.

“First of all, that food and those cookies weren’t for Val. They were—”

“W-wait, Elder Sister! For now, shouldn’t you just explain what Val’s angry about? Cedric has no business knowing whom you privately cook or bake for.”

Though Stale continued smiling, he sounded more flustered than usual. He clearly didn’t want Cedric to know the cookies were for him, though I couldn’t imagine why. Even stranger, Arthur was pressing his lips together and nodding in agreement.

Not wanting to go against their wishes, I explained that the food and cookies were meant for Val as well. That was enough to make the blood drain from Cedric’s face, so I was glad I’d heeded Stale’s advice and left him and Arthur out of the story. Such an addition could have taken Cedric’s legs out from under him. If he learned Tiara and I had made those cookies together as presents for Stale and Arthur, depression or jealousy might very well have seized Cedric’s heart. *Now that I think about it, maybe that’s why he was checking if Stale was Tiara’s adoptive brother...*

“I truly can’t apologize enough!”

Cedric groaned and clutched his head as another humiliating incident seared itself permanently into his perfect memory. I didn’t know what to do but smile at him awkwardly. *It must be really exhausting to have a perfect memory.*

Sefekh and Khemet seemed disinterested in anyone but Val. Maybe they’d already cooled off or simply lost interest in Cedric. As for Val himself, he stared Cedric down, his lips twisted and eyes narrowed. The muscles in his face spasmed like the prince was some new and threatening life-form he meant to confront. When Val caught me looking, he pointed at his mouth in the hopes that I would undo my order. Well, we weren’t going to make any progress here unless Val could respond to Cedric, though I feared he would say something



horrific again.

I granted Val permission to speak. He let out a long sigh. “So freakin’ annoying.” Then he waved Cedric off, as if shooin’ a stray dog. “The hell is an apology supposed to do? I don’t want anything to do with you, so stay out of my damn life.”

Val’s voice dripped with venom. It seemed he detested even the slightest interaction with Cedric. I half-expected him to ask permission to beat him up, but Val’s true desire was to avoid Cedric entirely.

The prince responded weakly, “I understand.” He was definitely upset. I would have to reassure him that Val treated *all* royalty and knights this way. “Oh, right. What was this contract you mentioned, Pride?”

Cedric approached me, speaking in hushed tones. Perhaps the apology had helped calm him, even though Val didn’t accept it.

I’d mentioned the contract in the entrance hall earlier, and while I didn’t want to say too much in front of Sefekh and Khemet, Cedric seemed eager to follow up on the subject. I leaned in and whispered a simple summary: Val entered into a contract with me that forbade him from disrespectful or harmful behavior. Cedric was startled by this, but I couldn’t thoroughly explain the fealty contract’s mechanism.

“But this man rescued my people,” Cedric said. “I’ve already wasted your goodwill, Pride, so there’s no need for him to treat me better than you. Tell him the contract doesn’t apply to me.”

“What the hell?!” Val blurted out. He scrunched up his face as he shouted, “Didn’t I tell you to leave me alone, you moronic prince?!”

He had a point. There was no reason to modify the contract if the two never interacted.

“I’ll allow you to strike me if Pride invalidates the contract,” Cedric said.

Val’s resistance instantly melted away. Instead, a sinister aggression stole into



his body language. There was no doubt in my mind that Val would hit Cedric if he got the chance. *Even Stale and Arthur's faces lit up a little! Are they looking forward to seeing him get hit? I wish they'd control themselves!*

"I think that's a good idea!" Tiara chimed in. "You already allow him to interact differently with Prince Leon, Big Sister."

Now even Tiara had broken her silence to support Cedric's suggestion. Cedric flinched at the sound of her voice and quickly looked away to stop himself from blushing.

Well, if it made Cedric feel better, I would allow Val to disrespect him as long as it didn't cause physical harm. For example, he could push him backward or grab him by the collar if it didn't leave any marks on his body. I also added the condition that Val couldn't act this way in front of anyone other than us. *I can't be sure if any of this will ever apply outside of the present moment.*

"Hey, Mistress. We're goin' home if everything's done here. You don't have any letters to send, do you?"

After all that had happened, Val's voice lacked its usual bite. He had one hand on Khemet's head as he whisked the rest of the sand back into his mailbag and hauled the sack over his shoulder. The children joined him, clutching their bundles of flowers.

"Thank you for the roses!"

"We'll take good care of them!"

I stepped aside so they could make their exit. I'd already kept them here far too long for what should have been a simple delivery. They were probably eager to go.

"No, I don't have any letters for you," I replied. "I'll be sure to let you know the next time I'm ready to deliver something. Until next time, Khemet, Sefekh."

"Khemet? Sefekh?!" Cedric said. "They look a lot older than that!"

Val whipped his head toward the sound, his gaze threatening to bore a hole in



Cedric's head. The startled children looked back and forth between them.

"Ah, so you're from that country?" Cedric went on. "I suppose you do look like their people. I've never met anyone from that place until now, but..."

Cedric launched into a foreign language out of nowhere. He'd transitioned without the slightest change in his tone or expression, and I briefly wondered if the game I was living in had glitched. I certainly hadn't heard this language before. Stale's puzzled look told me it was new to him as well. I thought Val might understand, but all he did was gape at Cedric in disbelief.

"Was my pronunciation incorrect?" Cedric asked, placing his hand on his chin in thought.

I told him that Khemet and Sefekh were the children's names. Cedric seemed surprised by this, but he apologized to them for the misunderstanding.

"I see," he said. "So you're named after numbers? I wouldn't have predicted that, but I like it. I bet they're important numbers that mean something spec—"

"Aaaaaahhh! Shut your mouth, you stupid brat!"

Val let out a long scream and conjured a sand snake from his bag. It shot at Cedric and coiled around his mouth while Val panted to catch his breath. *Am I imagining it, or is his brown skin a little flushed?* Val had left Cedric's nose uncovered so he could breathe, and after a moment of shock, the prince curiously tapped at the sand covering his lips. I probably should have scolded Val for instantly making use of his new privileges, but the whole display left me too stupefied to speak.

I stared at Val, dumbfounded. Stale and Arthur's jaws had dropped just like mine. Tiara and Vice Captain Eric seemed confused, but I couldn't explain all this right now.

"Val..."

I finally managed to speak. When I called his name, he spun toward me with an angry grunt.



“It’s got nothin’ to do with you, so butt out!”

But it *did* have something to do with me. I simply had to ask him about this. Val noticed the change in my expression and raised a brow, unsure what to make of my reaction. When he finally turned around to follow my gaze, he froze.

Khemet stood behind him, both of his hands wrapped around his bundle of roses.

He and Sefekh stared up at Val, who finally understood. All the sand he’d been controlling spilled to the ground. He’d been wielding it without ever touching Khemet or using the boy’s special power.

Softly as a sigh, Stale said, “Can you stay a bit longer, Val?”

Val snapped out of his stupor. Resigned to his fate, he groaned and sank to the floor. “So annoying.” His tone was flat, and his head hung limp. He’d deflated like a balloon without air.

Stale suggested we call for Prime Minister Gilbert to figure out how Val had controlled the sand without Khemet’s help. The prime minister had been the first person to discover Khemet’s power, so he might have some useful insight. We asked Val to wait for his arrival.

“So...is Val going to be all right?” Cedric asked.

“He’s okay,” I said. “He’s a bit tired from carrying all those roses to us, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

Cedric cast a concerned look at the man slumped in a corner and asked if he’d done something wrong. My response seemed to satisfy him for the most part. I asked him to take a seat on the sofa, which he did.

I wasn’t technically lying. Val had indeed come here to deliver the roses, and it sounded like he’d probably spent the previous night drinking with Leon and neglecting sleep. Leon had told me that his own days ran long between his studies and trade agreements. If he had to finish those first, drinking with Val



could have easily lasted until dawn.

“What’s with all those roses, by the way?” Cedric said. “I’ve never seen blue roses before. They even change color.”

He eyed the flowers eagerly. I vaguely remembered Cedric and Arthur being the only love interests in the game who needed to hear the legend of the roses from Tiara. When I asked if he’d like to take some, he lit up with a boyish grin. “Really?!”

I chuckled at his excitement. “Anemone is going to start exporting them as a product soon. We received a mountain of them, so take as many as you want.”

While I couldn’t give him any seedlings, I didn’t mind if he brought a lot of roses home with him. Yet Cedric shook his head. Maybe he didn’t want to fill up his carriage?

“If Anemone is going to export them, then that means they’ll be quite profitable. I’d treasure any gift from Prince Leon, but as long as these were a present to Freesia—to *you*—I can’t cultivate these roses in my homeland. Prince Leon sent them to Freesia because you’re their ally. I understand that much, at least.”

His earnest response nearly knocked me off my feet. So he could act like royalty, after all! He must have studied more than just basic etiquette. King Lance and King Yohan had to be so proud.

“Speaking of your homeland, what brought you here today? And where are the kings?”

I’d completely forgotten them in all the chaos. At the start, which now felt like ages ago, I’d asked why the United Hanazuo Kingdom had stayed at the castle overnight. Cedric gasped, as if he himself had only just remembered.

“They’re currently discussing trade with Her Majesty,” he said. “They’re going to have formal meetings every time they visit one another because ten days each way is too long of a trip to make for official business.”



*I see.* Cedric had come to see me because he had nothing else to do. No, it was probably Tiara he wanted to see. Even now, Cedric glanced her way, and Tiara ducked behind Stale. His shoulders slumped, and a pang of sadness struck me.

“But that worked out perfectly for me,” Cedric continued. “There’s actually a favor I want to ask of you, Pride.”

He quickly recovered and returned his gaze to me. The fire burning in his eyes spoke to his determination. I waited for him to explain himself while he snuck another peek at Tiara. Warmth crept into his cheeks, but he swiftly set it aside.

“I’d like to start exchanging letters with you,” he said.

*Letters? Does that mean he wants to be pen pals?* I asked if I had that right, and he nodded. *But why me and not Tiara?* As I tried to wrap my head around it, Cedric pressed on.

“I’m sure that as crown princess, you get more letters every day than you can count. That’s why I wanted to ask for your permission before I wrote to you.”

It was kind of strange to ask for permission just to send a letter, but he must have learned this in his etiquette lessons.

“I don’t mind...if you’re sure I’d be the best pen pal for you.”

I turned slightly so only Cedric could see me, then gestured toward Tiara with my eyes. Even with my back turned, I heard Stale and Arthur draw in sharp gasps. Cedric must have understood because he looked at his feet and turned red again.

He swallowed hard before he recovered enough to respond. “Yes, *Princess* Pride. It must be you. I hesitate to discuss things here, so I’d like to describe my intentions via letter.”

*What could this be about?* We had managed to seclude ourselves from the others, but he still couldn’t speak of the subject out loud? Regardless, I gave him permission to write to me, and he breathed a sigh of relief.



“I appreciate it. I...don’t think it will be a problematic topic for us or Freesia. I’ll write to you once I’m home and await your response. Also, Prince Stale...”

Stale flinched, surprised to hear his name come up. “Yes?”

“As the next seneschal, you might find this particular topic troublesome. Yet I hope you’ll give it your honest consideration once you’ve read my letter.”

Cedric bowed formally to Stale, which earned him more than a little flinch this time. Stale’s aura darkened to something frightening for a moment, but then he smiled and said, “Very well.”

Curious, I stole a glance at Arthur. Stale’s reaction had the knight just as tense as his friend.

“A-and you too, if you please, Princess Tiara...”

Though Cedric had mustered up the courage to ask her, she shut him down with a firm, “No, thank you!”

“Got it,” he said calmly, but I heard the dip in his voice.

I quickly piped up to help him recover. “Oh! Um, that’s right! Val can deliver letters in a flash if we leave them in his hands.”

“What the hell?! Don’t make me work with that moronic prince!”

Cedric, on the other hand, seemed pleased by my suggestion. “You mentioned that he was a deliveryman, didn’t you? I heard he went around rescuing people and delivering goods during the war at incredible speed. Could you tell me more about that?”

He leaned forward enthusiastically. It brought to mind a scene in the game where Cedric asked the knowledgeable Tiara to teach him about things he didn’t know. This included the legend of the blue roses, things from books she’d read, and tales of faraway countries.

Only Freesia enjoyed our particular system of deliverymen, so I understood Cedric’s interest. Stale offered to give a detailed explanation in my place, even though Cedric had asked me in particular. Stale simply smiled and said, “Prince



Cedric and I already discussed a related topic yesterday.” That reminded me of the lengthy conversation they’d had at the party. Maybe they’d come to like each other a little better.

“I appreciate that, Prince Stale,” Cedric said. “I’d love to hear more in relation to last night’s discussion.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Stale said pleasantly.

He told Cedric all about the trio’s unique job. Cedric absorbed this new information as readily as ever. Something shifted as he and Stale conversed; I hoped it was fondness growing between them. Cedric had probably never met anyone smarter than him in his whole life, after all. Stale knew of Cedric’s talents too, and nothing would thrill me more than if they ended up becoming friends.

As for how things were in the game... *Oh, I feel like Stale actually really hated Cedric.* Understandable, seeing as how Cedric arrived at the castle to marry Stale’s adorable little sister. That hatred only skyrocketed when Stale found out Cedric was after Tiara’s life. Fortunately, by the end of Cedric’s route, Stale finally came around and supported his relationship with Tiara if it made her happy.

I flopped onto the sofa and sank into the cushions as Stale continued his explanation. Khemet and Sefekh took the opportunity to dart over to me.

“Happy birthday, Mistress!”

“Happy eighteenth birthday! I hope you’ll keep taking good care of Khemet and Val!”

Something Stale said must have reminded them that yesterday was my birthday, although I was sure Leon had told them about it when they picked up the roses from him. I sat up and thanked them both. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Val straighten out of his slump against the wall.

“Oh yeah, Mistress,” he said. “Who’re those potential fiancés of yours?”



*Eek! H-hang on a second!* Just like that, Val had dropped a bomb in the middle of the gathering. *How can he bring that up so casually?!*

I sprang to my feet, but Val only yawned and asked, “What’s with you?”

*That’s my line!*

Khemet and Sefekh, who must have heard about this as well, exchanged eager glances.

Life returned to Val’s tired face as he ate up my flustered reaction. “Botha the sisters lookin’ for husbands,” he said with an evil grin.

*Did Leon tell him this? No, the whole country already heard about last night’s announcement!*

“Three guys at once, huh? Way to get the men linin’ up for you, Mistress.”

Val smirked as he kept trying to get a rise out of me. I pressed my lips shut and glared at him, which only fueled his mirth. Sefekh and Khemet waited for my response as well, both gripping their roses.

I scanned the room to see who else was watching. Tiara blushed while Stale kept his eyes glued on me, hardly blinking. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric were a bit red too, and both broke eye contact the moment I looked their way. A curious Cedric practically scorched me with those fiery red eyes of his.

“I-I can’t speak about my marriage candidates,” I replied. “Not even Tiara and I know who’s on each other’s lists. It’s top-secret information only Mother, Father, and Uncle Vest are privy to.”

Though I was addressing Val, I made sure the others could hear this too. I tried to keep my composure, but warmth seeped into my cheeks and my brow dampened. Everyone else relaxed; I caught them nodding in my periphery. Yet Val clearly found this all *highly* entertaining.

“Anybody we know? What about Little Miss Princess’s candidates? Is Leon on there? Some other prince?” He flung questions at me, watching my face closely to gauge my reaction to the barrage. I insisted that I couldn’t answer any of



them while Val's grin steadily widened and my eyebrows twitched.

"Do you *really* want to know who they are?" I snapped.

"Nah, not like it matters," he said before bursting into laughter.

*Why does he insist on teasing everyone?!* His contract required him to express his true feelings, which meant this was his honest reaction to the news—a fact that did nothing for my rising temper.

"I don't care who's on your list, but everyone else sure seems to."

Still chuckling, Val tipped his head back and gestured at the others. None of them protested, and worse yet, they completely avoided my eyes. I suddenly felt like a kid in time-out. Blushing furiously, Cedric hung his head and pursed his lips, obviously curious about Tiara's marriage candidates.

*Pouting won't help your case! I don't know who they are either!*

Tiara and I had received separate lists of candidates when we first spoke with Mother about this new system. We gave her our personal lists by sliding her our papers face down. Tiara didn't say a word, and after asking Mother one question, neither of us spoke of it ever again.

"Second time gettin' engaged, huh, Mistress? Better make sure this one doesn't run off on you too."

*Aren't you the one who asked me if I wanted to flee in the middle of the night?!* I tried to infuse that question into the glare I shot at Val, but even if he understood, he just went on smirking. *He knows exactly what he's doing!*

"The second time?!" said a voice behind me.

I turned to find a flustered Cedric sitting on the couch. "No, it's nothing..." he said, shaking his head. *I guess Cedric doesn't know about my previous engagement. Not that it's the kind of thing I like to discuss openly.*

A knock interrupted this mortifying game of twenty questions. I expected Prime Minister Gilbert, but the voice on the other side belonged to someone else.



“This is King Lance of Cercis and King Yohan of Chinensis. We’ve come to retrieve our brother and say farewell to Princess Pride, Prince Stale, and Princess Tiara.”

King Lance must have finished his discussion with Mother. Cedric flew up from the sofa the moment he heard his brother’s voice. I answered the king’s call and ordered a guard to open the door. Too late, I remembered Val in the corner. He’d already built a sand wall to hide himself and the children. It stood out in the parlor, but Val didn’t care as long as it concealed him.

The two kings greeted me as they swept into the parlor. Cedric asked what had taken them so long, but King Lance scowled and refused to respond. King Yohan smiled tentatively and set his hand on King Lance’s shoulder.

“He was worried you disrespected Princess Pride or someone again. Isn’t that right, Lance?” he asked, chuckling.

“You really think I’d do that again?!”

The second Cedric realized he’d raised his voice, he gasped and spun to face the rest of us. His swift bow couldn’t hide his blush, and I had to laugh.

Now that I thought about it, Cedric had hardly spoken with Tiara at all throughout this. Had he given up on her once the subject of marriage candidates came up? No, that couldn’t be it. In fact, Tiara treated Cedric even more coldly than before, like she had no feelings for him at all. Even now, she hid behind Stale so that *none* of us could see her, much less Cedric. The kings wore strained smiles as they took in this display, and King Lance cleared his throat to change the subject.

“Did Cedric make any more trouble for you?” he asked me.

“No, I enjoyed my time with him. Allow me to see you all to your carriages.”

I led the three guests out of the parlor. I’d hoped to share roses with them anyway, and I *definitely* didn’t want them discovering Val. We could wait for Prime Minister Gilbert just as easily in the entrance hall.



When I explained the mountain of roses, King Lance said, “So these were a gift from Anemone?”

“I didn’t expect to see something so beautiful as soon as I stepped inside. It nearly knocked me off my feet,” King Yohan said cheerfully.

“I’d be happy to share my roses with Your Majesties, if you’d like. Our countries are allies, after all. You too, Cedric.”

The kings thanked me for the offer.

With a smile, Stale added, “There should be some bouquets ready to take now.”

Behind him, Tiara stared at the floor in silence. Why wasn’t she chiming in excitedly like normal? Had Cedric had done something to her? Surely not; the prince looked as worried as me. He seemed to pry his mouth open with some effort.

“Forgive me, Princess Tiara, but are you feeling unwell?”

“Not at all! I’m just a bit tired!”

She answered without a beat of hesitation, but she hopped back like a rabbit to separate herself from Cedric. Tiara gripped Stale’s shirt and clung to it. Cedric froze in shock at this harsh rejection, while the kings covered their faces and hung their heads. They were convinced Cedric had done something wrong to deserve this treatment. I apologized to them in an attempt to clear up the misunderstanding. “It’s quite all right,” they responded in unison.

Mary and the gardeners had a few bouquets ready for us. Even better, they’d pruned down some of the bushes to a more manageable size so our guests could take a plant home with the roots intact.

I cut three individual roses for King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric to show them the transformation. Surprisingly, the biggest reaction came from King Lance.

He’d looked confused when a maid presented a bouquet of red roses to him.



As he took an individual rose from me and watched it turn red, he jerked back with a cry of, “Whoa!”

Cedric already knew how the roses transformed. King Yohan seemed to understand that they changed colors as he compared the blue roses on the bushes to the red roses in the bouquets. King Lance’s reaction had him grinning in amusement.

King Yohan explained that he had always loved roses and was pleased to witness this transformation up close. “How beautiful,” he said serenely. The king’s own delicate beauty, only enhanced by the roses in his hands, almost made it hard to believe he was a man.

Cedric’s eyes were already lit up with anticipation by the time it was his turn. He didn’t even blink until the transformation was complete.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said.

“It’s like a spell,” he murmured, fixated on the red rose. He furrowed his brow and stroked his chin. Before I could ask what was wrong, I realized his attention had turned to Tiara crouching behind Stale.

Though Stale regarded Cedric cordially, his expression left no doubt about Cedric’s odds of getting past him. Maybe he was feeling protective of Tiara. Cedric looked away, giving up on whatever he’d been contemplating. I’d thought the two were on the cusp of friendship, but it seemed Stale had discovered Cedric’s feelings for Tiara.

“Did you want to give one to Tiara?” I whispered to Cedric.

All the blood rushed straight to his cheeks. *I knew it.* Peering closely at him, I mouthed the words, “*That shouldn’t be a problem.*” But Cedric shook his head subtly so only I could see. I supposed he wasn’t ready to hand her a rose, judging by how flustered he was—much less speak with her one-on-one.

Cedric had done much worse things to me than to Tiara, but I didn’t bother bringing that up. It would only drown him deeper in shame. I found it



impressive that he'd outgrown his ignorance and thoughtlessness, but not everyone agreed.

In the end, Tiara never emerged from her hiding spot, and the overprotective Stale never gave Cedric an opportunity to approach her with a rose. Cedric would no doubt be trudging home with slumped shoulders today.

*I feel bad for him. Well, we're going to start growing these roses in the castle garden, so he'll have more opportunities if he comes back to Freesia in the future.* However, he would have to give Tiara a rose before she was engaged.

"Thank you for inviting us to your party, Your Highness," King Lance said. "I hope to see you at more events in our homeland someday."

"I look forward to the next time we meet, Princess Pride," King Yohan said.

They shook my hand as they said their goodbyes. Cedric waited his turn behind them to say goodbye to Stale and Tiara. My sister did manage to peek out of her hiding place for this, at least. After all her stiff, guarded behavior around Cedric, she mustered the strength to smile and shake his hand.

*Our country's second-born princess is such a sight to behold...though she still looked a little angry when she shook his hand.*

The three men thanked us for the parting gifts of bouquets that the gardeners had crafted for them. "We'll have to ask Prince Leon to start shipping these to our country as well," King Lance said.

Then, at the very last moment, Cedric opened his mouth with determination blazing in his eyes.

"Pride, Prince Stale...Tiara...I look forward to seeing you all again."

At long last, he managed to informally address Tiara. The effort must have drained him, as sweat broke out on the blushing prince's brow. King Lance and King Yohan wore smirks at this tremendous display of effort, then all three of them bowed to us one last time.

I was watching the carriage drive off when Tiara approached me and took my



hand. Though she stared at the ground, I leaned down enough to see the strange furrow creasing my sister's brow. Was she angry? Was she embarrassed, recalling the things Cedric had pledged to her the last time they parted ways?

"I hate that man, but..."

Even as she trailed off into silence, I caught the tenderness in her voice.

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"What did you do to Princess Tiara this time, Cedric?"

Lance's deep voice broke the silence in our carriage. His question prompted me to develop a sudden interest in the view outside the window. Sure, I was sulking, but I didn't care.

"I didn't do anything," I said. "I *couldn't* do anything."

My tone deflated by the end of my sentence. I rested my head in my hands and slouched against the carriage seat. Across from me, Yohan chuckled and reached out to stroke my hair.

"Do you mean you held back?" he asked.

"No, I just chickened out. I wanted to give her a rose, but I couldn't."

I clutched my rose tighter, only relenting when Yohan warned that the thorns would prick me.

"I don't think I can beat out the others for her heart."

I actually *heard* my brothers choke when I said that. Lance sputtered and coughed until he got himself under control. "D-do you mean her marriage candidates?!"

My only response was a heavy sigh.

After that, my thoughts lingered on the two men I feared were my competition: Prince Leon Adonis Coronaria and Prince Stale Royal Ivy. I couldn't measure up to either of them. Leon was more outstanding than I was; he had



instilled himself as a trusted acquaintance of Freesia's, and he'd displayed both leadership skills and his country's might during the war. He had praised Tiara and described her as an ideal fiancée.

Then there was Stale—her closest male companion and someone she'd grown up with. He also boasted impressive skills as the country's next seneschal. The pair already looked like lovers to me, with the way Tiara used Stale as her shield anytime she felt unsafe. I'd caught glimpses of Stale and Tiara's close relationship before and after the war.

*Marrying Prince Leon would be good for Freesia's alliance.*

My mind raced as I stared out the carriage window. If Tiara was in love with Leon, there was no way she would consider me.

*But if she loves Prince Stale...*

Tiara, second-born princess of Freesia—even just her name and title sent my heart racing. I shut my eyes and filled my head with nothing but Tiara, replaying every last sight of her stored in my perfect memory. I settled on one particular image of her and recalled our conversation in that exact moment.

*"My plan won't change either way."*

*Not even if one of those princes intends to steal her heart from me.*

I dared not speak those words aloud. Instead, I spent the rest of the carriage ride ignoring my brothers' incessant questions.

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*"Please forgive my delay, Princess Pride."*

Prime Minister Gilbert was waiting for us when we returned to the parlor, his light-blue, almond-shaped eyes as steady as ever. His matching light-blue hair lay draped over his shoulder in a ponytail. Nearby, Val and the children remained hidden behind their sand wall. The prime minister knew they were here, but he merely gave the sand wall an awkward smile and left it at that.

Though he wasn't royalty, Val probably didn't want anything to do with him—



not that he could stop Prime Minister Gilbert from circling the wall and starting up a conversation.

“The fault is mine, Prime Minister,” I replied. “I didn’t mean to make you wait here when you’re always so busy.”

We must have just missed each other. Worse yet, when we entered, he wasn’t on the sofa. That meant he’d stood here waiting for us all this time.

“That’s perfectly all right.” His gaze flicked over to the flowers in Arthur’s hand. “Oh my. Those blue roses certainly are unusual. Was this the delivery we received from Anemone this morning?”

“Yes, they’re a present from Leon,” I told him. “The others have taken some already, so please help yourself if you think Maria or Stella would like some.”

Arthur handed the plant to Prime Minister Gilbert at my suggestion. He readily accepted a small bush that had been pruned down to a convenient size for transport. I explained how the roses transformed from blue to red, and the prime minister nodded in understanding, his eyes going from his own blue roses to the red ones in our hands.

“I’m sure Maria and Stella will be delighted. Thank you, Your Highness. I’m excited to bring these home.”

I mirrored Prime Minister Gilbert’s smile with one of my own. When I asked him to tell me how his family reacted later on, he agreed without hesitation.

“I’m glad you like them!” Tiara said, beaming at Prime Minister Gilbert. “Well, I’m going back to my room now!”

When she made to leave, Stale asked if she was certain. Again, she insisted she was merely tired. She’d told me in the past how Cedric’s attempts to talk to her wore her out, and all the excitement over the rose delivery likely only amplified the effect. Earlier today, she’d also discussed her birthday party plans with Prime Minister Gilbert, Mother, and Father. She very well might have overexerted herself. When I inquired about it, she assured me she was fine.



“I know I can count on the rest of you to solve what’s going on with Val!”

She glanced at the wall of sand in one corner of the room. It seemed she understood that we’d been trying to hide the details of Khemet’s and Val’s powers from Cedric. Even Tiara didn’t know the extent of Khemet’s special power. While I could trust her, I needed to keep word of it to as small a group as possible.

“I just wanted to give him the roses, so I’m perfectly happy now!”

With that, she bid the prime minister farewell and headed for the door. Khemet and Sefekh, roses in hand, peeked out around the sand wall to wave and say goodbye. Tiara waved back, then closed the door behind her.

*Everyone loves her so much. Tiara really is amazing.*

After she left, I asked Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and Jack to wait outside the room. Arthur already knew about Khemet’s power, but I couldn’t have him stay while I sent Vice Captain Eric away, so I told them this was royal family business.

Once they were gone, Prime Minister Gilbert said, “All right, Your Highness. Shall we get to it?”

I nodded and called out to the other side of the room. “Val, could you, Khemet, and Sefekh come join this conversation?”

The wall of sand collapsed at my order. Val reclined comfortably against the wall, but his eyes told me he wasn’t happy with this outcome. Khemet stood beside him, clinging to his arm.

“This is about them, I take it?” Prime Minister Gilbert asked, though he hardly sounded surprised. I’d had no other reason to keep them here while dismissing nearly everyone else.

Stale stepped in to explain what we knew as of today.

Val’s special power had changed without any help from Khemet. Khemet could amplify the powers of others, and until now Val had only ever been able to craft walls and domes out of earth with his help. Today he managed to cover



Cedric's mouth with the sand at his feet without touching Khemet at all, a previously impossible feat.

Prime Minister Gilbert's eyebrows rose as Stale went on, but after a moment of thought, he asked Val if he could use this new ability even now. Val clicked his tongue, dragged himself onto his feet, and stepped away from Khemet. Sure enough, he managed to gather the sand on the ground into the shape of a snake that slithered back into his mailbag.

"Wow... Khemet turns ten this year, isn't that right?"

When Val and the children nodded, the prime minister offered his leading theories.

The first was that Val's special power had changed in some way. Using Khemet's amplification power over and over again had morphed Val's abilities, or at least Val's perception of his abilities.

His second theory was that *Khemet's* special power had been the one to change. Perhaps Khemet's growth allowed him to amplify Val's power without even touching him anymore.

Khemet's power of amplification was already unprecedented, and special powers only existed within Freesia to begin with. Many aspects of these abilities were still a mystery. Both of Prime Minister Gilbert's theories made sense, but he and Stale asked Val and the children for a little help in the matter.

Stale first tested Khemet's power on his own teleportation ability to see if he could detect any increase in Khemet's strength. The test failed, just as it had two years ago. Stale had been interacting much more with Khemet over time, yet his special power hadn't changed in the slightest from the exposure.

Next, Stale had Sefekh test her power without Khemet, but again we observed no changes. Val and Khemet agreed that she could shoot water with more force than before, but that seemed like it had more to do with Sefekh's own growth than Khemet's special power.



These tests only proved that as always, Khemet couldn't use his special power on anyone other than Val and Sefekh. Val was also the only person affected by Khemet's special power without physical contact. At this conclusion, Sefekh hammered Val with her hands, crying, "But I'm the one who's been with Khemet the longest!"

Val retreated when she tried to stomp on his foot. "What the hell do I care?!"

But Sefekh was right: it was strange that Khemet's power would change for Val and not her. Perhaps Val truly had caused this somehow.

Throughout this entire process, Khemet sat back and watched the others testing their powers, his eyes wider than usual. His expression hardened at the prime minister's next suggestion.

"In that case, there's one more experiment we can try. Val will sever contact with Khemet for a while to see if there are any changes in his special power."

If Val's power regressed till he could only build earthen walls again, it would prove the theory that Khemet's growth had been affecting him. But if enough time passed and the scope of Val's power remained unchanged, it would show that the cause of this improvement existed within Val—or that Khemet's power didn't amplify special powers but instead *evolved* them. Whatever the case might be, it meant Val spending time away from Khemet's special power to see if anything changed. Val had only moved sand and earth near himself thus far, so there was no telling how a larger usage of his power might go.

Stale agreed with the prime minister's proposal and ordered Val not to touch Khemet unless absolutely necessary. I added that Val should report to us if he learned anything new about this. Val scowled, clicked his tongue, and grumbled that this was a lot of work, but he ultimately agreed. It was Khemet who pouted at the rest of us.

Upon noticing, Sefekh asked, "What's wrong?"

"Um, can I stick with you and Val even if you don't need my power anymore?!"



He worried about getting left behind during delivery jobs. Indeed, if Val could complete the work on his own, Sefekh and Khemet could stay here in Freesia, safe from the many dangers that deliverymen routinely faced. Khemet wasn't even ten years old yet.

"Who said *you* get to make demands?" Val snarled. "You're the one who's been clingin' to me all this time without even knowin' what your own damn power does. But I guess Sefekh can't do any fightin' without you."

Val glared down at Khemet, lecturing him like he should have figured all this out on his own. He was right about one thing: Sefekh's water attacks were pretty weak without Khemet amplifying them. Furthermore, Val needed Sefekh's special power since he wasn't allowed to harm anyone himself.

Khemet's face lit up at that. Sefekh was still holding her roses, but she gently placed her hands on Khemet's shoulders.

"So I *can* stay with you both, right?!"

"The hell are you yappin' about? Were you plannin' on goin' somewhere else?!"

Khemet tried to cling to Val like usual, but Val jumped out of the way in accordance with his new orders.

"I'm not going anywhere!"

*Even if Sefekh could fight without Khemet, I bet Val would still take them both wherever they wanted to go.* He'd sooner give up his job as a deliveryman than follow an order to leave Khemet and Sefekh in the slums while he traveled all over for work.

We asked the children for their help in following the rules and for all three of them to spend the next week in Freesia. They could report to the castle more quickly that way. We could call it a vacation, since the trio didn't have any scheduled deliveries for the next week anyway. Val clicked his tongue several times throughout this explanation, but Khemet and Sefekh only perked up more



and more.

“We have to understand this special power and keep it confidential to protect Khemet,” Stale reminded the grumpy Val.

Val gave one last loud click of his tongue, but he didn’t protest.

Regardless of the true nature of Khemet’s power, we would struggle to contain the secret if we couldn’t even control it. And that would mean all sorts of nefarious people seeing Khemet as a target. He wouldn’t be safe unless he could keep this secret throughout his childhood. Val didn’t object; he understood this just as well as anyone.

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“How long are you brats gonna hang on to those roses?”

I watched the castle gates close after we passed through them, then let out a sigh. Sefekh and Khemet clung to their bouquets of red roses in their left hands, their single blue roses in their right. They hadn’t let go since the gardeners removed all the thorns.

The brats exchanged a glance before hesitantly holding their blue roses out to me.

“Huh? What gives?”

I scowled at them, demanding an explanation. It took me a minute to realize I’d stopped in my tracks.

“Mistress gave you a rose, right? We’re just doing the same thing.”

“I gave one to Sefekh and she gave me one back! It’s fun to do it for everyone!”

The children proudly held up their bundles of four red roses to show me, but my eyes zipped directly to the two blue roses. I took out a red rose I’d tucked into my pocket earlier, comparing it to the blue ones in front of me. Finally, I took the brats’ stupid blue roses. As soon as I touched the flowers, the blue warped into red. The kids cheered, blabbing about how pretty it all was, while I



watched the change in silence. I stashed the two red roses alongside the one I'd received from Pride, which made the kids grin even wider.

*I've seen them change colors a buncha times now.*

Pride had given a rose to everybody in the entrance hall. It was nothing special. Yet I couldn't bring myself to look away when Khemet and Sefekh handed me their blue roses.

*I'm not even a flower kinda guy.*

I'd never so much as stopped to admire a flower in passing. Stuff like that didn't interest me in the slightest. If anything, I was the type to trample through flower beds if they were in my way. I definitely didn't need to get flowers from anybody. Besides, with all three roses sitting in my pocket, I couldn't tell who gave me which one. But I caught myself gazing at them all the same. When I looked down, the brats were beaming up at me in a way that made my eye twitch.

*Really pisses me off.*

I didn't feel like returning the roses or throwing them away. Instead, I thought about how to keep them in decent shape. I now had three roses, while Sefekh and Khemet each had bundles of four—and theirs probably included the extra ones they'd cut for themselves. For some reason, I got weirdly embarrassed when I remembered that the roses I gave them had been bundled up with Pride's and their own.

"You would've had four roses like us if you'd clipped one yourself," Sefekh said.

"Should we go back to get another one?" Khemet asked.

"No," I snapped.

"Are you sure?"

"Wouldn't it be nice if we all matched?"

I ignored this next round of questions and kept walking. Against my will,



Cedric's words played on loop in my head.

*"I see. So you're named after numbers? I wouldn't have predicted that, but I like it. I bet they're important numbers that mean something spec—"*

I'd been the one to name Sefekh and Khemet, a fact I sure as hell didn't need to be exposed to Pride and the others. Just thinking about it made my face heat up and my heart jump in my chest. The last thing I ever expected was to encounter a person who could decipher their names.

"Now I've gotta worry about some new damn royalty..."

It didn't matter which country I got half my blood from. I didn't mind the prince understanding their names either; it wasn't like I'd put any *real* thought into them. But since I was the one who picked those names...

*Important numbers that mean something special.*

Pride had allowed me to disrespect Cedric and mess him up a little if I wanted to—but that didn't mean I could lie. If Cedric, a member of royalty, had finished his sentence, I would've had no choice but to answer any question he had. I wasn't sure I could outright reject the guy's theory about the names.

"Khemet" and "Sefekh" were how old they were when I first met them.

At the time, they were just the first names I came up with. If somebody quizzed me on it, I could easily say there was no deeper meaning. Yet for whatever reason, that felt like a lie. It made me feel sick, but I just couldn't shake it.

When did their names become more than some plain old numbers? I racked my brains but couldn't come up with a satisfying answer. Instead, Pride's words from two years ago replayed in my head. I clicked my tongue, ruffling my hair and struggling for a way to get rid of this awful, stomach-churning realization. It wasn't just the children themselves—the names I'd given them buzzed around me like a fly that wouldn't leave me the hell alone.

I'd met them when Sefekh was seven and Khemet was three. Back then, it felt



like another annoying inconvenience...but I couldn't remember the last time I'd thought of it that way. Somewhere down the line, the event had changed from a hassle to a stroke of good fortune.

I groaned. "I'm gonna puke."

The brats asked what I'd said, but I told them it was nothing and left it at that. I squeezed the roses in one hand and reached my other out to Sefekh, grabbing her and matching her pace. She reached her own free hand toward Khemet.

Despite it all, I just couldn't let go. Not until the kids wanted to let *me* go, anyway. It was cliché as hell, but I felt like I would follow them to the ends of the earth.

"Family" could be such a nuisance. All the same, I tucked that sentiment away in my chest and pressed on.

*"May I spend my life alongside you."*

After two days without any direct contact with Khemet, I found that my power had gone back to normal.

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"What did you just say?! She has *marriage* candidates?!"

I was Adam Borneo Nepenthes, the crown prince of Rajah, and this was the worst news I could have gotten. My fox-like eyes narrowed with rage.

Messengers had raced around the continent on horseback and sent letters by bird to deliver the rapidly spreading news. I glared at the servant reading one such letter to me, much as I knew this unfortunate messenger had decided on this disastrous outcome himself. The pale-faced servant apologized over and over but managed to finish reading the letter through his trembling. Anything less would've been an act of disrespect toward his prince.

The queen of Freesia announced a new marriage system at the firstborn princess's birthday party. Furthermore, the queen stated that all of the marriage candidates were *at* the party. A party I did not attend.



I grabbed my dark-purple hair and mussed the smoothed-back locks into a wild mess. “You must be joking!” In my anger, I kicked the slave who’d been polishing my shoes. “Both princesses get three candidates, and not one of them is from Rajah? Why shouldn’t the crown prince of a mighty empire marry a princess from a great kingdom?!”

“I don’t know...” the messenger trailed off, biting his lip. The simpleton knew better than to talk back to or refute me.

The Rajah Empire was a massive country that had found its prosperity through bolstering the slave trade and conquering foreign lands. Recently, we’d failed to gain control of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, instead agreeing to a peace treaty between ourselves and Freesia.

As the crown prince of that country and someone who’d aspired to marry a Freesian princess, I hated every word of what I’d heard of this marriage candidate sham. I’d consulted the Freesian queen on the matter when I visited for the peace treaty negotiations, but this announcement proved I’d been completely rejected.

“Aaaaah! Screw that old hag! I want you to slaughter every last one of those candidates!”

I howled and ranted, but my men still responded with a “Yes, Your Highness!”

“Pass it along to the messengers,” I said before ordering everyone out of the room. I refused to involve myself further in the matter. My men didn’t need specific instructions on how, when, or who to kill; they would carry out my command as swiftly and thoroughly as possible. And when Freesia came looking for culprits, I could blame the whole thing on the subordinate responsible for the finer details of the plan.

Once everyone was out of my sight, I sat in my chair flailing my feet. Two slaves approached to clean up the wine a different slave had spilled when I struck her. I barely paid them any heed, kicking them in the backs as well.

“Here I am, trying to take one of those repulsive daughters off her hands, and



she has the nerve to defy me! Isn't that right?!"

I stomped on the backs of my slaves in an effort to dispel the anger building up inside me. No matter how much violence they faced, the slaves would never—could never—fight back. They merely lowered their heads and waited out the beating, nodding even though I couldn't care less about their opinions.

"Besides, it was the worst possible timing, wasn't it?! They only ever send me invitations to parties I can't attend!"

During the peace talks, we'd discussed my receiving invitations to future meetings and events, but the dates conflicted with my plans. I could have cornered the princesses if I'd been at that stupid party, but I simply couldn't attend. The schedule clashed with official Rajah business I couldn't afford to miss.

This had to be intentional. Sure, I hadn't shared my calendar with Freesia during the meetings, but they must have known somehow that this particular date would inconvenience me. I'd tortured several of my spies to suss out the truth of the matter, but to no avail. First, my attempts to invite Freesia to Rajah were rejected, and now the princesses' future husbands were set in stone because of a party I couldn't even partake in.

"Damn it! Drop dead, goddamn you! Just die, you scum!"

*Wham, wham, wham!* I spent the next thirty minutes kicking at slaves until some of my boiling rage fizzled out.

Throughout it, not a single person waiting outside my room dared to enter.

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"Is that another of Prince Cedric's letters, Pride?"

Stale had come to visit me in my room during his break. I told him to have a seat on the sofa while I wrapped up a couple last items, but when I turned I found him standing in the middle of the room looking at me.

"It is," I said. "He replies so quickly, and I don't want to be the weak link."



“There’s no need to overexert yourself,” Stale said kindly, though I couldn’t quite read what was behind his smile today.

I thanked him for his concern and picked up my pen once more.

A month had passed since Cedric asked to exchange letters with me. I’d sent Val to make a delivery to the United Hanazuo Kingdom about two weeks after they left, and he had returned in no time at all with a letter from Cedric that shocked me to my core. I rushed to respond and passed my letter off to Val as quickly as I could...only to receive yet another nearly instantaneous reply from Cedric.

Val once again needed Khemet’s amplification for his powers. When he told me he didn’t have any deliveries to make at the moment, I put him in charge of my exchanges with Cedric. We still didn’t fully understand what was going on with Khemet, Val, and their respective powers. To borrow an image from my past life, it was like Khemet was the power source for Val’s battery, which needed charging every two days...not that we understood much else about this relationship.

Prime Minister Gilbert had told me that Khemet’s growth and state of mind might be why Val was the only person he could “charge.” I asked Khemet if he viewed Val and Sefekh differently in some way, and as we suspected, he answered immediately in the affirmative. It made sense to us that Khemet saw Val and Sefekh as having different roles in his life, and he explained it at length...but Val and Sefekh weren’t fans of the response.

“I don’t remember actin’ anything like that!” Val had said.

“But I’m like that too!” Sefekh had cried, shaking Khemet by the arm.

Val could deny it all he liked, but I agreed with Khemet as an outsider looking in. Sefekh acted upset, but beneath that, I could see how pleased she was by Khemet’s description. Khemet smiled shyly, as if he knew how they both felt under the surface.

“Khemet’s always clinging to you, Val!” had been Sefekh’s parting words as



she doused Val with a water jet.

With the matter essentially settled, I'd asked the three of them to start making deliveries again.

Annoyed by the frequency of the trips he had to make between Freesia and Hanazuo, Val had said, "Why don't I just drag the prince here with me if you wanna talk to him so much?"

Kidnapping a prince would be a crime, of course, and repeated invitations to the castle would make people draw improper conclusions about us, so I had to reject Val's offer.

Val resorted to taking out his frustration on thieves and traffickers, beating up anyone who approached him during his travels and dragging them off to the royal order, but it seemed his stress levels were high now that he'd hunted those criminals into extinction. *And to think he used to complain that capturing them was a waste of his time.*

He reacted poorly to my delivery request, having been turned away at the gates of Hanazuo many times before we became allies, but this time it wasn't just bitterness souring his mood. He said many people in Hanazuo showered him with attention, recognizing him as the man who'd saved so many during the defensive war. Not only did he hate the stares he garnered, but some of those people even tried to befriend him.

"A pain in the neck," Val had called it. Though he also said the Cercians presented him with gifts of liquor and food during each visit. Khemet had called them "very nice people," whereas Sefekh shared Val's disdain for all the attention. For his part, Cedric respected Val's disdain for him, leaving his letters with guards instead of handing them off directly.

Val *did* have to personally enter the throne room to collect letters to Mother from His Majesty, but for the most part, he entered the castle and retrieved that day's letters from the guards. This left him a lot less grumpy when I tasked him with transporting letters between Cedric and myself.



Three days prior, Val had to go all the way to Chinensis to deliver King Yohan's birthday present. According to him, the streets were packed for the celebrations, so more civilians approached him than usual. He disliked Chinensians in particular because they treated him almost like royalty.

I'd wanted to attend King Yohan's birthday party too. Unfortunately, Chinensis took days to reach, so only Mother, Uncle Vest, and the knights ended up going. Tiara wouldn't be an adult for seven more months, so she couldn't attend foreign social events. Stale and I had our own business to attend to at the castle, but that wouldn't take place until nine days after King Yohan's birthday party. I might have teleported to the party, but using Stale's power that way would only draw unwanted attention, so Mother and Uncle Vest made for the smallest acceptable delegation we could send. They traveled by royal carriage and used a special power to avoid standing out. Without it, they couldn't have made it back to Freesia for our own celebration. *It would've been really bad to miss that. Times like these make me realize how tough it is to be queen.*

"I don't mean to pry, but may I ask if you and Prince Cedric are still corresponding on the same subject?"

My pen froze. I turned to find Stale staring intensely at me. He knew what Cedric and I wrote each other about. Cedric had even consented to him knowing—he'd wanted the next seneschal's opinion on the matter before he took it to Mother. Stale had grimaced when I initially explained this, probably because it was so unprecedented, until at last he'd admitted, "I don't...think it's a terrible proposition." He was still sulky, but he offered advice whenever I came to him.

Stale's question piqued the interest of Arthur and Captain Callum. Their eyes fixed on me. Tiara looked up from her book and cocked her head, as curious as the rest. She was more interested in the United Hanazuo Kingdom these days. Something to do with her special arrangements for her birthday party. However, she still didn't care to exchange letters with Cedric herself.



I would have loved to dispel the mystery for everyone, but nothing was official yet. Cedric had presented something to me, I asked several detailed questions, and he sent me his answers, but both of us had our own details we needed to work out.

“Yes,” I replied, “I believe he’ll be able to officially discuss the matter with Mother and anyone else who needs to know once things settle into place on both sides. Can you wait a little longer?”

Everyone nodded, although Stale—the one person who knew as much as I did—scowled and murmured, “Officially...” Coming from the lips of the crown princess, that word carried a lot of weight for the next generation’s seneschal.

“He’ll be here for your birthday party next week, so hopefully everything’s in order by then.”

I punctuated that with a reassuring smile, but the vague deadline cast a cloud over Stale’s expression.

His birthday was coming up in a week. It was a very important celebration for the kingdom of Freesia—and the reason Mother and Uncle Vest were rushing back to the country in their carriage.

With Uncle Vest away, Stale had been working with Prime Minister Gilbert. I worried that they might fight the way they used to, but neither had mentioned any trouble so far. Tiara was turning sixteen soon, so perhaps the happy occasion had mellowed them out somewhat. At least, I hoped it had.

My grip on the pen tightened.

Tiara was turning sixteen, the marriageable age in Freesia! I didn’t know who she planned to marry, but whoever he was, he would definitely be at her party! It hurt to think about, even if she *did* have another year left to decide on a fiancé.

Unlike me, Tiara was bound to marry foreign royalty.

That meant we would only see each other a few times a year. Our current life,



where we were around each other every day, would come to an end. I tried to push it from my mind so the loneliness couldn't consume me, but the reminders kept creeping back into my brain and dragging down my mood. The mere thought of living apart from her bored a hole through my heart and brought me to tears. I would probably be a sobbing mess by this time next year. If she married Leon, I could see her more frequently, but she could never marry her older sister's former fiancé.

Tiara herself seemed too focused on her own birthday plans to pay the ordeal much mind. Stale remained unruffled as well. This was, after all, something that had been decided long ago.

*Wait, but...* I realized I'd stopped writing my letter ages ago. *No, I can't let this spoil my mood. Stale's taken time out of his busy schedule just to come talk to me.*

A knock came at the door. I swiveled in my chair and heard Captain Alan call out from the other side. "Pardon me, Princess Pride. It's time for the imperial knight shift change."

Jack opened the door for Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric, whose arrival reminded me of the time. Arthur and Captain Callum greeted their fellow knights, bowed to us, and bid us farewell until tomorrow. But Stale stopped them.

"You have a break now, right, Arthur? Let's do some sparring."

Stale smacked his fist down in his palm, giving off a menacing aura. Maybe he needed to relieve the stress and nerves of his upcoming birthday party.

Arthur agreed, though reluctantly, and Stale said his goodbyes. That worked for me, as I didn't want to waste Stale's precious free time with my slow letter-writing anyway.

I returned to my task once Stale, Arthur, and Captain Callum left. I needed to respond to Cedric's letter as soon as possible, as I'd already invited Val, Khemet, and Sefekh to come pick up my response tonight. Val never arrived earlier than



he had to, but that *did* still leave me with a strict deadline. As the crown princess, I needed to settle this matter for the future of my country.

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“Why the hell’re you so pissed off, Stale?!”

*Clang, clang!* The room rang with the sound of steel against steel as Arthur deflected my attacks. He spun around, his fighting stance still perfect, when I teleported behind him. He’d learned to predict my next move after all these years of sword practice together, though I highly doubted anyone other than Arthur could see through me.

Arthur was always showing up with new techniques under his belt, so I couldn’t anticipate what was coming next no matter how hard I tried. The more infrequent our sparring sessions became, the more I had to confront his frightening and constantly evolving fighting ability. I heard he still sparred with the imperial knights and Commander Roderick, and I had to wonder if they perceived Arthur’s growth the same way I did. It was no surprise to me that Arthur had already reached the rank of captain.

“If you can’t hit me... just stay in front!” Arthur hissed.

I kept teleporting to create different angles of attack. As soon as I saw him grit his teeth, I teleported and smacked him with my fist. I managed to hit his breastbone through his armor, but he jumped away in time to avoid taking the full brunt of the blow. He bent over, absorbing the shock of the impact.

“If you wanna say something, just spit it out already!”

His pained shout brought me back to my senses. He’d picked up on my irritation easily, and not because I’d attacked him the moment he changed into his armor. I faced him head-on with a glare, but before I managed a single word, he shouted, “If you won’t say it on your own, I’ll force it out of you!” He was the only person in the world who could speak to me, the firstborn prince, with such venom.



“Yes, I’m a little annoyed,” I said. “I admit it.”

“It’s more than a little!” he shot back.

I wiped away the sweat on my brow. *You’re just as annoyed as me*, I wanted to say, but that would only leave us in an unproductive loop.

In truth, I was pretty sure Prince Cedric wanted to become one of Pride’s marriage candidates, but I hadn’t voiced my suspicions to Arthur yet. After what happened with Prince Leon three years ago, I didn’t want to put Arthur through all that unnecessary fear and anxiety again. If I was wrong, it would be even more devastating to him. I couldn’t afford to tell Arthur anything I wasn’t absolutely certain of, both now and in the days to come.

“My birthday party next week is going to be a pretty big event.”

“Sure. The whole country’s gonna be celebrating you reaching adulthood,” he replied, pointing his sword at me. “So will I, of course.”

Men in this country became adults at seventeen and could marry at that time.

“Obviously, the United Hanazuo Kingdom will attend as well,” I said. “But Prince Cedric is the only member of the royal family coming to Freesia, since the party falls so close to King Yohan’s birthday. He’s probably headed here right now, using someone with special powers to make the trip faster like Mother and Uncle Vest.”

King Yohan and King Lance were busy with all the foreign nations that had attended the party. They were probably spending their days discussing things like peace treaties and alliances. Thus, they wouldn’t be able to attend my party. Only Prince Cedric, the royal prince, would attend...and that did nothing to untangle the irritation plaguing me.

Pride and Tiara had three marriage candidates each. They would meet with these candidates many times at future parties and events to choose the most suitable partner. The more parties a bachelor was invited to, the higher the chance that his name was on one of the lists. Some candidates might have to



stay home for reasons beyond their control, like Hanazuo's two kings, but it was safe to assume candidates received invites to just about every event in Freesia.

And here Prince Cedric had been invited to yet another Freesian party.

The United Hanazuo Kingdom was a new ally of ours, so it wasn't that surprising. *But still, I can't help but think there's a deeper reason!*

"Well, Prince Cedric has gotten his act together, right? I mean, I know you still haven't forgiven him, but what's the big deal about having him come celebrate your birthday?"

Despite his pacifying tone, Arthur's eyes betrayed more frantic emotions. Did he realize Prince Cedric was in love with Pride too? The second that thought struck me, the words poured out of me unbidden. I never could hide my true feelings from Arthur.

"That's right. I still haven't forgiven Prince Cedric for all the ways he disrespected my elder sister and for eating her food and cookies. I haven't gotten to punch him yet, and I have yet to see *you* do it either."

Arthur and I would never get our revenge if he became the prince consort. That had to be why I was so irritated. I couldn't think of any other cause.

Though he was taken aback, he quickly recovered and muttered, "I know..."

Then, as if he'd seen right through me, Arthur hit me with a question out of nowhere.

"Hey...do you remember three years ago when I asked you what kind of guy Princess Pride should get engaged to?"

He averted his gaze, clearly struggling. I crossed my arms, still holding a sword in one hand. I remembered the moment he spoke of, of course. It came after the dissolution of Prince Leon's engagement to Pride, when we were loading our luggage onto the carriage at that inn. Arthur saw me struggling to wrangle my emotions and asked me a question—a question that took me less than a second to answer.



*“What kind of guy do you want her next fiancé to be?”*

*“He must be honest and upright, with no history of crime, betrayal, or womanizing. He must love Elder Sister with all his heart, care deeply for his homeland like Elder Sister or Prince Leon, be smarter than me or Gilbert, and be stronger than you. If he meets all those criteria, maybe I’d consider him.”*

Arthur had laughed and called me idealistic, but he’d agreed with me in the end.

I recited what I’d said to him word for word. Arthur couldn’t meet my eyes the entire time.

“How many of those qualities should a man have...before he’s a candidate you’d accept?!”

*What is he talking about? Is he saying most of that describes Prince Cedric?* He’d disrespected Pride too many times to be called “upright.” True, his perfect memory made him a genius and earned him the nickname “God’s Child.” But Arthur was a much more talented fighter than the prince. Prince Cedric only met about 60 percent of my requirements right now.

“At least 90 percent,” I said.

“Really?” Arthur asked, his eyes shifting all over the room.

What was getting to him so badly? I knew these were strict requirements, but that was how I felt. Besides, regardless of whether Prince Cedric was on Pride’s list of candidates, her other candidates might fall even further from my mark... *Wait. Other candidates?*

“What are you hiding, Arthur?”

His shoulders lurched. “N-nothing!” he said, face twitching.

*That’s right. He’s good at sensing when others are lying, but he’s a terrible liar himself.* Arthur, Tiara, and Pride were the only people who could tell when I was lying, but he was an open book. I only needed to press him a little before I saw the truth written all over his face.



“Ah, so that’s it. When were you informed?”

“No, no one told me... I just kinda figured it out...”

“Uh-huh. So you *do* know something.”

I’d tricked him. Arthur clapped a hand over his mouth. It had been a while since I’d deceived him, so I smiled as I approached, letting myself gloat. Arthur staggered backward.

“What’s wrong, Arthur?”

“You’re the one who won’t tell me what Princess Pride and Prince Cedric are talking about in their letters!”

Backed into a corner, Arthur finally fought back.

He was right; I hadn’t shared Pride’s information with Arthur or Tiara. Not only was her correspondence extremely confidential, but it also had the potential to make Arthur worry.

“Elder Sister ordered me to stay quiet. You never even asked me about it until now.”

“That’s because—”

Arthur managed to clamp down on his words this time. Had he been ordered to remain silent too? Well, I certainly knew where that would have come from. Arthur wasn’t going to speak, but I needed to get a little more out of him.

“I see. Congratulations, Arthur. I didn’t realize you were one of Elder Sister’s marriage candidates.”

“D-don’t be stupid! Y-you know better than anyone that I don’t have the status for that! Wh-why’d you hafta say that?!”

Arthur blushed furiously, swinging his sword around. *Oh, I was wrong.* Nevertheless, that meant he held some other important piece of information: one or two of the candidates’ identities, if not all of them.

I nodded as I watched Arthur struggle to compose himself. If he thought he



could keep this secret from me, he was dead wrong. “Very well. Let’s be men and settle this with a duel.”

Arthur still blazed red, but he held up his sword out of reflex when I raised mine. “What do you mean?”

I responded with my most heartfelt smile. “It’s only you and me in this room. Whoever lands the first hit or gets his opponent on the ground wins. If I win, you tell me what you’re hiding. If you win, I’ll tell you what Elder Sister and Prince Cedric have been discussing in their letters.”

“Are you serious?!”

I understood why he was so surprised. I was offering to betray Pride’s confidence, and with Arthur being a trained knight, he would have an overwhelming advantage in this duel.

“If you beat me, you can decide if you want to hear it or not, and I’ll never bring it up again,” I said. “But if I win, you *have* to tell me. I’ll get it out of you no matter how much you complain. Got it?”

Arthur, apparently seeing this as his only way out of his predicament, nodded and swallowed hard. *Good. Arthur isn’t the type of guy to weasel out of a promise.*

Sensing something in my smile, Arthur raised his sword with a look of intense concentration. He knew me well enough to predict that I planned to teleport.

We stood opposite each other with our swords at the ready. After a moment of silence, broken only by us steadying our breaths, we sprang into action.

Twenty seconds later...

“That’s not faaair!”

Arthur’s scream echoed off the walls of the practice room.



### Chapter 3:

## The Next Seneschal and the Birthday Party

**“R**EALLY? Still nothing?! Heh heh! Aw, how disappointing...”

A demon cackled, a demon whose voice I knew all too well.

I spent all my time in this dark room, clinging to the cold floors and plain walls...and waiting. I waited day after day, until my sense of time frayed and my whole world narrowed to the darkness around me.

*Where am I? Ah, that's right.*

In addition to losing track of time, it seemed I'd lost all sense of who I was. It was an unseemly but fitting way to meet my end.

“Now, have you finally decided to be honest with me? Stale is seventeen years old now. What purpose do you serve in this castle? Tell me...”

The demon's shrill cackling didn't pierce my thoughts. What was my name? I tried to remember. *Oh, it's so close... Right on the tip of my tongue...*

*Splash!*

A spray of cold water doused me through the bars of my cell. My breath caught. Inhuman, high-pitched laughter followed the impact and ricocheted off the walls.

“Good morning. Was that what it took to wake you up? Heh heh!”

The demon sneered. Her smile curled unnaturally, and her purple eyes glimmered with horrific delight. This laughing sadist, this woman who held absolute power, called the name I'd forgotten.

“What do you say, Uncle Vest?”

*Vest. That's it, that's my name. Vest, the man whose greatest mistake can never be undone.*



I called the name of the girl before me, and her smile stretched even wider.

“Good, you can still speak. Guess what, Uncle Vest? Your niece has come to visit you after Stale’s party to give your tired body a good whipping. Aren’t you pleased?”

The Freesian queen snickered. She peered at me, the former seneschal who’d withered away into a shell of his old self.

“Won’t you listen to a request from your adorable little niece? If you don’t, your wife will pray the price, as will—”

“No! I told you years ago that your threats won’t work on me.”

I didn’t let her finish. Her face fell, but soon enough her lips lifted once more.

“That’s true,” she said.

She’d made these same threats when I was first imprisoned in this cell. They no longer held any weight. She could slaughter my loved ones in front of me and I doubted it would move me in the slightest.

“You really won’t do me this one little favor?! All I’m saying is that I want to spend more time with my dear uncle!”

“You want to make a trade for a fealty contract. I won’t change my answer, no matter how many years pass. I’m never going to give you my special power.”

Albert had died, followed by Rosa...and then this young woman became queen. She used her newfound powers to force me out as seneschal and lock me away in my cell—my punishment for rebuking her actions after she took the throne. She killed so many others, and she certainly hadn’t spared my life out of some sort of fondness for a family member. She simply wanted to get her hands on my special power.

The queen began asking me for a fealty contract a few years after that, but I always refused. Becoming her slave might free me from my cell, allowing me some semblance of a life. Maybe I could even breathe the outside air again. But I remained obstinate.



“You’re wrong,” I declared, loud and clear.

Her eyebrow twitched, but her smile remained frozen in place.

“I’ll reprimand you as many times as it takes. That’s my final role in this world... A role Albert and Rosa couldn’t fulfill.”

I refused to let her have her way. Gilbert was busy taking on the work of both the prime minister and the prince consort. If he was willing to yield to her in some bid to save the Freesian people, I would spend the rest of my life refusing to bend and calling out her misguided and evil deeds.

The queen pressed her lips into a hard line, and I repeated the words I said to her every time she visited.

“What you’re doing is wrong. Your rule over Freesia won’t last much longer at this rate. It will collapse quicker than your own life. You’ve already reached the point of no return.”

*Clang!* She kicked the bars of my cell with her heel, but I ignored her violence.

“It’s for your sake that I’m not using my special power. I’ll gladly rot away in here if it means no one else has to suffer. That principle is my pride as a member of royalty.”

“Are you stupid?!” she screamed. “I’m telling you I found a way to use you! Don’t pretend you have royal blood like me when you’re just some bottom-of-the-barrel noble scum!”

I closed my eyes and let her howl out her frustration. *Ah, I see. So I was born to a lower-ranking noble family.*

“Will you give up and kill me first?” I asked. “Or will time catch up and destroy you, allowing me to walk away a free man? Either way, so long as I’m alive—”

“That’s enough, Uncle Vest. *We’re* the only ones who even know you’re alive, yet you still won’t give in?”

She brought her fingers to her mouth, bit down, and blew. *TwEEEEEEet!* The shrill whistle pierced my ears. A second later, my nephew Stale materialized



behind the queen outside my cell. The boy had been adopted into the royal family long ago. His blank, glazed-over eyes regarded us without any hint of emotion.

“You called?”

He and I both knew what the queen was about to ask.

“Do the usual,” she said. “Don’t stop until he’s learned to be obedient, but don’t kill him. He’s my precious uncle, after all.” Her smile pulled sickeningly taut. “I’ll be back later to see your work.”

She left, the old prison door slamming shut behind her and sealing me off once again from the world. Stale approached a rack of swords and whips. He glanced at me and paused, as though he hesitated to perform his duty.

“What’s wrong, Stale? Not sure if you’ll be able to spare me today?”

“Her orders were abstract this time. Now that she’s gone, she won’t come back for a few more weeks. I could do it without wounding you...”

“She said to do ‘the usual.’ What would you do if she happened to come back and check? You’d only bring the same punishment down on yourself.”

My scolding had an effect. His posture stiffened. I crossed my bound arms and legs, my chains rattling as I moved.

“I don’t need you to sympathize with me,” I went on. “You’re our victim. We stole everything from you when you were little.”

Stale had been adopted into the royal family for his special power—just like I once was. Gilbert had told me about the fight Stale put up to stay with his mother, but I couldn’t help him back then. I’d managed to abandon my past, escaping the grip of loneliness and homesickness, while he was still tormented by it.

The young man picked up a blade without another word. I told him it was a good choice and watched emotion cloud over his face like a storm rolling in.

“I wanted you to be happy. Just like I was when I met Rosa and Albert for the



first time.”

Rosa and Albert had welcomed me to the castle when I felt like I didn’t belong. It was why I decided to dedicate my life to them and the Freesian people.

My cell door only opened for mealtimes—and for this. Stale stepped over the threshold, clutching the sharp blade.

“Is Tiara doing well?” I asked.

“She is. She’s living peacefully in her tower, ignorant to the depravity of the outside world. The queen hasn’t taken an interest in her.”

I heaved a sigh. I’d hardly ever felt so relieved. *Thank God. Tiara is safe.* Those words alone were my salvation.

“I see.”

Stale’s hands shook. The blade of his sword scraped against the floor. Why was he hesitating? After all these years, hurting and even killing people was second nature to him. The darkness concealed his face, or perhaps my eyesight had deteriorated after all this time without light.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, jingling my handcuffs. My shackles weren’t tethered to the ground, so I stumbled forward on my weak legs to approach Stale.

He succumbed to a moment of honesty. “If you...had been there...”

Though the gloom hid his expression, his voice was laced with pain. I’d been imprisoned by the queen before I could leave anything behind for Stale, and I knew he must be struggling to fill the role of seneschal.

“What about Gilbert? Is he well?” I asked, and Stale nodded. “Still working?”

“Yes, harder than anyone in the kingdom.”

*More good news.* I’d heard that Gilbert was providing support for Stale too. A considerable amount of time must have passed.

“Let’s get to it already. I’ll bet you have a lot of work to do, don’t you?”



He didn't have time to chat with me. I knew how all-consuming the job of seneschal was better than anyone. Stale didn't respond, but I heard his jaw click as he gritted his teeth. I appreciated his reluctance; a human heart beat inside him yet.

Stale exhaled, then raised his sword. The queen's orders were to hurt me, and his blade was going to fulfill that duty to the utmost.

Just before Stale could strike, I remembered something important and uttered his name. He froze with the sword perched above his head.

"Happy birthday."

"Thank you..."

His voice emerged as a thin rasp between clenched teeth. I only wished I didn't have to stain him with my blood on his birthday.

Then, at long last, the blade...

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*Crash!*

I jerked awake to find myself sitting at my desk, pen in hand. I must have fallen asleep in my chair.

"Forgive me, Uncle Vest. Did I wake you?" a familiar voice asked.

My nephew stood amid books knocked from their shelves—presumably his doing.

"No... Sorry, Stale. I think I dozed off..."

"Of course you did. You and Mother just got back to Freesia yesterday. Please, lie down on the sofa, and I'll handle the rest of your work."

Stale smiled as he brushed the dust off each book and set them back on the shelf. Only then did I notice the blanket draped around my shoulders. Stale must have placed it there while I slept.

As he said, Rosa and I had returned the day before. Even after leaving Prince



Cedric in Gilbert's hands, I had to conquer a mountain of work to prepare for today's birthday party. Even so, I couldn't believe I'd dozed off during work. That had never happened before.

"No, that's all right," I said. "Isn't it time you started getting ready, Stale?"

"I suppose you're right," tonight's guest of honor replied. He'd been working under me for two years, but his diligence still impressed and surprised me. He would make a perfect seneschal someday.

I checked my desk drawers and the cabinet next to me while Stale was busy sorting the next batch of documents.

"I can help for thirty more minutes," he said. "The party's for me, so I want to contribute as much as possible."

"Why are you worrying about that? I already feel bad about asking you for help on your birthday."

I wished he only had his own preparations to focus on, but that morning he'd volunteered to help at a time when I was hard-pressed to refuse an extra hand. And Stale could carry out the work of ten men on his own.

"There's nothing to feel bad about. I'm happy I get to work with you again after all this time, Uncle Vest."

I couldn't bring myself to respond to his polite smile, so I stared at my file cabinet...until I was certain.

"Stale. You were searching for tonight's invitee list while I was sleeping, weren't you?"

He froze. "Of course not," he said, his placating smile plastered on his face.

I sighed. Someone had shifted my papers ever so slightly and shut my desk drawers while I slept. Stale had already asked me for an *invitee* list, not a guest list. He wanted the names of anyone invited to the castle, not just the names of those who had agreed to show up.

"The firstborn prince and future seneschal shouldn't act like a common



bandit. You're seventeen years old. It's not like you're a child anymore."

"I'm very sorry."

He bowed, but all I could do was sigh again. I used to show him things like invitee lists, but I'd started handling such things on my own ever since the announcement of the princesses' marriage candidates.

Stale was clever. If he looked over every list of invitees from parties and ceremonies, he could probably narrow down the marriage candidates. He adored Pride and Tiara, and if he knew the names of the men they might marry, it would definitely distract from his future seneschal duties and assistance to the prince consort.

"I guess I should be impressed. You started your day with so much enthusiasm. Is that why you told me to sleep on the sofa?"

He would've had a better time searching for the list if I was asleep. Plus, he could teleport wherever he wanted while I was out.

My words flustered him. "No, I just..."

I cast a glance at the documents. "There's nothing I can do about this. If you try that again, I'll ban you from entering my room."

Silence settled over us until Stale made another apology. I avoided his gaze so I wouldn't give anything away, but in truth, we could not have a seneschal abusing his powers for personal gain.

So preoccupied was I that my lecturing turned to rambling as I tidied up the documents. "If your attachment to Pride and Tiara weren't so strong, you wouldn't even need to hunt down the list. We could have told you their marriage candidates from the very beginning..."

"Huh?!" Stale squeaked.

I must have been really exhausted. Regretting the admission, I pivoted the conversation before more could slip out.

"How are things with Gilbert, by the way? I assume your studies in aiding the



prince consort are proceeding well too?”

“Y-yes, of course. I’ve learned a lot over the past few days.”

“I see. That’s good.”

Stale remained fixated on me. I doubted my change of topic was having the desired effect.

“Don’t you need to put those away?” I reminded him, nodding at the papers in his hands. Stale flew back into motion and tucked them on the shelf. “Gilbert is a wonderful prime minister. I hope you use this opportunity to grow closer to him.”

“Right.”

It was hard to miss the resentment straining his voice. He tried to hide it, but a quick look revealed how he wanted to pout and sulk. Gilbert had had a history of mistreating Pride up until a few years ago. He was a new man now, but knowing Stale, he likely held a grudge due to Gilbert’s past.

“You’re seventeen now, Stale. You need to start acting like an adult.”

Stale always tended to overstep when it came to Tiara and *especially* Pride. Somehow, he’d managed to remain calm two years ago when Pride’s engagement to Prince Leon was formalized. But his eyes had been locked on the prince from the second he entered the ballroom—despite the fact that he shouldn’t have known about the engagement yet. It was why we had to direct Pride and Tiara to keep information about their marriage candidates a strict secret, particularly from Stale.

I wasn’t eager to lecture the boy on his birthday, though. His movements slowed, his mood clearly deflating. *Why did I have to scold him today of all days?*

“You’ve done enough. Go back to your room and prepare for the party.”

Stale checked the clock and nodded. He said goodbye and started for the door, but I stopped him before he escaped. Stale cocked his head in confusion,



and I paused so I could choose my next words carefully.

“You really got a lot done on those documents in a very short time. Your plans were perfect, and you executed them with expert precision. I struggle to find a flaw in how you’ve handled the guests, their attendants, the guards... Having you here with me is a big help. Thank you for the blanket too.”

Stale pressed his lips together, but he didn’t break eye contact. I knew he’d searched for that list, but he’d still finished his assignments flawlessly. I knew that if I left a job in his hands, he wouldn’t let me down.

“Frankly, there are a lot of things about Gilbert’s past I don’t know,” I said. “But we’re responsible for all of it too. Don’t carry such a burden all by yourself.”

I’d tried to stay out of Gilbert’s business, aside from scolding him for how he treated Pride. He was always good at keeping secrets, but meddling in his affairs was like rubbing salt in a wound I had no right to touch.

“I’ve put a lot of care into Pride and Tiara’s futures, from the new system of marriage to the candidates themselves. We won’t make the same mistake twice, though I understand that it’s hard for you to trust us now.”

“No, that’s not true,” Stale said quickly. It almost sounded involuntary. He clamped his mouth shut after the outburst, squeezing his fists but holding my gaze.

“Besides, as your uncle, I’m glad that you care for Pride and Tiara so much. You truly are a kind person.”

In fact, that kindness had probably propelled him to search for that list of invitees—and made it impossible for me to trust him with that information.

“Also...” I began, setting down my pen.

Stale watched me uneasily, perhaps feeling shy from my praise. I looked him dead in the eye when next I spoke.

“Happy birthday, Stale.”



A fleeting shimmer lit his eyes. He swallowed hard, tilted his head back, and blinked rapidly.

Stale was turning seventeen. It was a special day for him. He'd only been seven when he came to the castle, and it hadn't been an easy transition for such a young boy. But thanks to the princesses' love, and the friends he'd made, he'd grown into a fine prince who would someday make a brilliant seneschal.

"Thank you very much..."

It was rare to see Stale so flustered. If my praise could inspire such a reaction, I should compliment him more often. Of course, I couldn't do it *too* much.

Stale bowed before quietly exiting the room. I listened to his footsteps grow distant before I took up my pen once more.

My nephew's birthday party was tonight. Representatives from many peaceful nations would attend this event, making it a larger affair than usual. We also had to invite the Rajah Empire, but fortunately, they'd declined due to a scheduling conflict and sent along a birthday gift instead. Stale's party would go off without a hitch as long as Rajah stayed away, but other anxieties weighed on me. I had to do everything in my power to prevent a different sort of catastrophe, which meant employing every possible precaution.

Stale Royal Ivy, the young man who worked so hard each and every day, would one day take my place. I would put everything I had into making this a special day for him.

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"Ugh..."

I sighed as I took in a ballroom far too glittery for my taste. At my side, Vice Captain Eric whispered a warning. With a hasty apology, I stood tall and faced forward.

Today was Stale's birthday. Every year, I watched these ballrooms fill with people eager to celebrate in his honor. It always reminded me that Stale was a



*prince*, not just the friend I got to chat with like equals. I always sent him a birthday present, but it was a struggle to pick something good. The fancy gifts stacking up in the room left me woozy.







The young women at Stale's parties scared me a little, and this year was the worst one yet. Girls sixteen and younger watched him closely, eager to find a way to speak with him.

Princess Pride and Tiara were as popular as ever even though they weren't the guests of honor. Plenty of princes and young men gravitated toward them, and my chest ached whenever I wondered if one of those vultures might be Princess Pride's marriage candidate.

"Commander Roderick and the others look like they've got their hands full. Should we join them? What do you think?" Vice Captain Eric asked me.

We'd left to get booze for the others, but by the time we returned, they were surrounded by a crowd of guests and already held drinks. The attendees had swarmed the commander, vice commander, and captains. I would definitely be their next target if I joined that group.

I shook my head, and Vice Captain Eric chuckled.

"We can link up with them when we greet Prince Stale," he suggested.

He guided me to a secluded spot where we could stay out of view. I wasn't used to high-society manners, so I appreciated Eric getting me out of there. I didn't know how Princess Pride and her siblings managed to endure the social aspect of these parties. Leaning against a wall, my eyes drifted to the crown princess, who was almost entirely obscured in a sea of admirers.

"I wonder who the princesses' marriage candidates could be..." Vice Captain Eric said with a sigh.

He downed his wine in one gulp, and I followed suit. We passed our empty glasses to a waiter and hung back to observe the crowd for a while. A certain someone had to be among them.

"Sta—ahem, *he* told me quite a few possibilities," I replied.

Vice Captain Eric leaned eagerly toward me. I told him how I lost—or rather, how I was *tricked* in a battle with Stale and how he told me his theories to



apologize for cheating. According to him, we simply had to note which men attended all the major parties and events.

“All of the names were ones Captain Callum already guessed,” I said, and my cohort smiled nervously.

We knew who attended Freesian events and who singled out Princess Pride during those events: the oldest son of a duke from Yaburan, the second-born prince of the kingdom of Veronica, the firstborn prince of Lilac, two eldest sons from different Freesian dukedoms, and the eldest son of a Freesian marquess. Most of these men traced their bloodlines back to Freesian royalty. I’d met them many times during my shifts as an imperial knight or at parties like these. None of them seemed all that close to Princess Pride, as far as I could tell. Two had flashed us suspicious smiles, so I hoped Pride wasn’t considering either of them, at least. Finally, there was the royal prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

“Out of all of them, she’s closest with the prince from Hanazuo.”

I could tell he’d intentionally refused to say Prince Cedric’s name. I reminded him this was all speculation. He merely smiled, told me he understood, and stared off at Princess Pride in the distance.

Vice Captain Eric identified the men he spotted near her: a Freesian marquess with a guest from Lilac standing next to him. I recognized them from various interactions over the years.

There was still a lot of time before the princesses officially announced their candidates, though I was all but certain of two names on Princess Pride’s list. The first was Prince Cedric. If she...*loved* him...there was no reason for her not to choose him. He was the royal prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom and an overall impressive person, though I still couldn’t wrap my head around why he’d acted like such an idiot when he first came here.

As for the other...

“Oh, there he is.”



Vice Captain Eric raised his glass. I followed the gesture, staring along with many of the wide-eyed guests around me. The man in question was not dressed in his usual garb. A murmur rustled through the crowd. Princess Pride must've noticed, as she likewise turned to look—and her jaw dropped. Flustered, she rushed to greet the man. I understood her surprise. She couldn't have imagined seeing him the way he presented himself tonight.

*“He must be honest and upright, with no history of crime, betrayal, or womanizing. He must love Elder Sister with all his heart, care deeply for his homeland like Elder Sister or Prince Leon, be smarter than me or Gilbert, and be stronger than you. If he meets all those criteria, maybe I'd consider him.”*

Stale's words replayed in my mind. Not all of it applied to Prince Cedric, but this guy was a different story.

Princess Pride greeted him, and while I was pretty far away, I could tell Tiara was just as surprised as her sister. I'd already warned Stale about this man, but he couldn't take his eyes off him either.

“He really stands out,” I said.

Vice Captain Eric chuckled. “Of course he does. It's pretty obvious what's going on now that everyone knows about the marriage candidate system.”

All the guests gathered around Dad had turned to catch a glimpse too. I couldn't contain my words as I watched a man I knew become the center of attention at a royal family event.

“Captain Callum is so amazing...”

Callum Bordeaux was the second son of Lord Bordeaux, a Freesian earl, and the most elite member of the royal order. He became a knight at age fourteen thanks to his outstanding test results, joined the main forces at the top of his class two years later, and became the youngest person ever promoted to captain of the Third Squadron.

The commander and vice commander were invited to royal events and



parties, as was the knight who performed best in exams the prior year. That knight ended up being Captain Callum every year after his promotion to captain. All the knights loved him. Plus, he knew how to fight, had an amazing special power, deployed the perfect battle plans, impressed everyone who laid eyes on him, and never said a bad word about anyone. He easily fulfilled 90 percent of Stale's requirements.

Even Vice Captain Eric and I had never seen him in real formalwear before tonight. He was speaking to Princess Pride and blushing so hard, we could spot it from across the room. Even Princess Pride was flushed. Who could blame them when it was so obvious that the captain was one of her marriage candidates? Captain Alan, who'd taken Captain Callum's place as the highest-performing knight at the party, smirked at them.

It all started a week after the queen's big announcement, when Captain Callum's family suddenly called him home. The next day, he returned to the royal order and requested a leave of absence for the day of Stale's birthday party. Vice Captain Eric and I were already scheduled for imperial knight shifts that day, but it struck us as strange that Captain Callum wasn't going to use his personal invitation through the royal order. Captain Callum told us someone in his family had fallen ill and he needed to act as their emergency proxy.

The next day, Dad returned from a meeting with Her Majesty looking as flustered as I'd ever seen him. For some reason, Captain Callum wouldn't stop apologizing to him. The captain's request was approved as "special leave," and his invitation to Stale's birthday party passed down to Captain Alan as the second-highest performer in the order. But by then, a bunch of us had already worked it out. Dad told us Captain Callum would be taking more special leave from time to time due to "family issues," which sealed the deal for the rest of us knights.

Captain Callum was famous within the royal order for his elite status, but his older brother was supposed to inherit his family title. It didn't make sense for a captain like him to have to help his brother with social events out of the blue.



Yet the queen had randomly summoned Dad, and then Captain Callum got his “special leave.” It clearly had something to do with the royal family.

Finally, Dad and Clark had summoned us four imperial knights for a meeting.

*“I’m sure you expected this already, but I wanted to let you know about Prince Stale’s birthday party and the change in plans.”*

Dad spoke reluctantly. Clark wore a faint smile. As for Captain Callum, he turned redder and redder as the meeting went on. It didn’t take a genius to put the pieces together.

*“Callum is going to start attending events as the second son of Lord Bordeaux, not as a knight, due to his family’s ‘strong insistence.’ You’ll probably see him at Prince Stale’s birthday party...as the proxy for his family member, who fell ill. Do you understand?”*

We all nodded. Vice Captain Eric looked just as flushed as I felt. Captain Alan managed to remain calm in front of Dad and Clark, but he wriggled as he tried to suppress a smirk.

After the meeting, Captain Alan looped his arm around Captain Callum, grinned, and said, “See? I told you!” He took a fist to the face right after that.

The official story was that Lord Bordeaux was ill and needed to send someone as his proxy, but no one believed this because of the suspicious timing. Stale was genuinely surprised when I told him, but he didn’t know if Captain Callum was actually invited as a proxy or as an individual, since Seneschal Vest was the one with the list of invitees.

The guests swarmed Dad, Clark, and Captain Alan to get the full story, desperate to know why Captain Callum wasn’t coming to parties as a knight anymore. It was probably easier to ask them than Captain Callum himself. After all, he might end up being the next prince consort.

As I watched the blushing Captain Callum and Princess Pride speak, a thought crossed my mind.



*It's hard to believe there're people in this world who don't have a single flaw...*

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*How did I end up in this position?!*

My mind reeled as I struggled to greet each guest who approached me. I'd repeated this question over and over for the past week. Even though I never found an answer, the question nagged at me.

"Why, I never expected to see you here as Lord Bordeaux's proxy," an earl's relative said. "Tell me, is His Lordship doing well?"

Sweat dripped down my brow as I replied that he was faring all right. But the man was healthier than ever, and in fact, he'd spent the past week practically skipping with joy. My brother and I barely knew what to do with him.

As the rulers of a county just outside the nearest town, Mother and Father were extremely proud of me. They could hardly imagine a better outcome than this.

It was Father and my older brother who first informed me of my status as a marriage candidate. The queen had personally invited them to the castle, where my father instantly accepted the proposal, never once asking for my opinion. To be fair, it was unthinkable for an earl's family to turn down a marriage proposal from the royal family.

Father sent for me as soon as he got back to his manor. *He was so obvious about it. He completely wasted Her Majesty's attempts to keep this quiet!* I'd rushed home when the messenger informed me that Father was ill and Mother was in critical condition, but instead of ailing parents on their sickbeds, I returned to a jubilant welcoming party. Only my brother was as fretful about the situation as I was.

*"I'm sorry, Callum... I didn't want you wrapped up in this."*

My brother was an intelligent, hardworking man who lived up to his status as an earl's heir, running the house flawlessly. He was also a wonderful sibling who



supported me when I first told him my dream of becoming a knight. Like me, he had little interest in clinging to royalty or the family name, so this topic was more stressful than exciting for him. He stopped Father from rushing to me as soon as they left the castle, forcing him to return home and concoct a convincing pretext first.

He eventually snuck me away to his room so that we could discuss all this in private. There, he explained that Princess Pride had designated me as one of her marriage candidates.

Instantly, I understood why my quiet, stern parents were suddenly acting like giddy children. Not only had I been handpicked by a member of the royal family, but I was now a candidate to become the prince consort! There was no greater honor for a noble, even if I didn't end up marrying the princess. However...

It was Princess Pride's *choice*. Out of everyone in the world, she'd picked me as one of her three candidates!

It took me nearly an hour to regain my wits after that revelation. The more I thought about how she'd selected me personally and what a tremendous honor that was, the more my brain stuttered. I had a good idea as to *why* she'd chosen me, but my body was still boiling with embarrassment—and a bit of joy too.

Once I'd regained my wits a bit, my brother got to the unpleasant part of the conversation.

*"So, Callum... You see, Father thinks..."*

The royal family didn't mind if I continued to attend events using my invitation as the highest-performing knight, as anything else would give up the secret. Yet my brother told me Father had refused their offer. He preferred that I present myself properly as a marriage candidate, even if my identity wasn't going to be announced, and decided I would serve as his proxy for all future events. My brother insisted that Father and Mother stay home for a while to add credibility to their supposed illness. It seemed that Her Majesty had left the



decision of whether to tell me in my family's hands, but when my brother saw how out of sorts Mother and Father had gotten, he agreed that they had no choice but to tell me. Secretly, however, I wished Her Majesty hadn't told anyone but him.

Mother and Father, completely swept up by this entire thing, told me that I should start serving as the Bordeaux family representative without bothering to lie about their health. They suggested I leave the royal order and work instead as my brother's steward—thereby drawing more attention to the honor bestowed on the family. Before I could refuse, my brother stepped forward and did it for me.

*“You’re the ones who set up strict conditions for Callum to join the royal order! I’ve had enough of watching you meddle in Callum’s life! No more compromises. If you let the secret out and Callum loses his place as a knight, the two of us will cut ties with this family. Are you prepared to have the Bordeaux bloodline end with us?!”*

Ever since we were children, my elder sibling had looked after me. He was the one to convince Father not to present me to the world as a Bordeaux when I attended events with them. I got to receive my invitation as a knight and not an earl's son. Many times, I'd wished I could be more like my brother.

My brother's speech cooled our parents off, especially when he pointed out things like the threat of assassination if the world learned I was on Princess Pride's list of candidates. We agreed I would attend events as father's proxy or, at times, as my brother's proxy when he was particularly busy. I apologized for stealing his opportunities to attend formal gatherings, but he said, *“I appreciate it, actually. It's less stress to know you'll act as Father's proxy...and I don't really like places where I'm expected to socialize.”*

After that, I applied for a leave of absence, telling the commander I needed to help my family. I thought I'd be able to keep the truth from the other knights that way, but the very next day, Her Majesty summoned my direct superior: Commander Roderick. When he returned, I took one look at him and knew



what had occurred.

Her Majesty must have explained the true nature of my leave to the commander and instructed him to approve my request as “special leave.” Then again, the queen essentially *had* to offer me unique privileges in this situation. I was in the running to become the next prince consort. The royal family and royal order could have avoided all this hassle if my father had simply kept this secret to himself.

So there I was, attending Prince Stale’s birthday party under the pretense that my father was ill and my brother was busy. Commander Roderick had personally explained the story to Alan, Eric, and Arthur so they wouldn’t grill me. I could not avoid this no matter how much I felt like dropping dead from embarrassment. Naturally, Alan made it even worse by reminding me he’d predicted this.

“Captain Callum!” Princess Pride exclaimed. “Your clothes...!”

My heart rate spiked as she took in my formal attire. “My father is unwell at the moment, so I’m here in his place,” I explained, solely for the other guests.

Princess Pride paused like she wanted to say something more. Her avid attention did frightening things to my heart.

“Um, Captain Callum...is this my fault?” she asked, her voice hushed and brow furrowed with anxiety.

Even with my face burning hot, I managed to reply, “No, Father insisted. If anything, we’re the ones who’ve caused problems for the royal family.”

I would’ve attended these parties as a knight if it wasn’t for Father’s selfishness. My brother and I held little interest in things like social hierarchy and royalty precisely because of our parents’ personalities.

Princess Pride was even more flustered by my answer. “I-I-I’m so sorry! I never imagined you would have to go to all this trouble!”

“N-no need for that! I appreciate how you’ve treated me during my imperial



knight duties. We're using the public story that Father is ill and I have to attend in his place..."

Unfortunately, most of the knights in the royal order could easily read between the lines. I smiled at Princess Pride, trying to silently convey that, but she did not seem reassured.

"Um...you see, th-th-this is all because..."

"I-I understand!"

Princess Pride's cheeks glowed pink. She cast her gaze aside, refusing to look me in the eyes. Her bashfulness made my heart skip a beat. But people were beginning to notice our lengthy interaction, and I lowered my voice to a whisper.

"However long you choose to put things on hold, I don't mind. Marriage was something I put completely out of my mind when I decided to become a knight, so I'm perfectly happy to lend you my name until you've made your decision."

The princess looked up at me with wide eyes. She pressed her lips together in a thin line.

I knew exactly where I stood. My ego wasn't big enough to believe that Princess Pride was anything more than fond of me. Most likely, she'd set her heart on one of the other two candidates already. She'd selected the rest of us because she felt she could trust us and we wouldn't stir up trouble—even if the engagement period lasted more than two years or she never managed to marry the man of her choosing. All three of us were no doubt honored just to make her list.

There was no chance of an earl's second son being her final selection—not if Princess Pride was looking for the most qualified candidate.

"Th-thank you...very much..." she said.

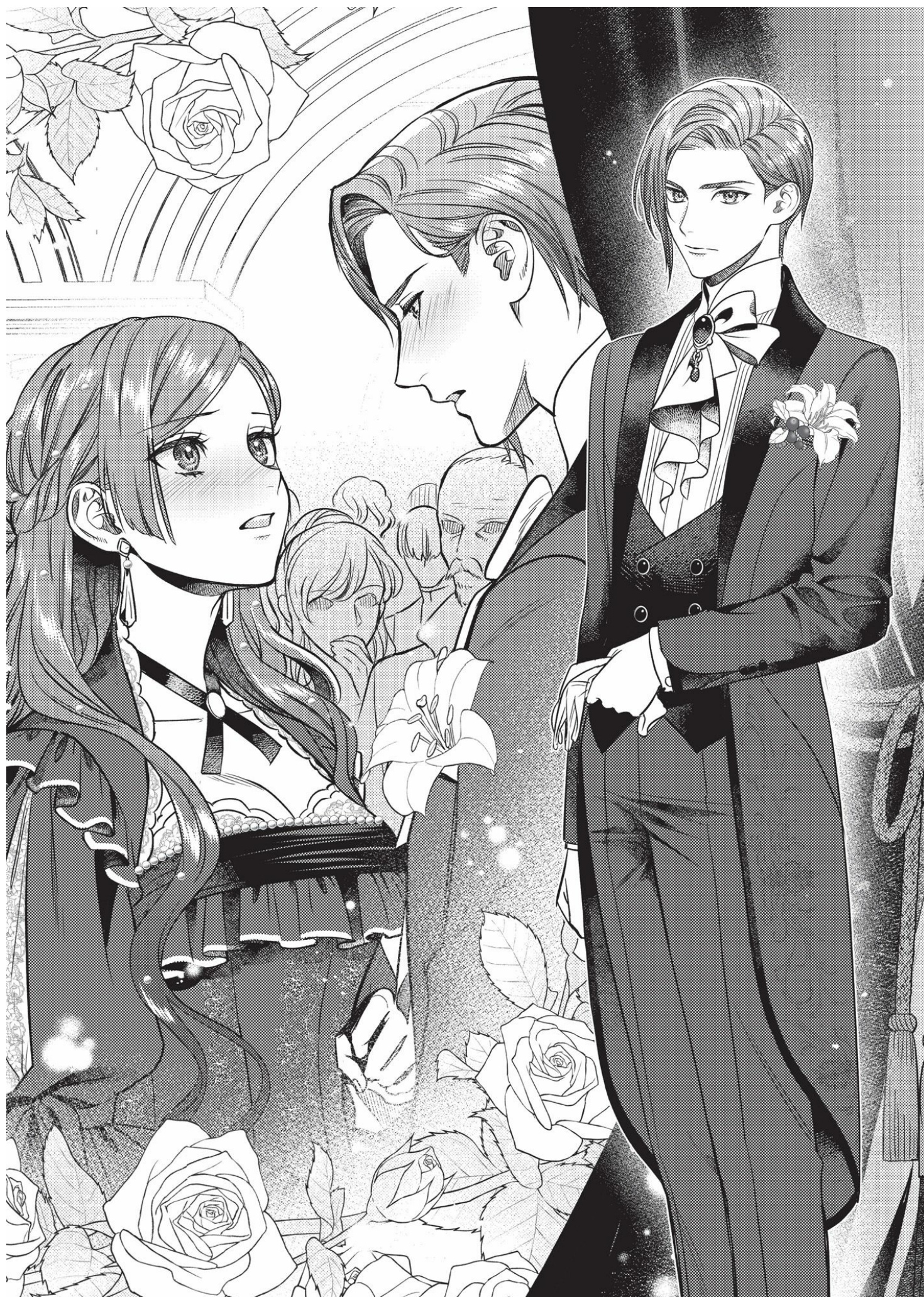
With a sigh of relief, she looked down at her feet. She hadn't refuted anything I said, which helped calm me down...and left a subtle ache in my heart. Her



Highness really *did* have her sights set on someone else.

We finished our conversation, said goodbye, and went our separate ways. I was more than happy to offer Princess Pride my name if it led to her happiness. I was honored to know she trusted me so much after I'd failed to keep her safe during the war.







“You and Princess Pride make a beautiful pair, Lord Callum.”

“The two of you seem to be very close...”

“A captain in the royal order, the highest performer of all the knights, and a member of the Bordeaux family. Your wife is going to be a very lucky woman.”

Every time someone looked at me as Princess Pride’s future husband, I had to resist the urge to squirm. I insisted I was only here as Father’s proxy, but it didn’t stop any of the gossipers. I knew they meant this all kindly, but calling us a “nice-looking couple” who had “obviously grown close” sent my blood pressure sky high. Most embarrassing of all...it looked like I was dressed up and putting on a show to campaign for Princess Pride’s heart.

I’d been raised by very strict parents. Yet even when they set conditions on me becoming a knight, I never held a grudge against them. Right now, though, in this one moment...

I *really* felt like cursing that pretentious father of mine.

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*Aaahh! What should I do?!*

I wanted to cry. Captain Callum was turning bright red under the unrelenting attention of all the guests around him. I greeted each one as they approached, though I couldn’t get the captain out of my mind. I’d requested him as one of my marriage candidates.

Captain Callum hadn’t remarked on the situation during his imperial knight shifts, so I’d assumed he either didn’t know or didn’t feel any need to discuss it. *That’s why I didn’t expect this at Stale’s birthday party! Gosh, he’s all dressed up!*

The outfit suited him even better than his knight uniform. Frankly, he was incredibly handsome. I always knew Captain Callum belonged to a prominent noble family, but this party really put his upbringing on display. His flawless presentation attracted the eyes of every person in the room, which only



worsened my guilt. With so many people at this party, no one would have noticed if the captain hadn't attended.

Still, this was a special case. It was the first party since Mother's announcement about our marriage candidates. Captain Callum stuck out even more because he'd never attended events in anything other than his uniform.

*The usual noble guests are practically drilling holes through him with their eyes!*

This was nothing like the games and manga from my past life, where everyone might mistake him for a handsome stranger. Every last soul in the room recognized him as Captain Callum of the Bordeaux family. And it was all my fault. He maintained the fiction that he was here at his father's insistence, but I couldn't blame him. After all, he had to involve his family's reputation for the sake of his cover story.

I should have expected that his family wouldn't hold back once they received the big news. My guilt intensified when I pictured his relatives ordering him to show up to the party in formalwear instead of a knight's uniform. I'd left Captain Callum, a man barely in his twenties, with a huge mess to clean up. *He's already proven himself to be an outstanding knight! It's not fair that he has to start dressing like a nobleman!*

*"I don't mind however long you choose to put things on hold. Marriage was something I put completely out of my mind when I decided to become a knight, so I'm perfectly happy to lend you my name until you've made your decision."*

*Gaaah!* My smile twitched whenever I thought back on his words. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. *The real reason I chose him was—*

"What's wrong, Pride? Are you feeling unwell?"

Cedric's voice jolted me from my frantic thoughts. I didn't even realize I'd been fanning myself.

*Now I understand why horrible memories make you shrivel up in agony,*



*Cedric.*

He studied me with concern. “Want to go get some air? I could send for a doctor or a maid.”

“No... Thank you, but I’m fine. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Cedric’s eyes still flickered with uncertainty, but I was glad he could speak to me without the excess formalities. That was probably in part due to our letters; I’d asked him to write to me like an equal. Maybe writing to Tiara regularly too would cure him of this strange mannerism entirely, even if all they discussed was the weather. I would have to get on him to try again. Then again, no one wanted a pen pal they despised... Maybe I could test the waters with her some other time.

“It’s your talk with Lord Callum that’s bothering you, isn’t it?” Cedric said. “I thought they looked alike when I met Lord Bordeaux at your party, but I didn’t realize they were actually relatives.”

When I confirmed his suspicions, he nodded.

“I wouldn’t have expected Lord Callum to be on your list,” he went on, “but he’s a nice man from a prominent family. I’m just surprised that I sussed out a candidate so quickly.”

“No, no, Captain Callum is here as the *proxy* for his *ill father*.”

He seemed surprised by my firm response. Although he was speaking quietly, I couldn’t allow him to fling around such suspicions at a public event. I had to stick to the story.

*Good, I managed to convince hi—*

“But weren’t you and Lord Callum just talking about that?”

*What?! I jumped, snapping my eyes back to Cedric. He balked at my reaction. He heard us talking?! No, that’s impossible. We were being really quiet. The guests closest to us didn’t act like they heard us either!*

Cedric appeared to sense that something was wrong. He furrowed his brow



and paused before asking, “Were you guys whispering?”

*Yes, of course we were!*

Then it hit me. Cedric could read lips. He must have been watching us from afar, assuming we were speaking at a normal volume. He apologized, saying he didn’t mean to eavesdrop. This was just a reminder of his truly boundless talent. Cedric could interpret any conversation, even clandestine whispers. I would have to keep my mouth covered next time. He wasn’t someone I ever wanted on my bad side, that much was certain.

I asked him to keep my talk with Captain Callum a secret, and he agreed right away.

“You could tear my fingernails off and I’d still never tell a soul,” he said. If it came to something so grisly, I hoped he would just confess. Were he to say something like that to Tiara, she would probably get angry and tell him he’d just make even more trouble for her.

“Oh, that’s right! Have you spoken with Tiara yet?”

It wasn’t so much the *speaking* with her that was the problem, but rather Cedric’s inability to do it without blushing. Case in point, a faint pink glow lit Cedric’s cheeks and he worried at his lip when I voiced my question. Maybe the task was too daunting for him after all.

“No, but...” Cedric halted, as though picking his next words extra carefully. He brought his fist to his chest and looked me dead in the eyes. “I-I’m going to talk to her like anyone else this time. I’ll prove it! I won’t make her uncomfortable!”

I let out a quiet cry at his powerful declaration. I was like a proud mother watching him grow and learn with each passing day. *No, I’m too young to be thinking like that.* Though I couldn’t help but wonder if Cedric was the reason King Lance seemed wise beyond his years.

“Good luck,” I said. “Either way...I hope the two of you can get along a little better.”



I smiled, silently praying I wouldn't have to intervene this time. Not having his brothers around concerned me, but he seemed unperturbed by that.

"As do I." He glanced around, lowered his fist, and whispered, "I must sincerely thank you for this...and the other matter too. I asked Her Majesty for an audience tomorrow before I go home. I would never be able to have this talk with her if it weren't for you and Prince Stale looking out for me."

Cedric barely reined himself in before he switched to formal speech. But I shook my head. *He* was the one who got us to this point.

I asked him if King Lance and King Yohan knew about this yet.

"Of course," he said. "I really surprised them with it at first, but they approved in the end. I think I might finally be of use to my country."

His smile was one of pure joy, without even a hint of hesitation. I returned the prince's thanks.

"I'll be cheering you on," I said. "I'm glad we got here because honestly, things were at a standstill. I never expected you to be the one to propose this."

"It's all thanks to the wise and talented Prince Stale. Not only is he smart, but he knows how to get to the bottom of any problem. I doubt anyone in the world would make a better seneschal than him."

He was *really* laying it on thick. I grinned, always prepared to hear my dear little brother praised. Cedric even agreed to repeat all that to Stale himself.

"That's right. I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier but...I'd like to wish Prince Stale a very happy birthday. I was so disappointed that my brothers couldn't attend, so allow me to convey our best wishes on behalf of the entire United Hanazuo Kingdom."

Cedric slid back toward formalities, like he was reading from a script.

I thanked him and gestured at Stale. "He's busy chatting with Commander Roderick right now. You'll greet him after Tiara, right? He *is* tonight's guest of honor, after all."



He swallowed hard. “S-so I shall!”

I only hoped he wouldn’t do anything to anger Stale again. In our letters, Cedric frequently asked for Stale’s opinions, but I’d been the one to write his responses. Stale still seemed to make Cedric nervous. I cheered him on, pushing him lightly on the back like he was a child being sent out on his first solo errand.

Stale’s grudge over the cookie incident probably made things difficult for Cedric, but he was still Tiara’s big brother. They had to start getting along—at least enough that Stale didn’t scare Cedric away from his beloved princess.

*Both for Cedric’s sake and for what comes next.*

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“I must apologize, Prince Stale,” Commander Roderick said to me. “Callum has made quite a fuss at what’s supposed to be your birthday party.”

The commander bowed deeply. I smiled and told him it was all right. I didn’t care about the captain stealing everyone’s attention, but there was one problem...

“I’m sure Callum will tell you himself, but extenuating circumstances surrounding his family mean he’ll be attending parties in their place for a while,” the commander added.

I nodded and shot a glance at Arthur. He flinched when he caught my eye, but managed to contain himself after that. When it came to this, Arthur and I disagreed, so I would need to get information out of the commander if I wanted to dig into this.

“I saw the paperwork while helping Uncle Vest,” I said. “It said Captain Callum is taking special leave?”

“Yes. He was originally scheduled to attend the party as a knight, so Her Majesty granted him special leave from that duty.”

That was perfectly logical, but still... *Captain Callum? I never imagined he would turn out to be one of Pride’s marriage candidates.*



I knew he was from the Bordeaux family, but I'd completely failed to consider him. He and Captain Alan once faced investigation and repercussions when Pride suffered an injury under their watch. Was this his atonement? If Pride was considering marrying him, it meant she carried no grudge over the incident and was grateful for his service. Or was it possible that somewhere along the way, she'd fallen in love with him? *No, that's impossible, as far as I know. Even if love and romance fall outside my areas of expertise.*

Pride didn't play favorites, and I'd never sensed her developing feelings toward any one man. Prince Leon had been my only suspect in that arena. To put it bluntly, Pride parried all other men's advances with practiced ease.

Perhaps Pride already had a husband in mind and had filled the remaining slots with suitable men. Did she have her heart set on one of the other two candidates? In my mind, Captain Callum was flawless in both personality and capabilities. He'd put his life on the line to protect her. I had little doubt he would make a fine prince consort and keep Pride safe. *He'd be better than Prince Cedric, at least...*

"Is something wrong, Your Highness?"

The vice commander's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I replied that I was fine, if a bit tired from greeting so many guests. Arthur scowled at me; I could never hide anything from that guy. He didn't want to voice his complaints in a public setting, so I had to ignore him and go back to my conversation for now.

*Ugh, why did Prince Cedric's name have to pop into my head? I know he has feelings for Pride, but how does Pride feel about him?! She gets along with him better than anyone else who could be a candidate, but still!*

With Captain Callum confirmed as a candidate, Pride could have filled the other slot with someone else she was close to. Anyone on her list had to be one of her close confidants, whether he was a filler candidate or Pride's true love.

It was no use. My mind was sliding away from the conversation again. It



wasn't as if Captain Callum had any faults I could name. I was just so envious!

*I'm jealous that Pride trusts him so much!*

Regardless of why Pride had selected him, his being on the list at all meant she could envision marrying him. *How can one man be so lucky?!* I never thought I'd have to battle such childish emotions at the age of seventeen. If only I could have seen Uncle Vest's list and confirmed whether his invitation went to the Bordeaux family—not that I could risk searching for it again. He'd definitely ban me from entering his room if he caught me a second time.

*"The firstborn prince and future seneschal shouldn't act like a common bandit. You're seventeen years old. It's not like you're a child anymore."*

*"You're seventeen now, Stale. You need to start acting like an adult."*

It was like he'd predicted this outcome from the start. Actually, knowing Uncle Vest, that wouldn't surprise me one bit.

Captain Alan called out to me while I mused. I asked what the matter was, but it was Vice Commander Clark who said, "We should probably be on our way now..."

*Shoot.* Before I realized it, I'd let the conversation die. He was looking out for me, trying to smooth over the awkwardness. To be honest, I wasn't really in the mood to talk to anyone anymore.

My eyes drifted toward Arthur. When he caught my gaze, he turned and addressed the other knights. "Sorry, but I'd like to speak with Prince Stale a little longer."

*Another thing worth scolding me for.* Here I was seeking Arthur's help once again. I smiled and told him I didn't mind talking more. Boy, was that an understatement. I had all but begged him to stay.

The knights nodded and left the two of us alone. We traded our empty wine glasses for fresh ones before Arthur faced me. Party guests here to wish me a happy birthday milled about, eager for their opportunity to speak with me. They



would have to wait a little longer.

At long last, Arthur spoke. “Well? Didn’t I tell you? Captain Callum is here due to the stuff with his family.”

“But you share my opinion, don’t you, *Sir Arthur*?”

“I guess so... Unlike you, *Prince Stale*, I’m nothing but a simpleton who can’t comprehend anything too complicated.”

“My, Sir Arthur, you suddenly have such a way with words.”

“That’s all thanks to you.”

Arthur was actually keeping his cool, and that pissed me off. I was itching to tell him he’d gotten better at sarcasm, but he’d probably credit that to me too. I resisted the urge to teleport him straight into a wall.

“So, what do *you* think?”

When he failed to respond, I realized Arthur must have been struggling with as many turbulent emotions as I was. I drank to keep myself from prodding further.

That was when I happened to catch a glimpse of Prince Cedric. He was discussing something with Tiara, but I couldn’t see her face from where I stood. The prince hadn’t interacted with Tiara much since the defensive war even though Elder Sister and I maintained frequent contact with him. Anytime I mentioned his name, Tiara would blurt out, “I hate him! I don’t want to hear another word about him!” It was unusual for her to have such strong negative feelings toward a person, although it made more sense when you accounted for how he’d mistreated our sister. It wasn’t as if I’d forgiven Gilbert for his past misdeeds either.

I suddenly feared that my influence was to blame for Tiara’s newfound capacity for hatred. I’d always wished for her to grow up into a righteous person like Pride, but now...

It wasn’t just Pride. Tiara had also settled on three marriage candidates. She



was busy planning some sort of event for her next birthday, but to me, it seemed like she was looking for ways to distract herself. She wanted something she could focus all her attention on. Pride had been the same way on her sixteenth birthday, completely occupied with thoughts of instituting her school system in Freesia.

A crown princess like Pride would generally consider nobles or non-inheriting royals as marriage candidates. Tiara, however, had to marry into a royal or noble family from another country so as not to disrupt the Freesian line of succession. Becoming a nobleman's wife would be a downgrade in status. As one of only two Freesian princesses, she would hopefully marry another member of royalty—a safeguard to stop her from threatening Pride's claim to the throne.

Pride and Tiara were close in age, but once Tiara married into another royal family, she would be removed from the Freesian line of succession, even if Pride were to be assassinated during her reign. Anything less would offer Freesia up to another country's control. In the unthinkable event of Pride's death, Mother would become queen again if she was still alive. Any daughter of Pride's would also be in line to take the throne. The most important requirement was that the queen be someone who developed the special power of precognition.

Princesses in Freesia were more likely to marry into foreign royal families the closer they were in age to the crown princess. Tiara would never threaten Pride's life, but plenty of people would gladly drag her into a scandal for their own purposes. Sending Tiara away to marry a foreign prince would keep her *and* Pride safe from such machinations. Although I'd be lying if I said I wasn't going to miss her.

Like Pride, I had grown up with Tiara. Her kindness was a shining light in my life, and her influence was why I now felt capable of supporting Pride. She was nothing if not my cherished sister.

My life was going to be completely different in two years' time. Pride's fiancé would be finalized. Tiara would marry and move away. Maybe I was biased as



her older brother, but I really hoped Tiara would be betrothed to a kind person in a nearby country. Prince Leon from our neighboring kingdom of Anemone would make a fine husband, but that wasn't likely after his failed engagement to Pride. Outsiders would suspect bad blood between them, even if Tiara and Prince Leon were perfectly happy together. Not a favorable outcome.

If Prince Leon had remained a *candidate* and had never been Pride's actual fiancé, Tiara and the prince might've been able to marry without trouble. If they'd kept it private, Pride wouldn't have to worry about others' opinions when she picked a new fiancé.

"Marriage candidates..."

My thoughts wandered down that same well-worn path once more. *No, I already processed my emotions about Captain Callum. But I lose my mind whenever I see him standing next to Pride as a Bordeaux and not a knight!*

*"If your attachment to Pride and Tiara weren't so strong, you wouldn't even need to hunt down the list. We could have told you their marriage candidates from the very beginning..."*

*There's Uncle Vest's nagging again!* I clutched my head, and Arthur asked if we should step outside. There was no time for that; I needed to get my thoughts in order and speak with my guests. I refused to besmirch Uncle Vest's good name after he'd worked so hard to ensure I had a nice party!

No, it was futile. Pride was everything to me. Tiara was my precious little sister. How could I *not* care about this? Uncle Vest, as close as he was to Mother and Father, should have understood how I felt. Besides, if I didn't care for them, I wouldn't have needed to search for the list behind Uncle Vest's back!

Arthur saw me squeezing my wine glass hard enough to shatter it and whisked it away. I stared down at my empty hand until I sensed eyes on me. Prince Cedric, who'd been speaking with Tiara, was staring at us.

Maybe he had wrapped up his conversation with Tiara and was waiting for an opportunity to speak to me. I nodded at him, powerless to resist once we'd



made eye contact. I could continue to speak to Arthur and avoid him like the rest of the guests...but there was something I had to ask him.

I invited Prince Cedric to join us, and Arthur returned with a fresh glass of wine for me. His eyebrows rose at the sight of Prince Cedric, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Prince Cedric said hello and wished me a happy birthday. Then we fell into a perfectly normal conversation. Arthur stepped away after making his own greetings. I could have stopped him, but I didn't want the guests resenting Arthur for taking up even more of my time. Prince Cedric said he hoped to speak to Arthur before he left.

Now that it was just the two of us, the topic shifted to his letters with Pride.

"That would be thanks to your wisdom and talent, Prince Stale," Prince Cedric was saying. "Not only are you smart, but you also know how to get to the bottom of anything. I doubt anyone in the world would make a better seneschal than you."

Even I could tell that his enthusiastic praise was genuine. I thanked him. "I don't know anything about Elder Sister's marriage candidates, but I intend to serve her future husband to the best of my abilities."

"How wonderful. I'm sure he'll feel secure knowing he can rely on you."

Was he covertly referring to himself? I couldn't look at him with anything but suspicion while my brain was still boiling.

"Are your brothers faring well, Prince Cedric? I don't mean to be rude, but might I ask if they have any plans to marry?"

"No, they said they won't be marrying until the country is open and everything is running smoothly."

"I see. Do you hope they'll find their partners sooner rather than later?"

Prince Cedric's eyes widened at my bold question. He set a hand on his chin in thought. "Well, as embarrassing as it is, I'm very dependent on my brothers...



not that this will come as news to you.”

I could see his love for King Lance and King Yohan in the shy smile on his lips.

“I can’t deny the possibility that I’ll feel lonely once they’re married. They were my entire world up until only a few months ago.”

*My entire world.* That phrase stirred a sense of kinship in me. Perhaps all younger brothers felt that way about their older siblings. I pretended not to realize that Pride was the change in his life that came “a few months ago.”

“That said, my only wish is for my brothers to be happy. Whether they get married tomorrow or ten years from now, it makes no difference to me. I’ll accept whatever future and whatever partners they choose.”

Prince Cedric, smiling softly as he thought of his brothers, projected the perfect image of a royal prince. I found the turmoil in my heart settling as we spoke, much as I hated to admit it.

Just as he would never stop caring for his brothers, I couldn’t possibly stop caring about my sisters. I needed to figure out how to act accordingly. That was part of why I decided to begin working with Uncle Vest two years ago. I was even studying under Gilbert to learn how to assist the prince consort. I would be all right, even if Captain Callum...or maybe even Prince Cedric was the one Pride brought into her life.

“That’s a wonderful way of looking at it,” I said.

Prince Cedric laughed and thanked me. He then noticed the guests waiting to speak to me and bowed. “I’ll let you go now. I appreciate you sharing so much of your time with me.”

I very nearly felt at peace, but he stopped to add one more thing.

“Prince Stale, I...”

What he said then shook me to my core.

*What?! Hang on a minute!*



He strode away, ignorant to the fact that he'd left me speechless.

*Wait, wait! You've got to be kidding me! What does this mean? Wasn't he supposed to be Pride's future fiancé?!*

All the questions I couldn't voice in public clogged my throat. Even as I flailed, guests flooded in to greet me. I couldn't ignore them any longer. I produced the responses expected of me, but all the while my head rang with Prince Cedric's words.

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"Good evening, Sir Callum. Or should I call you Lord Callum tonight?"

About halfway through the party, I finally called out to the knight captain. I'd intended to wait my turn, but the other guests made way as soon as they noticed me.

"Prince Leon!"

Callum's eyes flew wide when he spotted me. His flushed face and damp brow spoke to his exhaustion, so I handed him a glass of wine with a smile—a gesture that made him flinch. Yes, he certainly was exhausted. I'd never seen him so worn down throughout our many encounters in Anemone and Freesia. This night was akin to a high-society debut for him. I couldn't help but sympathize, yet Callum said he was fine, even as his fingers trembled around the stem of his glass.

"Have you already chatted with everyone? Aside from Princess Pride, of course," I said.

I had yet to see Callum greet any other members of the royal family. The nervous knight downed more of his wine, caught his breath, and told me he still needed to visit Prince Stale, Princess Tiara, and Prime Minister Gilbert. Guests had clustered around him all night long, and since he wasn't royalty, he couldn't ignore them. I was impressed he'd already managed to meet with the queen, the prince consort, and Pride.



“I’m sorry to cause such a fuss,” Callum said.

“No apology necessary.” I smiled and added in hushed tones, “More importantly, I want to congratulate you on being selected as a marriage candidate. It’s a weight off my mind to know you’re in the running.”

“O-oh, no! I’m just attending the party as my father’s proxy!”

I couldn’t suppress my amusement as Callum struggled to stick to the story.

“You don’t have to hide anything,” I whispered into one of his reddened ears. “I’m on your side. I’m sure it’s no fun to tell everyone your family is having issues.”

While I’d never been in his shoes, I understood that nobles put a lot of work into maintaining their family’s reputation and outward appearance. The Callum I’d come to know would never show off his newfound status as Pride’s marriage candidate. This decision had to have come from the head of his family.

Callum, still red in the face, sucked in a breath and bowed deeply. I gave him a good-natured pat. His silent expression of gratitude spoke volumes; he was still the same imperial knight I’d come to know.

As he rose, I glanced around and noted the many eyes trained on the two of us—mainly on Callum.

“You don’t want to join the other knights?” I asked.

“There are a lot of people I’d like to speak to, but I’ll only be a burden to the knights if I spend the party in their company. I already declined to join them.”

I was always impressed by his consideration for others. The knights had amassed a small crowd themselves, likely hungry to know more about Callum’s status. He couldn’t risk becoming the center of attention at a birthday party meant for Prince Stale.

“I see.”

At that moment, I spotted Arthur making his way through the sea of guests to join the other knights. He wasn’t particularly fond of social engagements, so he



must have wanted to take some of the pressure off his comrades. I gently rested my hand on Callum's shoulder.

"What say we have you finish making the rounds?"

"What?!" he cried, bewildered. The wine in his glass rippled, almost spilling over at one point.

His responses tickled me so. "It will be all right," I insisted, then led him toward Prince Stale. The prince noticed us coming and called out to us.

Callum gave the prince the same explanation about being his father's proxy.

"That must be difficult for you," Stale remarked with a smile.

We finished our pleasantries and headed toward Tiara next.

I was essentially dragging Callum through all this, not giving him a single moment to sort out his thoughts. I understood why he was so confused. It wasn't as if the two of us had interacted many times in the past.

Tiara was also surprised to see the two of us together. The crowd of guests around her parted just as they had for Stale so we could approach. Callum shifted in discomfort when granted audiences with the royal family so effortlessly.

"You're with me," I said. "There's nothing to worry about."

The tension in his face relented once he understood.

I kept my eyes on Tiara as I wrapped one arm around Callum's shoulders and escorted him forward. We reached Tiara with ease, thanks to the compliant crowd. She seemed gloomier than usual; perhaps she was exhausted from speaking to so many men. Once we reached her, she brightened up and greeted us with a sunny smile.

"You look lovely in your formalwear, Captain Callum!" she said in near-singsong. After that, she told us to enjoy the party. Then we were off to our next appointment.



Prime Minister Gilbert spotted me before I could discover him in the crowd. He was as shrewd as ever.

“Why, if it isn’t Prince Leon,” he said, acting like this was mere happenstance. I returned his greeting, and Callum followed suit. The captain then explained his situation once more.

“Oh dear. Please give my best wishes to Lord Bordeaux. He’s a lucky man to be blessed with two outstanding sons, one an accomplished imperial knight. I’m sure he’s very proud.”

“You speak too highly of me,” Callum said. “Thank you for your continued support of my father and brother.”

“Certainly. You’re the knight who’s going to protect my dear Princess Pride, regardless of the validity of any rumors circulating through this room tonight. Entrust *that* matter to me, won’t you?”

The prime minister’s words dripped with implications, but he smiled at Callum. His slender eyes shimmered mysteriously, his deep yet quiet voice rolling over us. The prime minister’s aura chilled me to the bone, but it was directed at the other guests rather than myself and Callum. Callum was Pride’s imperial knight, and the prime minister wanted to shield him from unwanted attention as much as possible. The whole thing served as a stark reminder of this man’s hidden depths, depths I’d first learned about during the defensive war.

With him out of the way, we’d finished all the necessary greetings, so Callum and I set off on a little walk again. I changed the subject when he tried to object.

“Sir Callum, do you happen to read books? The two of us have never had many opportunities to converse.”

Callum asked me to repeat myself, then said that yes, he did read. We strolled across the ballroom until we reached a maid carrying a tray of wine glasses. I picked one up and admired the rich color.



“I’ve been a big reader since I was a child,” I said. “However, I really only read things in the palace library and academic books. What about you?”

“Most of the books I read are about knights, though I sometimes read novels as well. One particular author I like is...”

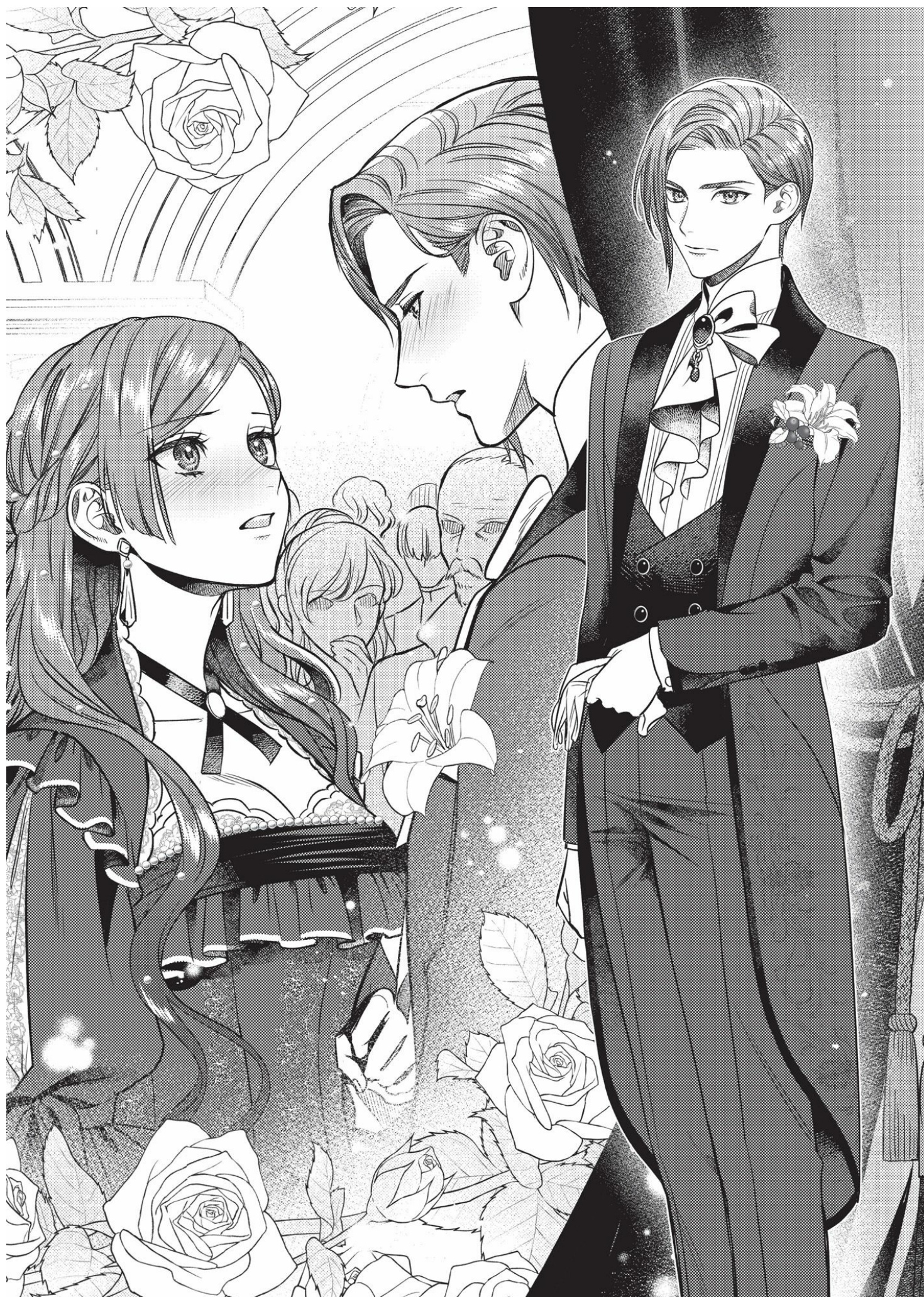
I’d expect nothing less of Lord Bordeaux’s son. He was well read and devoted to the study of his profession. The mention of novels piqued my interest.

“I’ll have to give that a read if it’s as interesting as you claim,” I said once he’d told me more. “We don’t import many books yet, but I’m sure we’ll see demand for them rise.”

“I wish you luck,” Callum replied. “Novels *are* a form of entertainment that can be enjoyed by people of all classes.”

*Entertainment.* That word stoked my interest even more. Nothing would please me more than to introduce a new pastime to the Anemonian people. I might even be able to discuss books with the townspeople who lived outside my castle. *What fun that would be!*







I led Callum elsewhere in the hall as we continued our chat. When he realized my intentions, he hesitated.

“Prince Leon, why?”

Keeping a firm grip on his shoulder, I forced him onward...to the corner where the knights were gathered.

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Commander Roderick was the first to notice our arrival, likely owing to his height. “Greetings, Prince Leon...and Callum.”

When he called out to us, nearby guests stepped aside to let us pass.

My attendance at this party as the Bordeaux family representative had drawn the attention and suspicion of the guests the moment I set foot in the castle. The other knights must’ve had a barrage of questions to deal with all evening.

Prince Leon, my current companion, would someday rule Anemone—a major trading hub rivaled by few countries in the world. None of the people surrounding the knights could match his fame or his status. They weren’t courageous enough to question Princess Pride or even me directly about our situation. Surprised to see me and Prince Leon together, they fell away to clear a path for us.

“Good evening, Sir Roderick,” Prince Leon said, flashing a smile. “Sir Callum and I were just conversing among ourselves. Might I join the rest of you here?”

Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark looked more ambushed than charmed by Prince Leon’s smile.

“Of course,” the commander said.

He made space for Leon, who thanked him and strode forward with me in tow, not hesitating for a second to insert himself into the gathering of knights. I could see the other guys struggling to act natural with a prince suddenly among them.



“Pride has told me of her imperial knights’ flawless service, and I’m sure that’s all thanks to your excellent training, Sir Roderick,” Prince Leon said.

“You’re far too kind. Anemone’s participation in our yearly joint exercises has been a great help to our rookie knights. I look forward to overseeing this year’s exercises again.”

“I’ve been told the Anemonian knights have been putting up a better fight these days,” Vice Commander Clark chimed in. “I’m sure there’s plenty more we can learn from you.”

“You’re too kind.” Prince Leon then turned his jade-green eyes on the other knights.

“Look at you, Callum!” Alan said. “Our Bordeaux boy is the star of the show tonight.”

“Are you mocking me?” I shot back.

Eric took that moment to interject. “Can I get you new glasses of wine, captains? I’m sure you’re parched after all the conversations...”

“Wait, let me do it!” Arthur said.

I apologized to him for the trouble, but already my tension melted away, my shoulders relaxing away from my ears. Being among my comrades made me feel like a whole new man. This was the only place in the ballroom where I could be at ease. It was like taking a breath after holding it all night long. The last time I was this nervous was during my induction ceremony into the main forces.

Perhaps noticing this change in me, Prince Leon smiled and raised his hand. He was looking past Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark—straight at Arthur.

He waved elegantly at Arthur, who was already on his way back with fresh wine glasses in hand. Once again, the other guests noticed the gesture and made way. They didn’t dare prevent the crown prince of Anemone from having



access to the knight.

“Do you need something from me?” Arthur asked.

Prince Leon donned that dashing smile of his. “I just wanted to try calling for you.”

Arthur tilted his head and handed off the wine to Alan and me.

“You’re a fine knight as well,” the prince said.

The group chatted for a while, then Vice Commander Clark asked if Prince Leon had finished speaking with the other guests.

“Yes, I’ve already said hello to the people I needed to speak to. I think it’s about time I take my leave.”

The party wound down around us, the chaos and commotion gradually quieting.

This seemed like the time to thank the prince for all his help. “Say, Prince Leon—”

“I hope the two of us can speak about books again some other time.”

“As do I...” I was too confused to come up with anything better.

“That’s good,” he said with a boyish smirk. Then he leaned close to my ear so only I could hear him. “I can’t stay with you forever, but as long as you’re with her ‘ex-fiancé,’ you’ll be all right. It should make things a little easier for you.”

My eyes boggled. Prince Leon’s smile had turned calculated and sharp.

*I knew it!*

The prince had spent the party as my shield against the rumor mill. He got me through my required greetings swiftly before delivering me to the safety of the other knights, all while steering me clear of gossipmongers. Many still tried to get my and the knights’ attention or corner Leon for a chat, but none of them dared say a word about the state of my potential engagement to Pride. It would be a deadly faux pas to bring up the subject in front of her ex-fiancé.



I chose my response with some delicacy. “Why are you going out of your way to look after me?”

Prince Leon was much younger than me, even if his status exceeded mine tremendously. He didn’t *need* to watch out for me at the party. In fact, the gossiping nobles would probably interpret this as Leon fishing for information about Pride’s next potential fiancé or even pressuring me somehow. But I knew the clever prince would have accounted for all that.

“Well,” Leon began, pretending he didn’t already have an answer, “I just wanted to talk to one of Pride’s amazing imperial knights. Besides, we only really discussed books, right? No one would have a problem with that if they overheard it.”

A devilish smirk played on his lips, so pleased was he about his little scheme.

“Pride’s knights mean the world to her. I can’t help wanting to protect them from those who mean them ill,” he added quietly.

He swept his gaze over each of the knights. I should have realized sooner that his true intent was to protect Princess Pride. Now that I was one of her marriage candidates, any smudge on my reputation was a smudge on hers too. Guilt took hold of me as I reflected on my own ineptitude and how I’d burdened the crown prince of Anemone. I hung my head, ready to apologize and express my gratitude.

“Besides...”

Prince Leon wasn’t done yet. I looked up to find Leon’s trademark charming smile back in place. He met my eyes, unflinching.

“I wanted to thank you for what happened two years ago.”

He brought a finger to his lips and lowered his voice to a whisper. In the face of that gesture and the enchanting light in the prince’s eyes, I suddenly understood why women blushed so much around him. An aura this powerful was overwhelming from so close, and I tensed up to brace against it.



*Two years ago.* That was when Pride and us knights had rescued Leon from his younger brothers' schemes.

"I appreciate that, Prince Leon, but we were only doing our job and following Princess Pride's orders. There's no need for it to weigh on your mind."

"That doesn't matter to me. I still had to make it up to you."

All the imperial knights felt we'd only done what was required of us, but Leon had smothered my admission. I quietly yet fruitlessly tried to convince Leon of this, but the tall prince looked down upon me—positioning himself as the person of higher station.

"If anything, this one time isn't enough," Leon said. "I'll be sure to repay you even more than this."

His dark-blue hair fell over his face for a moment, but I caught a glimpse of his jade-green eyes through the veil of his hair—and any doubts I had about his intentions evaporated.

"I should be going," Leon said, stepping away from the knights.

He bid the others farewell, raised his wine glass, and looked each man in the eyes one last time. When it was my turn, Prince Leon's eyes glinted.

"Please, allow me to keep 'discussing books' with you until I'm satisfied, Sir Callum. Until next time."

With those words and a final charming smile, Prince Leon exited, leaving me at a loss.

The kingdom of Anemone was Freesia's neighbor and ally. Prince Leon, Princess Pride's sworn friend, sat at the very top of the hierarchy. He would surely appear at any party I attended as the Bordeaux family representative. It seemed he was going to use the powerful weapons at his disposal to protect me and the knights from prying eyes at all of these events.

I wiped at my brow as I studied my feet. I'd always done my best to remain calm in sticky situations, but all this social maneuvering had me drained.



“What’s wrong?” Arthur asked.

“What were you and Prince Leon talking about?” Alan chimed in.

“You two really bonded over books, didn’t you?” Eric said.

I did my best to steer them away from topics relating to the prince.

A crown prince had spent the evening looking after mere knights. That thought alone was enough to overheat my exhausted brain. Words tumbled past my lips without thought or filter.

“A savior...”

I slumped over and let my head droop, my usual composure abandoning me. It was so unusual that even the commander and vice commander checked up on me.

I was one of four knights who happened to be in Anemone to protect the princess that day years ago. Yet in return, Prince Leon was going to spend many future parties and events guiding the knights safely through rocky social interactions. It was far too generous. I had no way to express the gratitude welling up inside me.

Leon Adonis Coronaria was the famous prince set to rule over Anemone someday, and he’d very nearly become the prince consort of Freesia. I mulled this over as I watched him stride gracefully away from the knights he’d saved this evening.

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“Good work this evening, Vest.”

Only a few minutes remained before the queen would make her final address to the party. I’d fulfilled my duties as seneschal for the time being and could step away from Rosa and Albert. The man who’d praised me held out a glass of wine for me, which I gratefully accepted.

“You’ve worked hard too, Gilbert.”



I raised the glass as I complimented the prime minister. Gilbert wasn't smiling, but he met my eyes. He'd been circling the party to speak with guests all night and looked even more exhausted than I felt, despite his flawless smile and effortless elegance.

"Lord Callum...*Sir* Callum surprised me. I certainly hope Lord Bordeaux can make a full recovery soon," said Gilbert.

I furrowed my brow and squeezed my eyes shut. Gilbert was a smart man. If the other guests could figure out what was going on with Callum, there was no way it had escaped him. He took my silence as answer enough.

"I have no right to ask you about the rumors," he said, holding up both hands to signal that he wouldn't press the matter further. "But Sir Callum is one of Princess Pride's cherished knights," he said. "I'd like to support him however I'm able."

A quiet sigh escaped my lips. "Just don't make any trouble for Albert."

Gilbert agreed right away. "I'd never want to get on your bad side."

"And I feel the same about you."

I kept my expression stern, but Gilbert smiled openly. He closed the distance between us, standing a hair's breadth away.

Leaning over a titch, he whispered, "Allow me to confirm some names that *aren't* candidates to marry Princess Pride or Princess Tiara."

The man barely moved his lips, speaking so softly that the words almost didn't register. Still, I surveyed the other guests in the ballroom with resignation. No one would be able to tell we were speaking, let alone guess the topic of our discussion.

With another sigh, I returned my attention to the prime minister. "Gilbert... Doesn't posing that question mean you've already figured it out?"

"Don't be alarmed. I would never share this information with a single soul, no matter what was done to me. Quite the opposite, in fact."



Gilbert made a show of bowing to me, his long hair spilling over his face.

“I’ve already consulted with His Royal Highness...and now I’d like to ask permission from you, Her Majesty’s right hand,” he said, his almond-shaped eyes fixed on me.

Unfortunately, I didn’t need to ask what he was talking about. Lord Bordeaux had gladly revealed his son’s status as a marriage candidate even though Callum, a knight, desired no such attention. That much was only natural. Callum wasn’t just a nobleman. He was a knight, and that profession exposed him to plenty of danger. He was someone who protected others as opposed to receiving protection himself.

I suppressed a groan. Callum was easier to target for things like assassination than other noblemen. He also spent his life surrounded by knights. Some of them might have titles, but their families fell below royals and other nobles in the hierarchy. Callum would definitely struggle to free himself from the nosy questions of the elites.

While the public story maintained that Callum was stepping in to take over for his family, I didn’t want him or any other candidate suddenly encountering obstacles in their lines of work. It would reflect poorly on this brand-new system of engagement candidacy.

More than anything else, we couldn’t allow Pride’s second engagement to fail like the first. It was the royal family’s duty to support Pride’s candidates, one among them bound to become future prince consort...even if that meant getting a little crafty.

Gilbert’s lips curled upward in understanding. His light-blue eyes glinted like the edge of a blade. “If you would like the information to take a *new course*, allow me to see it done.”

A chill ran down my spine. Gilbert’s smile spoke to his absolute confidence. I got the impression he’d done this sort of thing before. In the silence that followed Gilbert’s offer, I crossed my arms over my chest.



“Albert’s in charge of you. Not like I can personally object.”

“Thank you *very* much. I’ll inquire with His Royal Highness later.”

He bowed again. Sensing eyes on me, I turned to find Albert glaring at us from where he stood at Rosa’s side.

Gilbert’s smile soured ever so slightly. “Pardon, but I’ll be taking my leave.” He retreated before Albert could grab him by the scruff of his neck.

Rosa began her address, which marked the end of Stale’s birthday party. A weight lifted off my shoulders. Despite the schemes and desires warring throughout the ballroom, my nephew’s party had ended without incident. But at the same time...

*Clack, clack, clack.* My graceful, even steps echoed down the hall. Now that I’d reported to the queen and prince consort, I had to stop by my own office. The issue at hand filled me with a newfound resolve.

I closed the office door behind me, locked it, and scrutinized my surroundings. Nothing had changed since I’d left, so I approached one specific corner of the room.

*Next time, I definitely need to take better precautions—lest the Rajah Empire begin to suss out the candidates’ identities.*

This was, in part, why I’d granted Gilbert my implied approval. I’d then reported what Gilbert was planning and how much he’d already discovered to Rosa and Albert.

I reached toward the hiding place concealed within this room. Not even Stale and Gilbert knew of its existence, despite all the time they spent in my office.

*Rajah is sure to make a move if there’s any more commotion like there was at the party.*

With Rosa and Albert’s permission, I’d sent letters warning the families of the marriage candidates to keep said candidacy strictly confidential until the



princesses were officially engaged.

The reveal of even one had sent shock waves through the party guests. Noblemen and royals could hire guards to protect themselves, at least. Rosa, Albert, and I were convinced the candidates' families would see this occasion as an opportunity to boost their reputations—just as the Bordeaux family had. That made it all the more imperative to warn them against such reckless actions.

*Especially now.*

I picked up the hidden documents, which included the list of party invitees, and spread them out on my desk. The emperor and crown prince of Rajah were among the invitees. If they'd attended the party, we would have had to seriously consider Callum's safety. Now that Stale's birthday party had instigated rumors about Callum's status, the time had come to start making actual preparations.

*Rajah's crown prince was eyeing up a marriage with Pride or Tiara.*

The empire was not one of our allies, thus we'd made sure they couldn't attend Pride's birthday party. That had allowed the queen to declare all six marriage candidates were present—a covert way of excluding the Rajah Empire from the running.

*If they'd come, they would've targeted the candidates. Pride's in particular are rather unique.*

I retrieved one document in particular from the spread and set it on top. It was the list of candidates we'd originally presented to Pride and Tiara. Each list bore three stamps. I studied Pride's list, going over her candidates and their profiles once more. Rosa, Albert, and I had chosen these men together, and of them, Pride's selections were...

*Callum Bordeaux.*

Second-born son of an earl and countess. His older brother was set to inherit



the Bordeaux family title. Callum possessed the special power of superhuman strength and had joined the royal order at the youngest possible age of fourteen. It took him only two years to go from a rookie to a member of the main forces, where he graduated at the top of his class. Due to the unsatisfactory performance of the captain and vice captain of the Third Squadron at the time, Callum was promoted to captain at the age of twenty, the youngest captain ever recorded. He was extremely accomplished and recognized yearly as the most outstanding knight in the royal order.

Callum served as an imperial knight to Pride.

*Stale Royal Ivy.*

Firstborn prince of Freesia. His birth mother was a commoner, but the king and queen had adopted him at the age of seven, granting him two sisters—one older, one younger. Stale possessed the incredible special power of teleportation. He dedicated himself to his studies as the next seneschal and earned broad respect for his intelligence. He'd taken yet another leap forward recently and begun to contribute to the work of the prince consort.

Stale was the adoptive brother of and steward to Pride.

*Arthur Beresford.*

Captain of the Eighth Squadron of the Freesian royal order. He had no siblings, only his mother and father at home. His father was the commander of the royal order, but the commander had come from a commoner family. Arthur's special power was the ability to assist the growth of plants. He joined the royal order at the youngest possible age of fourteen and climbed out of the rookie ranks in a single year, graduating to the main forces at the top of his class. He became vice captain of the Eighth Squadron at the age of nineteen and was promoted to captain within a month, breaking Callum Bordeaux's record for youngest captain in the history of the order.

Arthur served as an imperial knight to Pride.

Despite being a commoner, Arthur had formed a close friendship with the



next seneschal, Stale, at the age of thirteen. The state of his education and sophistication had been a concern, but we'd added him to Pride's list of candidates under special circumstances, as he would have Stale as his steward to assist in his duties as prince consort.

Aside from Callum Bordeaux, the men's family or former family were commoners—and their relatives would make for easy targets if anyone learned of their candidacy. Past precedence allowed for leaking a future prince consort's name before the official announcement. This often meant that jealous higher-ranking nobles and foreign royals heaped pressure on the lower-ranking noble family thus revealed. Some men had even faced threats and failed attacks against their relatives.

Rosa and Albert had allowed Stale to shadow me in my work as seneschal, but I'd hidden his place on the list from him. I couldn't stop Pride if she decided to tell him herself, but it was more appropriate for me to wait until then—or until Pride had settled on someone else. If Stale knew, it would rattle him too much for him to keep up his fine work of learning the duties of the seneschal and the prince consort.

*Well, I'm sure he wouldn't be upset, at least.* That much was certain.

I returned the documents to their hiding place. I'd been the one to put Stale and Arthur's names on the proposed candidate list in the first place. Determined not to go down the same path we had with Prince Leon, I'd included people Pride could desire and who desired her—not just those with status or political benefits. Evidently, my choices had hit the mark.

*"Please allow me to confirm one thing. Are these marriage candidates..."*

I didn't know why Pride had asked Rosa that question when settling on the three names, but without Stale's unique situation being what it was, all of this would have been impossible.

I let out a quiet breath, then closed my eyes in a semblance of prayer.

Stale had smoothly absorbed the duties of both prince consort and seneschal,



which qualified him for the candidate list. Rosa and Albert hadn't been on board at first, but I'd managed to convince them. He was someone Pride would be happy to choose, and only I stood to lose if she picked him—yet I still advocated for him.

*Our country and its people take priority...as does a proper fiancé for Pride.*

My personal pain was irrelevant. As seneschal, I could not hesitate should Pride and my nephew choose each other. In fact, there could be no greater happiness as an uncle than to see my adoptive nephew choose to live alongside Pride as her prince consort.

"It's not an issue. I've got life in me yet."

I was no longer busy looking after my wife, daughter, and son. I could work as seneschal for the next ten years, at minimum, and that thought filled me with pride.

*That's why there's nothing to fear. The decision lies entirely with her. There's no need for her to take me into consideration.*

Fortunately, Gilbert would never age out of his job. Only I posed any sort of issue. I'd lived for this job, even cutting ties with my past. Now there was only one thing for me to do.

I was going to carry out the path laid before me until my body withered and crumbled.

"Uncles are always running around for their nephews."

I didn't smile often, but I did now as I took in my office. This place used to be mine alone, but now traces of Stale lingered in every corner. He'd spent nearly three years devoting himself to his studies, all to succeed me and become the Freesian seneschal.

Thus, I poured everything I could into Stale—all while knowing it would mean nothing if Pride settled on him in the end. All of my hard work would prove fruitless.



“He’s seventeen now. He can make his own decisions.”

As a budding adult, Stale faced a future I never would have thought possible. It was why I worried so much over the safety of the marriage candidates and their families. Their identities absolutely had to remain a secret.

“I’ve got to stay healthy as a horse and keep on with my work.”

If something happened to me, it could cost Stale and Pride certain options for the rest of their lives. Stale was the only one in line for my position. I could imagine no greater regret than growing too ill to work and forcing him to take over before he was ready.

I checked the locks on the doors and windows, then ensured everything was in its proper place. I extinguished the lights before opening the door, greeting the guard outside, and exiting my office.

*I don’t care who she chooses. It could be Callum Bordeaux, Arthur Beresford, or even Stale.*

Losing Stale would pain me, but that meant nothing so long as my nephew was happy. Soon enough, Pride would have to choose her husband. Everything hinged on that day...and what was sure to follow.

*Yes, it’s still much too soon for me to wither away.*

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“What’s wrong, Arthur?”

Princess Pride posed this question to me three days after Stale’s birthday party, following the afternoon shift change with Captain Alan and Captain Callum. I gasped as her voice snapped me out of my thoughts, then looked up to find both her and Tiara staring at me. Vice Captain Eric regarded me as well. *Oh crap. I’m on duty, but I can’t stop spacing out.*

I apologized, told her I was fine, and stood up straighter.

“Is something bothering you?” Princess Tiara asked, but I assured her it was nothing.



Even Vice Captain Eric had pressed me before we showed up for our shift, but it wasn't like I could tell him. I'd been ordered to stay silent.

Dad had gone home the day before because he had a little time off. But that morning, he'd told me I didn't need to come home for a while. He almost never spoke to me as my father around the training grounds, yet all of a sudden, this was the first thing he'd said to me in the morning. I'd asked if something was wrong with Mom, but he'd said she was fine. Dad knew about my special power, and he would've told me if she was sick. I was worried about him; he'd just come back from a break, but he still looked kind of worn out.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right...but be sure to tell me if you're feeling tired, okay?" Princess Pride said in response to me.

She turned back to her desk. I thanked her, which earned me a smile before she returned to her letter writing, yet another reply to Prince Cedric.

Princess Pride and Prince Cedric had started writing to each other about a month ago. Stale couldn't tell me much, but he said it was all formal and official, and they weren't just chatting about life or whatever. I doubted there was anyone else in the world who could exchange multiple letters a week with Princess Pride. It made me kind of jealous. Every time I watched her diligently writing her replies, it gave my heart a painful squeeze.

Two days ago, right after Stale's party, Prince Cedric had secured a private audience with Her Majesty. On top of that, he returned home later than all the other guests. I didn't know if he was just acting as the king's proxy, if it had to do with the letters...or if he was speaking to her as Princess Pride's marriage candidate.

A whole bunch of stuff had been going on lately, and I couldn't keep up with it anymore. First there was the war, then my promotion to captain of the Eighth Squadron. I fought Captain Harrison, Princess Pride and Dad and everyone threw me a party for my promotion, the queen announced the princesses' new marriage system, and now Captain Callum was one of Princess Pride's



candidates!

All of this happening in just a few months made my head spin. It didn't feel real. It would make more sense to find out Captain Harrison had knocked me out during our duel and this was all one long dream.

Captain Callum and Princess Pride made a nice couple when they stood together. I knew Stale shared my shock over Captain Callum's candidacy, but my emotions ran deeper than that, balling up until I didn't really know how I felt anymore. Captain Callum was basically a perfect candidate, but Princess Pride was probably in love with Prince Cedric. It was all just a big jumble in my brain at this point.

The other knights had figured out what was happening with Captain Callum, but none of them brought it up. He maintained that he was helping his family. Besides, this was Captain Callum we were talking about. The other knights regarded him with envy, not hatred. Captain Alan was the only one who felt comfortable teasing him about it.

After Stale's party, I was worried the castle would be abuzz with rumors about the captain, as the ballroom had been that night. Clearly Captain Callum wanted to keep it all a secret, but it was too late for that now.

He wasn't the only one people were spreading rumors about, though. As soon as I entered the castle the next day for my shift, everyone was theorizing about noblemen and foreign princes. They wove tales about everybody from Freesian dukes to nobles from Yaburan and even potential candidates from Lilac.

I only managed to overhear bits and pieces of it around the castle, but it sounded like speculation swirled around a *whole lot* of potential marriage candidates, not just Captain Callum. People were saying it was unusual to see the captain dressed like a proper nobleman, but that was as far as things went.

Prime Minister Gilbert had smiled creepily at all of this and said, "*My, Princess Pride is always the center of attention, isn't she?*"

As for the captain, he was relieved that everyone was talking about him less.



The more rumors I heard, the more it seemed like some other nobleman or prince was more likely to be on Princess Pride's list.

"Okay, I'm all finished!"

Princess Pride set her pen down and stretched at her desk, prompting Princess Tiara to look up from her book.

"Good job, Big Sister!"

Princess Pride swiftly sealed the envelope and smiled at her. "I'm really getting the hang of writing letters. It's just unfortunate that I won't have as much need for it soon."

I remembered how long she'd taken to finish each letter when she and Prince Cedric first started writing to each other, but these days, she was a lot more efficient.

Princess Pride looked so happy to have improved at another skill. "Maybe I'll be able to start replying to all the letters I receive," she said.

Stale put a quick stop to that, warning her she'd injure her hand if she had to write dozens of responses every single day.

Leaving the sealed envelope on her desk, she rose to her feet. "There's still some time before Val and the children arrive. How about we step outside and get some fresh air?"

"That sounds lovely!" Princess Tiara agreed, clutching her book as she sprang to her feet.

When Princess Pride passed Vice Captain Eric and me, she patted us both on the shoulder. "Let's go to the garden! I bet it will make you feel better."

For a second, she wore a mischievous smirk that threatened to stop my heart dead in my chest. I knew she was taking us out to the garden because she was worried about my health. I thanked her in a fluster, after which Tiara took our hands and dragged us along behind her. The vice captain gave me a reassuring pat. I felt a bit pathetic knowing I looked bad enough to have everyone fussing



over me.

“The flowers in the garden are lovely right now,” Princess Pride said. “Let’s go get a look so we can tell Khemet and Sefekh all about them!”

Her genuine joy lifted the weight right back off my heart. I couldn’t help smiling as I agreed.

“I’m excited for Big Brother to join us!” Tiara said as we stepped into the hall. She let go of our hands and linked arms with Princess Pride. Vice Captain Eric and I followed them, watching the pair as they strolled toward the gardens.

As always, Princess Pride’s smile filled me with relief. It rekindled my unwavering determination and served as a light guiding me in the right direction.

I was going to stay by her side. I would protect that smile of hers forever. As long as her face was lit up with joy, I needed nothing more to be happy.

Regardless of who she chose to share her life with.

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“It’s not a good time, Clark...”

My vice commander had dragged me to our usual tavern earlier this evening. Now I gripped the handle of my beer mug and protested, my tone noticeably grave. Usually I would down my drink in a single gulp, but I could hardly stomach it tonight.

“How unlike you, Roderick!”

Clark poured beer into his own mug and gave me a firm pat on the back. Beer sloshed out of my mug and onto the counter.

“You’ve been acting strange,” he went on. “I won’t push if you can’t tell me what’s wrong, but you can’t have the other knights getting suspicious now, can you? Just drink up for tonight.”

I had no choice but to obey when Clark slapped me again. I gulped the beer



down and slammed my empty mug on the counter. He wasted no time in refilling it.

“Talk to me, buddy. You’ve been out of sorts ever since you came back from your trip home. Did something happen with Clarissa?”

Clark drank his beer as he awaited my response. He and the knights always noticed when I was off. Even Arthur seemed troubled. I supposed that was why Clark had dragged me here—to question me.

My face fell when he mentioned my wife’s name, a gesture that unfortunately did not go unnoticed.

“Wait, for real?” Clark leaned closer, but I shook my head.

“No, Clarissa and the whole family are perfectly fine. The restaurant’s doing well too.” I emptied my mug again, this time refilling it myself.

“That’s...good,” he said cautiously.

I didn’t elaborate. I had a very good reason to keep any further details to myself.

“Did you two get in a fight?”

In response, I slammed my forehead down on the counter.

“Really?! You did?!” he asked, startled.

“It wasn’t a fight... She just scolded me...”

Clark chuckled at this explanation. This time, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Clarissa’s scary when she’s angry,” he said sympathetically. Then he pushed all sorts of booze on me, urging me to drink up. I guzzled down one after another out of sheer desperation.

“Did she find out you were hiding something from her again?”

“She sure did,” I answered bitterly.

Clark watched while I hung my head and gnawed on a piece of jerky. As I continued drinking, I yearned to open up to my friend. My frustration escaped



in a sigh. It had been a long time since I'd resorted to angry drinking after an incident like this.

*I'm not actually lying, though.*

Clarissa had cornered me the moment I arrived home. At first, I was simply surprised, but then I noticed what she was clutching and my heart stopped. She was all but crushing an envelope bearing the crest of the royal family.

My wife frequently opened my mail while I was away. She would visit me at the training grounds if she received any urgent messages or news of a death. This time, that system backfired. A castle guard had arrived with the letter two days prior. This wasn't unusual in itself—I *was* the commander of the royal order. But this letter was addressed to the Beresford family, not me specifically. Clarissa opened the letter without a second thought. She nearly dropped to her knees when she saw what was inside.

Our son, Arthur, had been selected as one of the crown princess's marriage candidates. The letter emphasized that this information had to remain under the strictest secrecy.

With the cat out of the bag, I had to come clean about everything I knew. I'd been summoned by the queen to discuss Callum's leave a few days after Princess Pride's birthday party and received confirmation that the knight was a candidate to marry the princess. But that wasn't all. Though I could hardly believe it, the queen and seneschal revealed that Princess Pride had selected my own son as well.

It was already unprecedented to have two knights under my command be selected as potential husbands for the crown princess, but one of them was my very own son. That meeting in the throne room left me staggering back to the training grounds on unsteady legs. I racked my brain to figure out how things had ever come to this point, but I never arrived at an answer.

After Clarissa heard all this, she looked just as uncertain as I felt. All I could tell



her was that this was the princess's will. I'd accrued substantial status and accolades during my time as commander, but my wife and I were both born commoners. Arthur himself never received the education expected of even a lower-ranking noble, much less the future prince consort. Yet the next Freesian queen had still chosen him as a potential partner.

The queen and seneschal had explained the history of the marriage candidate system to me that day. The prince consort revealed that they wanted a new system that would support Princess Pride regardless of what kind of person she chose. Being a candidate didn't guarantee Arthur would be her husband, but that didn't diminish the honor of her selecting him. I frankly struggled to understand how my family, with nothing but commoner blood in our veins, received an honor that had yet to be bestowed upon royalty or noble elites. As much joy and shock as I felt in that moment, confusion overrode them both.

Once I'd caught Clarissa up to speed, she simply asked if Arthur knew yet. I shook my head. I couldn't tell him, not while I had yet to process the information myself. If I shared any of this with Arthur, a knight who had to see Princess Pride every single day, he wouldn't be able to contain his emotions. There was also the issue of Callum—a knight Arthur deeply respected, and now a fellow marriage candidate. It would send my boy into an utter panic.

Still, Princess Pride's intentions remained a total mystery to me and my wife. Perhaps she already had a fiancé in mind, but that didn't explain why she would put Arthur on her list. Callum was the son of an earl. The Beresfords held no title that would qualify our family for such an honor.

"Are you sure there's nothing more going on between Arthur and Princess Pride?" Clarissa asked hesitantly after a long silence.

I understood the implication, but I also knew for certain that there wasn't. While Arthur and the princess's relationship wasn't strictly professional, it wasn't what Clarissa insinuated either. Arthur had also formed a strong friendship with Prince Stale in the seven years he was acquainted with Princess Pride.



My wife knew of Arthur's deep respect for Princess Pride as royalty, just not where those feelings originated. But if I tried to explain, I would have no choice but to explain the incident at the cliffs seven years ago as well.

Clarissa ended up closing her restaurant for the day so she and I could talk. She agreed when I asked her not to tell anyone—not even Arthur—and to avoid attracting suspicion. I kept the letter on my person at all times, leaving no evidence behind at home.

By the time I needed to return to the training grounds, it seemed like Clarissa had processed the whole situation a little better.

"I thought Arthur was like you and that this sort of thing wasn't on his mind..." she murmured.

Her face was flushed, and I worried she'd given herself a fever from overthinking. She assured me she was all right and encouraged me to return to work.

We concluded that we'd ask Arthur not to come home for a while. Clarissa needed a few days to pull herself together. Seeing Clarissa, of all people, so profoundly rattled only further proved the gravity of the situation.

*I haven't seen her that troubled in years.*

I sighed, staring at my own hand while Clark refilled my mug. Nearly all the other bottles he'd plied me with were empty.

"You really made her mad, didn't you, Roderick? Did you apologize?"

"I did...but this isn't the kind of thing that just goes away."

At least I hadn't scared her and made her cry like before. Yet when I remembered her red cheeks, feverish from churning over this information again and again, guilt about keeping this secret from her clawed its way into my gut. I'd only been trying not to burden her with something so overwhelming.

One couldn't simply refuse a marriage request from the royal family—



especially given our commoner status. If Arthur found out about this and Princess Pride actually chose him, I had no idea how he might react. Would he be overjoyed? Would he protest out of humility? Or would he react in some other way I couldn't even anticipate? All I knew for sure was that the news would take Arthur right off his feet. He cared very deeply for the princess, but such feelings didn't typically lead to engagements or marriages, and I had no talent for picking up on any emotions subtler than that.

*Clark's much better suited for this kind of thing than I am.*

He would no doubt have a slew of helpful opinions on the matter, but even though he was like family to us, we weren't related by blood. I couldn't break my vow of secrecy for Clark. Though I'd planned to keep even my own wife out of the loop, it was a relief to have *someone* to share these worries with.

*And how would Arthur feel?*

That thought alone left me so woozy that all the alcohol seemed to hit me at once. I set my head down on the counter to survive a wave of drunken dizziness.

Clark chuckled. "Finally got to you, huh?"

He knew better than anyone that when I was troubled or upset, I would drink hard. I sensed him watching me, even as I lay there with my eyes shut. Clark was the only person in the world I could get this drunk in front of, and he'd learned over the years how to handle me in such a state.

I heard him sip from his own mug. Then he patted me on the back. "We've both gotten older, haven't we?" he said, voice light with mirth. "We used to be able to drink a little more than this."

I couldn't count how many times he'd dragged me—red-faced and plastered—back to the training grounds. He didn't disturb me where I lay on the counter; instead, he draped my uniform jacket over me like a blanket. Maybe he'd finally realized I *was* exhausted as I looked.



*He better not be thinking about ordering more...*

As I dozed off, I completely missed the sound of an envelope falling to the floor.

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I paused in the middle of deciding what to drink next, staring at the paper on the tavern floor. It had spilled out of an envelope the second it hit the ground. I couldn't see the sender's name, but the expensive stationery must have come from someone of considerable status. Yet it had fallen out of Roderick's pocket. I scooped up the envelope, careful not to look at the name on the front.

I checked if anything else had fallen out before picking up the folded paper. As I creased it and brushed the dust away...

"What?"

The question slipped out before I could contain it. I cursed my own eyesight the moment the words on the page registered. I hadn't unfolded the letter, but I could see the words through the other side of the stationery.

*Marriage candidate. Arthur.*

I shut my eyes as if I could unsee the words. Still avoiding the sender's name, I slipped the letter into its envelope and stuffed the whole thing back into Roderick's pocket.

"Oh, Buddy..."

I set a hand on my sleeping friend's back. Now it made sense why Roderick had been so exhausted, starting from the queen's meeting about Callum's special leave and continuing all the way up to today. *So that's what's going on.*

I doubted Arthur knew about this yet, and based on what Roderick told me, he'd only just broken the news to Clarissa.

"I'm not supposed to know either."

Unfortunately, I had no advice to offer my troubled friend on the matter.



After all, I was never supposed to know. I patted the commander on the back and took a closer look at his face. His son was in the running to become the prince consort, and Arthur might potentially marry the woman who'd saved Roderick's life. And the worst part was...

"This really isn't your strong suit, is it?"

I held my head in my hands. Roderick must have had a hell of a time grappling with something as unexpected as this.

"That's our Princess Pride for you," I murmured, resisting the urge to laugh.

Though I wished I could congratulate him on his son's candidacy, I didn't dare—not with my dear friend already struggling to process the situation. Instead, I filled my mug yet again.

"Arthur, Callum, and one more person. Well, assuming it all goes as planned..."

A young man's face flashed in my mind, halting my train of thought. As a knight, I shouldn't have been pursuing such a subject even in my head.

I polished off the rest of my drink and set it down with finality. "Come on, Roderick. Let's get you home."

I lent him on my shoulder as I helped him stagger out of the tavern. Roderick had taken Arthur to this very tavern a few months ago, and I had an idea of what they'd discussed and the futures they planned to carve out for themselves. That must have complicated Roderick's feelings even further.

"We're really getting up there, aren't we?"

*We're old enough that your son's engagement is the biggest problem in our lives.*

I lent him on my shoulder as I helped him stagger out of the tavern. Roderick had taken Arthur to this very tavern a few months ago, and I had an idea of what they'd discussed and the futures they planned to carve out for themselves. That must have complicated Roderick's feelings even further.

"Whichever way this goes, it'll be a good thing," I said under my breath. "And



a bit sad as well.”

I smiled at my friend, who was still able to walk despite drinking himself into oblivion. Looking skyward, I sighed as we trudged toward the training grounds.

“Well, don’t you worry.”

My voice came out a little louder this time. I directed my words at the sky, even with Roderick leaning against my shoulder. He probably couldn’t hear me—in fact, I made sure he couldn’t.

“When the time comes, I’ll cry with you.”

*Regardless of which outcome we’re crying about.*

Gazing at the full moon as I walked alongside my drunk friend, I made a vow that no one else would ever hear.

An uncertain future stretched before us, and it sent a pang through my heart.

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“May I be permitted to ask something?” I said, bending my knee in the queen’s presence.

“What’s this about, Yohan?” she asked, her eyes glued to the gemstone I’d just presented her. The jewel came from my home country—no, my home “province” now.

“Why do you insist on having me present offerings to you personally?”

This detestable queen had conquered Chinensis and claimed it as her territory seven months ago, after she and Cedric lured Lance and me into their trap. She had stolen our countries and our culture during her rule. Few of my people prayed to God anymore, and those who did faced imprisonment if not enslavement for doing so.

At first, we’d paid the queen by giving her criminals whom she could enslave, but Chinensis was a small, closed-off country with few criminals to offer. The queen took anyone already incarcerated, then moved on to past offenders



who'd committed graver crimes. Her next target was anyone who'd committed any crime at all. Little by little, she enslaved my people for increasingly arbitrary offenses, all to fill her quota.

*Transgression.* That was how our rulers described those who practiced our country's faith. Chinensis had to adapt to the Rajah Empire's non-religious culture once they swallowed us up into their territory. Anyone caught in the act of prayer was arrested as one of these "transgressors." We couldn't fight back. We were people of Rajah now.

What was so wrong about praying to God? Many Chinensian people couldn't comprehend why such a thing was criminal. But every last one of them, young and old, were shipped off as slaves if they were caught praying. That is, everyone excluding me.

"What, do you have something better to do, my former king?"

*Former.* That word was a dagger to my heart. I was no longer a king, just someone meant to unify an occupied territory. The queen regularly instructed me to deliver jewels to her, which gave me an opportunity to read her mood. The only time I left the province was when she forced me to make the ten-day trip in each direction.

The queen twirled the gem—an exquisite stone mined through the hard work of the Chinensian people—between her fingers like a mere pebble, watching as it caught the sunlight. I could not respond, so she continued in my place.

"I went out of my way to keep you alive. What's the point if I don't get to see your face?"

The queen snickered, a truly beastly sound. She regarded me for the first time, her lips pulling up as though the corners were connected to strings. Now that she was bored of the gem, she tossed it to her seneschal and cupped her head in her hands. A wicked glint flashed in her purple eyes, and I swallowed to keep my bile down.

For some reason, she chose not to kill me. I was the former king and a symbol



of my country's religion. She could have beheaded me in front of my people to declare the end of Chinensis. Yet I lived. The queen had persuaded Rajah to install me as the agent of unification, even ordering me—and me alone—to keep wearing my cross pendant. I displayed the symbol of God even as the queen cast my people into slavery for praying to Him.

This was my punishment. I, the leader of a puny country like Chinensis, had dared to raise my sword to the superpower of Freesia.

“Ah! Lift your head and let me get a better look at you,” the queen said. “How does it feel having to kneel to someone you utterly despise? Heh heh... Ha ha ha!”

The queen cackled down at me from her throne. I pushed my rage and hatred deep down, biting my cheek until I tasted blood. My heart burned inside my chest, the scorching fires turning it dark as ash.

“You ought to be grateful. You would have spent your whole life without seeing a castle as beautiful as mine.”

I felt no envy toward the queen's stronghold. It was built on the blood and anguish of her people, making it a disgusting, inhuman display of greed. But the queen proudly raised her hands to the walls as if it were the most noble thing in the world.

Still on my knees, I fought to contain my raging emotions and looked up at the queen. She slowly rose to her feet, glaring at me like my apathy offended her. She closed the distance between us.

“Tell me, Yohan. Do you really think you can't be corrupted even further?”

I froze. The evil in her voice wasn't of this world. My heartbeat stalled and my eyes went wide, but I was too paralyzed to blink. Her sneer crept wider, filling me with a visceral, cruel terror.

She looked down at me and set her hand on my chin, forcing me to meet her eyes. The queen smiled at my powerlessness with pure ecstasy.



“For example...” came the words from her vile lips. “What if...you had to serve that prince you hate so much?”

The image of the young man flashed in my mind—the traitor who’d brought this disgrace to my heart, the brother who’d killed off the last vestiges of my dear friend’s sanity. Hatred swelled inside me, turning my vision blood red. Satisfied, the queen smirked.

“Oh, I’ve got it! I’ll put you in charge of his clothes when the time comes. You’ll be the one to clean his clothes and body of blood once he’s betrayed the love of an innocent maiden. What a perfect role for the former king of a pious land. Heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Whatever foul thing she envisioned, it left her bending backward and howling with laughter. *What did any of that mean? Innocent maiden? Love? Blood?!* Was it all the ramblings of a mad queen?

“I look forward to seeing the two of you reunite. The next three months can’t pass quickly enough!”

With that, she stroked my white hair. I resisted the urge to smack her hand away, and my tension did not go unnoticed. The queen sneered and dragged her red-painted nails from my neck down to my shoulder. I bit down on my cheek to contain a shudder of disgust.

“Don’t forget, you’re just the agent of a province now. I’m the queen of Freesia, and as for him...”

Her smile pulled taut, sending a shiver down my spine. I couldn’t look away from the sickening sight. Her next words came in a voice deep enough to shake the ground beneath us.

“I’ll make you lick his shoes.”

I’d never witnessed anything as cruel as that smile. It stole the breath straight from my lungs.

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“What’s wrong, Yohan? Are you still thinking about Cedric?”

Lance’s voice snapped me out of my trance; he was staring worriedly at me. *Oh, I didn’t mean to space out like that.*

I must have gotten lost in thought when I remembered that Cedric was waiting for us at the castle. It was probably our first time going on such a long trip without him.

“Yes, I am. Sorry, Lance. I was just thinking he looked a little sad before we left.”

“Don’t worry about him.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was being overprotective. I smiled, which Lance tentatively returned. He and I had our own reasons for leaving Cedric in Hanazuo while we attended this party.

In fact, the guest of honor was approaching us right now.

“Thank you for inviting us, Prime Minister Gilbert,” I said, shaking the man’s hand.

“No, thank you for coming all this way.”

Gilbert Butler, the prime minister of Freesia and a significant contributor to our defenses during the war, was celebrating his birthday. He’d invited us as representatives of Hanazuo.

Cedric had wanted to come too, but Lance and I had refused. Only a month remained until he would receive an answer about his proposition. Interesting things were already happening in Cedric’s life, so Lance and I had avoided taking him to Freesia. While the party took place at Prime Minister Gilbert’s home rather than the castle, the two princesses whom Cedric had insulted so terribly would be in attendance—though that was part of the reason he’d wanted to come in the first place.

“It’s an honor to have Your Majesties in attendance. I do hope you’ll make yourselves at home.”



He thanked us elegantly before heading off to greet other guests.

Though it came as no surprise considering his position, I couldn't help noticing all the notable people packing the party. In addition to the princesses and the prince, the Freesian seneschal and queen were in the crowd, though the prince consort remained in the castle as Her Majesty's proxy. A few knights mingled here, while others stood guard around the large manor. A beautiful woman with a young girl—most likely Prime Minister Gilbert's wife and daughter—lingered at the back of the room. The girl called out to Princess Pride, Princess Tiara, and Prince Stale. It seemed the four were already well acquainted.

Princess Pride noticed us watching her and approached. Lance and I met her halfway and exchanged greetings, the three of us smiling somewhat awkwardly at each other.

"I see Cedric isn't with you tonight," she said, looking concerned.

"Indeed, he's...feeling a bit under the weather." It wasn't *really* a lie, though I was embarrassed to utter it all the same.

"Well, I'm still happy to see you both."

Princess Tiara and Prince Stale nodded to us as well, joining their sister for our chat. I let Lance respond to all of them first.

"Thank you for saying so. I'm glad to see you too, Princess Pride. And the same to you, Princess Tiara, Prince Stale."

I shook each of their hands as I spoke, but it was Princess Pride's name that warmed my heart most. It was hard to believe the miracle that happened that day...or our present situation.

I maintained a faltering smile as we chatted, until Princess Pride and Prince Stale exchanged meaningful glances.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "Stale and I haven't heard anything from Mother about the matter yet."

"Has Prince Cedric fallen ill with worry?" Prince Stale asked.



“Of course not,” Lance and I replied in unison.

Princess Tiara was still smiling, but she tilted her head. She’d said she didn’t know anything, yet I had to wonder if her smile was a bit gentler than usual with Cedric absent. When I met her eyes, she bit her lip and cast her gaze to the floor.

“By the way, Your Majesties, have you begun exporting gold and minerals to other countries yet?” Prince Stale asked. “I happened to hear a few whispers about it.”

Though he exuded a pleasant and casual air, I was impressed as always by this future seneschal of Freesia. He always had one ear to the ground when it came to what other countries were up to.

“Yes, we have.”

With that, Lance and I caught them up to speed.

We’d started trading with Freesia now that our countries shared an alliance. Cercis provided gold ore and gold jewelry while Chinensis offered gems. Fortunately, we’d already been preparing to open the country up before this alliance, and just last week, the system went into effect. Freesia’s assistance—along with advice from Prime Minister Gilbert and Prince Stale—had made a big difference.

The development of gold veins, coal mines, and ore mines. The personnel necessary to provide steady output. Construction and stabilization of assembly lines to mine, process, and export goods. Lance and I had been working steadily on all of this since becoming kings. Gold and minerals were our countries’ main natural resources. We aimed to increase profits and work opportunities for our people and compete on equal footing with the many countries throughout this wide world. At last, our country was opening up.

We’d compared our trading terms and opened up a port to facilitate deals. In less than a month, the first foreign ships would arrive to do business. They wouldn’t just be traders from Anemone or Freesia, our ally. We would trade



with the whole world.

“I truly can’t thank you—well, thank *Freesia* enough,” I said.

My heart swelled with gratitude, and I couldn’t help smiling. Finally, the dream I shared with Lance and Cedric had come to fruition.

“Please, no need. Hanazuo and Your Majesties’ skills have been a great help to us.” Princess Pride beamed at us. “Besides, we’re the ones who should be thanking you. Your country is providing us with high-quality gold and jewels...at such an incredibly low price.”

She kept her voice hushed and her eyes on our faces...though she paled as though remembering something. Prince Stale and Princess Tiara chuckled at her.

“Of course,” Lance said, surprised at having embarrassed the princess by striking such a deal. “We needed a much more substantial way of repaying our debt.”

Lance and I sold Hanazuo’s gold and jewels at the lowest possible price to Freesia and Freesia alone—taking into account the shipping, mining, processing, and labor costs. We presented our goods to them almost for free, but it was our idea to do so.

The Freesian queen and seneschal had reacted to the proposal with surprise, but this was the will of our people as well. Their freedom and their lives were worth far more than any gold or jewels. We mutually agreed to this low price, selling our gold and jewels in small, fixed amounts at regular intervals. Besides, Cercis’s gold and Chinensis’s jewels were essentially boundless, even if the time and skills needed to process them put a limit on how much we could export.

Some went as far as to say that anyone could dig in Cercis and strike gold. That was why the value of gold and jewels had gone down within Hanazuo for the past hundred years or so. A few of our younger folks thought that the “mere” act of presenting Freesia with gold and jewels for close to free still wasn’t good enough.



Princess Pride had also tried to stop us, even after we established this deal with Her Majesty. But we told her to think of it as Cedric's reparations for disrespecting her. She still hesitated, but she agreed to go along with it this time. *If anything, it's far too little to make up for what he did.*

As we enjoyed our chitchat, I surveyed the mansion's ballroom. "I see that many guests from Freesia have been invited tonight."

"Really?" Lance asked, oblivious. He scanned the room as well.

This wasn't a royal family's party, and it was therefore less formal, so Prime Minister Gilbert's invitations were a display of his friendship rather than an official summons. We were here as Freesia's new allies, but I spotted few other members of royalty. Princess Pride's four imperial knights and Prince Leon from Anemone were here, as well as some high-ranking nobles...even some guests I didn't recognize at all. If Cedric were here, he could have told us how many times we'd met before.

"That's right," Prince Stale said. "The prime minister wanted to meet with nobles he hasn't had much of an opportunity to speak with before now."

Though he smiled, his aura turned sinister. If Prime Minister Gilbert wanted to meet new nobles, that would probably include lower-ranking families. It seemed his job required maintaining many connections to his country's people. He struck me as a very capable person if he intended to reach out to everyone in such a massive country.

Prince Stale read my conclusions in my face. "I've been sharing in his desire these days, so I'm glad to be able to speak to as many nobles as possible."

For some reason, the princesses' smiles faltered at that.

"That's wonderful," Lance said. "We'll have to learn from his example, Yohan!"

He slapped me on the back, sounding *very* impressed. He was right. The two of us needed to spend more time interacting with our country's noblemen and



civilians. Opening up the kingdom would change our people's way of life, after all.

I smiled and agreed. Opening our borders was just the beginning. We needed other lands to understand how our people lived, establish communication, and allow us to join the rest of the world so that we Hanazuo royals could protect our citizens' peaceful lives. We had to juggle trade, communication, faith, connections, and the safety of the Hanazuo people all at once. It would be no small task taking all of that on. Plus, if we received Queen Rosa's permission on that *other* matter, we'd have even more work on our plates. But right now, my heart raced with anticipation for the future.

I'd come to realize just how big of a place this world truly was.



## Chapter 4:

### The Callous Princess and the Royal Prince

**“S**O IT’S FINALLY happening?”

My words came out more like a sigh than a question.

“Is something wrong, Stale?” Gilbert asked, but I shook my head.

My work as the prince consort’s steward under Gilbert’s supervision never seemed to end. I gathered the documents I’d finished sorting, turned, and handed them over to Father. “Here you are. This is a survey of all the noble families, from the royal capital to the most distant territories within Freesia.”

Father accepted the papers, flipped through them briefly, and began to read from the first page. With our initial research complete, we had a little breathing room. However, Gilbert was already waiting for Father’s stamp of approval so we could begin the next survey. He was always so quick.

“Public order has stabilized a lot within the past few years, but that means we have to take a closer look at the unifying agents throughout each region,” Father said. “We can call for the help of the earls around the country, but it could lead to collusion...”

“That’s true,” Gilbert replied. “It will take some time, but I believe our best option is to dispatch guards and knights to carry out the survey in secret. Let’s also call on the dukes to help us get a thorough understanding of things. I’m currently doing my best to leverage dukes and other trustworthy people to that end.”

Father furrowed his brow at the documents for a time, then waved his free hand. An eager Gilbert handed him the next batch.

“I’ll send word to the dukedoms.” Gilbert flashed an elegant smile before stepping back. “In the meantime, may I ask you to join me in my office, Prince



Stale?”

“Yes, of course.”

I said goodbye to Father and exited his office, going right next door to Gilbert’s. We entered and shut the door behind us.

“Forgive me,” Gilbert said with a smile that was not at all apologetic. “I’m sure you’re already busy with your work under Vest, and now you’re helping me with—”

“It’s fine. Uncle Vest said all we have left is to make the final arrangements with Mother. Let’s get this wrapped up before the guests from Hanazuo get here.”

“Right.”

Gilbert removed letters and lists from his shelf, and we prepared our official notification to send to the dukes.

“Also, I was furious when this came to light two months ago,” I said. “If more of those nuisances are out there, I want to get rid of them as soon as possible.”

Just thinking back on it made me seethe. About two months ago, Gilbert had conducted a certain investigation based on information he’d received, which led to the prosecution of a baron and his family. Gilbert had done a good job looking into the tip, but the more he and I investigated, the sicker we felt. My stomach churned when I thought about how the man had tricked his own citizens and committed such a grave crime. To make matters worse, this behavior was rampant among lower-ranking noblemen.

Gilbert had wasted no time bringing the case to prosecution, but Mother and the palace officials unanimously agreed that we also needed to reevaluate the way we were managing things in this country.

Last month, Gilbert had invited lower-ranking noblemen from the royal capital and more distant regions to his birthday party. There, Gilbert, Arthur, and I tried to warn them and bring new information to light...which had reaped



us quite the reward. I suspected we could use official events in the future to meet personally with all the noblemen in the country.

“I agree, Prince Stale. Anyone who hides behind their country or their title to resort to crime is—”

“You’re one to talk.”

His smile turned awkward. “Yes, that’s fair.”

I’d said the same thing to him when the baron’s crimes came to light and received a pretty satisfying reaction.

It had been the same with Gilbert; it was difficult to obtain solid evidence when it came to the misdeeds of those in power. These weren’t just people with authority either. They existed outside of the scope of the royal family, making it hard to catch them up to no good.

Most of what Gilbert learned from his information dealers related to black market activities. He wasn’t as good as Arthur when it came to sensing sinister motives, though. *Actually, our investigation would be a lot easier if we had a bunch of Arthurs to help us.* Unfortunately, we didn’t, so we’d just have to be extra-thorough in our search.

“Ah, that reminds me,” Gilbert said. “A messenger from Anemone came by this morning. In three days’ time, another delivery will arrive for the royal order.”

“Another one, really?”

Considering the date, the delivery had to be for Vice Captain Eric.

A few months ago, Prince Leon had begun sending supplies to the royal order for the imperial knights’ birthdays. Arthur received weapons and gunpowder. Then Captain Alan was gifted food and field provisions. They all arrived in massive quantities for use by the royal order as a “token of friendship,” as Prince Leon put it.

The knights already received large stipends to procure their supplies, but now



they were flush with weapons too. We couldn't decrease their budget, so Father suggested expanding the royal order in accordance with this glut of supplies. But while many men aspired to join the order each year, the exam admitted only the most elite performers into the main forces. The knights had suffered few casualties in recent years, so their numbers were always increasing.

"Supposedly, it's going to be alcohol this time," Gilbert said.

I could already picture the revelry that would erupt throughout the order when they discovered *that* particular present. In fact, Captain Alan would probably appreciate it even more than Vice Captain Eric. Anemone traded a wide variety of fine liquor, after all.

As I worked, I thought of the flustered vice captain. The knights always looked nervous when a massive shipment arrived at the training grounds on their birthdays. Arthur reacted with more than mere shock when he received that first delivery of weapons—it actually upset him. He regretted thoughtlessly telling Prince Leon his birthday in the first place. On Captain Alan's birthday delivery, he'd asked for genuine advice about how an imperial knight like himself could reciprocate the gesture on Prince Leon's birthday.

However, I assumed Prince Leon was sending these gifts as "tokens of friendship" and not "birthday presents" so the knights wouldn't have to worry about returning the favor. It was a display of Anemone's amicable relationship with them...but the knights insisted on repaying him anyway.

Captain Callum's birthday would be upon us next month. I wondered what would show up then.

I glanced at the clock and realized quite a bit of time had passed. I forced my attention down to the papers in my hands. I needed to hurry.

"We should have a few hours left before the carriage arrives from Hanazuo," Gilbert said cheerfully. "I look forward to seeing Prince Cedric. Don't you?"

This had to be revenge for what I'd said earlier. He knew Prince Cedric had



been weighing on my mind.

“Of course,” I said.

We would hold talks later today consisting of Prince Cedric’s presentation as well as Pride’s. Right then, the prince’s admission to me at my birthday party flashed through my mind. When I considered it calmly, it would benefit our country. That was the only reason I’d tried my utmost to assist him, and why Mother was probably going to give her approval at today’s talks. But his true goal was likely—

Gilbert called out to me, and I hurried to finish what I’d been working on before I lapsed into thought. He smiled at me, already finished and ready to return to Father.

“Shall we?”

I hated the warmth in his eyes when he looked at me. He was treating me the same way he did his daughter, Stella. Regardless, I tucked the documents under my arm and pushed my glasses up. I was already used to the new pair I’d received for my seventeenth birthday. My work done, I hurried after Gilbert.

I’d spent the past few months taking time out of my schedule to thoroughly investigate any noblemen or royals who could potentially be on the princesses’ list of marriage candidates. The fact that I hadn’t discovered anyone with nefarious intentions gave me some peace of mind. Uncle Vest, Father, and Mother must have been very careful in their selections. Still, one of the men *could* be plotting behind the scenes—in which case, I would personally strike him down when the time came.

At the very least, I knew Captain Callum was a trustworthy man...though that brought a slight ache to my heart, for whatever reason. Regardless of Prince Cedric’s next moves or who Pride selected from her list, I wouldn’t be startled anymore.

“Thank you for waiting, Father.”



I had already found my resolve two years ago.

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“Apologies, but my little sister is...”

I sighed. King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric stood before me. They’d come all this way to meet with Mother. Tiara, Arthur, and Vice Captain Eric had joined me in greeting them, while Stale was busy helping Prime Minister Gilbert. He’d told me he would probably have a break in his schedule around the time the meeting wrapped up.

Cedric hung his head, hiding his face beneath his blond hair. “No, Pride. I should be the one to apologize...”

The kings set their hands on his shoulders and smiled sadly at him. I resisted the urge to do the same. Tiara had all but fled back to her room when she finished greeting the trio.

*Cedric didn’t actually do anything wrong this time.* While that was technically true, Cedric’s past misdeeds and Tiara’s first impression of him still tipped the balance. I couldn’t blame her for running away, yet I also sympathized with Cedric. He was completely head over heels for Tiara, and she obviously didn’t reciprocate.

Half a year had passed since Cedric confessed his feelings to Tiara after the war. They’d run into each other at several events since then, but they had a long way to go before they could be called friends. Cedric had mostly overcome his chronic blushing around us, at least. These days, he could talk to Tiara without turning bright red, but Tiara was still too mad at him to entertain his conversations. I hadn’t seen them interact since the time I tried to step in and help, but Cedric said there’d been no progress whatsoever. He said she’d acted just as upset at Stale’s birthday party. The more I thought about it, the worse I felt for him. I’d cry if the friendly, angelic Tiara refused to speak to me.

“Mother is waiting for you in the royal palace,” I said. “I hope we can speak again after your meeting, so long as it doesn’t delay your schedule.”



The kings and Cedric agreed. I watched them set out for their meeting with Mother, their servants and guards behind them. Then I returned to the palace to check on Tiara.

Right when I stepped inside, my pale-faced sister ran up to me. Her personal maids, Carla and Chelsea, followed her with obvious concern.

“I-I’m sorry, Big Sister! I just...!”

Tiara must have realized how rude she’d been. Well, she *had* greeted our visitors and provided an excuse to leave, so it wasn’t a total disaster. If anything, she’d put her intentions on full display; everyone could see that she’d run away just to avoid Cedric. Seeing her so uncharacteristically rattled, I couldn’t keep myself from smiling, but I tried to calm her down.

“It’s all right, Tiara. No one’s mad at you. Let’s talk in my room.”

I led her upstairs to my chambers. The familiar setting seemed to soothe her nerves. She slumped against my sofa, drawing deep breaths while I asked Mary to make us some tea. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric looked relieved that she’d more or less returned to normal.

“I just don’t understand Prince Cedric.”

Her murmur hung in the air.

“You don’t?” I asked as I sat beside her.

Tiara leaned against me and nodded. With the knights here, I couldn’t ask her about her feelings directly, but I hoped she’d tell me as much as she could.

“He’s so...strange. Something’s just weird about him!”

She was so cute when she puffed out her cheeks in anger. She kept her hands folded on her knees.

“I suppose you’re right,” I said delicately. Cedric had a peculiar attitude, especially when it came to Tiara and me. I understood why that confused her.

Carla set down the cup of black tea Mary had brewed for us. I took the next



one from Lotte, my maid, and thanked them both. Tiara blew on her hot tea to cool it, her voice fading in and out as she spoke.

“He did such awful things to you, but sometimes... I mean, he’s a spoiled crybaby who cares about you now, but... And besides, he’s still mean sometimes!”

I nodded along as I listened, but her last sentence came as a surprise. *He’s mean?!* When had Cedric been mean? Was it during Stale’s party?

I asked if Cedric had done something disrespectful again, but Tiara shook her head. “He wasn’t disrespectful, but...” Again, she trailed off and sipped her tea, careful not to scorch her tongue. I shot a searching look at Arthur and Vice Captain Eric, but they appeared to be as clueless as I was.

Was Cedric the kind of man who liked teasing girls he had a crush on? If so, I would definitely need to tell him that was impolite.

Tiara set her cup back down on the saucer and rested her head on my shoulder. “I was really rude to him too today, so I’ll be sure to apologize when I see him next.”

She sighed, shoulders slouching. She slumped like a child who’d just been scolded, and I stroked her hair to reassure her. Though she’d known Cedric and the kings would arrive at the castle today, it seemed she hadn’t prepared herself mentally. Cedric’s confession would have been enough on its own to make her nervous. But they were going to keep seeing each other from here on out, which understandably added to her worries and threw her emotions into tumult. Her sixteenth birthday was only two months away.

My sister had until she was seventeen to settle on a marriage candidate, which left her with more than a year. Even so, turning sixteen meant she would step into adulthood, and that was sure to come with some big life changes. For one thing, she would start attending many more foreign social events alongside me and Stale.

Implementing a Freesian school system had completely occupied my brain



during my sixteenth birthday, so I hadn't noticed such subtleties. In fact, I'd completely forgotten that I was going to meet my fiancé that night. But Tiara had her own worries to contend with.

"It's all right, Tiara. Stale and I...no, *everyone's* going to be there with you."

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in close. Tiara nodded against me. She wiped her eyes with her dainty hands, trying to hide her anxious tears. We remained that way for some time, cuddled up safely in each other's arms.

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"Sorry for the delay, Pride."

I was slightly out of breath by the time I knocked on the door to Pride's room. As soon as the guard opened it, my eyes went straight to the sofa, where Tiara had dozed off in her embrace.

Pride pressed her finger to her lips, and I covered my mouth. She smiled at the gesture and whispered, "Thanks for all your hard work, Stale."

I approached the sofa as quietly as possible. Tiara was slumped against Pride's shoulder, limp as a doll.

"I'm sorry, did I take too long? Should I carry her to bed?"

Pride smiled, stroking Tiara's blonde hair. "No, she's just napping. She said she wanted to talk to the guests when they finished their business."

"Got it." I returned her smile, then brushed Tiara's bangs aside to peer at her face. Pride and I had grown accustomed to the expression of utter peace Tiara wore while sleeping. "I've been told that Mother has finished her meeting with Hanazuo's representatives. It should be about time to head down...so I think we should wake her."

When I stepped back, Pride lightly shook Tiara's shoulder. "Stale's here, Tiara," she repeated until Tiara's eyes fluttered open.

"Mm? What is it, Big Sister...? Oh, Big Brother!"



Tiara blinked awake, taking in the room in astonishment. When she realized she'd fallen asleep on Pride's shoulder, she sat up and apologized to her. Then she turned to me.

"When did you get here?"

"Just now. Mother's meeting is over, so our guests from Hanazuo should be headed this way soon."

Tiara flinched at the word "Hanazuo." Perhaps she intended to apologize for running away from them earlier.

"Don't worry. They're not here yet," Pride said, rubbing Tiara's back.

"It sounds as if Mother approved of the meeting topic."

Pride's face lit up. "Really?! That's great news!"

Though she likely suspected this outcome, my news seemed to relieve her. Tiara took us both in curiously, perhaps suspecting we would bring her up to speed. Pride and I traded glances, coming to an agreement with nothing more than that look.

A knock at the door interrupted our exchange.

Tiara shrieked in surprise, but she covered her mouth and apologized when she realized it was just a guard. Even Arthur and Vice Captain Eric couldn't contain their smirks.

Jack took a message from the guard outside, closed the door, and turned to us. "Princess Pride, Prince Cedric would like to speak with you in the parlor."

Suspicion rippled through the room. Cedric wanted to talk to Pride alone, without the other guests from Hanazuo? But why?

Pride acknowledged the message and rose to her feet.

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"I'm sorry I took so long, Cedric," I called out to the prince as we entered the parlor. Stale strode at my side with Tiara and my imperial knights behind us.



Cedric straightened at the sound of the doors thudding shut.

“No, I got here too early,” he replied. “I’m sorry, but my brothers are going to talk to Queen Rosa a little longer before they join us.”

Despite Cedric’s calm tone, sweat dampened his face. He looked too anxious to sit. When I invited him to relax on the sofa, he refused. After everyone exchanged greetings, Cedric turned his focus to Tiara, who hid behind me and Stale.

I smiled awkwardly, nodding to confirm that Tiara was actually back there. Stale stepped aside to clear a path while I slipped behind the hunched-over Tiara. I gently placed my hands on her shoulders.

“Tiara tells me she’d like to apologize for what happened earlier,” I said, doing my best to serve as an intermediary for the pair. Tiara nodded.

“Apologize?!” Stale blurted out, but I simply smiled and told him it was all right. Luckily, he accepted my explanation and put up no further fuss.

With my encouragement, Tiara took a few slow steps toward Cedric and tugged at the sleeve of her dress. Already blushing with nerves, she parted her pink lips so she could speak.

“Um... Earlier today, I was—”

“Wait a minute!”

Cedric held out his hands as he cut off her apology. Tiara and I both startled at this unexpected response.

“Sorry,” he said, wide-eyed. “You see...if what I’m about to say goes against your wishes, you can forget about it for good. In exchange, we’ll act like what you’re apologizing for never even happened. May I still have your permission to speak?”

Nervous, Cedric flitted between formal and informal speech. His handsome face tensed with anguish and determination. Tiara blinked, surprised by this development, but then she agreed. I knew she wasn’t sure where this was



going, but I was glad she was willing to listen in exchange for him forgetting about her earlier rudeness.

Cedric smiled with relief, then swept his gaze over the room. “Can I do this in front of them?” he asked me and Tiara.

We took in our audience, exchanged a look with each other, and nodded in unison. We could trust Stale and the imperial knights with anything.

“Very well.”

Cedric took a deep breath. He squared his shoulders and laid his feelings bare for the whole room to hear.

“Tiara Royal Ivy...I’d like to ask that you consider me as a marriage candidate.”

“What?!”

The first cry came from Stale. He gaped at the three of us, desperate for an explanation. Tiara turned bright red at receiving such a request in front of everyone, and I was blushing just as hard, only a step behind her.

“Hey, what do you mean by that?!” Stale asked, but I reached over and covered his mouth, dragging him behind the petrified Tiara. “Mmph!” He seemed more rattled by my hand on his mouth than by being silenced.

Cedric didn’t seem to know what to make of Tiara’s frozen state, but he continued nonetheless. “We just received Queen Rosa’s approval...and her permission to make the news public. The United Hanazuo Kingdom and Freesia are going to establish an international postal service.”

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and held it up for Tiara to see. It must have been a contract.

“Freesia will house the main branch, of course.”

My eyes were glued to the paper. It had to contain the signatures of both kings, as well as Mother’s.

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric gasped. They knew as well as I did that we’d tried



to establish an international postal service for the past three years but hadn't made any real progress until now...excluding the work of one particular deliveryman under our command.

Stale and I had been informed of this venture with the United Hanazuo Kingdom. We'd advised Cedric through our letters and served as intermediaries between him and the queen. *But why is he talking about that right now?!* I was utterly confused. *Seriously, why?!*

I couldn't interrupt this pivotal moment, so I resigned myself to questioning him repeatedly in my mind. Meanwhile, Stale listened with his mouth still covered, though I suspected he wouldn't have managed a word even if it wasn't. He was the smartest person I knew, yet the situation had strayed from his expectations. Still, I had no doubt he would be the first to understand.

"Wh-what about it?!" Tiara asked, flustered.

She looked as confused as I was. Why had Cedric confessed his feelings to her again in the first place? I could tell she was starting to regret not sending the rest of us out of the room, but soon Cedric gave her a clear answer, undeterred by her reaction.

"I've been selected as the general manager of this international postal service," he said. "I'm going to connect the United Hanazuo Kingdom to Freesia—and eventually, to the rest of the world."

He was dead serious, and we all knew it. The fire burning in those red eyes was the same one we'd seen blazing during the war.

Hanazuo and Freesia needed someone with authority to manage this shared institution. As the royal prince of the former, Cedric was more than qualified.

But Tiara still didn't seem to understand. What did that have to do with her marriage candidates? Was he trying to say that the new title made him a suitable husband for her? The royal prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom hardly needed to accrue more titles. She was on the verge of questioning him, but then...



“That’s why I’ve decided to settle down and build a life in this country,” Cedric said.

Tiara’s breath caught in her throat. Her confusion was written all over her face, and she boldly asked Cedric if he understood what he was suggesting.

Cedric didn’t back down. He returned the letter of consent to his pocket and fixed his gaze on Tiara. As we stood speechless and stunned, Cedric alone moved, reaching out for her. Not a single one of us could’ve anticipated what he said next, his voice so quiet and tender.

“That way, you’ll be able to stay in this country even when you’re married.”

Tiara trembled. Her pale, slender limbs shook as she flailed for words, but she seemed too shaken to find any.

“You’ll be fulfilling your duty as the second-born princess by marrying me, the royal prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. But you won’t have to leave the people you love. You’ll get to spend your days with Pride, Prince Stale, and your dear family.”

Tiara flinched as Cedric spoke, bringing both hands to her chest and biting hard on her bottom lip. Despite her quaking, she did not tear her eyes away from the fire burning in Cedric’s gaze.

“I...don’t care if you don’t love me,” he said. “My only wish is to do whatever I can to help you. If you already have your heart set on Prince Le—on some other man, I’ll accept your decision.”

I freed Stale’s mouth to clutch at my dress over my heart. Cedric was offering up his entire life simply to make Tiara’s happier. He’d already become the general manager of the postal service, meaning he was prepared to devote himself to that duty even if Tiara rejected him.

“However, if your heart isn’t set on someone else...then I want you to choose me. If your desire is to be a wallflower, quietly observing parties and events from afar and trying not to make waves...then I’m asking you to bloom at my



side.”

Tears shimmered in Tiara’s eyes. Her cheeks flushed, but she didn’t cover her face or avert her gaze from the prince. Cedric noticed her crying, and his composure broke at last.

“Why?” Tiara asked, her voice so faint I could hardly hear her.

His pledge to build a life in Freesia meant he was prepared to leave his homeland—a country he’d worked hard to save—and his dear brothers behind.

Cedric watched Tiara closely, likely reading her lips because she spoke so softly. He furrowed his brow and followed up her question with one of his own. “Does a man need a reason to dedicate his life to the woman he loves?”

That question, despite its childlike innocence, cut through the room like a blade.

He seemed to think this was the most natural response, which obviously left him all the more panicked when tears spilled down Tiara’s cheeks. And yet, he doubled down on his desire. Until she stopped him, it seemed like the prince was going to go on expressing his love.

“I want to see you standing next to the people you love and smiling from the heart. I never want that smile to leave your face...and I want to share in that happiness with you.”

Tiara’s tears dripped down her neck and soaked into the collar of her dress. She kept blinking and weeping, and large droplets fell to the carpet beneath her. Only when she brought her hands to her mouth to stifle her sobs did she break eye contact and look down at her feet.

Cedric stretched out his hand to wipe her tears away but froze before he reached her, apparently thinking better of it when she hadn’t actually given him an answer yet. He pulled his hand back, clenched his fist, and extended it once more—this time as a question.

“Tiara, allow me to repeat the words I said to you on the day we parted



ways.”

It seemed he would keep going until Tiara responded, even though he was proceeding as though the crying princess would never reciprocate his feelings.

“Tiara Royal Ivy... You have stolen my heart.”

Thanks to his perfect memory, he recited the exact words he’d said that day nine months earlier. Tiara’s tears now wet her sleeves as she kept her hands pressed to her mouth. Try as she might, she couldn’t stop them—not even when she squeezed her eyes shut.

“I want...to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Tiara let out a choked sob at that. With trembling fingers, she reached out and took Cedric’s extended hand, bringing it up to her cheek. Cedric tensed at the touch of her delicate fingers but followed her lead, cupping her cheek as her tears wet his skin.

Like another teardrop, Tiara’s answer spilled out from her.

“Yes... I’ll pick you!”

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“Our sincerest apologies, Princess Pride. Cedric has gone and made more trouble for you...”

King Yohan and King Lance apologized sternly, but I told them it was all right. The two of them had appeared in the parlor just after Cedric finished his proposal to Tiara. As soon as they saw him cupping the crying princess’s cheek, King Lance yanked Cedric away in a panic, certain he’d done something wrong.

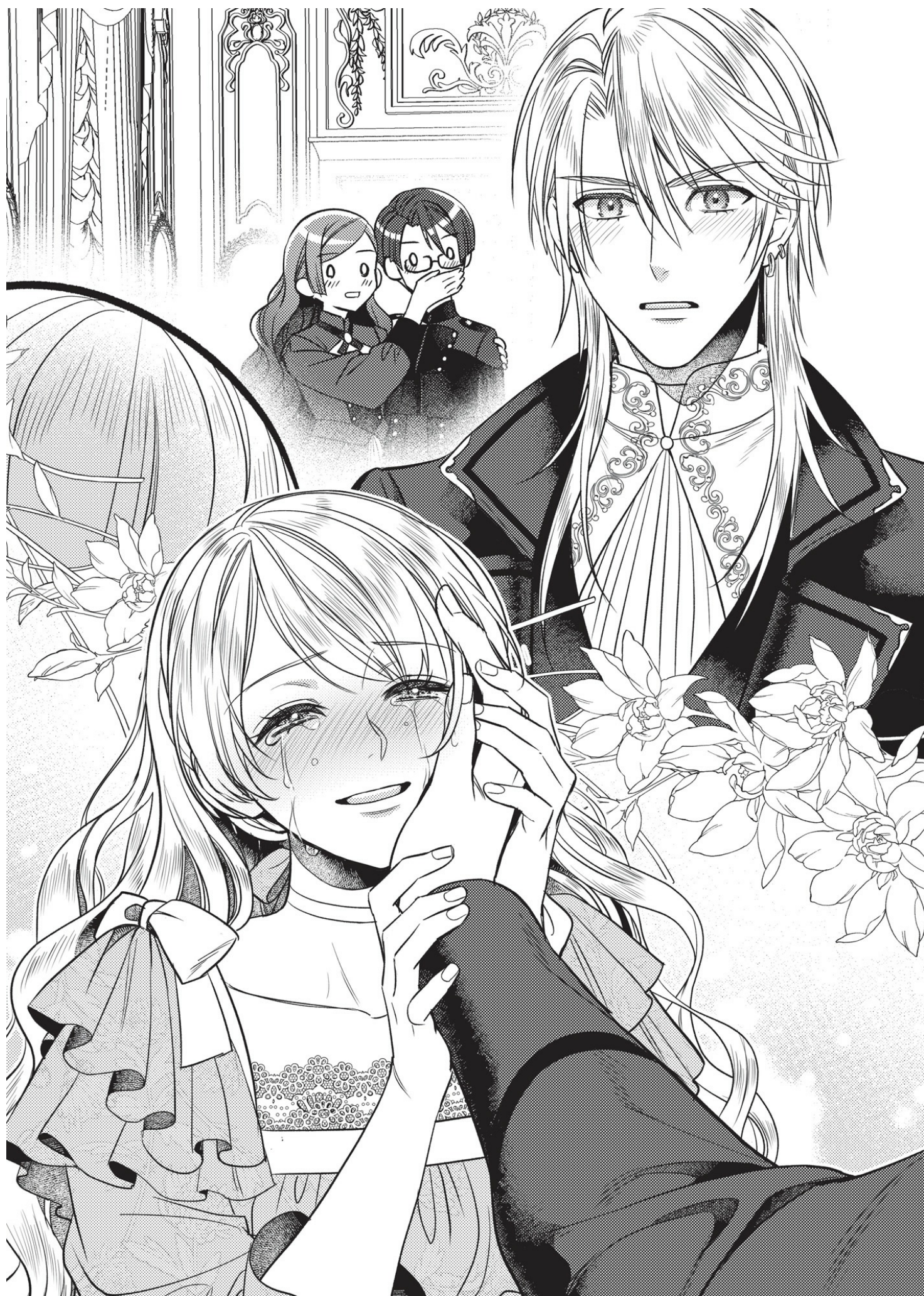
I managed to clear up the situation, but Cedric had indeed proposed to Tiara again, so the kings were left standing there with their mouths agape. Frankly, I was still struggling to process it too, but I managed to appear calm.

“More importantly, I’m surprised to hear Cedric intends to take up permanent residence here in Freesia. Did you already know this?”



Both kings nodded without so much as a glance at each other. Stale and I knew Cedric was going to take the role of general manager, but his relocation came as a surprise to us. I'd assumed that Cedric was going to work at the United Hanazuo Kingdom's branch while we established the main branch in Freesia.







“He’d already made up his mind by the time he came to us with the proposal,” King Lance said.

“We won’t stop him if he wants to leave the country,” King Yohan said. “We’ll merely give him the push that he needs.”

“It’s not like we’ll never see him again,” King Lance added.

His smile seemed light and genuine, even as he contemplated his brother leaving the country. In contrast, the mere thought of Tiara moving away had been distressing me. It seemed big brothers were a different breed; Stale had kept a cool head all this time too. Maybe I was just being childish.

King Lance cupped his hand over his mouth and whispered, “We’d be willing to reconsider his position if you have concerns, Princess Pride...”

We sat on a sofa opposite the two kings. King Lance kept a close eye on Tiara and Cedric as they discussed something in the corner of the room. King Yohan smiled stiffly and nodded in agreement with King Lance. I matched their expressions.

“No, that’s not necessary. Mother and Uncle Vest have already approved of him, after all.”

Cedric’s position as the general manager of the postal service was already decided. Despite being royalty, he’d passed an examination to showcase his abilities. He was the one who’d demanded the test, saying he wanted to find out if he was the right man for the job. When he turned eighteen, he spent time learning everything he needed for the position. Cedric managed to pass all three written exams provided by the seneschals of Freesia, Cercis, and Chinensis with perfect scores. Even the incredibly strict Uncle Vest praised him for it. To put it in terms from my past life, Cedric’s memory was so incredible, it was like using a computer while he took his finals.

Furthermore, Cedric had mastered all foreign languages currently known to Freesia and Hanazuo in order to communicate with the entire continent



someday. This came as a shock to Uncle Vest as well. He and Prime Minister Gilbert knew how to translate a few languages, but certainly not *all* of them.

Prime Minister Gilbert and I had been the ones to work out the majority of the practical details behind this international postal service. All of them were brand-new systems and organizations to Cedric, but he memorized and comprehended them in a flash. He was the perfect person to lead this operation.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for the United Hanazuo Kingdom to interact with the rest of the world,” King Lance said. “We’re going to make this postal service a success no matter what it takes!”

His powerful smile filled me with confidence.

Cedric had surprised me when he first came to me with this proposal. My school system was making good progress, however, and I found myself searching for ways to improve the mail system as well. Stale had explained our postal system to Cedric, and Hanazuo’s offer to work alongside us was ideal. They were far from Freesia, which made it hard to negotiate alliances and peace agreements. With this, we could set up two distant bases with a connection point in between. Cercis even had a harbor that would make deliveries easier. If we divided up the delivery territory, it would reduce the workload for deliverymen too.

I never once suspected that this was all a calculated plot to propose to Tiara.

My little sister was the second-born princess. As with any princess throughout history who wasn’t fated to become queen, Tiara had no choice but to marry someone in a foreign country. But if Cedric married her as the royal prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom and took up residence in Freesia, Tiara would have every right to stay here as his wife.

I didn’t know how or when Cedric realized Tiara’s true desire, but he must have put a lot of thought into how best to help her. I was so happy. Every time I thought about being separated from my sister, it made me want to cry.



I looked over to the back corner of the room and saw Cedric whispering something to Tiara. She had stopped crying and was listening to him with wide eyes. Midway through, she flushed bright red.

“You idiot!”

Had Cedric said something mortifying again? We were all used to that by this point, so the kings and I didn’t know what else we could do. Cedric blinked at Tiara like he didn’t understand what he’d done wrong.

“What did you say this time?” King Lance asked, holding his head in his hands.

“She may have agreed to your request, but remember that you’re still only a candidate,” King Yohan said.

Cedric staggered away from Tiara, mumbling, “N-no, I...!”

Tiara puffed up her red cheeks and pelted Cedric with her tiny fists. “Why! Do you! Say! Such! Stupid! Things?! Idiot!”

He covered his face. “I-I’m sorry?!”

I relaxed when I realized the fight wasn’t anything serious, but the kings and I apologized to each other regardless.

“I’m sorry about Tiara...”

“We’re sorry about Cedric...”

I never thought a day would come when I had to apologize for Tiara, the utterly perfect princess. The opposite was much more likely. Yet Tiara always acted so childish when it came to Cedric. I wondered if it was just my imagination.

Stale usually scolded her too, but he sat next to me in a daze. Maybe it was the shock of having Cedric steal his adorable little sister right before his eyes. Curious, I looked to Arthur next. He seemed to have his wits about him, but he’d gone pale and pensive. Vice Captain Eric was a little flushed, perhaps from witnessing the passion between Tiara and Cedric, but he slapped Arthur on the shoulder and reminded him that they were on duty. Perhaps Arthur was just as



upset as Stale.

Their long-standing grudges against Cedric made him the one man they didn't want to take Tiara from them. Selfish as it was, I was more happy than shocked by the arrangement. I'd never expected Tiara to stay in Freesia for good.

"I don't even care anymore!" Tiara shouted, still smacking him. She rushed to those of us seated on the sofa. "Big Sister, are you sure Prince Cedric can handle an important role like being a general manager?!"

"Is something the matter?" I asked, but Tiara puffed up her cheeks and hollered again. Then she remembered she was in the presence of Cedric's brothers and quickly apologized.

From his spot against the wall, Cedric peered over at her like an abandoned puppy. "So you *do* want to keep me off your candidate list now?"

Tiara turned even redder and whirled on him. "No, I'll choose you! I want to stay with my beloved Big Sister, Big Brother, Arthur, Prime Minister Gilbert, all the imperial knights, Val, Sefekh, Khemet, and Prince Leon! Hmph!" Then she turned away again and sat next to me on the sofa, clinging to my arm. "Now we can be together forever!"

Her list of names had confused me a little, but I stroked her hair and told her how happy I was...expressing a fresh bout of remorse to the kings right in front of me. They tried their best to smile at us, but I pitied poor Cedric. I thought he might mope, but to my surprise, he was smiling too.

He looked at Tiara with nothing but joy, buoyed by her smile. When he caught me watching, Cedric gasped, bowed his head, and slowly approached the rest of us. Tiara refused to look at him, but Cedric didn't mind. He apologized to Stale and me for causing such a disturbance. Then he lowered himself to one knee so Stale wouldn't have to look up at him.

"As I've already told you, I'd like to be close to both you and Pride, and I intend on building a life here in this country."



Stale was at a loss. It was as if Cedric was asking his permission to marry Tiara right here and now. Stale's eyes darted around, and he muttered some sort of response.

"I understand that you have reason to doubt me," Cedric went on, sensing Stale's hesitation. "I still have much to learn, so please tell me whenever you see ways in which I'm failing to meet expectations. It would be an honor to learn from the firstborn prince of Freesia. I'm going to work hard to gain your approval until Tiara's marriage candidates are finalized."

Cedric spoke not as the royal prince of Hanazuo but as one of Tiara's marriage candidates, something Stale clearly hadn't expected. His mouth hung open, but he finally managed to close it and extend his hand with a faint smile.

"I'd be happy to oblige, if you're sure I'll suffice. Here's to the two of us working together."

At Stale's answer, Cedric's eyes shimmered with delight. He clutched Stale's hand in both of his and thanked him. Both kings sighed with relief; I felt the same. I'd half expected Stale to declare, "I'm never giving you my sister!" and start an all-out brawl.

Cedric turned his attention to me next, the flames in his eyes flickering with reverence and trepidation—like I was some wrathful goddess to appeal to.

"My desire to bring prosperity to both of our countries through this organization is genuine. I swear I have no ulterior motives. I'll prove to you that I can fulfill my role. I make this oath to you."

He extended his right fist to show me the empty finger where he'd once worn the ring he gave me. I smiled, nodding my approval of his resolve to accomplish this task with his own power.

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Our guests from Hanazuo climbed into their carriage. Tiara was still fuming when Cedric stepped inside, but as soon as it drove off, her expression shifted.



She pursed her lips and watched that carriage until it trundled out of view. Afterward, she told us she was exhausted and returned to her room. Stale and I headed for my room.

“Um, Princess Pride?” Arthur said once we were all there. It seemed difficult for him to get the words out.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, and Stale’s gaze sharpened.

The knight looked down at his feet, then raised his head with fresh determination. “What did you think when...Prince Cedric proposed to Tiara?!”

I tilted my head. Arthur made the matter sound so extremely grave. Maybe he was worried I was depressed over losing my dear sister.

I smiled, touched by Arthur’s consideration. “I was surprised. It was so sudden...but I’ll be happy if I get to see Cedric and Tiara a lot once they’re engaged. I’ve known about Cedric’s feelings this whole time.”

“What?!”

That cry came from not just Arthur, but Stale and Vice Captain Eric as well. I laughed behind my hand. Their surprise could not be more obvious.

“Wh-when was this?!” Stale asked.

I told him about Cedric’s confession when we left Hanazuo and the times he’d asked me for romantic advice, then swore everyone in the room to secrecy on the topic. Vice Captain Eric nodded, but Arthur and Stale couldn’t seem to close their mouths.

“So *that’s* why you were laughing?!”

“How long did you know?!”

They hounded me with questions. I giggled at the memories while they slumped, overcome by Tiara and Cedric’s secret.

“May I ask...one more thing?!”

Arthur gripped his head in his hands, barely managing to utter the words.



With my go-ahead, he met my eyes despite his flushed cheeks and covered his mouth with his arm. Had hearing of Cedric's feelings caused this reaction?

"What exactly...is Prince Cedric to you?"

"A cute friend, I suppose? He feels like a little brother to me."

Maybe that was rude to say when I already had a younger brother, but I felt compelled to tell the truth in that moment—an admission that nearly knocked both Arthur and Stale off their feet. Arthur was feverish from overthinking. Perhaps he couldn't believe I could consider another country's prince a brother.

I explained that Cedric had grown into a fine young man, one whom I trusted to serve as the general manager for the postal service, but my words made little impact on the flustered pair before me.

Vice Captain Eric laughed and told Arthur to snap out of it, even as the younger knight swayed on his feet. Even Stale crouched and pressed his head to his knees. The display dredged up a memory. I apologized for worrying them, and they both shook their heads and assured me it was fine. Was it really that hard for them to accept?

The crouching Stale and boiling Arthur continued to overheat in that room despite the chilly winter winds battering the windows. They stayed that way until Captain Alan and Captain Callum arrived for the shift change.

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"Cedric..."

Our carriage rattled down the bumpy road. Lance pronounced my name like a sigh while sitting across from me in the carriage.

"What are we going to do with you?"

As he sighed again, I simply sat there with my head in my hands. I'd been like this ever since we left Freesia. Yohan joined us in our carriage out of concern, smiling nervously from his place at Lance's side.

"Are you all right?" he asked, reaching across to pat me on the shoulder.



Perhaps he thought I was upset that I'd parted ways with Tiara on such bad terms. Or maybe he believed I was anxious about my future role as the general manager. Either way, I refused to raise my head to acknowledge him.

It took a full half hour before I spoke. "I don't know how I made Tiara so mad..."

The words dripped out of my mouth as heavy as mud. Despite my tone, my brothers looked relieved by my blunt, almost childlike confession.

Lance patted my shoulder. "That's all?"

"What did you say to her?" Yohan asked.

"Or did you do something?"

I brushed my blond hair to the side. "I just told her."

"Told her what?" Yohan prompted.

I lifted my head slightly and pressed my lips together as though I could hold back the rest of what I had to say. But Lance urged me to speak, so I did.

"I said she didn't need to worry about my feelings...if there was already someone else she loved."

"What?!"

"Huh?!"

My brothers cried out in shock. Lance even smacked my head hard enough for my teeth to clack.

"What are you doing?!" I shouted—but it wasn't loud enough to drown them out.

"How can you say that to someone you just proposed to?!"

"You finally get her to like you, then you go and waste it?"

I gulped. Lance yelled at me plenty, but it was rare to hear Yohan raise his voice. What about that made them so upset? I replayed my conversation with



Tiara in my head. Lance had dragged me away from Tiara, but Pride pushed us back together so we could talk in a quiet corner of the room. I'd whispered that comment about her loving someone else to a red-faced, crying Tiara as she scrubbed at her tears.

*"I'm sorry, but if you already love someone else...you don't need to worry about my feelings."*

*"Huh?"*

*"If it's too painful, I don't mind if you confess your feelings to him."*

*"Wait, what are you...?"*

Tiara had struggled to respond, confused by my offer. I faced her directly and did my utmost to make myself clear.

*"I've seen you and Prince Stale act as if you're in love. Or if you want to return Prince Leon's feelings for you, it's all right with me! If you want to share your life with the man you love, then I—"*

And that was when Tiara called me an idiot. I'd only been earnestly encouraging Tiara's happiness, but somehow I set her off instead. The perfection of the memory didn't alleviate my confusion when I replayed the moment.

Suddenly, Lance grabbed me by the hair. "What possessed you to say that?! Did you forget all the manners you learned?!"

"No, I-I didn't!" I replied, face twisting with pain and confusion. "She was crying so hard, though!"

For some reason, that shocked both my brothers. I suppose they'd assumed Tiara's crying was all my fault, but I had seen Pride explaining things to them. Then they'd looked at me and Tiara and some sort of understanding passed over their faces.

*"Obviously, she was crying because she didn't want to marry me!"*

My brothers fell silent, all their scolding abruptly coming to a halt. I continued



on, heedless of whatever this reaction might mean.

“Tiara was miserable at the thought of leaving her family! But I forced her to choose between that or the horrible idea of marrying me!”

I was being completely honest with them. This matter was of the utmost seriousness to me! Yet they watched me curiously, almost mockingly.

“She agreed to consider me as a fiancé even though she hated me enough to cry about it. That’s how badly she wanted to stay in Freesia! She was probably sobbing because she wouldn’t get to spend her life with the man she loved!”

I squeezed my fists as the guilt tore through me once again. Yet Yohan sat across from me, smirking. He even covered his mouth to conceal his laughter.

“Say, Cedric, did you ever figure out who this ‘man she loved’ was?” he asked me.

“That’s right, you mentioned you had some sort of rival for her heart...”

Deflated, I let my eyes droop. “Prince Stale and Prince Leon from Anemone.”

They looked even more surprised by that, but I barreled on before they could hurl questions at me.

“Even if she and Prince Stale loved each other, Tiara is the second-born princess. She can’t marry a Freesian prince, she has to marry foreign royalty. Prince Leon also told me things that made me think he loved her. He came running to help us during the war, saving a bunch of people in the process. Plus, he’s the heir to a major trading hub. What woman *wouldn’t* fall for him if she found out he was in love with her?”

The thoughts that had been weighing on me all this time tumbled out of my mouth. It was like Tiara had rejected me entirely. By the time I was finished, my head was hanging low. Even I could admit that Stale and Leon weren’t just kind and talented people—they were incredibly gorgeous too.

“So you think that Princess Tiara and Prince Stale are in love with each other, or that Prince Leon’s love for her has stolen her heart?” Yohan asked me.



“Exactly.”

I sank into a deep depression, and I wasn’t going to crawl out anytime soon. For that very reason, I only barely registered Yohan leaning over to whisper in Lance’s ear.

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“Does Cedric really not know about Princess Pride and Prince Leon?!” I asked Lance.

Before we even formed an alliance with Freesia, Lance had been gathering information about other nations thanks to his country’s harbor. During the process, we’d learned a lot about Anemone, the world’s trading hub. We were aware that Leon and Pride were close even after their engagement ended, and Lance kept me up to date on everything he learned. But back then, Cedric was still slipping through our fingers every time we tried to get him to study, so he had no idea.

Lance answered with a nod and folded his arms. Leon, the man who’d ended his engagement to Pride, would never seek a marriage with Tiara. In fact, we suspected that Tiara and Leon shared such a friendly, open relationship *because* there was no chance of them ever entering into a romance.

Cedric’s claim about Tiara and Stale was just as confusing. Stale clearly doted on Tiara as his little sister, but their relationship didn’t strike either of us as romantic. *If anything, it’s Princess Pride whom he...*

Neither of us would admit to following where that speculation led. We’d once incorrectly thought Cedric was in love with Pride, so we didn’t trust our judgment on such things the way we once had.

We did know one thing for sure: Cedric’s fears had no basis in reality.

Lance cupped his head in his hands as he studied his depressed little brother. I crossed my arms and smiled, but I had no more idea of what to do in this situation than Lance did.



“What now, Lance?”

“We’ve done enough. Just let him feel rejected.” Lance sighed like he was expelling any further thoughts on the matter from his body and leaned back in his seat.

“Are you sure?” I asked, reaching out to stroke Cedric’s hair. “Can’t we just tell him that *one* thing?”

“There’s no need. Let him work it out for himself. It will make things easier for Princess Tiara in the long run.”

“One thing? What thing?!” Cedric asked, jerking his head up. He scooted so far forward on his seat, he almost bumped noses with his older brother. “Is it someone else who has Tiara’s heart?!”

Lance shoved him backward. “Focus on the awful things you said first, idiot!”

“I’m telling you, I don’t know what I did wrong!”

I burst out laughing, clutching my sides. At length, I broke through their squabbling. “You really think you can be a general manager when you’re acting like this?”

Cedric shifted his gaze to me. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Lance, still fending off Cedric with one arm, said, “He doesn’t understand romance, but other than that, he’s doing just fine.”

In truth, Cedric had picked up on Tiara’s sadness before even her siblings noticed. But when Lance and I asked how he knew, he refused to answer, just as he refused to tell us when he fell for her.

“Tell me what you meant by that!” Cedric demanded.

“If we tell you, you have to say what made you fall for Princess Tiara in the first place,” Lance told him.

“Your little brother’s love life isn’t just some game, Bro!”

“You don’t even understand what’s going on in your own love life, you fool!”



I couldn't stop laughing as the spat played out before me. Cedric still believed that Tiara despised him and was desperate to come up with a way to make things right. I wanted to help him, but it was better if I kept my thoughts to myself.

*Too bad. He doesn't even realize they feel the same way about each other.*

My grin widened. The day after Pride's birthday party, Queen Rosa had summoned Lance and me to a "meeting between allies"—but it was there that we learned the truth.

*"Tiara, the second-born princess of our kingdom, has requested an engagement with the United Hanazuo Kingdom."*

Usually, Lance and I would receive this sort of news separately. Rosa explained that Tiara wanted us both to know of her request—she'd asked that all three of her marriage candidates come from the United Hanazuo Kingdom, though their names would remain a secret. Politically speaking, this was a great arrangement for us. Tiara, a second-born princess, could marry a prince or a king.

At first, Lance and I thought Tiara aimed to strengthen the relationship between our countries. But she didn't need to fill all three slots with people from Hanazuo if she didn't want to marry Cedric. Even if she only chose Lance and myself and excluded Cedric, it made no difference. The second-born princess of a prominent nation could say that she preferred to marry a king and that the second-born prince lacked the requirements to be her husband. Lance and I could think of no reason for her to add Cedric to her list when he'd already confessed his feelings to her—except that she'd already set her heart on him.

That meeting cast Tiara's reactions to Cedric in a whole new light. Lance and I could easily imagine how she'd respond when asked why she'd added Cedric to her list of candidates.

*"I only wanted to strengthen our bond with the United Hanazuo Kingdom!"*

Lance and I considered sharing the news with Cedric. With all of his past



mistreatment of Pride and Tiara, we decided it was best to shelter him from information that could send him into another one of his frenzies.

When Tiara realized that we knew of her marriage candidates, she started to behave suspiciously toward all of us—not just Cedric. It only got worse when she figured out that we knew Cedric reciprocated her feelings. After all, we knew that Tiara had added our names to her list as part of a failed plot to hide how she felt.

We could do nothing but show her kindness after the revelation, but one question still lingered on our minds.

“Really, why *did* you fall for such a person?” Lance mused aloud. It was a question directed at both Cedric and Tiara.

My laughter petered out as I waited for the response.

Cedric uncovered his face and grabbed Lance’s arm. “I’m not telling you!”

I grinned, adjusting my glasses. “Then we’ll just have to look forward to the day you finally decide to tell us.”

For now, I would rejoice over my little brother’s unwittingly requited love.

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“It doesn’t make any damn sense!”

*Wham!* The sound of a forehead meeting a table echoed through the room.

The same evening that Cedric and his brothers returned to Hanazuo, Arthur went to Captain Alan’s room to drink. Once I finished my duties for the day, I sat with Vice Captain Eric on either side of Arthur. His face was red, but I suspected it wasn’t because of the alcohol. I was right there with him.

“I didn’t expect that development either,” I said, setting my head in my hands. “How did it end up like this?”

I was drinking more than usual that night; I could already feel the flush in my face as I shook my head. The imperial knights weren’t used to seeing me so



tipsy. Vice Captain Eric looked past Arthur at me, smiled sympathetically, and took a commiserating drink. Arthur and I joined him, guzzling like drunkards.

Captains Alan and Callum exchanged pained looks across the table. Typically, we'd be the ones warning *them* to take it easy on the beverages, so I understood their perplexity. Plus, the knights were very cognizant of my status as the Freesian prince whenever I showed up to drink with them.

Captain Alan finally worked up the courage to call out to me. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric raised their heads.

"What exactly happened in the end?" he asked.

All three of us looked away and refused to speak.

I'd grown accustomed to gathering with the imperial knights in Captain Alan's room over the past two years, but he was markedly unsettled this time. Arthur and the vice captain had asked permission to come over, which Captain Alan had granted—but only if they explained that nightmarish scene he had encountered during the shift change. Captain Alan had invited Captain Callum too, and when the four knights entered his locked room...I was already waiting inside, making myself at home.

The knights had not been surprised to find someone in the room, though perhaps they were surprised it was *me* specifically. They'd shut the door quickly, before any other knight could catch a glimpse of their guest. Only Arthur had looked unruffled by my arrival. He'd sat right down next to me and said, "Let's drink."

I sulked, incapable of clinging to my usual neutral smile. Arthur topped me up while Vice Captain Eric, a knight who usually kept his distance around me, accepted a bottle from Captain Alan two seats away.

As the captains poured us more drinks, they watched us in bewilderment. In a reversal of our usual roles, they were the ones looking after the three of us this time.



“Sorry, but that’s confidential,” Arthur said, filling the void I wouldn’t.

He was so down, he kept his head glued to the table. Cedric, the royal prince, had proposed to Tiara. And Tiara had accepted the offer. Marriage candidates were kept in strict confidence; it wasn’t something we could casually chat about over drinks.

Vice Captain Eric apologized again after Arthur’s grumbling, while the captains stayed silent. I brooded beside them, and Captain Alan was presumably searching for something to say.

Captain Callum took a hearty swig of his drink. “Did Prince Cedric do something nasty to Princess Pride again?”

He was right to suspect that Cedric had *something* to do with all this fuss.

“No, but...” Vice Captain Eric faltered.

Arthur and I shook our heads in perfect unison, which led Captain Alan to clap a hand over his mouth.

“Nothing happened with Princess Pride!” Arthur said. “It’s just... It’s just...!”

He groaned and released his mug to clutch his head in both hands. He ruffled his long hair and pulled on his ponytail, leaving it in a tangle. I eventually took pity on him and yanked out his hair tie. Gravity brought Arthur’s hair cascading around him.

“I never predicted this,” I mumbled. “To think his true feelings were for someone else...”

I took a drink to hide my shame. Once it was gone, I slammed my mug on the table even more violently than usual. I tried to stay composed on the surface, but I had a feeling my eyes would betray everything. I twiddled Arthur’s hair tie between my fingers to dispel my frustration.

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric blushed at my reminder of the scene we’d witnessed. The captains exchanged a glance as they watched us. Captain Alan’s lips started to twitch, and Captain Callum nodded a bit too firmly, fiddling with



his bangs.

*Wait, did they already know?!*

Our reactions were apparently enough for them to draw a conclusion. It seemed they'd already guessed that Cedric was in love with Tiara. If they hadn't, Arthur's state of utter disarray told the story plainly enough. He was the one who'd been so worried about Pride and Cedric's relationship, after all. But the three of us had to act like we were maintaining this secret, and the captains couldn't openly console us either. Instead, they refilled our mugs with water and beer. Heavy on the water, in Arthur's case. He was a pain to deal with when he was really drunk.

Arthur thanked Captain Callum, but then his eyes went right back down to the table.

I had a solid guess as to what he was thinking. Pride hadn't been the least bit upset by the development. Ever since Arthur saw Pride grin and laugh with Cedric at the victory banquet, he'd been absolutely sure that Pride was in love with him. It was why today's revelation was such a shock. Cedric's initial proposal to Tiara was surprising enough on its own, but I knew Arthur was more concerned about Pride's reaction. Then it turned out that Pride had no romantic feelings for him at all! This whole time, she'd been giving him romantic advice behind the scenes.

The more answers he and I demanded, the more we realized just how wrong we'd been. He'd voiced none of his suspicions to me, likely terrified of a repeat of what happened during Pride's engagement to Prince Leon. I knew he still burned with shame at how his incorrect suspicions back then had upset me.

Realizing he'd made a similar mistake today must have left him unsteady on his feet. It was a miracle he hadn't passed out on the spot. Pride had smiled at us and described Cedric as a little brother. Hearing that, we both knew we were going to drink hard tonight. But even more shockingly...

"And then, Princess Ti—"



Before he could let the cat out of the bag, Arthur banged his forehead on the table over and over.

“Don’t forget we have training exercises tomorrow,” Captain Callum said. He gently lifted Arthur’s head by his long silver hair.

Arthur sat up obediently, revealing a forehead even redder than his face. “Sorry,” he said without taking his eyes off the table. He gulped down the water Captain Callum had poured for him and finally seemed to notice that his ponytail was undone. He looked around for his hair tie, only to spot it between my fingers. He snatched it away.

“I was wrong too,” I said softly.

“Huh?”

Arthur asked me to repeat myself. It took him a moment to realize I had jumped to the same conclusion about Pride and Cedric that he had. I stared off into the distance, lost in thought and ignoring my beer.

*I was sure that he was plotting to get closer to Freesia as one of Pride’s marriage candidates.*

Cedric would become the general manager of the postal system. He’d passed the exams effortlessly and earned the approval of Uncle Vest. I even predicted that he intended to establish his position in Freesia, not Hanazuo—but I’d assumed the goal was to get on Pride’s list or even get selected as her husband. Surely the general manager position was just a stepping stone to being the prince consort.

*I never expected him to be eyeing Freesia as his permanent home.*

I was ashamed of how badly I’d miscalculated Cedric’s intentions. I’d accepted over time that Cedric was a fine prince, but everything else had felt like pieces of a larger plot to get to Pride. In reality, Cedric had no interest in becoming the prince consort or spending his life with Pride. He honestly intended to become the general manager because he wanted to be with *Tiara*—all so that she could



stay in her homeland.

*“Someday, I hope to become very close to you and Princess Pride, Prince Stale.”*

I finally understood why Cedric said that to me at the victory banquet. He would become our brother-in-law if he married Tiara. Cedric’s confession had set off a cascade of realizations, all of which swirled around my head along with the alcohol.

Then I recalled Cedric’s parting words at my birthday party.

*“Prince Stale...I hope to one day become a citizen of this wonderful kingdom of Freesia.”*

That simple sentence had tipped me off to Cedric’s plan to settle down in Freesia and work on the international postal service from here. But he intended to build that future with Tiara, not Pride.

*I haven’t forgiven Prince Cedric for what he did to Pride. I’ll never forgive him, like I’ll never forgive Gilbert for what he did to Pride. But still...*

As my thoughts trailed off, I downed the rest of my beer. Complicated feelings bubbled up inside me until they overflowed.

“He really pisses me off.”

The imperial knights overheard my muttering. Captains Alan and Callum struggled to contain their laughter from across the table. No doubt, it was quite a thing to see their prince wearing the same despondent look as Arthur. It was almost as if...

“Whaaatever.”

I smiled. The alcohol was kicking in, causing me to slur my words. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric could definitely tell something was off. With a mischievous smirk, I turned to Arthur. We stared at each other’s red faces, pretending not to notice how drunk we were.

Once our hazy eyes met, I slammed my mug down and wrapped my free arm



around his shoulders. My smile morphed into a smirk, and I chuckled drunkenly. I took in the bewildered look on Arthur's face before I spoke.

"Now we have a real reason to give Prince Cedric a good punch."

Despite my red face and glazed eyes, my voice was as clear and strong as ever. Arthur blinked at my bold pronouncement, but then the same evil smile tugged at his lips.

"You're damn right."

Arthur wrapped his arm around my shoulders in return. Without another word, we toasted and downed the rest of our drinks.

By this point, the captains couldn't hide their laughter at our drunkenness. With our arms wrapped around each other, gleefully imagining all the ways in which we'd torment the foreign prince...we were, without a doubt, two men who'd just had our little sister stolen from us.

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I sat back and observed the drunken Arthur and Prince Stale, as well as Captains Alan and Callum enjoying the show from across the table. Like them, I'd had more to drink than usual that night. Struck by the memory of the love story that played out between Princess Tiara and Prince Cedric right before my eyes, I sighed. But I was the only one who knew the full story, and I managed to stay pretty calm about the whole thing. I was simply happy to know Princess Tiara—the girl who was so close to Arthur and her siblings, the girl who always treated us imperial knights with such kindness—was going to stay in Freesia. But most of all...

*Princess Tiara couldn't have made it more obvious.*

When I remembered how she'd reacted to the visitors from Hanazuo that morning, I had to bite back laughter. It was clear as day that Princess Tiara couldn't act normal around Prince Cedric. She blushed, her lips trembled, she stammered out a greeting when he merely said hello to her. A smile was



enough to make her leap backward and flee the scene. Kings Lance and Yohan seemed to make her nervous too, but her reactions to Prince Cedric really sealed the deal.

Only the kings and I seemed to pick up on her true feelings. Even Princess Pride and Prince Cedric believed she ran away because she was angry with him.

“So obtuse,” I murmured, then busied myself with another drink.







I glanced over at Arthur and Prince Stale, their arms still around each other, and marveled that they could be just as thickheaded as Princess Pride and Prince Cedric.

“I like today’s beer. It’s nice and bitter.”

Everyone turned to me when I spoke, but when they saw the pleasant smile on my face, they took another drink. We might’ve had slightly different tastes when it came to this beer, but I was the only one who described it as “bitter” and nothing more.



## The Right Person in the Right Place, Perhaps

**“H**OW ABOUT THIS, Callum?” Alan asked me. “It’s nice and flashy.”

I glared at my cohort as he picked up something utterly unsuitable for our objective. “Don’t forget why we’re here.”

It was hard to imagine Princess Pride’s birthday festivities had taken place just the night prior with the town outside the castle completely back to normal already. This late at night, the shops throughout the royal capital were closed, but vendors operating out of stalls and tents kept their lanterns lit to draw in customers on their way home from work. We passed vendors peddling food, alcohol, miscellaneous wares, cheap weapons, even art. This town lay close to the royal capital. Its many streetlamps created a safe atmosphere for shopkeepers and passersby alike. We regularly strolled through this market after finishing training at the castle.

“What’s with you, Callum?! It’s just a vase!”

“Yes, and it’s very nice,” Eric told Alan, “but a smaller one like this would be better to store a single flower in...”

Alan pouted. We’d stopped at a shop selling vases and pottery, and now we were scouring the packed wagons and shelves in the little stall in our search for the perfect flower vase. We needed a way to store the single roses and bouquets we’d received from Princess Pride.

“The bigger the better, right?” Alan countered. “I won’t have any use for the little ones later on.”

“Why do *you* get to be the judge?” I said. “You’ve never decorated with flowers before. Besides, you probably have a bigger one for bouquets already.”

I understood Alan’s logic, but he was wrong about this particular situation. Princess Pride herself had given us these roses. Her bouquets could fit in a



larger vase, but the single roses would need bud vases—small containers built to display one or two flowers each.

We'd get more use out of the bigger ones, but storing a single rose in a large vase would put stress on the flower, as it had to lean against the side to stand. And once trimmed, a flower had a short lifespan; we couldn't risk mishandling it.

Alan held up a vase too large to even display on a corner of a desk. It was definitely meant for an entire bouquet. I sighed; the single rose would drown in that thing.

"I guess I shouldn't get my hopes up for the man who keeps the princess's rose in an empty liquor bottle."

"I'm telling you, it's the perfect size!"

"Then how about we select vases the same size as liquor bottles?" Eric said, trying to placate Alan, who never seemed willing to back down.

Eric and I had decided to visit the market after our training exercises, hoping to go home with the perfect vases. We only invited Alan because we happened to run into him at the front gates, but he also had a rose from Princess Pride, so it made sense for him to join us.

We were shocked to learn that Alan had no desire to buy vases whatsoever. Anyone else would go to whatever lengths it took to extend the life of flowers like the ones we'd received, but Alan was considering leaving them as they were or sticking them all in one big vase.

When I asked him about his plans, he said, "I already have a few liquor bottles lying around." The man was going to stick a precious gift from Anemone into alcohol bottles! Even if they *had* already undergone their color transformation, his careless disregard made me feel like I was going to lose my mind.

"I figured you two would already have small vases," Eric said. "You seem into that kind of thing."



“I don’t have any bud vases on hand, no,” I replied. “The roses weren’t the right height for my vases either.”

I held up a cylindrical vase and brushed my bangs aside with my free hand. Though I already had a vase in my room where I kept my bouquet, I carefully considered how the one I held might suit my single rose. I’d gotten that other vase when I joined the main forces of the royal order, but I never looked at it as anything more than a bit of decoration. I certainly never thought I’d ever need to display a single rose. But I couldn’t stand the idea of keeping Princess Pride’s special rose hidden amid the bouquet. I made up my mind. I needed a smaller, separate vase, even if it was only a cheap one I found at the market.

“I only have large ones too,” Eric said. “Though my family keeps bud vases at home.”

“Good point, Eric,” Alan said. “Can’t you just head home and get one? Your family lives pretty close.”

“Well, no, I... This rose was a gift. I’d prefer to buy something brand new for it.”

Eric’s face fell. He returned a simple bulb-shaped vase to its shelf and took a deep breath.

Alan was right; Eric could have left right after training and gone to his family home to grab one. But what would his family think of that? They might find it strange that he wanted to display a rose from the princess. I understood why he’d prefer to buy a new vase from the market instead of having to come up with some excuse for his family. Plus, his notoriously pesky little brother wouldn’t be able to tease him about it if he never knew.

“Oh yeah?” Alan said, tilting his head.

Compared to the liquor bottle he planned to use, a well-worn vase would’ve been a tasteful and sentimental way to display the rose. He told Eric not to overthink it, but then a new thought seemed to strike him.



“Arthur’s probably getting one from his family, right? I saw him going home with his roses tonight.”

“Ah... Now that I think of it, he was sprinting home after training. He didn’t even take a horse,” Eric said.

Princess Pride had gifted an entire rosebush to Arthur’s family in addition to the roses she gave him personally. He’d run home cradling the plant as soon as training exercises ended that evening. We hadn’t even gotten a chance to invite him on this outing. Since he had to take the roses home anyway, it was probably less awkward for *him* to borrow a vase from his family while he was there. Not that it really mattered if the vases we used were brand new or not.

“Now that I’m here, I may as well buy something,” Eric went on. “Captain Alan, what do you think of—no, Captain Alan, don’t choose a red one! The rose is already red!”

Eric froze in the middle of picking up another vase when he spotted Alan’s choice. I sympathized with his need to stress the point—it was almost like Alan was *trying* to make the wrong choices.

“But it reminds me of her,” Alan said, only half-serious.

He regularly took shopping trips with us, but it seemed like he was enjoying the new experience of picking out vases more than our other trips. His current vase was a hand-me-down from another knight.

“Go with a black one or something dark, Alan,” I said. “You’ll probably get it dirty anyway, so pick a color where that won’t stand out.”

“It’s not like I’m gonna use it once the roses are dead.”

Eric chuckled. “You can’t say that for sure. Knowing her, it’s entirely possible she’ll give us even more flowers in the future.”

We were being careful not to say the princess’s name aloud in the market, but we all knew who Eric meant.

The debate went on as we perused the vases, but there was no bitterness



behind it. We weren't just bickering to stoke our egos; we all cared a lot about Princess Pride's feelings. She was the kind of person who would share gifts with her own imperial knights, after all. Eric had a good point. We didn't want to get our hopes up for more gifts, but we should prepare for the future regardless. Alan regarded the vases on display with newfound determination.

"You're probably right," he and I murmured at the same time.

Eric blushed even though he'd been the one to suggest the idea. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, masking his bashfulness by examining something on one of the shelves.

"What vase were you talking about?" Alan asked as he joined Eric at the shelf. He let out an "ooh!" when Eric pointed at a simple bud vase. The glossy sheen of the cylindrical black vase reflected the lantern light. Not only would it hide stains, but it also captured a certain elegant spark that reminded me of Princess Pride herself. Eric grinned as he plucked it off the shelf.

"Nice, Eric! You sure know how to pick 'em. Can I take this one? Which one do you want?"

"I'm glad you like it, Captain Alan. I prefer this one here, so feel free to buy the black one."

Alan looked guilty about taking the vase with the best design, but Eric picked one from the shelf above—a bulb-shaped vase he'd latched on to as soon as he spotted it. A string of painted ivy curled around the base of the simple white piece. Eric made up his mind on the spot.

"I like it!" Alan said, though he clutched his black vase possessively. The man was chaos walking. Whether he admitted it or not, I figured he would want something dark enough to hide the dirt and stains that sometimes came with our jobs.

Alan and Eric looked to me next. After what Eric said, I deliberated as I compared two different glass vases. They snickered as they watched me crane my neck to examine the vases without picking them up.



It was unusual to find glass vases for sale in the market, as they were both valuable and easily broken. I was trying to decide between a blue-tinted vase that would accentuate the red rose or a clear vase that wouldn't clash with any flower.

My family's manor would possess no shortage of vases. They would be both higher quality and more valuable than the ones at this shop too. My brother and I both enjoyed simple designs, so the family kept lots of glass vases around the home.

After considering whether I could reuse the vase in the future, I decided Princess Pride's rose should be my priority. I would have to return home on a day off and retrieve a good glass vase for it.

"I think a clear vase fits your personality best, Callum. But you've probably got a ton of them back at the Bordeaux estate, huh?"

"That's not true... Well, I suppose there might be one or two..." I turned away, self-conscious of the fact that Alan had practically read my mind. He *did* have a point, but I hadn't expected him to come to the same conclusion as I had. I bit my cheek and settled on the blue-tinted glass bud vase instead.

"Glad we managed to make up our minds!"

Alan's smile left me tense with embarrassment. But then I remembered how Alan had needed a subordinate's help to pick out a vase, and it made me feel a bit better.

"Does your family not decorate with flowers, Alan?"

"Eh, I feel like we used to from time to time. I wasn't really in charge of it. When my parents asked me, I just stuffed flowers into my boots and stuff."

He was chuckling, but Eric and I exchanged a horrified glance. Surely the part about the boots had to be some sort of strange joke—but knowing Alan, we couldn't rule it out. Maybe picking out a liquor bottle for his rose was actually a sign of care, not indifference. Alan couldn't possibly mishandle a present from



Princess Pride.

“Alan, be sure to buy a new vase if you damage this one.”

“Please don’t try to cram a lot of flowers into one bud vase either, Captain.”

“I know, I know.”

Everyone saw Alan as reliable, both in his knightly duties and at social events. Nevertheless, Eric and I vowed that when it came to flowers, we would keep a watchful eye on our colleague.

Alan paid for his vase, ignorant to our staring. “Everybody loved the flowers she presented to the royal order too. Well, I guess they were more excited about who they came from.”

“I’m sure that’s part of it,” I said, “but I doubt the other knights have ever seen those blue roses before now.”

We weren’t the only ones to receive flowers from the princess. With the help of her gardeners and some rookie knights, a corner of the royal order’s training grounds now housed a freshly planted rosebush. The rookies, armed with knowledge from the palace gardeners, would look after it. Alan, Eric, and I had witnessed a crowd of knights clustered around it before we left for the market.

“Roses are already pretty rare, but not even the highest-ranking noble families get to see blue ones like those,” Alan said. “I don’t see why they’d be any less fascinating to our elite knights.”

I paid for my vase while the others talked. I certainly wasn’t the only knight in the royal order who came from nobility, but I suspected almost all of them would be eager to see the blue roses regardless.

Eric smiled and agreed, then finished his purchase. As a commoner, he probably found the roses fascinating, but I figured most of the gushing over their rarity and value came from upper-class families.

“The legend that came with them was interesting too,” he said. “Remember the thing from the placard?”



A placard stuck out of the soil where the roses were planted. It explained that the roses were a gift from Anemone, provided information about their ecology, and described a legend about how their incredible transformation worked. When Princess Pride explained it, it was clear that the legend was a story people used when they confessed their love or proposed to their partner.

“She still went and gave us each a rose after she read about that legend. Isn’t that so like her?” Alan said. “You turned really red, Callum.”

“You froze up too!” I shot back, glaring at him.

He laughed shyly. “Well, I mean, come on!”

Eric hadn’t been there in that moment, but our descriptions probably painted a vivid enough picture in his mind. When Alan and I had arrived for our shift change, we received roses directly from Princess Pride, just like Eric and Arthur. She explained the legend and ecology in advance that time so as not to startle us—not that it did any less damage to our hearts. We didn’t stand a chance of remaining calm, not when that explanation came from Princess Pride’s own rosebud lips and when she insisted on giving each knight a flower personally.

Alan had gone stiff as a statue and leaned away from Princess Pride as she approached him, rose in hand. It was a miracle he didn’t snap the stem in half as soon as he accepted it.

In the few short steps it took for Princess Pride to reach me, I had replayed the story of the legend in my head so many times that I started to hallucinate and see her as the goddess from the tale. Blood rushed to my face. I couldn’t look away from her smile.

We’d managed to thank her despite our spiking blood pressure, but now it was hard to remember the roses’ transformations. Only Princess Pride’s smile remained vivid in my memory.

“She tells us about how those roses are basically meant to seduce people, then she smiles like an angel and presents us with flowers,” Alan said. “No one’s making it out of that alive.”



He waved his hand dismissively, though bringing it up had made him blush. Eric and I could do little but agree. We were all lucky we hadn't fainted on the spot. We cradled our vases in our hands as we exited the shop.

"Commander Roderick banned everyone from picking roses off the bush, but I bet a lot of guys would love to use them."

"He didn't have a choice," I told Alan. "Not unless he wanted all the roses going missing."

The Freesian royal order was made up of a large group of men. They would definitely want to try the color transformation for themselves once they read the legend on the placard.

"The knights with girls in mind were the ones who wanted them the most," Eric said. "Those roses are perfect for love confessions and proposals, like Captain Alan was saying."

"Now that you mention it, Steve and Hannes really wanted to get their hands on one of those roses," Alan mused aloud. "Bryce too."

"Bryce wanted them for his wife, I'm sure. He was trying to haggle with Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark to let him take three roses home with him."

"Oh, right!" Eric chimed in. "Vice Commander Clark should have had roses sent to his home too."

Arthur had taken home the roses meant for Commander Roderick, but we all knew Princess Pride gave our commander and vice commander rosebushes of their own. The ones addressed to Vice Commander Clark were delivered to the training grounds, while Princess Pride had sent a messenger to inform Commander Roderick that Arthur already had the roses meant for his family. This prevented people from thinking the princess was showing favoritism to the vice commander, but it backfired and riled up the rest of the knights when they learned of it.



Eric chuckled as Alan and I rehashed the situation. The commander and vice commander both had wives who would surely love the roses. They could present their wives with a single flower, just as Princess Pride had done for us. Receiving a transforming, soulmate-discerning rose would sweep any woman off her feet. What better gift could they receive from a man they loved?

“What would you do if those roses really *did* tell you who your soulmate was? Would you still use them?” Alan asked.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Eric said, suddenly gloomy. “I think it would scare me a bit. It would be sad to be in love with someone only to find out they’re not actually your soulmate.”

I nodded in agreement. It was romantic to think a rose could change colors when exchanged by soulmates, but I understood why he wouldn’t want something as simple as a flower controlling his and his partner’s feelings or lives. Regardless of whether you separated or stayed together, you would never be able to forget that a rose had a hand in that decision.

Alan regarded Eric thoughtfully. “Oh yeah? I think I’d go for it if it was me. Depending on the girl, wouldn’t it be kinda fun to keep on trying and trying until the flower finally changed colors when you gave it to her?”

“That’s your plan? To try and manipulate fate?” I asked with a sweep of my bangs.

That was the Alan I knew, all right. Rather than manipulating fate, Alan likely saw this as carving his own path through it. Neither me nor Eric said anything about the “depending on the girl” part of Alan’s declaration. As long as Alan’s feelings weren’t directed toward a member of the royal family, he was bound to pursue them as quickly as he could. That dogged determination helped explain why he would never give up until the rose finally transformed.

“What about you?” Alan asked me.

I averted my gaze. I did believe it was worth testing the roses to see if they would reveal who my soulmate was, but Eric’s argument made sense too. “I



think they'd be nice to use for a proposal. It would benefit both of you that way. Finding out someone's not your soulmate *after* the wedding would be a tragedy."

We all had to be thinking about Princess Pride's engagement to Prince Leon then. But even magical roses were meaningless when it came to marriages created solely to strengthen countries or families. Maybe it depended on the definition of a soulmate, but these types of relationships were matters of profit, not love.

My brilliant older brother had spared the family any such marriages, but if I was ever forced to marry a woman simply for political expediency, the existence of a soulmate-finding rose would complicate things. I'd probably be happier to remain ignorant if I had no way to deny the marriage. Though knowing for sure could make it easier to accept fate. If the woman *did* turn out to be my soulmate...

No. In the end, nothing would change either way.

"Could you say that to someone you actually loved?" Alan asked, all but reading my mind once again.

I fell silent. Alan must've already sussed out how deeply I cared for Pride, and *now* he seemed to discern that I was thinking of political marriages. *Someone you actually loved*. That phrasing forced me to redirect my train of thought.

I would only give a blue rose to the woman I was planning to marry, depending on the nature of our relationship. I didn't have the mental fortitude to carve a path through fate like Alan, but I also didn't assume the rose would fail me like Eric did. In fact, when I pictured it, the idea filled me with hope. If I married someone, I didn't want to bind them to me if we weren't soulmates. All the more reason to obtain decisive proof before taking that step.

This felt like the kind of conclusion that only could have come from Alan. I found Alan smirking at me and realized he was *enjoying* this. My furrowed brow had to be answer enough. He raised his arms to stretch, still clutching his vase



in both hands.

“Man, I wonder if she would’ve gotten all shy if we had given her roses.”

“Oh, the deliveryman actually did that,” Eric said. “She accepted a rose from him and everything.”

“For real?!” Alan cried out.

I was just as interested. Alan and I forced Eric to recount the incident, and he did so with an awkward smile on his face. He said that he and Arthur, the only imperial knights present, felt like they were going to drop dead when they witnessed that display. They really thought the roses only changed colors when exchanged between soulmates. Val’s act only upset the knights, but apparently, Arthur and Eric felt for a moment like they’d witnessed something catastrophic. Eric still seemed angry that Val had gotten one over on him.

“If the deliveryman could do it, do you think she’d let us give her a rose if we had the chance?”

“We shouldn’t be imitating someone as disrespectful as him, Alan.”

My warning only emboldened him to say something even more shocking. “But don’t you think she’d be really happy if we gave her roses and told her how we feel?”

“How we *feel*?!” I exclaimed.

Eric’s chestnut eyes went as wide as saucers, and he let out a cry as loud as mine. It was hard not to read deeper into Alan’s words. After all, he had utterly failed to keep his feelings for Princess Pride hidden from the other knights.

“I just meant praising her or telling her how grateful we are,” Alan said, chuckling at how startled we looked.

I sighed. I didn’t know *what* Alan might say to Princess Pride if he ever got his chance.

“I’m already really happy she gave us the blue roses at all,” Alan said. “I just wish I could give her one back, y’know?”



Eric and I didn't know how to respond. He didn't sound embarrassed in the slightest.

"That's what happened in the legend too."

Clearly Alan held strongly to his own ideals, both as a knight and as a man. It was already the highest honor to receive a rose directly from Princess Pride, but Alan seemed to prefer gifting a flower to receiving one.

Alan appeared to reflect on his words, though an opportunity to give a rose to Pride would likely never happen outside his imagination. Princess Pride's smile—so much like a flower itself—and the transforming rose were lovely enough on their own. But no matter how she interpreted it, I was sure Alan would be thrilled if Princess Pride smiled and accepted a flower from him. I wouldn't be surprised if her smile had opened his mind to the appeal of roses in the first place. Maybe he'd even gone so far as to fill up that liquor bottle he'd been saving for her rose with water to keep it alive!

"I guess you're right," I said eventually. "She's probably much more suited for receiving roses than giving them."

We'd walked a good distance from the market when I broke the contemplative silence. Princess Pride had already looked like a goddess to me when she first gave me the rose. I didn't necessarily want to recreate the legend with her, but I'd be lying if I said she couldn't steal my heart. I pictured her smiling and accepting a rose from me. Even in my imagination, my eyes were glued to her, my heart rate skyrocketing. The more I thought about it, the more I had to force myself not to squeeze the flower vase in my hands too tightly.

"That's...definitely true," Eric said. "Anyone would feel blessed just to be able to gift her a rose. I don't think they'd care about the soulmate part at all."

He looked up at the night sky and chuckled softly. Like the rest of us, he struggled to look Princess Pride in the eyes for too long, even if it would be to give her a single rose. His cheeks flushed, and that proved he was in the same headspace as I was: picturing that moment of gifting a rose to Princess Pride.



Perhaps he thought Alan and I would hold ourselves together whereas he alone would flounder, but I doubted our reactions would ultimately make a difference to the princess. That kind woman would smile at us without an ounce of disgust or disdain.

All three of us fell silent as our imaginations ran wild. We followed the main road that led to the castle, the evening breeze not enough to cool our rising temperatures. Though we did not speak, our thoughts doubtless lingered on the same thing.

Once we spotted the castle gates, Alan finally spoke. "Those blue roses. I get why any man with a woman in his life would want one."

Eric and I nodded eagerly.

"Me too."

"I couldn't agree more, Captain."

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"We should have sent them home with bud vases too."

Stale muttered those words under his breath as we paced the gardens. He, Tiara, and I would usually be in our rooms by this hour, but tonight was special. My guards, including Jack, followed after us. We were bundled up against the evening breeze, but beneath our heavy jackets we were wearing pajamas. Stale's sudden remark brought to mind something I'd missed earlier today when I'd given my imperial knights their roses.

"That's true," I said, slouching. I hadn't thought ahead to how they would preserve the roses, even though they probably already had vases to keep their bouquets in.

"Shall we prepare some for them tomorrow?"

"It'll be all right!" Tiara chimed in. "They'll definitely find ways to care for the roses!"

"Tiara's right," Stale said. "Arthur can probably get a vase since he's taking his



flowers home, and you can always ask the others about their plans tomorrow.”

My siblings made a good point. Giving them vases would only burden them if they already had some at home. There were plenty of vases they could take from the castle, but if it really came down to it, a normal drinking glass could preserve a single rose just fine.

I felt eyes on me and turned around. Jack offered me a smile and a nod, confirming that he didn’t need any extra help getting a vase. I’d ask Mary and Lotte tomorrow just to be safe.

“What vase did you choose, Big Brother?”

Stale pushed up his glasses. “I told my maids to handle that.”

Though he and Tiara often visited my room, we rarely entered his. That stoked Tiara’s impish curiosity, but Stale refused to tell her any more. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little curious too.

He’d told the maid that his rose was a “precious gift from Elder Sister” when he placed it in her care, so I was sure she’d treat it with utmost delicacy. This was Stale we were talking about, after all.

“Oh! Look over there!”

Tiara broke into a jog, pointing at the castle’s new rose garden. The spot had been bare yesterday, but today the roses I received from Leon stood on display. The blue flowers sat harmoniously alongside bright-red ones in a special spot picked out by the palace gardeners. In the dark, the flowers nearly blended into the night itself.

“They’re lovely,” I said. “I’m glad we came and saw them tonight like you suggested, Tiara. It’s a full moon and everything.”

“You can see the full moon right behind them from where I’m standing,” Stale said. “It makes them look even more magical.”

“Really?!” Tiara and I cried out in tandem.

Stale stood a couple steps behind us, looking at the roses from an angle. We



rushed to join him. From this spot, the moon shone in the night sky just behind the blue roses. The captivating sight stole my breath away. What a relief to know we hadn't missed this opportunity. If I had something like a camera from my past life, I would snap dozens of pictures to preserve this moment.

It was already so lovely, but I leaned toward Stale to try to center the full moon right behind the roses. He definitely had the best angle of any of us. Distracted, I accidentally brushed my cheek against his shoulder. Stale gasped and jerked backward. I quickly apologized for pushing him out of his spot.

"No, I've seen it plenty now," he murmured into his hand, but he bumped into Tiara when he stepped back.

Tiara and I had truly butted him out. I felt bad that he had such childish sisters. We both apologized, though Tiara and I wound up standing shoulder to shoulder to gaze at the roses.

*"I bet the blue roses will look really beautiful in the light of the full moon!"*

It was Tiara who'd approached us with the idea to go out into the garden that night. She'd suggested it during dinner, when we received word that the blue roses had been planted in the garden, and I'd agreed immediately.

*Actually, I think Tiara invited one of the love interests to see roses at night with her.*

Which character had it been? I racked my brain for all the highlights of *Our Ray of Light*. Each love interest had a scene where he exchanged a blue rose with Tiara, the game's heroine.

From what I remembered, Stale tried to send Tiara roses even before the player entered his route. I didn't know how many years before the start of the game that moment occurred. When Stale told the tower-bound Tiara about the blue roses, she replied that she'd always longed to see them.

She finally got a chance to see them firsthand after the start of the game, when Stale confessed, *"I've thought about sending you these roses many times*



*ever since that day.*” Tiara thanked him and told him she appreciated his kindness. She believed Stale couldn’t send her the rare roses because Queen Pride would be enraged. Stale’s true conflict was something else, and he smiled sadly when he realized Tiara had mistaken his intentions.

In the end, he didn’t even give Tiara a blue rose in that scene. He’d already explained the legend to her and now found it too awkward to recreate the story with Tiara. I pitied the Stale of the game. He’d lost his chance at a little romance due to the naturally airheaded Tiara. In the end, he finally gave her a rose only after the two of them fled the castle.

*“You’ve always loved them, haven’t you? Now I’ve finally given you one.”*

He’d sneakily picked a blue rose from the garden, hoping it would cheer Tiara up as she anxiously faced life on the run. It was a beautiful scene—Tiara was captivated by the color-changing rose while Stale was captivated by Tiara herself.

“Black? Or blue? What about...ceramic? Or maybe glass?”

“A glass vase that’s green and black.”

The present-day Tiara and Stale were chatting behind me. Tiara had joined Stale while I was lost in my reverie, and the two kept their voices hushed—likely to avoid disturbing me. I couldn’t hear everything they were discussing, but a backward glance revealed Tiara cupping her mouth, whispering into Stale’s ear.

Suddenly, Tiara hopped up and down. “How lovely!”

Stale crossed his arms at that, shoulders lowering.

*With Arthur, I think it was when the two of them were strolling through the garden.*

My thoughts drifted back to the game as I returned my attention to the roses. As I recalled, the game’s rose garden wasn’t as big as ours and held even fewer of these. Blue roses appeared around the time Arthur and Tiara started growing closer. Arthur had never been to the garden at the royal residence before, so he



accompanied Tiara to the slightly isolated spot where the blue roses were planted.

Tiara was the one to explain the legend to the knight, since he'd never seen such flowers before. When she told him how much she adored blue roses and their story, Arthur narrowed his eyes, irritated by his own turbulent emotions. He knew he wanted to give Tiara a rose but had yet to realize that he was in love with her. As a knight, Arthur kept a tight lid on his feelings.

He didn't actually give her a rose in that scene. *Ah, that's right. It was after he discovered his true special power.* They drifted apart, only to grow close again. One night, Tiara was startled to find Arthur at her door. He handed her a rose and disappeared before she knew what was happening.

*"No, it's late. I should go. I just came to give you this. Sweet dreams."*

While Tiara was distracted by the rose's transformation, Arthur fled, missing the color change himself. He had plucked one of the valuable blue roses without permission and was probably feeling shy, but now that I thought back to that scene, Arthur reminded me so much more of Commander Roderick. The commander wasn't the type to pick a rose from the garden without permission, but this sort of clumsy expression of love felt more like him than the present-day Arthur.

*I wish I could watch Commander Roderick give a rose to his wife.*

"I bet Arthur would be great at giving them to a loved one now."

Though I hadn't intended to say it aloud, Tiara overheard me and rushed to my side. "You mean one of these roses?!"

I covered my mouth and gulped. "Yes, that's right," I replied, unable to explain that I was comparing Arthur to a version of himself from an otome game. At the very least, I was confident that Arthur wouldn't hesitate to pick and present Tiara with a rose if he heard her longing for one now. Well, maybe if it wasn't a rose from the royal family's garden.



“Arthur isn’t as smooth as you think,” Stale said. “He’d be terrified and too humble to give you a rose, although he’d get his act together if he absolutely had to. I can just picture him turning bright red and holding out the rose with trembling fingers.”

“You aren’t one to talk, Big Brother!”

The second Tiara spoke, Stale let out a pained grunt, like she’d punched him in the stomach. I chuckled. They seemed to think I was talking about myself, not Tiara, but I agreed with Stale. Arthur would probably be nervous to give *me* a rose, so I couldn’t picture how he might react with my adorable sister.

“You’d get really embarrassed, wouldn’t you, Big Brother?” Tiara said. “You’d blush and your glasses would fog up until you couldn’t look her in the eyes anymore. Unlike Arthur, you’d make up a reason to run away—mmph!”

Stale covered Tiara’s mouth before she could finish. Her tiny eyebrows knit together as she shook her head in protest.

“That’s enough, Tiara,” Stale said with rosy cheeks, too strong for her to push away. He was nearly an adult now, though he’d definitely feel shy if he ever presented a woman with a rose. He was popular with the ladies throughout high society, and if he fell for one of them, he would definitely give her a rose more romantically than his in-game counterpart.

*Prime Minister Gilbert was much more mature in his scene.*

In the game, he was a secret route. He’d initially appeared as a thirteen-year-old boy named Gil. He decided to give Tiara a rose when she shared the legend of the blue roses with some children in town, all while disguised as an ordinary citizen. With an innocent smile on her face, she insisted that they really existed and she loved the idea of them. Gil presented her with one the very next day. He showed up in the middle of the night and handed it to her without any fuss.

*“I just happened to have one. It’s much better suited to a lady such as yourself.”*



Tiara was startled to see the very rose that had been on her mind the night before. She asked how Gil could have obtained a rose that only grew in the Freesian castle garden, but Gil dodged her question in a way that reminded me of the prime minister I knew today. It was excellent foreshadowing for the reveal of his true identity...even if the exchange was over in an instant, and Gil never acted even slightly embarrassed or anything. At least the player could sense the romance behind the gesture.

*"I'm just glad you like it,"* Gil had said to the elated Tiara. He'd seemed pleased, but it was like the whole thing wasn't a big deal to him at all. It was just another example of how Gilbert's route lacked romance—part of the reason I didn't remember it very well. I was confident that even now, Prime Minister Gilbert would give Tiara a blue rose without hesitation if he heard her say how much she adored the legend.

"We'll have to thank Prince Leon for his roses again!" Tiara said. "I'm so happy I get to see them with you two!"

Unable to contain herself, Tiara jumped for joy. I agreed with a giggle. Tiara was just so adorable. And Leon really *was* perfect in every way, even when it came to presents.

*Yet Tiara was the one taking care of Leon in their relationship.*

When that thought struck me, I stared off into the distance again. Leon was a perfect, model prince in this world, but his introduction in the game was downright dreadful. Tiara led Leon, who'd locked himself away in his room with a broken heart, by the hand out to the garden. That was where the rose scene played out in his route. Feeling the sunlight on his body for the first time in ages, Leon froze the moment he saw the roses. Then he gazed at the flowers lovingly, creating a gentle, romantic scene with Tiara.

*"Do you know of them?"* Tiara asked in the game.

Leon explained wistfully that his homeland of Anemone cultivated the blue roses. Instead of the large-scale cultivation Anemone had accomplished in this



world, Leon described them as an extremely rare variety of rose, even within Anemone. Queen Pride had probably forced Anemone to give her the roses growing in the garden. *Would you expect anything less from the last boss Pride?*

Naturally, Leon already knew of the roses' legend. Tiara told him how much she loved the story about the goddess and then... *Yes, that was the exact moment Leon gave her a rose.* I recognized in him the same Leon I knew now, even when his heart had been torn to pieces. He knew very well that he might face punishment if Queen Pride ever learned of his actions.

*"It's all right. I'm giving this to you because that's what I want. There's no deeper reason than that."*

With that ephemeral smile on his face, he looked the part of the perfect prince. Queen Pride had traumatized him to the point that he even feared Tiara, but his desire to make her happy in that moment overcame the rest.

*"This is just between us,"* he told Tiara, elegantly pressing his finger to his lips.

*Leon's route was soooo sweet! It makes sense that he was the character in charge of adding a little sensuality to the game.*

The present-day Leon gave us more roses than he could even carry. It was somewhat strange to think about. The roses felt less like gifts from a goddess of legend and more like symbols of Leon's happiness. A single rose could not convey all the love Leon had in his life these days.

In ORL, Tiara never took any of the love interests out into the gardens at night. At first, I thought she brought Leon out here then, but then I remembered the characters enjoying the sunrise. Arthur gave her a rose at night, but she didn't accompany him to the gardens for that, and Stale's scene took place during the day too. That only left...

*Cedric.*

As rude as it was—and it was *very* rude of me—thinking about him gave me a headache. Tiara and Stale eyed me with concern as I rubbed my temples, but I



couldn't help it. In developing one-sided feelings for Tiara, he was the only character following the same progression as the game. Tiara had initially liked him even less here than she did in the game.

Cedric had been so happy when Tiara brought him out to look at the blue roses that night. At that point in the story, he was desperately trying to make her fall for him. Despite his usual frenzied pursuit of her, Cedric took a genuine interest in the blue roses. That was what led to him and Tiara exchanging roses in his route.

At first, they'd come across the rare flowers during a stroll through the garden earlier in the day. When Tiara explained the legend, Cedric perked up, excited to lay eyes on a blue rose for the first time in his life. His enthusiasm made Tiara really happy. She must have been moved to finally see him interested in something other than winning her heart.

Cedric, enchanted by the novel color of the flowers, said, *"I'm sure these roses would be even more beautiful under the light of tonight's full moon."*

In response, Tiara asked Cedric to join her in the garden later that night. She'd never invited him to do anything of her own volition before. No one stopped them from entering the garden once night fell, since they were already engaged. Under the light of the full moon, they gazed at the blue roses in pure awe. But Cedric never actually gave Tiara a rose in that scene. Presented with a perfect opportunity to seduce her, he held back. He knew the roses turned red when given to a soulmate, and that knowledge squashed his desires.

Cedric didn't know what to do. He doubted he was Tiara's soulmate—after all, he only wanted to make her fall for him so he could kill her. If the rose didn't change color, it would expose his repulsive feelings as well as his true motives. If I remembered correctly, Cedric didn't give Tiara one of the blue roses until the very end of the game—after they'd defeated Pride and prepared to live happily ever after.

*"Back then, I was terrified that the rose wouldn't transform, but now I'm*



*ready to pledge my love to you,”* he told her, handing her the rose as part of a proposal. The blossom turned red, and the route achieved its good ending. It was all very typical of an otome game’s most popular route.

Now that I’d reincarnated into the game world, I understood that the roses turned red no matter who exchanged them. Even as a character in the game, Cedric was purehearted enough to truly believe the blue roses could determine if someone was your soulmate.

I wondered if he would ever give a blue rose to Tiara under the current circumstances. I’d seen the eager look in his eyes when he watched me give the others their roses, but he still struggled to say even a single word to Tiara. That said, I *did* want to support him.

“How would you like to be given one of these roses, Tiara?”

“Wh-what?! M-me?!”

Tiara jolted when I hit her with that question out of nowhere, turning her crystalline golden eyes on me. She blushed to receive such a personal question with no warning. Although she loved talking about romance, it seemed this was too sudden. Stale watched with interest as Tiara pressed her hands to her burning cheeks and cast her eyes aside.

“Hmm, I-let’s see! I-If that ever happened...I-I-I-I’d want it to be from someone I loved and who loved me back... L-Like in the legend you told us about. It would be nice...as a marriage proposal! D-don’t you agree that it sounds lovely?!”

Her voice shook as she stuttered out a hasty response. She looked up at me, waiting for a reply, like she wasn’t confident in her own answer. I thought a rose as a marriage proposal was perfect for a young maiden like Tiara.

“Yes, it would be wonderful.”

Tiara sighed with relief. A marriage proposal with a rose was indeed a lovely idea. Would Cedric pull it off? *You gave her a rose in the game.* But that was just



the game. Tiara had never received a rose from anyone other than me in this world.

“I’m sorry I was the first one to give you a rose, Tiara, but I really do love you.”

“I’m not mad at all! It made me really, really happy! I put your rose in a cute vase in my room and everything!”

She flailed, but her words made me smile. This sister of mine was just so adorable. She squeezed her fists and insisted she meant it, and I thanked her for her honesty.

“Wh-what about you, Big Sister?! I’d like to hear what you think too!”

I didn’t expect her to target me next, but I should have; I’d brought up the subject in the first place.

“Let me think...” I began, but then my mouth clamped shut.

Stale’s eyes were fixed on me. I searched around, trying to come up with the right words, desperately replaying each rose scene from the game in my mind.

“I-I like the version from the legend too, I suppose. I think it’s nice when both of you already know about the legend, but you exchange roses anyway. A formal presentation is nice too, but it’s best when it’s a casual sort of thing...”

“In other words, your ideal scenario is the way Val presented you with a rose?” Stale asked, his voice low.

*Oof!* I nearly choked at his unexpected response. I’d already been blushing and fanning myself, since I *never* talked about my romantic preferences, and I completely overlooked that I was describing something I’d already experienced. *Val! You’ll pay for this!*

He did present that rose to me very casually in that moment, but now it made me sad to think that there wasn’t an ounce of romance behind the gesture. For the first time, the pain of reality falling short of my ideals lanced through me. *Well, it’s not like he had the slightest desire to turn it into a romantic moment! I hadn’t expected him to give me a rose before Khemet or Sefekh. Why did he*



*even give me one in the first place?*

Now that I thought of it, Val had presented me with a rose effortlessly. Val's looks made it obvious that he was originally designed by a masterful otome game artist. He would be handsome if not for his evil expressions.

I wondered how he would have given Tiara a rose if he had been one of her love interests, but I just couldn't imagine it. Upon hearing how much Tiara liked the legend of the blue roses, Val would've ripped one off the bush and chucked it at her. He hated royalty in the first place and never cared for Tiara in the game—though it could've feasibly been an enemies-to-lovers sort of thing. Thinking of it that way, Val had actually been pretty cordial in how he presented one to me.

Tiara patted my back while I tried to catch my breath. I thanked her and stood up straight.

"That's true," I went on. "I guess I'd like there to be a bit of a romantic atmosphere. Aside from that, I just hope the other person would have a nice reason to give me a rose."

*I'm taking back what I said before!* I shouted in my mind. I still liked the idea of a casual gesture, but there was no point in doing it without a nice, romantic scene like in an otome game.

Stale sighed and agreed.

"I feel the same!" Tiara said, her eyes sparkling.

Even Jack, my guard, nodded in agreement.

*Please, if you're looking for an example to follow, model your choices after Tiara, not me.*

"You want it to be a special occasion that makes your heart race, right?!" Tiara continued. "I've been reading books with moments like those since I was a little girl, so it's hard not to yearn for it now..."







“That’s right, you always loved tales of princes and princesses, didn’t you?” I said. “Surprises are nice too. Like one day, someone surprises you with more roses than you can even count...”

“You mean like what Prince Leon did for you today?!” Tiara said.

*Right, Leon did just that!* That perfect prince easily surpassed the imagination of someone like me with zero romantic experience. I wanted to fall to the ground in despair, but I covered my face with my hands instead. *No, this isn’t his fault. I’ve just been reminded of what a wonderful gift he gave me.* It was depressing to learn just how little imagination I possessed.

“Shall we head back now?” Stale asked. “You’ll get too cold if you stay outside much longer.”

There was a note of concern in his voice, though I wondered if he simply couldn’t bear to see me in such a sorry state any longer. I agreed and staggered forward. Otome game characters surrounded me at all times in this life, and objectively, I’d already experienced a lifetime of heart-pounding moments.

“Let’s have a tea party in front of the roses next time Prince Leon is here!” Tiara said, flashing a sunny smile to cheer me up. “You can come too, Big Brother!”

Warmth flooded my chest when I agreed. Seeing the roses late at night was a special occasion, but they’d look just as beautiful bathed in midday sunlight. I’d love to have a tea party and enjoy the roses with everyone.

I turned around and gave the blue roses one last look even though I could see them at any time. Then we headed back to the palace. I hoped that one day, two people who loved each other would exchange one of those blue roses, just like in ORL.

*Ah, but at this point in time, it would be...*

\*\*\*

“I’m back,” I announced.



“Welcome home,” voices called out in response. Aside from the maids who’d been awaiting my arrival, someone else emerged at the front entrance. I smiled at the sight of my beloved wife, whose eyes went wide with shock.

“Gil, what’s that?” Marianne asked me.

“A gift from Princess Pride. I thought you and Stella would be in bed by now.”

I didn’t expect Marianne to greet me when I returned home this late with a rosebush in my arms. I’d taken a carriage back from the castle in order to transport the plant safely, but I arrived late because my work took longer than expected.

Our daughter, Stella, was sleeping in her arms. She explained that Stella had fallen asleep in her lap and was simply too adorable to part with. My smile grew. I wished my arms were free so I could hold Stella instead. The maids offered to take the plant, but I’d already gotten soil on my hands and couldn’t hold my little girl when she was just about to be put to bed. Sadly, she would have to stay with Marianne.

I explained the day’s extraordinary events to my wife as we moved past the entryway. I set the bush in front of the sofa for the time being. Marianne sat down with our daughter, gaping at the roses.

“They’re such a beautiful color. Was it really all right for our family to accept these valuable roses from Anemone?”

“Princess Pride told me she already gave some to her imperial knights and the royal order. She gave instructions on how to care for the roses and everything, so I can inform the maids and have them look after these while I’m away.”

The maids seemed pleased, or perhaps relieved, by that news. “Just leave it to us!” they declared, and I smiled at them.

“Princess Pride even told me about a very interesting legend surrounding these roses,” I added.

Stella squirmed in Marianne’s arms. She rubbed her eyes and blinked up at us.



“Father...” She reached out her arms for me, but I explained that my clothes were too dirty for me to carry her right now.

“Look at this!” Marianne said, pointing at the rosebush to distract her.

Her face lit up instantly, and my heart swelled. I plucked a rose from the bush. Just as Pride had described, it remained blue so long as I held it.

I got down on one knee in front of the sofa and held out the rose to my wife and daughter. “Maria, Stella...this is for you.”

Understanding dawned in Marianne’s eyes as she delicately took the rose between her fingers. Stella tried to wrap her tiny hand around the stem, but I warned her to avoid the thorns, and she placed her fingers over her mother’s instead.

As soon as I released my grip, the rose flashed from blue to red. Stella let out a cry of joy, while Marianne wore a blissful grin. To me, their reactions were far more charming than any color-changing flower. I could hardly look away.



## Teatime

**“M**AY I TRY brewing the tea, Uncle Vest?”

It was early in the afternoon when I proposed that Uncle Vest, the seneschal, enjoy some tea during a brief break in our work for the day.

He seemed surprised that I wanted to brew the black tea myself when we had a full-time servant to handle such things. I was next in line to take the title of seneschal—a job whose duties certainly didn’t include making tea, but Uncle Vest accepted my request anyway.

With his permission, I prepared everything I would need to brew a pot of black tea. Uncle Vest froze as he watched me carry out each step with the precision of a practiced servant.

“Have you rehearsed that?” he asked.

“Elder Sister and Tiara helped me,” I said.

I chuckled proudly. I prepared the teacups while the tea brewed. Uncle Vest rose from his work desk, and my smile grew. It was nice being able to surprise him.

“If I was going to serve you, I wanted to make sure I knew how to do it properly,” I said.

I wouldn’t give this anything less than my full effort. My uncle was a mild-mannered man outside of work, but tea was the one thing he refused to compromise on. Uncle Vest always had a cup of black tea during breaks from work, to the point that I considered it his main food group.

“Here you are,” I said. “Prince Leon brought this tea on one of his regular visits. It’s already been tested for poison.”

I presented a fresh cup of tea.



Uncle Vest tried a sip of the rich black tea accented with faint notes of citrus. I let out a quiet sigh of relief when pleasure washed over his face.

“I thought you might enjoy the tea, although I wasn’t sure what sort of sweets you’d like with it...” I said.

“I don’t need any,” he said. “I can always add sugar if I’m craving something sweet.”

He never asked for sweets outside of special occasions—he tried to avoid excess sugar in his diet. However...

“I...see...” I said.

“Stale, you have something, don’t you? You might as well bring it out.”

He’d seen right through me. Leon had provided a dessert he thought would pair nicely with the tea and suggested I share it with my uncle. Leon had been so eager, and I guess that enthusiasm spilled over to me because I was finding it hard to hide my disappointment at Uncle Vest’s disinterest.

I tried my hardest to remain expressionless as I retrieved the dessert from my desk.

Uncle Vest allowed me to offer him tea and a sweet treat that afternoon, pleased that I’d go to all that trouble for his sake.



## Afterword

**H**ELLO, this is Tenichi.

Thank you very much for purchasing *The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior* Volume 8, or *Last Boss Queen 8*.

It's thanks to all of you that I was able to work with Suzunosuke-sensei again and reach the point in the story where we finally meet the marriage candidates. With Pride's engagement arc from Volume 3 already feeling nostalgic, this book returns once more to the topic of her future husband. I restructured this "marriage candidate" arc to make it easier on the reader without changing any of the content itself.

From here on out, the story is going to revolve around both princesses' marriage candidates. I hope Pride's selection and Tiara's engagement problem make for thrilling twists!

I also wrote a new chapter about the blue roses that I hoped readers would enjoy. My goal was to have these sections complement Suzunosuke-sensei's beautiful cover art of the roses.

If you've read this far and have any particular characters or episodes you enjoy, please check out the web version published on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* as well, as it contains developments and character stories that differ from the ones published in the books.

Suzunosuke-sensei, thank you once again for another batch of gorgeous illustrations. I particularly love the transformation of the roses as shown on the cover art, as they capture a certain beauty that can only be depicted in color. The trio on the cover reminded me of an otome game's jacket art too! It made my heart race when I saw it.

Some of you may be coming to this series for the first time after last year's anime broadcast and the "TTS" manga adaptation that's now resumed. The first



volume of the manga, made by Kogawa Misaki-sensei and Kawano Akiko-sensei, was released two months ago now. Their enthralling pacing and beautiful, charming depictions of the characters have brought many new readers to this story. If you haven't already, please check out the manga adaptation too. It's so lovely!

As an author, I feel blessed to be able to work alongside such wonderful people.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Kogawa Misaki-sensei, Kawano Akiko-sensei, those who sent me fan letters, everyone at Ichijinsha, those who helped with publishing and novelization, those who sell this book, the managers who placed my books at the front of the store, all bookstore employees, the editor who supported me, my family who cheers me on, and my friends—I offer you all my most heartfelt thanks.

I hope to see all of my kindhearted readers again in the future.





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