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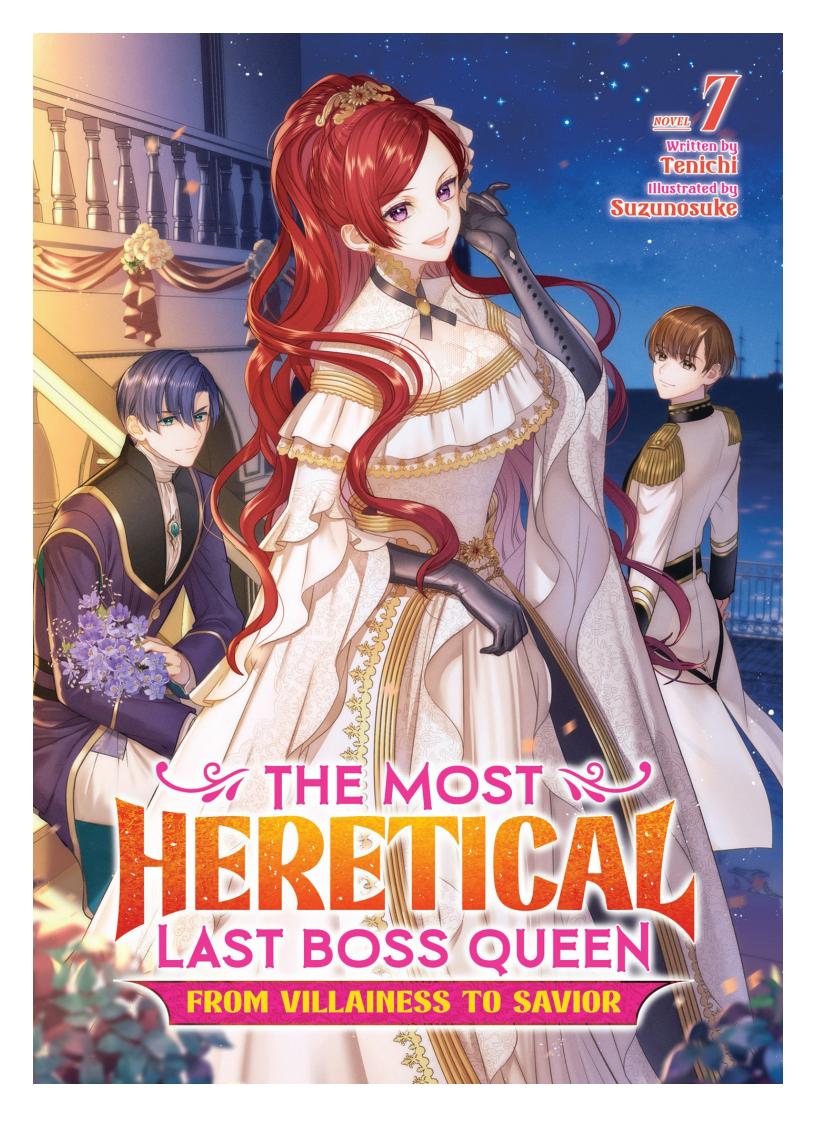
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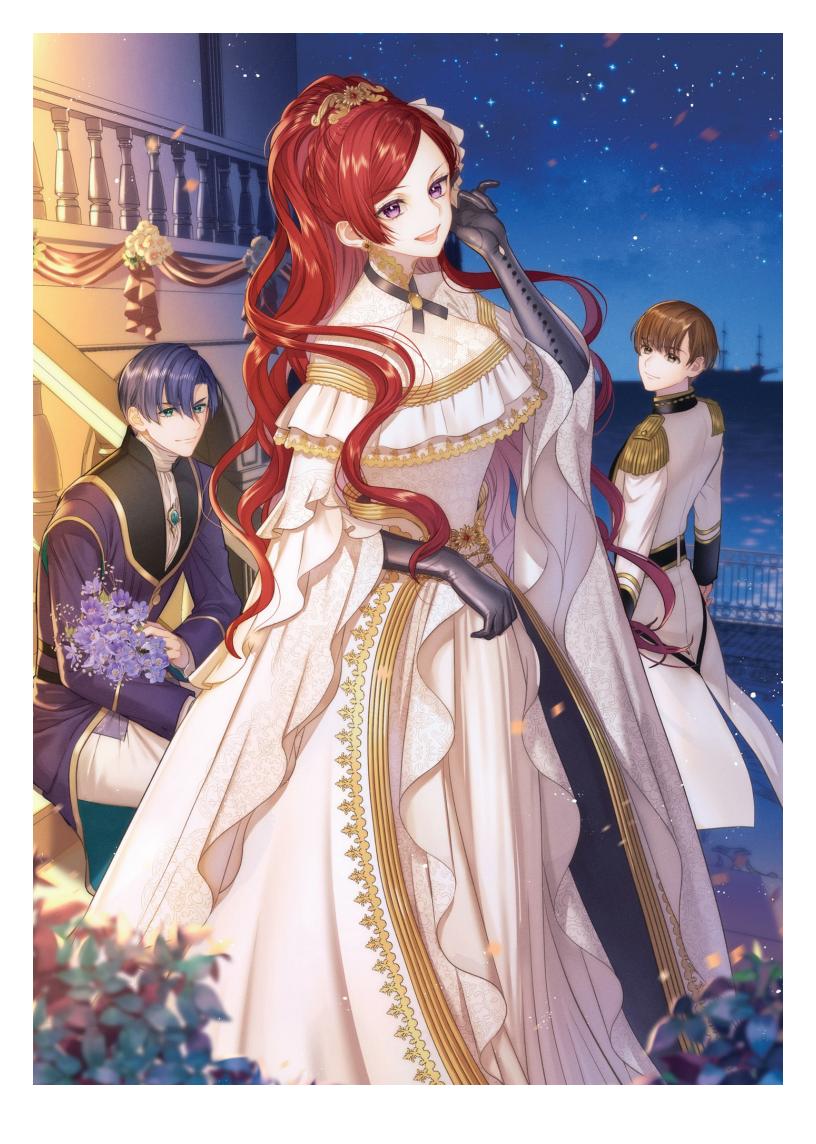
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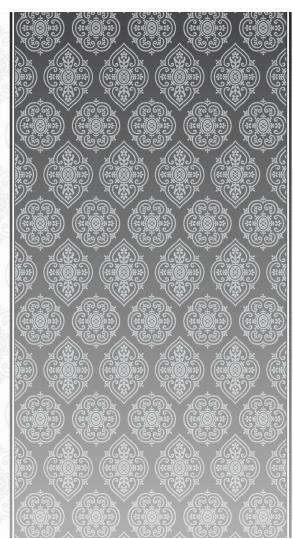
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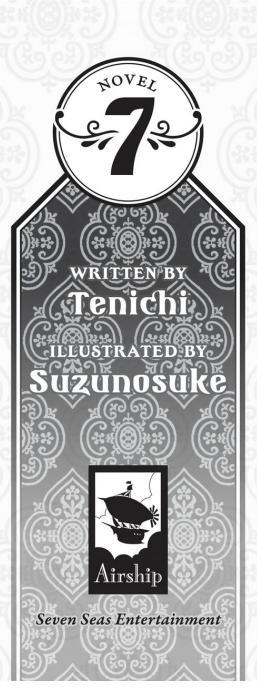
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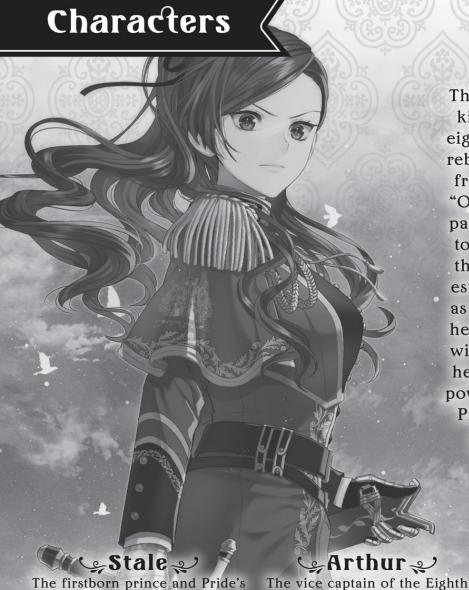
The Captain's Struggles

Afterword



THE MOST REPORT LAST BOSS QUEEN





&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.

Squadron of the Freesian royal order of knights. A love interest in the original otome game. Arthur possesses the special tion. He signed a subordination power to cure all diseases. He serves as one of Pride's

& Tiara

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

& Rosa &

younger adoptive brother.

A love interest in the original

otome game. Stale possesses

the special power of teleporta-

contract with Pride.

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

imperial knights.

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.

4 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.

4 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.

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.

<u>Vocabulary</u>

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 series was so popular, it was later given an anime adaptation.

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TRANSLATION: Emma Schumacker ADAPTATION: Michelle McGuinness

cover design: H. Qi

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner INTERIOR LAYOUT: M.A. Lewife COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen PROOFREADER: Cheri Ebisu

EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

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Chapter 1:

The Blasphemous Princess and the Celebration

A SHOUT RANG through the room—it was time to begin.

"Drink up, everyone!" cried King Lance in Cercis. "Feast! Make merry! Today, we celebrate the bright, new future awaiting the United Hanazuo Kingdom!"

"We thank God and make a vow once again in His name!" said King Yohan in Chinensis. "May the United Hanazuo Kingdom enjoy a prosperous future!"

The people in either country, who had been listening to their respective king with rapt attention, let out a rousing cry of "Cheers!"

Cercis was the land of gold. Chinensis was the land of minerals. Together, they were the United Hanazuo Kingdom, with Kings Lance and Yohan at the helm. Song, laughter, and clinking beer steins greeted the kings' joyful pronouncements of this joint kingdom's future prosperity. Vibrant dress and jubilation abounded. I joined in the celebrations as happily as anyone else; Hanazuo was an ally of my homeland of Freesia, after all.

After the United Hanazuo Kingdom came begging for aid, we led our Freesian knights to their country to support them in their defensive war against the invading Rajah Empire. We had emerged victorious only four days prior to this occasion. Hanazuo's rulers had been waiting for my leg to heal before holding these massive banquets and festivals. Both kingdoms were responsible for the simultaneous, kingdom-spanning celebrations, which went on all through the night. Once the banquets ended, the castle gates would remain open for anyone to come and go, regardless of their class or citizenship.

The people of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, who had always lived and worked closely together, rushed to each other's countries once they learned of the end of the war. They attended festivals throughout the kingdom regardless of which nation they hailed from. And the main event was still on the horizon.

"Captain Alan, Captain Callum—I'm sorry you two can't enjoy the party."

My two imperial knights lingered behind me. Unfortunately, they were just about the only people at the party not celebrating. They couldn't drink while on duty. Even so, they'd both personally requested to guard me once we knew the date of the victory banquet. Captain Alan led the First Squadron of the Freesian royal order and had short, dirty-blond hair and orange eyes. Captain Callum, with his reddish-brown eyes and hair, commanded the Third Squadron.

Arthur had volunteered as well, but the captains had sent him away with a "Don't worry about it! Go bask in the praise of everyone here!" and "Just try not to drink too much."

"It's no trouble for us at all!" Captain Alan told me now. "Are you sure your leg is healed enough for this?"

Captain Callum added, "If you think tonight's dance will be too much for you..."

I shook my head and smiled, assuring them I was fine. Then I looked around the room. My younger siblings, Tiara and Stale, had finally left my side to converse with the knights, soldiers, and aristocrats drifting through the party. Stale, with his black-framed glasses and jet-black hair and eyes, was the firstborn prince of Freesia. Tiara, who had golden eyes and wavy hair of the same color, was our second-born princess. The three of us blended in perfectly with the other guests thanks to the beautiful formal attire the two kings of Hanazuo had prepared for us.

The knights still wore their armor, which stood out as they wandered around clutching beer steins and socializing with soldiers. The easy way they conversed gave me hope that the life-or-death situations they'd faced together had forged a bond that went beyond the territorial boundaries of nationality. Arthur, in particular, stood ringed by his fellow knights as they praised his heroics in the war. He flushed from the attention and shook his head to deny the praise. His silver hair sat tied up high on his head. His eyes were a bright, beautiful blue.

Arthur was my very first imperial knight, and that was no accident. Even though I'd missed out on a lot of news and updates while recovering from my injury, I was sure he'd played a major role in our victory. In the world of the game, ferocious battles were a thing of Arthur's past, but sadly, in this reality, he'd had to wade into harrowing fights with the enemy more than I cared to think about.

"Princess Pride, it's time."

That was me: Pride Royal Ivy, the firstborn princess of Freesia, a woman with wavy red hair and purple eyes that were pointed at the corners. I was also the wicked last boss queen from the first game in the *Our Ray of Light* otome game series—a fact I remembered when I regained my memories of my past life at the age of eight. Tiara, my younger sister, was the game's heroine. Stale and Arthur, my adopted brother and my knight, respectively, were love interests. These characters' tragedies had all been avoided now. Even Cedric, the final love interest, had managed to protect his homeland of Hanazuo thanks to Freesia's help.

"Yes, Commander. Thank you."

I stood up straight when Commander Roderick urged me to get going toward the carriage waiting for me.

It was time to witness a historic moment with my own two eyes.

The carriage rolled right up to the border between Chinensis and Cercis, which was already swarming with people. Aristocrats, civilians, and soldiers mingled with beer steins and bottles in hand as they eagerly awaited the signal. My entourage joined their ranks, staring up at the sight before us.

A border wall separated the kingdoms of Chinensis and Cercis. King Yohan, the Chinensian ruler, had constructed the wall to shelter Cercis from the fallout of the war. Now that we'd won, the citizens would climb over it or slip through broken sections. People, young and old, still climbed the wall even now. They

waved from the top, striking poses with their drinks. It was time to bring the thing down for good.

Clang... Clang... Ding... Dong...

Bells chimed throughout Chinensis. The toll began with the castle's bell, then others rang out in answer. At that signal, everyone around us cheered. The people standing in front of the wall cast aside their drinks and picked up hammers instead.

When they brought those hammers down against the wall, the *thud* of the impacts echoed from both sides. Each person got a few hits before they passed their hammer off to the next citizen eager to strike. The endless wall, which spanned the entire border, began to crumble at the hands of the people gathering on either side.

The border wall had been a hasty construction in the first place, so it didn't take much to open gaping holes in it. Shouts went up when those on the other side came into view. Everyone picked up the pace, eager to bring the thing down at last. Chinensians hammered at the wall from the Cercian side, and Cercians tore it down from the Chinensian side, everyone working as hard and fast as they could.

Adults, children, men, women, commoners, nobles, soldiers, and even royalty —they all stood side by side for this task.

"Whenever you're ready, King Yohan."

The king of Chinensis accepted an ornate hammer from one of his soldiers. He had silky white hair, golden eyes, and thin-rimmed glasses. Although he stumbled a bit when he picked up the hammer, apparently surprised by its weight, he quickly gripped it with both hands. He then turned toward the wall and raised it over his head. The citizens surrounding him whooped and hollered, staring in wide-eyed wonder at the king.

A grin spread wide on the king's delicate face. Then he brought the hammer down—hard. The heavy impact was followed by another *thud* from the other

side. With the wall worn thin, we could hear their cheers. King Yohan couldn't stop smiling, even as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Once he broke through the wall, the soldiers standing to his back took up hammers of their own and expanded the hole. The people on the other side were surely doing the same. The brawny soldiers briskly opened a passageway large enough for people to file through. Everyone cheered each time someone new breached the wall and came through to the other side.

"First time doing physical labor in a while, huh, Yohan? You holding up okay?"

King Lance, the ruler of Cercis, was just as sweaty and ecstatic as his counterpart. He climbed through the hole to set foot on the Chinensian side of the wall, with Cedric emerging behind him. King Lance's golden hair drooped over his shoulders, bangs and all, and his burning red eyes were bright with glee. I watched from a short distance away as the two kings exchanged a handshake, which prompted the civilians to burst into applause.

A road between the two countries had been opened. King Lance had passed through it into Chinensis, and King Yohan followed by setting foot into Cercis. Now that the kings had been reunited, the event was officially over, but the citizens continued to swing their hammers and tools against the wall, chipping away at anything they could reach. They cried out for each other to destroy, to break through, to tear down the wall—jeering and overjoyed.

King Yohan handed me a hammer. "Would you care to do the honors, Princess Pride?" he asked, and I bleated in shock. "Prince Stale, Princess Tiara, and all the knights are welcome to participate as well." He smiled, but I was still reeling. I'd never expected an invitation to join in on such a symbolic and important moment for the two countries.

My happiness outweighed my hesitation, and I looked to Stale and Commander Roderick for approval. With their blessing, I picked up the hammer and squeezed the handle. It was heavy enough that I had to drag it rather than carry it, so the citizens of both kingdoms opened a path for me. I walked

through them and braced myself to hoist the hammer aloft and swing at a weak point. But it was so heavy, I could only get it a few centimeters off the ground. That wouldn't do. Not only did I want to maintain a certain image as Freesia's crown princess, but I was also desperate to participate in the ceremonial event. With these desires fueling me, I yanked the hammer up and swung with all the strength I could muster.

Clunk! The sound of the impact was a bit disappointing, but I struck my hammer against the wall and watched a bit of stone tumble to the ground. I didn't exactly knock a new hole in the wall, but everyone cheered anyway, warming me to my core.

I tried to raise the hammer a few more times, but I had no strength left in me. I steeled myself, determined not to let this stupid hammer defeat me, and suddenly its weight all but vanished. I turned to find Tiara and Stale helping me lift the hammer. Our pose reminded me of mochi pounding—something I remembered from my past life—but it *did* allow the three of us to get a few full swings in. The impact of each blow let out a healthy *clang*, and we finally managed to open up a hole in the wall. Largely thanks to Stale, that is.

The cheers intensified. I smiled, sweat matting a few stray hairs to my brow. I didn't care. I was too happy that I, as the crown princess, could smash this wall down like everyone else.

"That wasn't bad," Stale said, "but it's not enough to represent our Princess Pride."

With that, he pulled the hammer from my hands. Tiara and I gaped at him in confusion, but Stale just grinned at us.

"Allow me to display Princess Pride's true power... The power of her imperial knights."

On cue, Captain Alan stepped up from his post behind me. He seemed a little surprised, but he smiled and accepted the hammer from Stale nonetheless. The knights around us roared, and Captain Alan barked for Arthur to take his place

at my back. Then he raised the hammer with one hand, turned to the wall, and swung it down with all his might.

Ka-boom! The explosive strike cracked in my ears as Captain Alan tore a massive hole in the wall with a single hit. After a few more swings, the hole grew large enough for a child to pass through. It went to show just how capable our dear captain was.

Captain Alan smiled, waving to the knights and citizens cheering for him, then handed the hammer to Arthur. Arthur's brows climbed high at this unspoken invitation, but Captain Alan slapped him on the back and sent him stumbling toward the wall. The knights urged him on with glee. Even Stale was holding back a smile, so I knew he was enjoying this new development.

Arthur readied himself, his bewilderment hardening to resolve. He dashed at the wall, jumped into the air, raised the hammer over his head like a blade, and swung it down even harder than Captain Alan had.

Ka-boom! The wall shuddered beneath the thunderous impact. Arthur swung again and again, opening a giant hole.

The crowd was thrilled. Arthur delivered the hammer to Captain Callum next. "Here, since Vice Captain Eric can't be with us..."

But that was when Commander Roderick reached in and snatched the hammer away.

Arthur was startled. He and his father, Commander Roderick, both had silver hair and blue eyes, though the commander kept his hair far shorter than Arthur's long ponytail. A murmur ran through the knights; the commander was not exactly known for his frivolity. Arthur's jaw dropped; my eyes went wide.

The commander leveled us all with a heavy look. "I'm partly to blame for Eric's injury. I'll be the one to do this on his behalf."

At that, the knights let out a shout of approval. Their commander almost never participated in any sort of strength contest. Even Arthur's eyes lit up as

he watched his father approach the wall.

"The commander of the royal order's doing it too!" the knights cried, attracting attention from everyone nearby. Those busy hammering stopped to watch. A knight called through the hole in the wall, warning people on the other side to stay back. By the time the commander stood before the wall, everyone had cleared away.

Commander Roderick brandished the hammer without a word before stomping his foot. Then he swung the hammer down hard. *Crrrrack!* It slammed the wall with a rumble so fierce, the earth beneath us may as well have split open. The commander had opened up a giant hole in the wall—big enough for him to stride through.

The knights cried out with pure elation, singing the praises of their commander. The people of Hanazuo, on the other hand, were stunned by the unbelievable display.

"Was that a special power?!"

"What just happened?!"

People voiced their amazement on both sides of the wall.

I couldn't keep a smile from my face as I took in this absurd display. "Well done, Commander Roderick... Truly..."

The commander was more subdued. "Thank you, but it was nothing," he said, handing the hammer to Captain Callum. His destructive capabilities surpassed those of Captain Alan and Arthur, who were already leagues beyond Hanazuo's soldiers. I doubted there was anyone alive who could best the commander's strength. Hence why no one ever suspected that his special power was something entirely unrelated: resistance to slashes from blades. Wait, speaking of special powers...

Ka-boooom!

The loudest explosion yet shook me to my core. For a moment, I genuinely

thought we'd been bombed by the enemy again. I whipped my head around in time to see another section of wall collapse, this one completely untouched by Commander Roderick. Fissures spiderwebbed outward from the point of impact and brought the entire wall down on itself like an avalanche.

"Well, that's not surprising for Captain Callum," Stale said, impressed.

I'd completely forgotten that Callum's special power of "super strength" would make him the victor in this scenario. He'd swung the hammer just once, calculating how much strength to use and where to concentrate the blow for maximum impact, and using his entire body to unleash a devastating strike. Even someone with the same special power would struggle to break the wall down like Captain Callum had.

The knights were cheering wildly at this point. The civilians, who knew nothing of Captain Callum's special power, joined in with dumbfounded expressions. They must have felt like they'd just witnessed an illusion as this slender knight destroyed the entire wall in an instant. I was just relieved that the people on the other side had managed to evacuate in time—and that Captain Callum was our ally instead of our enemy.

"Of course you figured out how to do it without breaking the hammer," Captain Alan remarked, raising a hand.

The other captain high-fived him. "I wouldn't dream of hitting it harder than that."

Captain Alan made it sound like Captain Callum's true strength was even more intense than what we'd just witnessed. Now there was a scary thought.

Around us, civilians still exchanged questioning looks and perplexed shrugs. When Captain Callum politely returned the hammer to a Chinensian soldier, the other knights took off running toward the remaining sections of wall with newfound determination. It seemed that no knight could resist a competition of strength. Not that they had any chance of one-upping the commander without a special power to aid them.

By now, everyone had resumed dismantling the wall. Our knights were particularly fired up, which made the whole thing feel even more like a party. I found myself wondering if the other royal family members and I should leave.

"Princess Pride!"

An enthusiastic cry broke through the din. I turned to find King Lance approaching me, with King Yohan and Cedric on his heels. Stale and Tiara stepped back to give me some space as I greeted them.

"It's an honor to have you participate not just in our victory banquet but also this," King Lance said.

"No, I should be the one thanking you for letting me come to such a wonderful event," I replied. "Thank you for treating me so well."

King Lance and I had to strain our ears to hear each other over all the commotion going on around us. The people close to me—Stale, Tiara, and the two captains—could probably hear us too, but things were too noisy for the sound to travel farther than that.

"I'm truly pleased that we were able to form an alliance with the United Hanazuo Kingdom," I went on. "I hope you'll pay a visit to Freesia as well if the opportunity comes about. Mother will be eagerly awaiting you two."

The two kings smiled kindly at me and nodded.

"As the terms of our alliance dictate, the United Hanazuo Kingdom will commence trade with Freesia once matters here are completely settled," King Yohan said. "But please say the word if there's anything else we can do for you in the meantime."

"We'll be sure to repay the debt of gratitude we owe Freesia," King Lance added.

We smiled and thanked them in return. Even Stale was looking genuinely happy and unguarded. He'd worked a lot with the two kings while serving as my proxy and come to know them both well.

Cedric stood behind the kings, peering uncertainly at us. And while the prince hesitated to speak in front of all the civilians, I could tell he had something to say. He was giving me insistent puppy-dog eyes, so I had no choice but to oblige him.

"I look forward to working with you as well, Cedric," I said.

The two kings parted to allow Cedric through. With their permission, he stepped close to me. I waited for whatever he so desperately wanted to say.

Cedric was King Lance's younger brother. This man, with his shoulder-length, fluttering blond hair and fiery crimson eyes, was a love interest character from *Our Ray of Light*, also known as "ORL." He had also managed to avoid the tragedy the game had intended for him by defending his country alongside the two kings—his brothers.

"I look forward to working with you too," he said.

"Why are you still hesitating? Say what you want to say," I prompted.

He bit his lip, eyes darting around. Clearly he had more on his mind, and I urged him to continue, accustomed to his reticence by now.

Cedric gulped, then met my gaze. "Pride...just for a second, I want you to let me touch you."

I froze, mouth agape. It was just about the last thing I would have expected. I realized he must have been thinking about the promise he made to me when he came to my country to request military aid—a promise to never touch me again. Thinking back to the three days of trouble he caused during that time, I almost wanted to reject the request, but with kings and citizens all around us, I decided I'd grant him permission.

"How can you say it like that?!" King Yohan cried out while I deliberated.

"Cedric, now's not the time to act like this!" King Lance said.

They stuck to verbal blows, since they couldn't hit Cedric in front of all the civilians. Yet Stale's glower was even more menacing than the kings' words.

Even Tiara took half a step forward to protect me. I could sense Captain Callum and Captain Alan behind me preparing for battle. This was turning into a tense situation.

Cedric ignored his brothers' words and reached his hand out toward me. I took it, thinking he wanted to shake hands...only to be pulled gently toward him. My body tilted forward, but I didn't stumble. I merely focused on Cedric's hands to figure out what was coming next. The prince reached his other hand out to me, took a step closer, then placed a bright-red ring in my hand. The small, solid band sat in my palm. I stepped away from Cedric to examine it; this was one of the rings Cedric wore regularly, and it bore a red gem the same color as his eyes. The digit he wore it on was...

"Cedric, what are you...?"

Now that I understood the ring's meaning, I closed my hand to hide it from the civilians around us. The kings and my siblings had probably already seen it, but I needed to hide it from anyone else I could. I looked up at Cedric, a question in my gaze. Cedric stared right back at me, firm and unwavering.

"I want you to have it," he said. "Right here and now, I want to make a vow to you, and you alone."

He wasn't putting on airs like before. Sincerity imbued his every word. I could see it in his eyes, in his expression, and it filled me with hope and joy. I nodded at him as understanding passed between us. Then I squeezed the ring and clutched it against my chest.

"I understand," I said. "I believe you'll fulfill that vow, Cedric. I'll take good care of this ring."

I looked down at his left hand, now with one less accessory than usual. I suspected he would leave that digit vacant—until he fulfilled his vow, at the very least.

Cedric smiled softly, like a child who'd just had his drawings praised for the very first time. It made my chest tighten. King Lance bowed his head to me,

looking embarrassed. King Yohan smiled awkwardly but placed his hand on Cedric's back, revealing his quiet approval. In fact, I was the one reacting the least subtly, at least among the people around me.

Captain Callum and Captain Alan had come toward me when Cedric took my hand. Stale, now at my side, was staring Cedric down suspiciously. As for Tiara...

"You startled me!" she said. "I thought you were going to kiss her hair or her lips again!"

Wha—?! Eeeeek! Tiara! Tiara just dropped a bomb on this whole conversation!

I went stiff, but Tiara was beaming at me. Her expression so resembled Stale's evil smile that Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and even Stale himself gaped at her in shock. No one was more panicked than the two kings, however.

"You what?!"

"Her lips?! Cedric!"

I doubted King Lance's and King Yohan's eyes could go any wider as they stared at Tiara. They looked between Tiara, Cedric, and me, their mouths hanging open. Sensing the precarious situation looming before him, Cedric recoiled from his brothers' gazes. He clearly knew he was in for a scolding.

King Lance grew redder by the moment. He took a deep breath and grabbed Cedric by the shoulders. "Cedric! Is that true?! What did you do to Princess Pride?!"

"We can't apologize enough, Princess Pride!" King Yohan added. "Cedric still lacks sophistication, but we'll be sure he takes responsibility for his actions. I can't believe he would kiss a crown princess on the lips!"

King Lance grilled Cedric while King Yohan bowed to me, but all of this only made me more flustered. The knights and soldiers around us were starting to take notice. They couldn't hear our conversation, but they still moved to shield us from the civilians. Of course, that also meant none of us could flee this

awkward interaction. I had to come up with something, so I took a step back from the kings to give myself space to think.

"I-It isn't your responsibility, Your Majesty," I said. "My mother hasn't been informed of this either. Fortunately, he failed to kiss my li—"

"That's right!" Tiara cut in. "Mother also doesn't know that he pushed Big Sister up against a tree, yelled at her very rudely, and made her cry!"

T-T-T-Tiara?! Is she angry?! Yes, she's definitely upset!

She'd exposed more of Cedric's wrongdoings with the same wicked grin on her face. When I shot her a look, silently begging her to stop, she puffed out her cheeks and declared, "I haven't forgiven him yet!" Then she hid behind Stale's back. It dawned on me that Tiara must have seen everything back when she rescued me with her knives.

Stale was holding back laughter now. He turned and covered his mouth as his body shook. With rising dread, I turned back to the two outraged kings. They were both completely lost for words. In their eyes, I must have just gone from "person annoyed by Cedric" to "Cedric's victim." As they speechlessly awaited confirmation of their worst fears, I resigned myself to my fate and gave them a nod. The kings turned pale as ghosts.

"You absolute idiot!"

Whomp! King Lance whacked Cedric in the head with a sound not unlike the hammers striking the wall. Cedric grunted in pain but didn't attempt to defend himself.

"Your Highness, you have our sincerest apologies!" King Yohan hastened to say. "We had no idea Cedric had done something so unthinkable..."

"How can you do such a thing to a woman?!" King Lance shouted. "To royalty...and the crown princess at that?! You were there to ask her for an alliance, yet you went and... Wait, no, it's unthinkable to lay a hand on *any* woman! It brings shame upon you as a member of the royal family! Just what

did you even do in Freesia?"

With King Lance smacking Cedric and King Yohan desperately apologizing to me, I was worried that the three of them might actually get on the ground and grovel for my forgiveness. King Lance was already grasping Cedric by the head.

"Princess Pride, Prince Stale, Princess Tiara!" he said. "You have my heartfelt apology for the trouble this country and Cedric have caused you! There can be no excuse for allowing my idiotic brother to go without punishment! Please accept my kingdom's regret!"

Before I knew it, Hanazuo's debts to us had ballooned once again. When King Lance and King Yohan bowed to me—the former pushing Cedric's head down as he did—I implored them to stop. I can't have the kings bowing to me at a historic event for their country!

Cedric seemed to feel guilty that they were apologizing on his behalf. With King Lance still gripping his messy hair, demanding he apologize, Cedric bent at the waist and said, "I'm very sorry for what I did..." And he'd done it without a single complaint, even if King Lance was pushing him into that bow by force.

"You better not join the dance tonight either, Cedric!" King Lance said.

"I think that would be best..." King Yohan agreed. I understood why they'd be reluctant for me or Tiara to be in that kind of environment with Cedric, so I didn't say anything.

Bewildered, Cedric cried, "What?!" He slumped a moment later, accepting the punishment. As much as he deserved it, I felt a bit sad that he had to miss out on the celebratory event. Still, I was very glad the three royals wouldn't be dropping to their hands and knees this time around.

"We should probably get back to the castle," Stale said. He sounded rather relieved; perhaps he wanted to avoid the kings and Cedric bowing to him as well.

"Very well," King Lance said. "I'm sorry to ask this of you after Cedric has

disgraced himself, but we hope you'll join us for the next event."

"We'll also be sure that he never does something like that again," King Yohan added.

I dipped my head. "I look forward to it." Yet my heart was suddenly heavy. It felt like a rift had opened between us, though I dearly hoped that was just my imagination. Being put on a pedestal by the two kings despite being a foreign princess didn't sit well with me.

The dance they'd mentioned was the only event left among the victory celebrations. As we headed to our carriage, I prayed we might end the night on a high note.

"I'm really nervous about dancing with His Majesties, but I can hardly wait!" Tiara said, clinging to my arm.

Evidently, her mood had entirely recovered after that awkward encounter. I smiled and agreed with her, then glanced behind me. The civilians and knights were still working to tear down the wall. Peering past my knights, I saw that most of the structure had been reduced to a heap of rubble. Eventually, only a single section of the border wall would remain. The kingdom planned to turn that into a memorial, then start work on a public institution to bind Cercis and Chinensis together. It would stand as a symbol that no wall would ever separate these countries again.

As they undertook the work of clearing a site for construction, the people of Hanazuo laughed and embraced, heedless of nationality, status, or prior conflict. They looked truly, sincerely happy, and I couldn't help smiling to myself. Hopefully, everyone could share in this kind of joy someday.

This country has become much more open than it was just yesterday.

A gust of wind tousled our hair as we left the wall behind. It felt like the very kingdom was sighing in relief.

Elegant music wafted through the ballroom. A conductor led a live orchestra as guests clad in ceremonial outfits and flowing dresses drifted into the room. Many held glasses. Pleasant conversation hummed beneath the music. Inside the castle, a place largely off-limits to commoners, the final event of the night was about to begin.

Generally, no one was permitted to dance with royalty at a formal event in the United Hanazuo Kingdom unless they were betrothed. In this closed-off country, no one had danced with foreign royalty in more than a century. The previous rulers of both Chinensis and Cercis had only borne sons, so they hadn't believed an opportunity like tonight would come around until a new crown princess or future queen came into the picture.

But now here we were—the firstborn and second-born princesses of an allied kingdom. The "sudden" cancellation of Cedric's dance disappointed all the young ladies who'd been looking forward to it, but the people of Hanazuo were still pleased to see their kings dance in public for the first time.

The orchestra struck up a new song. Guests crowded the marble floor to cheer and applaud as the two kings led Tiara and me into the hall. I caught people sighing at the sight of our entrance. Tiara and I had dressed like royalty from Hanazuo rather than Freesia for this. For me, that meant a dress from Chinensis, a country where I'd resided for days. White lace and gemstones adorned my dress in true Chinensian style. Tiara wore fine garb from Cercis, the country we'd allied with first. Her light-pink ensemble was threaded with gold from head to toe. Even Stale took part, wearing the traditional, elegant white of Chinensis. I felt him watching over us as we entered with the kings, just as I felt the eyes of every last man and woman in the room.

Before we began, King Yohan took my hand. King Lance took Tiara's. Together, we bowed to the spectators. Then we took our first steps in time with the music. Tiara and I were only princesses compared to the kings of this country, but I hoped that just for a moment, we offered those eager spectators a picture of perfection.

I'm so glad I can actually do this.

A weight lifted off my shoulders as King Yohan slowly took me through the steps of the dance. My leg had only fully healed that morning, which meant I hadn't gotten to practice more than a couple of times. Fortunately, His Majesty took the lead with poise and grace. I snuck a look at the crowd and caught a few familiar faces—Commander Roderick, the knight captains, Hanazuo's nobles, Stale, and Cedric—all with their eyes fixed on us.

"Princess Pride, I truly don't know what to say in this moment," King Yohan whispered as we swayed along with the music. He was probably still thinking about Cedric's misdeeds.

"No need to worry, Your Majesty."

At my reassurance, a small smile flickered on his lips. "It's not just Cedric, of course. If it weren't for... Well, if you weren't the princess of Freesia, I don't think this miracle would have occurred."

He guided me into a twirl. My neatly styled hair fanned out as I spun.

"Lance wanted to bring Cedric back," he said. "He knew Cedric lacked the right sort of education for the job, but I stopped him. I wanted to support Cedric in breaking out of his shell, no matter how it happened. For Lance's sake, he made that shell his home, his prison, ever since he started being called 'God's Child."

King Yohan's white hair fluttered around his delicate features. He was a bit shorter than King Lance and Cedric, but he was still a handsome man and taller than both Tiara and me.

"And yet, for some reason, I got my hopes too high. I clung to the idea that 'God's Child' could provide an impossible miracle. It was cruel of me to foist that on Cedric after all those years I'd spent watching over him."

The king's face fell as the shadow of some unpleasant memory emerged. I didn't know how to respond, and I certainly didn't want to pry, so I let him

continue once he was ready.

"Cedric is just a person. If anyone has held him back all these years, it's the two of us. Although I don't think Lance has realized that yet." He glanced at King Lance, who was dancing with Tiara. "I don't want you to hold back your criticism of Cedric... I just hope you'll include us in that criticism as well."

My heart ached at this earnest plea and the emotion shimmering in his golden eyes. "I understand," I said quietly and watched some of the pain drain away. King Yohan thanked me and guided me into a turn.

"Princess Pride Royal Ivy, it's almost like you're the miracle we begged God to send us."

He squeezed my hand ever so slightly, even as we extended outward at the apex of the turn.

"The United Hanazuo Kingdom lives on! We can continue praying to God just like we always have! In any other circumstances, it wouldn't have ended like this."

Exhilaration made his voice huskier than usual. He pulled me close until I was a hair's breadth from his beautiful face.

"I want to apologize and offer you my heartfelt gratitude once again," he said.
"I'll pray for your happiness hundreds, thousands, *millions* of times."

His delicate smile was all I could see. My heart skipped a beat as my face flushed hot, as though I'd been basking in sunbeams.

The music wound down. We bowed to each other, then to the audience, and changed partners. Tiara took King Yohan's hand while I placed my hand in King Lance's.

Unlike King Yohan, King Lance was very tall—even taller than Cedric. He placed a hand on my hip, just as he had with Tiara, to guide me through the steps. But his dancing was a bit stiffer than King Yohan's. I felt his nerves in every movement. We danced with careful steps, our tension gradually ebbing

away. Just when it seemed like we'd found a rhythm, King Lance offered me an apology.

"Pardon my bringing it up again, Princess Pride...but I'm extremely sorry for what Cedric did."

I was about to reject it, but King Yohan's words were still ringing in my head, so I kept quiet.

"I've looked after Cedric since I was eight years old. It's my fault that he turned out the way he did."

We turned through a gentle spin. He supported me, keeping my body stable as my clothes and hair fanned out.

"Whatever his excuses, it doesn't change his offenses against you. The more I learn, the more I question why you came here in the first place."

We twirled across the dance floor, swapping places with King Yohan and Tiara.

"Cedric will atone for what he's done, of course, but I promise to do the same. To be honest, Yohan and I can hardly look you or any other Freesian in the eye."

Shock spurred me to respond at last. "Please don't feel that way! I've only come here as my mother's proxy. There's no reason for Your Majesties to be ashamed..."

He went on leading me through the dance, even as I refused his apologies. "Had I been on my own, I never would've been able to protect the country, the people, my friend, or my little brother," he said. "I'm too ordinary for something like that."

I could all but see the cloud hanging over him. My hand slipped from King Lance's, but he pulled me back in a moment later and continued the dance.

"It's a big world out there, but I never thought someone like you could exist in it."

With our hands clasped, we stepped apart before drawing back in toward

each other. His hand was stiff against my waist.

"Beautiful, noble, and capable of anything. I'll never forget you for as long as I live. I daresay I understand what drove Cedric into such a state."

The musical number reached its climax, picking up the tempo for the finale. I couldn't ask His Majesty what he meant with all my focus devoted to keeping up with the song.

"You're the person who changed Cedric."

Following the choreography, King Lance twirled me around, then dropped me into a low dip while supporting my waist. As the crowd cheered, His Majesty slowly helped me back up.

"I'm jealous of Freesia," he said. "Someday, they'll get to have such an incredible queen."



My face heated. This was the greatest praise I could receive from a reigning king. "That's not—"

Before I could finish, he held my arms and twirled me around and around in circles. "I'll make sure you're repaid for everything...even if I can't manage it under my rule."

The music slowed as King Lance's words intensified. We stopped, bowing to each other while the music petered out. Then we bowed to the audience too. As the guests applauded, King Lance took my hand and led me out of the ballroom. I squeezed his hand while the applause washed over us.

"Your Majesty, I appreciate your words," I said, "but you're the one who saved this kingdom, not me."

King Lance's grip tightened. I waved to the cheering crowd, both of us keeping our smiles fixed in place, though I could feel his attention shifting entirely to me. I didn't know much about King Lance from the game's story; Cedric never described him in detail. But from what I could see here and now, he was a fine and kindhearted king.

And that wasn't all.

"Your Majesty, you mean so much to Cedric and King Yohan. If you didn't...I don't think any of us would be here right now."

Even with the tiny bit of help Cedric had secured from other countries, it was King Lance's belief and hope in the outside world that had produced the United Hanazuo Kingdom we stood in today. The two kings—the men Cedric called his brothers—taught him to believe in a world that was bigger than his immediate circumstances. Ultimately, though, it came down to King Lance. His optimism and belief shone through in his brothers' every word and deed.

"Please don't belittle yourself with such descriptions as 'ordinary,'" I told him. "You're so incredibly special. You're a wonderful king."

I may have been smiling for our audience, but my words were only for him.

"What I want most from you, Your Majesty, is for you to keep being the wonderful king you've always been. That's all I could ever need."

That was what would lead to the prosperity of both Freesia and the United Hanazuo Kingdom, and I couldn't ask for more. Sure in my convictions, I smiled over at him. King Lance faced me, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Your future husband is sure to be the happiest man in the world," he murmured, expression softening. He chuckled, and suddenly he reminded me so much of Cedric.

We exited the ballroom, but just before he released my hand, King Lance pressed a kiss to the back of it in a gesture of respect. A cheer broke out from the spectators—we'd left the hall, but they could still see us quite clearly. I stiffened, unsure how to react to a kiss from a king. I tried to stay calm, but embarrassment sent my eyes darting around until I spotted Stale, Cedric, and all the others applauding us as well. Cedric was the only one blushing and rubbing his eyes. I wondered if he was embarrassed to see his brother kiss someone or if he was still upset about being barred from dancing.

"Elder Sister, Your Majesties, and Tiara, your dance was spectacular," Stale said as he approached.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum joined him. I thanked each of them in turn.

Tiara beamed proudly and grabbed my and Stale's hands. "It was so wonderful!" she said, and I wholeheartedly agreed.

Cedric eventually joined us, albeit slower than the others. His face wasn't as red as when I'd glimpsed it from afar. His fiery eyes, however, blazed in a different way than usual. He exchanged a quick word with us, as Stale had, then glared at the two kings.

"Bro, Big Bro—you didn't stop talking about me..."

The kings were both struck by his sulky murmurings, and they cried out in tandem:

"You heard that?!"

"You were listening?!"

Now that I thought about it, I seemed to recall Cedric being an adept lip-reader in ORL. The kings exchanged a look, silently quizzing each other about what they'd said during the dance. Poor Cedric must have been so embarrassed, having his two older brothers apologize to me on his behalf. Even so, I didn't see what could be so upsetting that it would leave him on the verge of tears.

"If I watch people's lips, I can make out most of what they're saying," Cedric admitted.

It wasn't just the two kings who balked this time—everyone was floored by that. Evidently, Cedric was still hiding his capabilities. The kings pressed him for more detail, but Cedric averted his eyes and acted like he couldn't hear them. Finally, he locked eyes with me and bent into a deep bow.

"Thank you."

His deep voice was like an arrow straight to my chest. I didn't know what he was thanking me for, but I knew he was grateful for *something* in his own way, so I quietly acknowledged him.

Cedric slowly lifted his head. He looked like he was going to cry again, but he managed to hold the tears back. In such a short time, he'd already grown so much.

The day after the victory banquet, we prepared to return home to Freesia. We'd had to linger here five days longer than anticipated due to my injury. When it was finally time to go, the United Hanazuo Kingdom's entire royal family came to the border gate to see us off. King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric were only some of the important people who showed up to bid us farewell.

"Thank you for allowing us to stay here all this time," I said. "I look forward to

our next meeting as allies."

"No, we and the people of Hanazuo should be thanking you. We will never be able to repay you," King Lance replied.

"We'll be sure to pay a visit to Freesia in the near future," King Yohan said. "The same goes for the kingdom of Anemone, since they rushed here to help us."

The two kings smiled fondly. They shook my hand, then exchanged handshakes with Stale and Tiara, who stood at my sides. Even the knights around us dismounted to receive praise from the kings during their farewell remarks.

I wasn't the only one who'd needed to rest and recover after the war. Most of the knights around us had been treated for their injuries at the same time. Now even the most heavily wounded men, including Vice Captain Eric, could make the journey home, even if it meant leaning on another knight for support.

Stale, Tiara, and I would teleport home once we finished saying goodbye, taking the four imperial knights with us. Vice Captain Eric would probably need to get more rest once he returned to Freesia, and Stale had convinced Mother that he should travel back with our group instead of enduring an arduous journey.

We wanted to teleport *all* the knights back to Freesia—or at least all the men who were injured—but such a massive amount of teleportation was impossible. Teleporting the troops to their respective homelands and regions could expose them to spies or emissaries looking for information on the state of the Freesian royal order. We had to avoid cluing anyone else in on Stale's special power. A member of the royal family could disappear from the convoy, since we would normally be inside a carriage anyway, but injured men or swaths of knights would raise questions. That said, I still didn't know why Mother ordered us to teleport home before anyone else.

By now, the kings had moved on to shaking hands with our officials.

"We'll never forget what you've done for us," King Lance said to Commander Roderick. "You're all wonderful, powerful knights."

"It's an honor," Commander Roderick replied.

"You've been a brilliant leader," King Yohan told Prime Minister Gilbert. "Your talents are what saved the United Hanazuo Kingdom."

"You exaggerate," the prime minister said.

After that, it was time to say goodbye to Cedric, the second-born prince of Cercis. His left thumb was still without adornment—but it wasn't just that one finger. He wore fewer decorative accessories than usual today. Maybe that was simply because he usually had so many of them.

"Pride?"

I reached out to the meek-looking Cedric. He took my hand and gently squeezed it in both of his hands. His fiery eyes blazed brighter than ever with all the words he meant to say.

"Take care, Cedric," I said, smiling. "Be sure to listen to what the kings tell you."

"Right," he replied simply. He refused to fake a smile, his expressions always sincere.

After our handshake, he studied my face before leaning down to kiss the back of my hand. His golden hair brushed against my arm as he lowered his head, and heat crawled up my neck at his close proximity. His eyes never wavered, fixed firmly on me. Unlike the way he'd kissed my hand when we first met, he pressed his lips firmly against my skin this time.

I was certain he'd gotten permission this time around. This was a show of respect, and it was clear he wanted it to come across this way. *Wait.* I'd been distracted by the kiss, but it hit me that this was lasting quite a while. *It can't be...*

That noise slipped out of my mouth unbidden, but I was too confused to contain it. I looked to either side and found Stale and Tiara just as shocked as I was. After a few seconds, Cedric finally withdrew.

This wasn't a mere show of respect. It was a *vow* of respect. With this kiss, Cedric was telling me that I was someone he would spend his whole life respecting and admiring. The prince's intentions left me lost for words. When we first met, he'd kiss me without rhyme or reason, but this was so deliberate, so intentional. He understood the weight and the meaning of this kiss, going so far as to turn it into a vow.

Cedric's smile was no longer brimming with confidence. When he brought his head back up, he frowned, searching my eyes for atonement. His handsome, masculine features rendered this a heavier blow to my heart than if he'd been cool and calm instead.

"I promise you...the next time we meet, I will be a different person," he said.

His usually casual tone had suddenly turned serious. It was like he was trying to fix the terrible first impression he'd left on me. I stiffened, trying to hold back my bewilderment, but that just left me frozen instead. When he released my hand, it flopped down to my side. It was like I couldn't even control my own body.

"I wish I could have..."

He murmured something to himself, but his words grew too faint for me to make out. I wanted to ask him to repeat himself, but I dared not in the face of that disappointed, melancholic smile.

"But that isn't something that's allowed of me. Not now, at least."

He put his hand to his heart and bowed deeply one last time with the elegance of a true prince. All I could do was stare and hope he elaborated, but he held his silence. His expression was stern and mature; I couldn't read it, just like when he'd given me his ring last night. I automatically clutched at the ring, now tucked away in my breast pocket. That ring had changed my opinion of

him, but this kiss was on another level. I couldn't see him as anything but earnest now.

Cedric moved down the line to shake hands with Tiara. She looked at him a bit suspiciously, but this was a farewell between our two countries, and she knew that as well as anyone. Tiara hesitantly reached out to Cedric. The pair exchanged a terse handshake, and Cedric kissed the back of her hand as a show of respect. This time, he quickly removed his lips. Tiara let out a "Hmph!" and looked away. But just before she could pull her hand out of Cedric's grasp, Cedric reached up with his opposite hand, clasping hers in both of his. A metallic rattle reached my ears. Tiara went wide-eyed in shock, her crystalline eyes meeting Cedric's fiery gaze.

I couldn't see the prince's expression behind his long hair as he bent close to Tiara's ear. I leaned in a little, the only person close enough to make out what he was saying.

"Huh?!"

I froze, hardly daring to breathe. My eyes were locked on Cedric's face, and heat flushed through my whole body. My brain was boiling; I hadn't felt so dizzy since that time Leon kissed my cheek. Arthur and Captain Callum called out to me from behind, concerned. Sure enough, they hadn't heard what Cedric said. I pressed my lips tightly together, ignoring the sweat building on my back.

Cedric slowly pulled away from Tiara and bowed his head to her, the same as he'd done with me. Then he said goodbye to Stale, Prime Minister Gilbert, and Commander Roderick as if nothing unusual whatsoever had occurred.

Tiara was frozen in place, just like me. Her hand remained extended where Cedric had clasped it. She clenched it into a fist, her pale skin bright red.

King Lance noticed the two of us blushing once Cedric finished his farewells. "Cedric! Don't tell me you did something rude again!"

King Yohan eyed Tiara and me with worry. When Stale also peered over at us, I explained that Cedric hadn't done anything out of line. But all Tiara could do

was sputter out, "N-no, nothing..."

Even Cedric was blushing as he explained to the kings that he'd merely touched our hands.

Fortunately, Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert had their wits about them and could move things along. Stale reached for Tiara and me, followed by Arthur and Captain Callum. It was time to go home.

"U-until next time... I look forward to seeing you all again," I managed.
"Commander Roderick, Prime Minister Gilbert, and all our knights... We'll be waiting for you in Freesia."

My face was still red and sweaty as I smiled at everyone. They bowed and smiled back. Then the world around us blurred away.

We were back inside our familiar Freesian castle.

It took me a moment to process the fact that we'd teleported. The moment I did, I sank down to the floor, completely exhausted. Tiara joined me, sitting down and leaning against me. Arthur and Captain Callum studied us with fretful looks. Stale had already vanished to retrieve the others, and a moment later, he reappeared with Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric.

A flurry of activity broke out right after we arrived. Stale had dropped us off at the castle's entrance, so we were greeted by a rush of familiar guards and maids. Stale and the knights kept them at bay despite their desire to fuss over us. All Tiara and I could do was stare at each other's red faces.

Once Tiara finally snapped out of her shock, she said, "Look, Big Sister..."

She carefully opened her hand so I could see what lay inside—the item Cedric had passed to her. If I'd calmed down at all, the sight of that object sent heat washing right back through me. Cedric's words replayed in my head, still clear as day.

"I promise to become a man worthy of you."

His voice was deep and striking, with an undeniable sensuality under the

smooth surface. Just recalling it sent a shiver through me.

"Knowledge, skills, sophistication. I promise to have them all."

That voice contained unwavering determination. I knew how strong-willed Cedric could be. It was why he had given me that ring last night.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

The moment Tiara heard those words, she glanced at me for just a second. It was as if she doubted his intentions, as if she thought Cedric was joking. But then, at the very end, he said this:

"Tiara Royal Ivy... You have stolen my heart."

When Tiara showed me what was in her hand, I took out the ring I received from Cedric and showed it to her. It was the ring from his left thumb and therefore symbolized "representation of power" and "persisting faith." The left thumb, in particular, held the meaning of "overcoming obstacles" and "displaying power." Wearing a ring on that digit usually meant a desire for these things. Thus, Cedric gave me *that* ring to show me he was done wishing and was prepared to achieve those desires on his own. It was a vow.

But instead of a ring, Cedric had given Tiara...one of his earrings.

It was the one he always wore. I'd thought that Cedric seemed less accessorized than normal, and now I realized his right earring had been missing when he leaned in to whisper to Tiara.

When a man wore one earring on his left ear, it was a vow to protect the woman he loved. Gifting one earring to a woman, when the man was wearing two, was an expression of love for her. Cedric had conveyed all of his feelings in that one gift to Tiara, and I knew he would work hard to live up to that wish—the proof of that was in the ring he gave me.

This was no half-hearted whim. He was so determined, it was almost frightening. In the game, it took him less than a year to develop into a fine representative of the crown. How much more would he grow in this new

reality?

"I-I don't... Why me?"

Tiara faltered, like her words couldn't keep up with her racing heart. Her face was still flush, her eyes darting all over the place. Her lips trembled, and she clutched her hands to her chest. Squeezing the ring tightly in her fist, she finally managed to form a sentence.

"I just...hate him so much!"

The golden eyes set in her beet-red face clouded with tears as her tiny fists trembled with anger.

That's the last thing I expected! Where in the world did this come from?!

Chapter 2:

Something Only He Knows

see. It sounds like the reports from the communication specialists were generally accurate. Isn't that right, Pride?"

As the queen of Freesia, I'd invited my children to report to me in my throne room once they returned from the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I was eager to see them again—as was Albert, my husband and the prince consort, and Vest, my seneschal. They joined me for this long-awaited reunion. I gazed at Pride, Tiara, and Stale, who stood in a line before me, as I listened to the information Vest was sharing.

My children reported on the events that transpired in Hanazuo, and I informed them of the peace agreement we'd established with the Rajah Empire. Pride and the others breathed sighs of relief when they heard that Rajah appeared cooperative and hadn't started any disputes.

"Pride, Tiara, and Stale...you've done well," I said. "We've managed to craft a splendid relationship with the United Hanazuo Kingdom, and I'm sure they will be able to maintain peace now."

All three offered tense bows in return. They thanked me for allowing them to travel to Hanazuo in the first place. Now that both sides had completed their reports, the room fell silent. The guards and soldiers didn't risk letting out a single cough, and the prince and princesses couldn't leave without my permission. They stood up straighter, their mouths and shoulders rigid.

"There's something important I'd like to talk about," I said.

I smiled, glancing to Vest at my side. He understood immediately and waved for the guards to leave. The imperial knights accompanying the royal children also left with a bow. An order to clear the room meant that *all* outsiders had to leave. I meant to discuss something that not even the guards could overhear.

Pride was particularly stiff. I knew she was wondering if I'd demanded such privacy because something had happened with Rajah. Vest certainly hadn't looked happy when he discussed the agreement, and my eldest daughter was shrewd enough to pick up on that, especially when Vest had called the arrangement a "cooperative effort." She gulped and clutched at her chest while she waited for me to speak.

"Well?" I prompted.

Pride squeaked in surprise when I broke the silence at last. She'd expected *me* to start this conversation, since I'd been the one to clear the room; I'd confounded her by asking. That, plus my tone had changed entirely now that we were alone.

"I'm asking you how your injury recovered so quickly, Pride," I explained. "Maybe it wasn't as severe as I feared, but Hanazuo allowed you to stay and rest until it fully healed. That's why your return was delayed, right?"

Some of my earlier composure fell away as I grilled my daughter. This was the real me, the Rosa very few people saw. It was how I addressed my children when I was more their mother than their queen.

Pride's face was frozen in a half smile. Clearly she was beginning to see just how worried I'd been. I never *had* found out how grave Pride's injury was. Perhaps I should have kept Captains Alan and Callum in the room to explain.

"Yes, of course. Thank you for your concern," Pride said, trying to look calm in front of her siblings.

Yet it was Stale and Tiara who stepped up to tell me that Pride had been healthy enough to dance at the victory banquet. My sigh of relief came in tandem with ones from Albert and Vest. Some of the tension washed out of me, and I allowed myself to relax in a way I never would in public.

"I'm glad to hear it. You went through a lot, didn't you, Pride?"

"Not at all, Mother. It was nothing. As I informed you earlier, I was only

injured because of my own haste—my own carelessness. I hope you'll reward Captain Alan Berners and Captain Callum Bordeaux generously for saving my life."

My sweet daughter. She had so much concern for the fate of her imperial knights. She held her head high and took a step forward, determined to make their commendable service known.

Tiara strode up beside her. "Big Sister is right! She was saved by the captains!"

She kept her voice assertive but not too loud. Tiara had been red-faced and immobilized for a while when she returned—because of Prince Cedric of Cercis, though I didn't know it then—but she'd insisted on joining her sister in the throne room to make this report to me. Stale and Pride could have handled the task alone, but I got the impression Tiara was just as determined as Pride to laud these captains.

"I'd like to request the same, Mother," Stale chimed in. "Captain Callum and Captain Alan are brilliant, reliable knights. As my elder sister's steward, I've concluded that their help is necessary in keeping her out of danger from here on out."

He went on to say that Prime Minister Gilbert and Commander Roderick had both concluded that the two knights displayed flawless judgment and execution. It seemed Stale's mind was made up when it came to Pride's safety. These two captains were accomplished, respected, and reliable knights—knights trusted by Arthur as well, as he told it.

Their sudden plea startled the three of us. There was no precedent for three members of the royal family to defend their knights so vociferously. I had to put up a hand to stop my children as they went on praising the captains and their performance. All three instantly fell silent, staring at me with eager eyes. It was all I could do not to sigh.

"I understand how you feel," I told them. "I'll decide what to do with them

after consulting with the commander. I promise to take your opinions into consideration and come to a proper solution. Now, you must be exhausted, no? Go and get some rest."

They bowed deeply before they exited, clearly hoping I would do as they'd asked. The door closed behind them, leaving only myself and my two closest advisors and confidants. No sooner had it clicked shut than I brought my hands to my forehead and slumped over.

"Calling her injury 'nothing'... What am I to do with her?!" I groaned.

"Always putting others before herself. She's really come to take after you, Rosa," Albert said.

"You're the one who can never stop himself from worrying about others, Albert..."

Albert rested a comforting hand on my shoulder when I kicked at my throne. Vest pinched the bridge of his nose, shoulders hunching.

My beloved children had finally returned. For the past week, I'd been determined to share in their fear and pain from their first experience on a battlefield. But when Pride described her injury as "nothing" and completely pivoted the topic to her knights, it crushed me. Beside me, Vest quietly emanated sympathy.

"What a coincidence, running into a group of Freesians in a place like this."

It was two days after I'd led my knights out of Hanazuo on the journey home to Freesia. That was when we encountered *them*.

My troops halted. A grand carriage blocked our path. My mouth went sour when someone emerged from the vehicle.

"We paid Freesia a formal visit just the other day, Commander Roderick," the man told me.

I had a pretty good idea who I was dealing with just by the way the man

smiled and carried himself. I could at least guess who'd try to sweep in and visit Freesia while I was away. It was the whole reason I'd left Clark and about half my men behind.

"Ah, pardon my rudeness," the man from the carriage said. "I am Adam Borneo Nepenthes, crown prince of the Rajah Empire. I signed a peace treaty with Freesia during my visit."

I reciprocated the man's unpleasant smile and offered my name and title. And though the crown prince had "apologized," I was unsure why he would lie in wait for us as he had. This was no coincidence. It couldn't be. He was blocking a one-way road—a road connecting Freesia to the United Hanazuo Kingdom, a road we had to travel down to get home.

Earlier, a communication specialist had told me that the Rajah party left Freesia the same day they arrived for their meeting. That should have put them much farther ahead on this road.

"So *you're* the famous commander I've heard so much about? Goodness me. I'll bet you've been blessed with a brilliant special power too, haven't you?"

Prince Adam's insincere smile twitched. My skin crawled from the hostility behind his expression. I braced myself, and my knights did the same, though we all tried to be at least a little subtle about it.

"It's such an honor to meet you," he went on. "By the way, who do you have there in that carriage? If members of the royal family are inside, I would certainly like to greet them."

I kept my own expression steady beneath his superficial grin. Pride and the others had teleported home, but I wasn't about to disclose that to him.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot oblige that request," I replied.

The prince's brow wrinkled in his first show of consternation since this encounter began. "And you...insist? As the crown prince, I ask that you at least tell me who's inside."

"Apologies, again. As a matter of safety, I cannot allow anyone to approach until we make it to our destination."

Prince Adam's mouth quirked, the man no doubt suppressing some scowl or click of the tongue. "That's too bad," he said, putting out his hand for a handshake—a gesture of goodwill. "There's really *nothing* you can do? I'd really like to see the firstborn or second-born princess for myself, as proof of our new treaty. But that really isn't allowed, even when they're so close by? It seems the wall around Freesia is a tall, unyielding thing."

I kept calm, despite his thinly veiled criticism. "You have my apologies," I repeated, and just as I was about to take Prince Adam's hand...

"It's all right, Commander."

A steady, male voice came from the carriage. I spun to find the doors opening. Prince Adam's eyes went wide as he looked past me and spotted the unexpected occupant of the carriage. He'd expected the princesses, but instead he saw a man with light-blue hair.

"Prime Minister, are you sure about this?" I asked.

"I am. I wouldn't want anyone thinking Princess Pride or the royal family were being discourteous."

Prime Minister Gilbert smiled at me and approached, his own guard following close behind. He ignored the crown prince's unpleasant smile and stuck out his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince Adam. My name is Gilbert Butler, and I am the prime minister of Freesia."

"Well, isn't this a surprise? Her Majesty informed me that the princesses were away in the United Hanazuo Kingdom."

Prince Adam's smile was forced when he shook the prime minister's hand. It seemed he was holding back quite a lot, his hatred simmering just under the surface. But if anyone was a match for him, it was Prime Minister Gilbert, who

could meet his razor-sharp smile with one just as deadly.

"That's right," the prime minister said, pointing at the next carriage down in the line. "The truth is that the members of the royal family are taking a *different* path to Freesia. I'm sure Her Highness is currently traveling a much safer road as we speak."

Twitch, twitch. Prince Adam's eyebrows spasmed as he realized he was dealing with a decoy. I was certain he took that as some form of mockery, but he stuffed it down and merely said, "I see."

"We've also just learned of the peace treaty with the Rajah Empire. It's truly a blessing. But please keep the royal family's separate route a secret. I only shared that with you because of our peaceful new relationship. If you have doubts, then by all means, take a look inside the carriage."

Prince Adam maintained his smile but glared at Prime Minister Gilbert as me and the knights moved aside to let him pass. Clearly, he'd taken the measure of the prime minister and correctly identified him as the biggest threat here.

"My, oh my," the prince said. "Forgive me, then. Please be safe on your way home. You'd best hurry before your horses get too tired." His smile growing even wider, Prince Adam signaled for his own carriage to move out of the way. That cleared our path at last, allowing us to continue our journey.

"Yes, thank you."

Prime Minister Gilbert shook Prince Adam's hand one more time. Meanwhile, I signaled for the knights to hurry past Rajah's carriage.

The prime minister freed himself from the handshake and made to return to his own carriage. He then paused to add, "Prince Adam, I hope to continue our good relationship in the future. Princess Pride also desires peace between—"

"What?!" All of Prince Adam's prim manners dissolved as he cried out in surprise, cutting the prime minister off mid-sentence.

Prime Minister Gilbert furrowed his brow in confusion. "Is something wrong?"

he asked, but the prince simply gaped up at him like he'd heard something unbelievable.

"Are you out of your mind?" Prince Adam wasn't smiling anymore, even as our prime minister maintained his composure.

"Of course not," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "Everyone in my country wishes for peace with the Rajah Empire." He kept up the diplomatic tone, but I could tell he was as baffled by all this as I was.

Prince Adam regained his composure and murmured, "I see..." He then spread his hands wide. "Heavens, I see Freesia's prime minister is as outstanding as its knights' commander."

With a faint smile, he drew himself up and stuck out his chest. He even reached up and patted the slightly taller Prime Minister Gilbert's head mockingly.

Although Prince Adam was the younger of the two, he was still a crown prince, and that meant neither of us could react to this affront.

"I'm honored by your praise," Prime Minister Gilbert replied calmly.

Prince Adam's smirk faltered for the first time. He took a step back, his eyes fixed on the prime minister. "We'll be on our way too then. I have very important business in Copelandii to attend to." He lingered, watching for Prime Minister Gilbert's reaction, but he didn't get one.

"Oh, is that so? Please give them our best. I'm sure Her Majesty informed you that we've had some conflicts with the kingdom of Copelandii. Of course, now that we've forged a peace treaty with Rajah, we hope to achieve peace with Copelandii as well."

After that, Prime Minister Gilbert bid farewell to Prince Adam and his party. He withdrew politely, but I remained at his back to protect him. Prince Adam responded with a carefree goodbye of his own. Only once the prince returned to his own carriage did I dare to take my eyes off him.

"You were right to have us switch to horses," I told the prime minister.

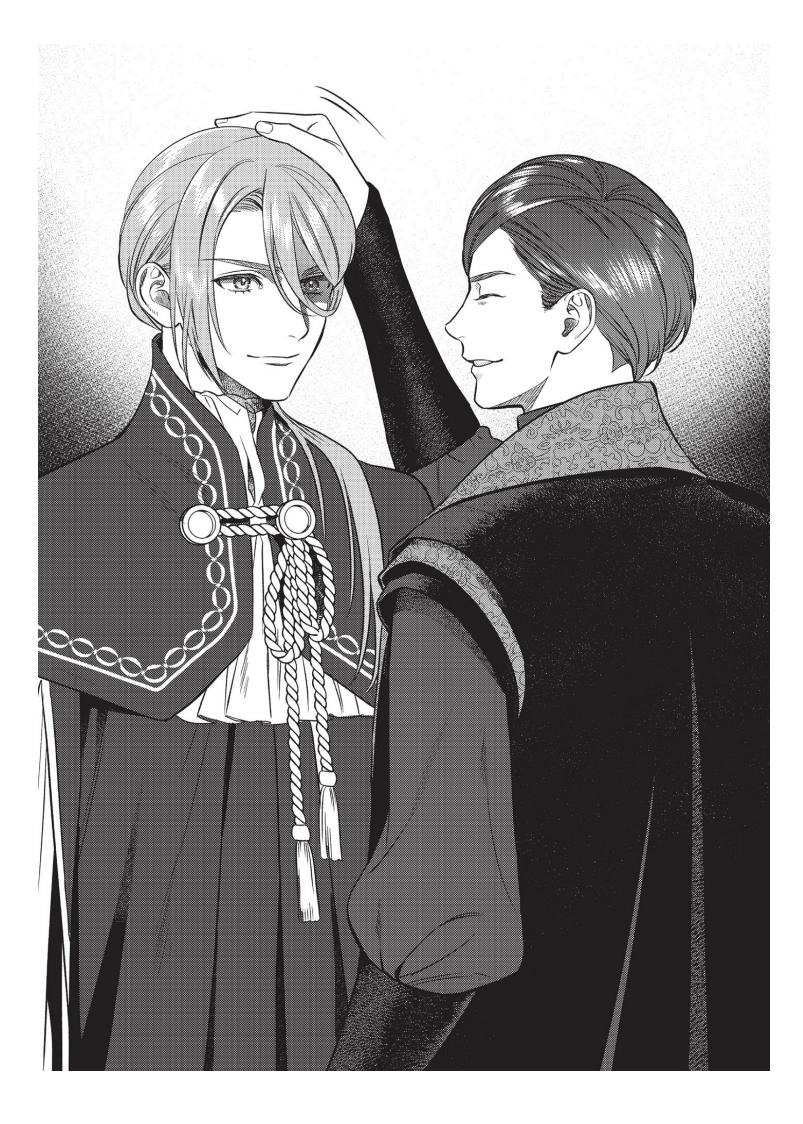
"It seems that way. I simply wanted to be safe. I never actually expected them to wait for us."

Prime Minister Gilbert bowed humbly. The vanguard had towed our party after leaving Hanazuo, allowing us to make a few days' worth of progress in a short time compared to what it would have taken on horseback. But when we approached this one-way path, Prime Minister Gilbert had suggested that we travel by horse for a while.

"His Royal Highness said that Prince Adam has quite the fascination with our dear Princess Pride and Princess Tiara."

He smiled bitterly. I was pretty sure he was thinking back on that transmission he'd received in the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Albert, the prince consort, had heard the entirety of the peace negotiations with Rajah and passed on the news.

We'd established peace, but our two countries were not truly allies. Rajah remained an empire we needed to be wary of. I knew Prime Minister Gilbert didn't want to reveal the vanguard's powers if he could avoid it. Even letting Rajah spot us from a distance would be better than being stopped by the crown prince and having him pry into our methods of transportation. We couldn't really hide, but we could at least make ourselves less conspicuous. I'd certainly agreed with Prime Minister Gilbert's conclusion on that.



Prime Minister Gilbert bowed to me and asked for my continued cooperation. Then he boarded his carriage. Just before the door closed, he cast one last wary glance at the carriage from Rajah. It trundled away with a *thud* of distant wheels and horse hooves.

"How eerie," he muttered under his breath before closing the door behind him.

"P-Prince Adam...are you feeling unwell?"

My chief of staff was white as a sheet. I'd made no secret of my anger ever since returning to my carriage, but for once, I wasn't screaming or lashing out at the people around me. Instead, I sat very still, a hand pressed to my head. Rage had my eyes hot and dry, even as my lips curled upward. When my chief of staff addressed me, it snapped me out of my daze, and I scratched at my messy and disheveled dark-purple hair.

"Monsters..."

No one caught my dark murmur, hearing only my ragged breathing as I kept mussing up my hair. Then I took a deep breath, sat up straight, and delivered a hard kick to the seat in front of me.

"Freesia's really full of monsters, isn't it?" I said with a chuckle.

I gazed out the window at the road behind us. We'd already turned a corner, putting the Freesian knights out of sight. But I didn't mind. I let my wicked smile seep across my mouth.

"I like them."

As I said so, spittle shot out from my toothy grin.

Three days had passed since we said goodbye to Freesia. Hanazuo's citizens were working on finding some sense of normalcy in this postwar world. Being

king of Chinensis, I craved that normalcy as much as anyone else. I had come to Lance's room to spend some time with him and his brother. At present, Cedric and I sat across from him on the sofa—but our meeting didn't start out so congenially.

Lance crossed his arms and frowned at the two of us. "So? What was all the fuss about?"

Neither of us responded. In all honesty, I didn't think I should speak before Cedric, but he was too busy sulking. And while Cedric had started this, I'd certainly made it worse. He had come to me looking for advice while I was waiting for Lance to finish some work. In a panic, I'd rushed into the hallway and shouted for Lance instead of trying to help Cedric myself. I never expected Cedric to come to me with a subject like that, and I frankly had no idea what to do about it. Lance was still asking me what had me so freaked out, but I couldn't find the words to respond. Cedric remained slumped on the sofa, refusing to meet our eyes and resting his head in his hands.

"It's got nothing to do with you, Bro," he muttered.

"Sorry, Lance," I said. "I was just surprised, so I yelled for you. It's really nothing."

Nevertheless, "surprise" wasn't a great reason to call for him while he was attending to his duties. No one had ever dared to do something so reckless unless Cedric fled from his lessons. As a fellow ruler, I was embarrassed to have acted so foolishly.

"It's fine," Lance said. "I was just about to go find you anyway. Cedric, you shouldn't go making trouble for Yohan."

Cedric sulked all over again. He shot me a sidelong glance, then heaved a massive sigh. With a slouch of his shoulders, he gave in and confessed, "I wanted relationship advice."

Lance choked and sputtered comically at that. He jerked up from his chair, smacking both hands firmly on the table between us. I half-smiled at him.

Cedric had indeed come to me to ask, "How do I interact with someone I love?"

"Cedric, why—?! Where's this coming from?!" Lance cried. His face was going red, likely from a mixture of his spluttering and the question itself.

Cedric was still facing away from us, but the tips of his ears were pink. He ventured a glance at us, his eyes resting on me. "I told you, Bro has no idea about this sort of stuff," he said, slumping back against the sofa.

"Wh-which girl is it?!"

I'd asked the same question. Lance's eyes darted back and forth between the two of us, but I had no answers for him. Cedric himself didn't budge and answered bluntly, as he had with me.

"A foreign princess."

His lack of hesitation sent Lance into another coughing fit. Once he finally caught his breath, he slid his bloodshot eyes from Cedric to me. I nodded to show I knew just what he was thinking.

Lance's head drooped, and he sat with a sigh. "Cedric, why are you so determined to antagonize Freesia?"

Cedric's cheeks were still pink, and he wouldn't look at me. "How am I supposed to talk to her when she's seen all the bad stuff I did? Now that I've told her my feelings...how am I supposed to be kind and make up for everything?"

His face blazed hotter with every word, and he indirectly confirmed our suspicions that this was all over one of the Freesian princesses. He was stuffing down his embarrassment, but at seventeen, it was perfectly normal for Cedric to fall for someone. However...

"Let me remind you that it would normally be unthinkable to do what you did in Freesia without punishment," Lance said. He had regained enough composure to chastise Cedric, his expression stern. "The only reason you escaped unscathed was because Princess Pride showed you mercy." He and I had already made Cedric fess up to all his recklessness in Freesia. We'd been overwhelmed even then—and this was just the list of things that Cedric himself acknowledged. Who knew what else he might have done? It was a miracle that Freesia never punished or expelled him. Lance had smacked Cedric a few times as he listened; I'd stuck to merely lecturing him. We ended up deciding on a few punishments, including a ban on leaving the castle. We'd never expected the etiquette lessons to be the worst of Cedric's torture, but Lance said every single one was a nightmare for Cedric.

Cedric didn't dispute Lance's criticism. "That's why I'm asking what to do," he said in a low voice.

I stepped in before he could get too emotional. "You should start by completing your lessons in etiquette and manners. The next time you meet her, you can offer her a real apology."

"But that alone won't get my feelings across. I won't be able to do anything if she forgets what I said to her before she left."

I doubted that was possible. Cedric, who was incapable of forgetting anything, didn't have a real grasp on how well the rest of us remembered things. Judging by how red her face had been, the princess wasn't going to forget Cedric's message for a good long while—even if Cedric someday wanted her to. For all we knew, his words might linger into the next century.

"What did you even say to her?" Lance asked, crossing his arms.

His brother was genuinely struggling. Each time we asked Cedric what he'd said to the princesses three days ago, he merely insisted that he didn't do anything impolite. This time, however, he looked at Lance and then me before turning around to face the opposite wall.

Finally, he confessed.

"I vowed to become a person worthy of her, and I said I wanted to spend my life with her. I gave her my left earring as proof."

Crash! Thud!

Lance and I both shot out of our seats and leapt at Cedric. He stood up too, startled by our sudden advance.

"Wh-what?!" he asked, but we were in no state to respond.

I brushed back Cedric's golden hair so Lance could grab his ear. Normally, the hair covered it, but we found that ear horribly bare today, its usual earring gone.

"So that's why you've been wearing less jewelry?!" Lance shouted, loudly enough to drown out Cedric's yelp of pain. His face flushed red as he screamed, "How could you skip all the steps before that?!"

I suspected he was more shocked than angry. Cedric had essentially proposed to the princess without ever making a declaration of intent. I was just relieved that he'd come to me for advice instead of trying it again the next time he saw her. He couldn't do much now but outright propose. That said, the princess was probably used to receiving presents and words of adoration from other princes and noblemen. It didn't sound like Cedric had said anything immoral or crass either, so that wasn't an issue. *But still!*

"It hasn't even been a month since you went to Freesia!" I heard myself say, my face running hot as theirs were.

Lance nodded in agreement, while Cedric simply stared at both of us. "Well, how long is it *supposed* to take to fall in love with someone?!" he asked, puzzled.

Oddly enough, neither Lance nor I knew how to respond. Cedric cocked his head when we froze—but as the elders in this exchange, Lance and I refused to yield.

"A-anyway...at the very least, you ought to stop trying to seduce her with your words," I said, cheeks burning as I stared at my feet.

Cedric didn't miss a beat. "Why? How else am I supposed to let her know how

I feel?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm pretty sure she got the message." Lance pressed his hand to his forehead, exasperated. His brother didn't understand a thing about the outside world.

"Maybe she gets it now, but the next time I see her, I want her to know my feelings haven't changed..."

"If you say it too many times, she'll think your words don't carry any weight. It's the same for other women too. You say those things to them, but they never really take you seriously, right?"

That finally made Cedric reconsider. After a moment, he righted his posture.

"No need to try and convince her of your feelings the next time you see her," I chimed in. "And don't talk to other women like that either."

Lance nodded his agreement. Even Cedric seemed convinced; he furrowed his brow and muttered obediently, "Fine, then..." At the very least, we probably wouldn't have to worry about Cedric saying anything impolite or offensive.

Lance and I warned him to be as polite with the princess as he was with other young ladies, and to avoid touching or flirting with women altogether. To our relief, Cedric said he needed to master manners and etiquette as quickly as possible. At that, Lance joined Cedric in slumping back down to the sofa. It was big enough for two people, yet Cedric scowled, clearly feeling cramped next to Lance's large frame. Lance ignored his discomfort and cradled his head in his hands, staring at his little brother.

"Okay, Cedric. Your goal is to marry her, right?" he said.

Lance left the question of whether that was possible unspoken. This time, Cedric's eyes went cold and distant.

"Marriage...?"

It took a moment for that word to sink in, but when it did, a blush swept across Cedric's face all over again. He was used to flirting, but the concept of

marriage was a whole other level that he wasn't prepared for. I smiled at his innocence.

Lance, however, turned deadly serious. "I see..."

I understood his concerns. Regardless of what Cedric felt, it would not be that easy for him to marry a princess. Yes, he was the second-born prince, so a marriage between him and a royal from an allied country wasn't unreasonable. If Freesia agreed to such a marriage, it would strengthen our alliance—among other major benefits the United Hanazuo Kingdom would reap. Freesia was a great power, after all. But that sort of arrangement largely depended on Hanazuo's growth now that we were free. *Freesia* had to see some merit in the marriage.

Unlike Hanazuo, Freesia already had plenty of allies, and their princesses were in high demand. Currently, our relationship consisted solely of Freesia coming to our rescue. We planned to start trading our gold and minerals with them, but that wasn't nearly enough to repay our debt. We were hardly in a position to ask for a princess's hand in marriage. This princess, in particular, was more aware of Cedric's misdeeds than anyone in Freesia. If the unthinkable did happen and Cedric was allowed to marry her... Well, Lance and I would miss him terribly.

In spite of all that, I said, "I think it's a good plan."

Lance jerked his head up when I spoke to him. Cedric was visibly confused, but Lance's expression softened a little. "You're right..."

He reached over and grabbed Cedric's head to stroke his hair. The prince seemed heedless of how messy it was getting; he kept looking back and forth between us.

"Well...that's assuming it's possible in the first place," Lance said with a smile. "If it does happen, Yohan and I will be sure to support you however we can."

He met Cedric's fiery gaze. The prince looked down at his feet and murmured, "Thanks."

"So, Cedric, when *did* you fall in love anyway?" I asked, looking to lighten the mood. I squeezed in on the other side of Cedric as Lance and I awaited his answer.

Pinned between the two of us, Cedric had no hope of escape. He looked anywhere but at us before finally replying, "During the war."

I chuckled. "I thought so."

Lance let out a sigh and scolded his brother for being distracted during such an important time for our country.

"It wasn't something I could stop," Cedric said. "I just realized I wanted to make her happy."

His frankness was more embarrassing than any of his actions thus far. I patted Cedric's head, secretly thinking that she already seemed happy, and warned him that he probably shouldn't say something like that to her. It would be a bit too much right now.

"It's too bad you couldn't dance with her," I added, and Cedric's face fell.

He truly was distraught by that, more so than I expected. The princess was certainly a wonderful young woman. I completely understood how she'd stolen his heart...and I was pretty certain Lance did too. She'd already supported him so much; it was only natural that Cedric would fall in love.

"But you can't get your hopes up too high, Cedric," Lance said. "She's the crown princess of Freesia, so there are probably a whole lot of men out there who are better suited for her than you. Don't forget that you still have a whole lot to learn."

I agreed. There was no way that Cedric was the only man in the world with feelings for Pride. If she weren't the crown princess, then even Lance and I would surely—

"What're you talking about Pride for?"

Huh? Lance and I froze. Cedric's question didn't make any sense. Wasn't this

entire confession about Pride?

"Are you saying...Princess Pride isn't the one you fell for?" Lance asked.

"Exactly. Why'd you think it was her in the first place? Not even Big Bro or the religious people of Chinensis want to get married to a god."

What are we talking about right now? A god?!

It was like Cedric had switched to a foreign language. I couldn't make heads or tails of what he was saying. Lance's jaw dropped; he'd also assumed this was all about Princess Pride.

"So it's...Princess Tiara that you love?" I said tentatively.

At the mention of her name, Cedric blushed more intensely than ever. At this point, he had the complexion of a boiled lobster. He bit his lip to stop it from trembling and gave us a single nod.

Lance was too shocked to speak, and I wasn't faring much better. Princess Tiara hadn't seemed to think very highly of Cedric. In fact, she'd rightfully chastised him for all the trouble he'd caused. It made far more sense for Cedric to be fixated on Princess Pride, who still treated him like a close friend even after falling victim to his antics—but we were wrong.

"You want to marry...Princess Tiara?" Lance said.

Cedric turned his rosy face away.

Princess Tiara was sweet, well behaved, feminine, and—judging by the brief conversations we had at the banquet—knowledgeable. She was incredibly good at knife-throwing, for some reason, but aside from that strange pursuit, I could see what made her an ideal woman in Cedric's mind. She treated Lance, me, and everyone else in the United Hanazuo Kingdom compassionately. Everyone except Cedric, that is.

"You and Princess Tiara came to fight with me during the war... Was that when it happened?" Lance asked.

Cedric didn't respond this time. I'd heard from Lance about Princess Tiara's

knife-throwing skills. They'd impressed not only our soldiers but the Freesian knights as well. Did that spark Cedric's attraction, or had something else happened between them that we weren't privy to? It was hard to fathom when Princess Tiara seemed just as irritated as ever with Cedric when they said their goodbyes. Lance and I had apologized to her and Princess Pride during the dance, but all Princess Tiara had done was smile and say, "You're not the one at fault, Your Majesty!"

And that was the princess Cedric went and fell in love with.

"Ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I clutched my stomach and howled with laughter. The more I thought about it, the harder I laughed.

"Big Bro, what're you laughing for?!" Cedric shouted.

Lance stared in awe—he hadn't seen me laugh so hard in ages. I tried to apologize, but I couldn't get any words out through the laughter.

"S-sorry, Cedric!" I stammered. "I'm...I'm just...even more surprised! It's just... so, so funny!"

Tears clung to the corners of my eyes even as I tried to calm myself. Cedric had flirted with plenty of women in his life, and sometimes they'd fallen for him in return. Lance and I had seen it ourselves. Yet the first woman he ever fell in love with was the one who thought less of him than anyone in the whole world. She was the second-born princess of the great country of Freesia—the younger sister of Princess Pride, to whom we owed a tremendous debt.

"Remember this, Cedric: even if it doesn't work out, don't let it discourage you," Lance said, placing a hand on Cedric's shoulder. He made it sound like the outcome had already been decided, which sent me into another fit of cackling. Cedric's chances were about as low as if it were Princess Pride he'd fallen for. Becoming Freesia's future prince consort would mean *more* competition than if he pursued Princess Tiara. But on a relationship level, Princess Pride seemed much closer to Cedric than Princess Tiara. Still, Cedric had fallen for the one

who didn't seem to carry a scrap of goodwill toward him.

"Don't act like Tiara's already rejected me! I'm not giving up yet!" Cedric said as he faced Lance head-on.

Lance mussed up his brother's hair. "As long as you don't make trouble for Freesia, Yohan and I will help you. Just be sure you work your hardest."

Those words finally sobered me up. We needed to be the ones to put the brakes on Cedric and ensure he didn't mess up again. That would only make Princess Tiara hate him more.

When I asked if there was anything nice he could do for her, Cedric replied, "There is one thing." He'd already been thinking about it, as it turned out.

When he didn't elaborate, I tried a different approach: "What is it about Princess Tiara that made you fall for her?" I was embarrassed to even ask such an innocent, almost childlike question, but the smile on Cedric's lips grew as he thought about it.

"What happened between the two of you?" Lance prompted.

Cedric hesitated. "I felt like...I wanted to see her truest smile. One straight from the heart." In contrast to all his earlier bluntness, this was vague and abstract—yet Cedric didn't elaborate.

Lance simply answered, "I see," and stroked Cedric's head again.

"I hope you two can get along," I said. "That's why I think it's best for you to master the art of manners as quickly as possible..."

Cedric held his head in his hands once more. The prince had been focusing on his etiquette lessons and was ready to start putting them into practice. I was just glad to see him forging a path forward. Lance had also seemed pleased with Cedric's dramatic transformation over the past month.

"Yohan and I have decided to go visit Freesia one month from now," Lance said. "If you can master etiquette and social courtesies by then, we'll take you with us."

Cedric's eyes lit up. "Really?!" he cried, flying to his feet.

"Are you sure about that, Lance? We'd be letting him out of his punishment early."

"We'll only do it if he doesn't cause any problems in high society here, of course," Lance said. "If there's any trouble at all, we'll push it back another three months... And if he's still acting up, we'll have bigger problems on our hands."

He was right. Even if Cedric *did* do something horribly rude again, Lance and I would be there to stop him. That said, we couldn't afford to fumble next month's meeting. If Cedric caused an issue or anything else went wrong three months from now, the alliance would come to nothing.

"If you mess things up at all next month, you won't be going back to Freesia again, no matter how many months pass," Lance warned him.

Cedric froze, which had me chuckling again. He was so afraid of messing this up. At the same time, Lance and I were looking forward to our first trip to Freesia. We hoped to build a long-lasting relationship with them while we prepared to open the United Hanazuo Kingdom to the world. After all, one condition of our alliance with Freesia was that we begin trading our minerals and Cercis's gold. We were eager to share them with Freesia in particular, of course.

Our conversation wound down at last, and Cedric quickly made to leave. He was clearly eager to go practice etiquette with his tutor, but he stopped in the doorway when I called his name. He didn't turn around, so I smiled at his back.

"I want you to learn a lot and gain lots of experience," I said. "Don't worry no matter what happens, Lance and I will be on your side."

Cedric gave me a shy nod. Just before he closed the door, I caught him gripping the cross pendant under his shirt.

"I'm sorry to call you here when you're off the clock," I told two of my captains.

The Freesian knights and I had returned to our homeland four days after leaving the United Hanazuo Kingdom, arriving early in the morning. It was a busy day for the royal order—we made our reports to the queen, ensured any injured knights received treatment, reviewed and replaced used weapons, and heard the reports from each individual unit. Late that night, I summoned Alan and Callum to my office.

"No, it's fine," they said in tandem.

I shot a quick look at my second-in-command, Clark, before continuing. "First of all...good work carrying out your imperial knight duties, even in Eric's absence. He has to rest a few more days, so you two and Arthur will continue to serve as you have been."

They thanked me for the praise, but the tension in the room was rising. A single gulp seemed to echo like a gunshot.

"Now, about Princess Pride's injury..."

The captains flinched; they knew this was the real reason I'd called them in here. Princess Pride had injured her legs while in their care. It was the ultimate failure, and Alan and Callum were all too aware of that. By now, they also must've guessed I had spoken to the queen about their punishment once I'd delivered my report to her.

"This decision was made not just by Her Majesty but by Clark and me too." I paused for a moment to let them catch their breath. They stood stock-still, waiting. "Alan, Callum—the two of you will receive a one-month suspension. That's all for now."

My captains stared at me, unblinking. Their eyes flitted from me to Clark and back again; I could see them practically vibrating with questions. Clearly they'd been bracing for a far worse punishment: demotion, discharge from the royal order, or worse. Compared to any of those, a month's suspension was nothing.

In fact, it was the sort of punishment I doled out if two of my knights got into a fight with each other or something like that. Alan and Callum must have thought this was some kind of mistake, but I kept my arms crossed over my chest and didn't elaborate.

Clark spoke up in my stead: "Her Majesty had little criticism of your performance in the war. It sounds like Princess Tiara and Prince Stale joined Princess Pride in defending you."

The name "Prince Stale" must've come as the biggest surprise. It made sense that Tiara would come to their defense, but the captains themselves had reported Stale lashing out at them in anger when he was still reeling from Pride's injury. Obviously, they hadn't expected him to go easy on them after they'd broken his trust by failing to protect her.

Clark smiled at the pale-faced men and took a step forward. "You failed when you allowed the princess to get hurt, yes, but you also saved her life. While you've had the merits and awards for that act withdrawn, both Her Majesty and Roderick agreed to a reduction in punishment."

"Hey, you said you shared my opinion," I pointed out, clapping Clark on the shoulder.

Alan and Callum thanked us with a bow, but I could tell they still weren't convinced. Callum raised his head after a moment and asked permission to speak. I waved him on.

"We'll humbly accept this punishment...but are the two of you sure this will suffice?"

It was the queen's decision, but I could still punish them at my own discretion. Callum suggested a demotion that would strip them of their roles as imperial knights or expulsion from the order. Alan nodded along. I just grimaced and let out a sigh.

"Before I answer that, I have a question of my own," I said.

Both captains stood ramrod straight and raised their heads, tensing all over again. Clark furrowed his brow in anticipation of my next words.

"Alan, Callum...is there something you two need to tell us about your future in the order?"

I watched my words strike them with all the force of a brick. They kept their eyes on me but bit their lips.

Understanding passed between us. I wanted to know if they were planning to leave their positions voluntarily, regardless of the official punishment. In which case, I was essentially demanding their resignations.

"No, sorry, sir! I don't have anything to say!"

"Neither do I!"

The two captains dropped into deep bows, eyes glued to their feet. They wouldn't straighten out till they heard my reply. Their posture declared the answer they dared not speak: "We're not resigning."

The silence stretched on. The captains weren't looking at either of us, and I sighed for the umpteenth time. Was I annoyed? Resigned? Even I wasn't entirely sure. Only one thing was clear: Alan and Callum deeply regretted disappointing us.

"Very well."

My tone was warm and calm, full of relief. Alan and Callum peeked up at me in surprise. Their shock only grew when they found Clark and I at peace with their decision.

"I would have had more words for you if you wanted to step down...but it sounds like that won't be necessary," I said, relaxing.

Alan blinked over and over, his mouth hanging open.

"I'm glad you both chose to stay," Clark said quietly.

Anyone who'd heard the captains' story—including myself, Clark, Pride, and

the other knights—knew they couldn't have possibly prevented her injury, given the circumstances. Alan and Callum had done everything they could, and thanks to that, they'd avoided an even worse outcome. Yet I knew they carried guilt with them, guilt that I'd feared would spur them into a rash resignation. If they made that decision, there was no coming back, hence why I had to be sure of their intentions.

However, they chose to continue serving as knights. It came as an enormous relief to know I wouldn't have to talk them into staying. With that weight off my shoulders, I finally answered Callum's original question. "The fact that you allowed Princess Pride to be injured, regardless of the reason, means you failed as knights."

Their surprise vanished, replaced with the stony calm of proper knights. Before they could avert their eyes again, I went on, "That being the case...I'm sure you two know better than almost anyone that Princess Pride will put herself in abnormal amounts of danger."

Alan and Callum's eyebrows rose. I took that to mean they agreed.

"Ever since that day six years ago...Her Highness sometimes demonstrates zero regard for her well-being."

Six years ago, enemies ambushed the royal order. We ended up caught on a collapsing cliff. Pride's contribution to that battle became a legend among the knights who witnessed it. Then came the attack on the slave traders and the defensive war in Hanazuo. Pride's efforts during both could be seen as bravery, but she also displayed a total lack of concern for her own safety. That was what I meant when I described her dismissal of her own well-being, and it clearly resonated with both captains.

"It's like the only value she sees in herself is what she can do for others," I said.

Alan gulped; Callum clenched and unclenched his hands. I could almost see scenes from the war flashing in their memories. Pride had put her life on the

line with a blood oath meant to rouse the citizens. She was injured because she prioritized a guard and Cedric over her own security.

Caring, compassionate, courageous... There were many things you could call her. But I thought back to one specific moment Callum and Alan had described. It happened during the collapse of the southern tower, when they'd rushed in to save her.

"Stay back!"

They knew why she'd said that—she didn't want them to be hurt too. But Pride herself was trapped. If she hadn't run into Alan and Callum in that exact moment, she would have died. Put simply, Pride was fine with dying if no one else died with her.

A chill passed through the whole room. Perhaps Pride didn't think these things through to their logical conclusions. Perhaps that kind, merciful princess told them to stay away in that moment only because she didn't want them to end up hurt too. And yet, she had completely abandoned herself.

What would make her feel like she had to do these things? Her people loved and trusted her so deeply. Not a soul questioned her right to the throne. All of us grappled with this same question.

"Neither Clark nor I are sure if she's aware of what she's doing," I said. "She knows she's the crown princess...yet she treats herself like dirt. It's almost like she's searching for a way to die."

Sweat broke out on Alan's and Callum's brows. Dread hung heavy in the air.

"But...she's learned to finally give herself some consideration," I added.

At these words, the captains relaxed just a little.

"When someone tries to save you...but they almost get themselves killed...it's really, really scary."

Pride had trembled at those words, and that was when I knew she really meant them. She finally understood what her actions looked like through

someone else's eyes. I'd been so relieved in that moment.

"We must protect Princess Pride from danger," I said. "But Her Highness finally saw the light after her injury. All it took was the pain of realizing she'd almost sacrificed someone besides herself."

That wasn't exactly a happy ending. Still, after putting Callum and Alan in harm's way, Pride finally reflected on the damage her recklessness could cause. It went both ways, though. The captains chewed the insides of their cheeks, unhappy that they'd caused Pride that pain. It had taught her a good lesson, to be sure, but it had also left a scar on her heart.

"She still has a long way to go. At this rate, even once she takes the throne, I expect to see her put herself in danger over and over again. Someday...she might even make the ultimate sacrifice."

We could all picture that far too easily, even Clark. Pride wouldn't hesitate to die for anyone, regardless of who they were.

Eyeing the captains, I said, "She's even capable of sacrificing herself for the knights who are supposed to protect her."

That changed the atmosphere in the room in a blink. Distress replaced the fear tensing the shoulders of the men around me.

"And most likely...if you two decide to leave the royal order over this, Her Highness will see it as her own fault. She'll value herself even less for being the reason you resigned."

Alan and Callum shared a look, and some silent understanding passed between them. Perhaps Pride had said something to support this notion, some heartfelt words she'd shared with them after acknowledging their good deeds. Whatever it was, only the two captains knew.

Hopefully, all this would lead to Pride reflecting more on her actions and taking better care of herself. Yet I found it far more likely that the next time she was in danger, she simply wouldn't ask for help. If she was about to be crushed

by rubble again, would she stay silent and refuse rescue? If she didn't want to put anyone else in danger, she might even venture out without any kind of escort at all.

It was part of who she was—a facet of her personality that mercy or compassion alone could not explain. Everyone in the royal order knew that Pride would never hesitate to act if she thought she could help someone. We understood she would always prioritize others over herself.

"But we can't allow that," I said firmly. "She's going to be our next queen. She's the one person this kingdom can't lose." The captains nodded their agreement. "That's why I want to be the one to say this to you. Think of it as an order from your commander if you wish. If she tries to shoulder the responsibility, then bring up my name."

I narrowed my eyes, scrutinizing my captains until they said, "Yes, Commander!" Then I jabbed my finger at each of them in turn to issue a gravely important order.

"Don't let her sacrifice herself."

It was brief, but full of dire meaning. Alan and Callum both gulped.

"Don't just protect her. Put a stop to her when necessary. Chastise her and force her to give up if she's trying to sacrifice herself. On top of that...do not allow anyone else to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Princess Pride Royal Ivy either."

The atmosphere in the room was like a battlefield. My voice reverberated through the air, deep and stern. Callum and Alan answered in strong, loud tones, not backing down in the face of my intensity.

This wasn't an easy thing to ask of them. They were only knights, yet they would have to put a stop to the crown princess herself. They wouldn't merely protect Pride from herself either—they would have to stop others from sacrificing themselves for her, or else her self-worth would plummet again. It meant protecting everyone around her too. Even so, Callum and Alan didn't

hesitate in the slightest. They vowed to protect Pride without any more mistakes.

"Clark and I will talk to her, but as imperial knights, you're the ones who will have to make sure of it yourselves," I said.

Now that I had their agreement, I let myself relax a little, sitting and settling my hands in my lap.

"For better or for worse, Princess Pride has changed thanks to you two," I said. "That's why I know I can count on you. Be sure to keep a close watch over her."

Before wrapping things up, I revealed a few more updates. Alan and Callum's suspension would begin once Eric returned to service, and since they were holding an emergency captains' meeting the next day, Arthur and a group of replacement knights would be assigned to Princess Pride's care. After informing them of all this, I finally allowed them to leave.

With Commander Roderick's permission, Alan and I bowed our heads, excused ourselves, and left the office behind. We hurried away in silence, gazing up at the moon cutting a bright hole in the dark night sky. I was sure the commander's words were replaying in Alan's mind just as they replayed in mine.

Alan was the first to break the silence. "Six years ago..."

Why was he bringing that up now? I glanced over at him, but he just kept on staring at the moon.

"Arthur might have already figured it out at that point," Alan said. "He might have been the first to realize just how reckless Princess Pride can be."

My brows shot up as I thought back to that day six years ago. Arthur had yet to even join the royal order, but that didn't stop him from making a pledge in the throne room.

"I'll absolutely become a knight someday. I'll protect you and those you care for. I'll protect Mom, Dad, and all the people in the kingdom with everything in my power. That's the kind of knight I'll become!"

Arthur vowed to protect the people Pride cared for. Alan and I couldn't have known what state of mind he was in when he made that promise. I suddenly felt like I understood, though. Given the responsibility the commander had just assigned us, Arthur's determination in that moment—when he wasn't even a rookie knight yet—made total sense.

"Then that's all the more reason why we can't fall behind," I replied.

I brushed my bangs away and averted my eyes from Alan, instead joining him in gazing up at the moon.

"I want to ask you something. You can do this, right, Alan? I know how much you like Princess Pride, but you'll have to stop her from putting herself in—"

"Aaaah! Of course I can do it! Besides, I hate it when she's sad." Alan stretched his arms overhead as he walked, perhaps working out the stress of that tense meeting we just had. I could hear the forced cheerfulness when he added, "I've gotta start workin' out."

He'd always looked up to Pride for how she conducted herself on the battlefield. It was why, as a warrior, he'd developed such strong feelings for her. But now...

"I still want you two to protect me!"

I knew he wanted to keep her safe. He probably even wanted to grant her wishes so that she would never get hurt again. As a knight and as a human being, he was ready to risk his life for her happiness—of that I was absolutely sure.

"As long as I can protect her...that's all I want," Alan said. He scratched his head, looked down at his feet, and smiled.

Taking in his tender expression, I replied simply, "I see."

Alan looked up at me. "You better not die next time, got it? Or else Princess Pride will cry."

I frowned when his tone turned mocking. "I didn't die the first time," I said, then shoved Alan aside so he couldn't keep staring at me.

The pain of my memories of that incident barreled into me.

"Thank goodness!"

She'd truly rejoiced over my survival. Then she cried for me—but no more. I would never make Pride cry again. If my or anyone else's sacrifice caused her such pain, then I would make sure there never *was* another sacrifice.

"At the very least, I'll do everything I can to avoid making her cry."

Alan laughed. "You're as stubborn as ever." His smile turned bitter, his voice dropping as he said, "Me too. I'll do whatever I can. She can't cry like that again."

I sensed an ominous undercurrent to Alan's words, something darker than the curtain of night overhead. It wasn't just Pride who'd been convinced I was going to die in that battle; Alan, this man I considered a good friend, had felt that way too.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's fine. I'll be sure to get my revenge someday."

"Revenge for your grudge, you mean?"

Alan chuckled, but before he could respond...

"Ah, Captain Alan, Captain Callum."

A familiar knight strode up to meet us; it was Arthur. He wore light, casual clothes instead of his uniform or armor since it was nearly time for bed. After greeting him, both Alan and I fell silent, given what we'd been talking about only moments ago. He could probably figure out why we were heading away from the commander's office, but he didn't push us for information. Alan and I

shared a look as we weighed how much to tell him.

"Gosh, you've really grown up, Arthur!" Alan said.

"Huh?!" Arthur yelped. His eyes widened and he took a step back. "Wh-what are you talking about?!"

"Not just your muscles," Alan said. "You're taller too. Teenagers sure do grow fast..."

"That's true," I chimed in. "You're like a different person compared to six years ago."

"H-hang on! What's this all about?! Why are you both talking about me this way?!"

We ignored him, going on as Arthur's face grew redder and redder.

"Please don't look at me like that!" Arthur begged us. "Anyway, why are you two out here so late?" He winced, evidently realizing the answer before either of us responded.

"Ah, it turns out we're getting suspended for a month." Alan's casual response had Arthur reeling, but my co-captain only grinned cheerfully. "It starts once Eric is back. But we won't have anything to do for a month. I wonder if they'll let us use the training grounds for our own workouts."

"It's been a while since a knight was suspended, but surely they'll let us do that much," I said. "We can't let ourselves get rusty."

Arthur gulped at our casual attitude. "Suspension?" he said timidly. "What else?"

"That's it," Alan told him. "The royal family and the commander took pity on us."

Arthur's eyes lit up with hope. "Th-then...after your suspension, you'll still get to be imperial knights, right?!"

This time, we were the ones who tensed with worry. The other knights

wanted us to survive this. Throughout the battle with the slave traders and our time in Chinensis, many of our fellow knights had praised us for protecting Pride's life. They'd also rushed to us in a panic afterward, asking if we'd be punished or forced to retire.

Until now, we'd always kept our mouths shut when it came to such questions. We'd made up our minds to go along with whatever judgment our queen and our commander delivered, even if it meant leaving the royal order. But we didn't expect that even Arthur was so concerned about our future.

"Well, most likely..." Alan said.

"That's our plan," I said.

Arthur was such an earnest, good-natured guy. His sunny smile never failed to warm everyone's heart, though in this moment it was also a dagger to the chest.

"That's so great," Arthur said, heedless of our reaction. "It's a huge relief. Oh, should I keep it a secret from the other knights?! Everyone's so worried about y __"

"Arthur," I cut in.

He snapped his mouth shut, eyes darting between Alan and me. Then we bowed deeply to him. Arthur was only a vice captain in the royal order. To receive such a gesture from two captains understandably rocked him. He looked around like he expected someone of higher rank to be right behind him, but there was no one here but the three of us.

"Sorry, Arthur."

"We're really sorry."

When Alan and I apologized, Arthur finally seemed to realize that these bows truly were meant for him and no one else.

"You and Prince Stale placed your faith in us...but we let you down," Alan said.

"We broke the trust in the imperial knights that you've helped build all this

time. We wasted the opportunity we were given," I said.

We didn't lift our heads as we spoke, and Arthur audibly swallowed. He knew what had happened to Pride during the battle, how she'd gotten her injury. The story went through not just the other knights but Stale and Pride as well. He knew we'd had to leave her side and that we'd done the best we could, putting our lives and bodies on the line to protect her, but it hadn't been enough to keep her from getting hurt. That must've been part of what spurred his response.

"Please, stop this..." Arthur choked out. He squeezed his hands into fists as he nervously made his plea. "Don't say stuff like that. Me and the other knights really look up to you two! We respect you...and we think you're amazing. That hasn't changed at all."

Arthur was taking a chance by speaking to captains who ranked above him this way, but he pressed on regardless.

"Princess Pride would have been hurt much worse if it weren't for you two.

All the other knights say the same thing. No one's said a single bad word about you. Everyone truly respects you, and that's why they've been so worried."

He sounded so sure of this. Arthur was good at reading people, so he probably *did* actually understand how the other knights felt.

"I'm so glad that you became imperial knights," he continued. "It was such a blessing that you were with Her Highness when she needed you. Captain Alan, Captain Callum...thank you so much for saving her."

Even with our heads bowed, Arthur's tone—his sincerity—reached us. Alan and I froze at the unexpected wave of gratitude that washed over us both.

"Stale, Princess Pride, Tiara, all the knights, and I still trust you just like always," Arthur said. "You're the great knights you've always been, and we know we can count on you."

Alan and I had never expected such kindness. Alan gulped, and I clenched my

fists tightly to tamp down a swell of emotion.

"So please don't bow to me. As knights, you two have...always been my inspiration."

As soon as Alan and I raised our heads, we caught the hint of a smile on Arthur's face. Then he bowed right back at us and said, "It's an honor to work with you!" His ponytail drooped over his neck, wagging like a dog's tail.

Alan reached out and ruffled his hair. "Thanks, Arthur."

"We're glad to work with you too," I said.

At this response, Arthur brushed his hair back into place and smiled shyly.

"Okay, then, Arthur! What say you join me for a workout tonight?" Alan said. He grinned to lighten the mood and linked his arm through Arthur's as he dragged him along.

"Wait, I just came to get some water!" Arthur said. "Oh, does that mean you'll spar with me?!"

"Alan, it's too late to get carried away with sparring," I said. "I know you love to train, but don't forget that we still have guard duties tomorrow. Be sure not to overwork yourself either, Arthur."

Alan pouted but reluctantly heeded my warning. Arthur insisted that he was fine to train that night, but he gave up when I patted him on the shoulder.

"Goodnight, then," Arthur said.

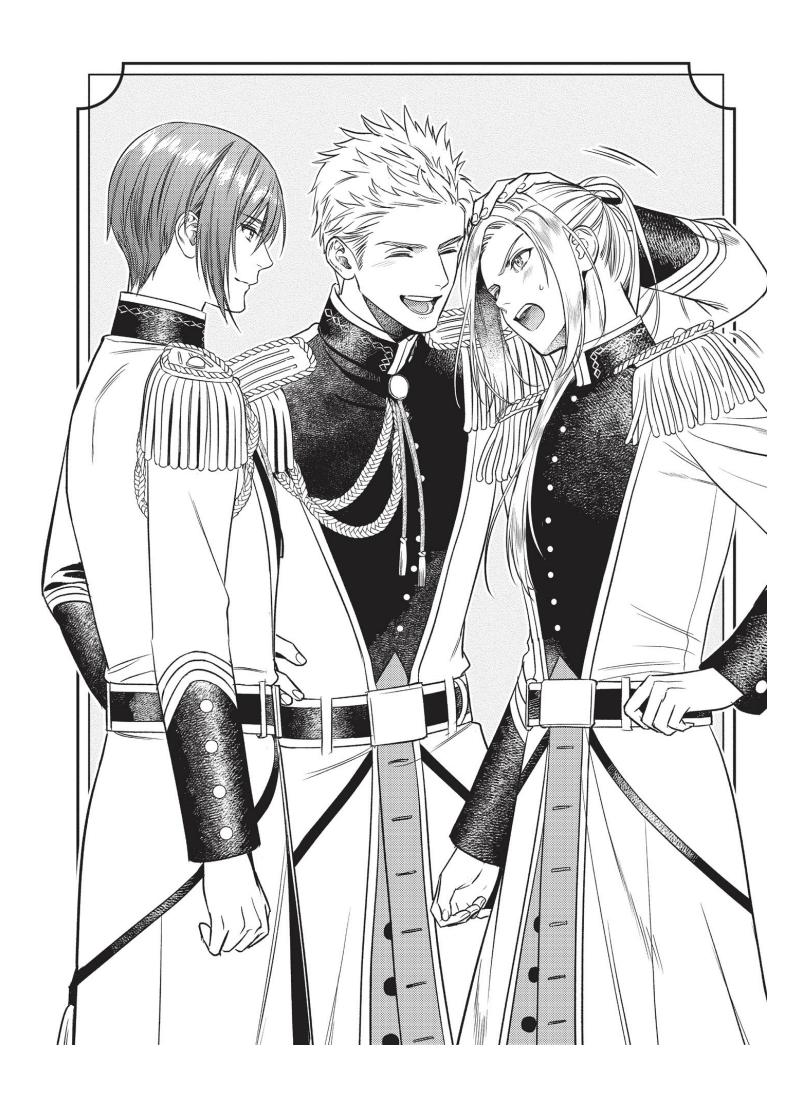
"I'll invite Eric and we can get some fighting in tomorrow!" Alan said, grabbing Arthur's shoulder and trying to cheer him up.

I started to warn them that Eric still needed rest, but Arthur drowned me out with a cry of, "Yes, please!"

"P-please, wait up!"

It had been six days since I returned to Freesia with Princess Pride. Dad had

arrived two days ago with the other knights. While Vice Captain Eric and other injured knights were still recovering, things had gone almost completely back to normal in the royal order. Plus, I'd learned that Captain Alan and Captain Callum were going to keep their jobs, staying on as Princess Pride's imperial knights alongside Vice Captain Eric and me. Their suspension would begin once Vice Captain Eric came back to work. The two had ordered me not to tell anyone else about their punishment, but I was still really happy with how everything had turned out.



From what I heard, they hadn't told anyone about their punishment during their captains' meeting yesterday. Dad had summoned me to his office in the morning, but he never brought up Alan and Callum. All seemed right with the world again. Vice Captain Eric was recovering nicely, Princess Pride's injury was healed, and Captain Alan and Captain Callum would return in a month. We'd even established peace with Rajah and aided in the recovery of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, who'd soon open trade with Freesia. It seemed like we'd finally returned to a state of normalcy.

Oh, how wrong that proved to be.

"Please...please wait! What are you...? I don't understand!" I called.

I was in the middle of a desperate sprint. With Vice Captain Eric still out, the three of us guarding Princess Pride only got brief breaks. Yet here I was, spending one of mine in a mad dash.

Captain Alan had been in a great mood last night, so the two of us had wound up sparring a bit. Then Captain Callum joined us, wanting to compete on Vice Captain Eric's behalf. The three of us got so into it that we accidentally ended up sparring until dawn. *And now this?!*

"Why...are you running...anyway?!"

I shouted at Captain Harrison yet again, but it was no use. In the time it took me to focus on yelling, he got even farther ahead of me. I picked up the pace, refusing to give in. I was one of the faster knights in the royal order, but I still couldn't catch him—he just kept gaining distance. My stomach churned, so I tightened my core and tried to ignore it.

"Captain Harrison!" I said between ragged breaths.

The captain used his special power to zoom ahead whenever I started catching up. He was a distant, hazy blip, but I had to keep going no matter what. I didn't want to think about how many dozens of laps we'd already done around the training grounds. He may be able to move fast, but it's still supposed to tire

him out like anyone else!

"This is just...cruel! You're usually...the one...chasing me!"

There was no way he could hear me over the distance, but I couldn't help but complain. It wasn't fair. Yesterday, he'd attacked me a whole dozen times!

The second I got a break, and who did I run into in the training grounds but Captain Harrison? Yet he ran away every time I got close. I'd looked for him that morning too, but he fled the scene before I could talk to him.

"You better come up with...a good explanation...or I can't go through with this!"

This isn't working. When I yell this much, I can't breathe! Watching the captain fade away into the distance, I came to a stop, and then...

"But I already gave you an explanation."

"Whoa!" I rasped, flinching. I'd hardly felt so much as a breeze—barely seen a flash of his long, black hair—yet Captain Harrison was right in front of me, peering into my eyes.

My heart raced, either from all the running or the sudden scare. I clutched my chest over my armor and took a few steps back. I was still too winded to respond, so I stared at Captain Harrison while he cocked his head to one side.

"What's wrong, Arthur Beresford?" Captain Harrison asked. "You should be able to run a kilometer or two."

I didn't understand why he was scolding me when he was the one running here. I panted, trying to catch my breath, and finally managed a reply.

"Why...did you...run?!"

"I knew you'd keep up."

As always, he was a man of few words. It was hardly an answer, but Captain Harrison rarely said more than the bare minimum.

I sucked in another breath, and he added, "You don't usually chase me."

So why did he make me run after him all that way?!

I was done trying to chase him. Instead, I was going to ask him my question while I had his attention. I took a few more steadying breaths, faced Captain Harrison, and...

"Hey! Where are you going now?!"

I hadn't meant to scream again, but Captain Harrison had taken off while I was pulling myself together. I was at my wits' end. I shouted after him as I reluctantly followed. He would start to walk whenever other knights were around, which was also the one time I couldn't ask him my question. He'd told me I couldn't even talk to Dad about it yet. It was then that I noticed Captain Harrison stagger. Was he finally getting tired? Thank goodness I wasn't the only one here with burning lungs and shaky legs.

"Captain Harrison! Please...answer my question!"

"I don't need to."

"I'm not agreeing to any of it yet!"

"You don't need to."

I was desperate, but the captain bluntly rejected me. My feet slapped heavily against the ground as I chased him. Other knights cast us curious looks as we passed.

"What's going on?"

"Are they fighting?!"

It was so embarrassing. I felt like a little kid again.

Captain Harrison suddenly screeched to a halt. I almost ran into his back, so I bent backward to dodge the collision. Captain Harrison spun and opened the door next to him, a door that led to his personal quarters.

"Are you coming in?" he asked, expressionless.

In a way, Captain Harrison was even harder to read than Stale used to be. He

never so much as smiled outside of battle. But I still wanted to talk to him, so I dipped my head and accepted the invitation. We needed to have a real conversation.

Captain Harrison's room was a mystery—I doubted anyone in the royal order had ever been inside it. As soon as we entered, he shut the door behind us. For a second, fear prickled along the back of my neck; this would be a great place for him to murder me.

His room was mostly empty. I didn't have many personal items myself, but I'd never seen a room sparser than mine. Captain Harrison had an order-provided bed, a desk, and a chair. Aside from a few items he needed to perform his duties, there was nothing but food, water, and a few pieces of clothing. It was hard to believe he'd lived here like this for years.

"So what do you want?"

His sharp voice was like a sword poised at my back. I flinched and spun around to find the captain leaning against his door with his arms crossed, his face as blank as ever. His blunt bangs covered his face when he tilted his head.

"I refuse to accept this," I said. "Please give me a real explanation."

"You've had one already," Captain Harrison replied calmly.

He was right—Dad and Clark had explained this to me before. Still, I wasn't convinced. Besides, they'd told me Captain Harrison had basically forced it on them. I had to get the real answers from the man himself. I steadied my stance, letting my hands drift toward my weapons just in case this conversation angered Captain Harrison enough that he attacked.

"Yes, the commander and vice commander explained it to me," I said. "But I'm not going to accept it yet."

"You don't need to."

He wasn't wrong about that. What mattered was the will of the royal order itself. I could raise whatever fuss I wanted, but that didn't mean I was entitled

to the full story.

Regardless, I told him, "It's just too sudden."

"The defensive war."

Huh? Is that all he has to say? I didn't understand. And unlike Stale or Prime Minister Gilbert, I was no good at debating. Yet I had to do my best.

"Just saying 'the defensive war' isn't a real explanation."

"I heard the reports from the Eighth Squadron."

He didn't seem to care whether I understood what he was saying. I wasn't even sure if these were truly answers to my questions or just random words he chose to say.

"I...I've only been vice captain for a month," I said.

"You gained good experience."

It was one simple sentence after another. I wanted to tell him that a single month wasn't enough experience, good or not. The defensive war had broken out in the middle of that month, which kept me busy and stopped me from doing a vice captain's usual work.

"This is wrong!" My voice spiked as emotion got the best of me. I balled my hands into fists and gritted my teeth as my frustration welled up, threatening to overwhelm me, while he continued to evade any kind of real response.

All Captain Harrison said was, "No, it isn't."

Why? The question repeated over and over in my head, but I couldn't ask it of Captain Harrison and hope to get a genuine answer. Even so, I couldn't accept this. It had only been a month. One month ago, Princess Pride and the other knights were celebrating my promotion to vice captain. Even Dad told me, "Be sure to gain lots of experience that will help you in the future." So why me?! Why now?!

"I...!" The word burst free before I could contain it. More bubbled up behind

it, my feelings surging to the surface. I was on the verge of yelling as loudly as I had when I was chasing him. "I can't be promoted to Eighth Squadron captain yet!"

That simple sentence left me out of breath. Squeezing my fists tightly, I glared at the captain, even with his eyes hidden behind his hair.

"What if someone outside hears you?" he said.

Another nonanswer. Sure, Dad had ordered us not to speak of this where someone could overhear it, but the captain's room was soundproofed. He leaned closer to the door, listening for anyone on the other side. Apparently finding nothing that troubled him, he sighed. If a knight had been close enough to hear, he really might have shut them up for good.

"I don't understand," I went on. "There's not a single reason for you to be demoted to vice captain."

"You became the captain, so I have to be vice captain."

It was like trying to argue with a brick wall. My words weren't reaching him at all.

"I don't understand why I'm being made captain! All I did was help out during the war!"

"You and Commander Roderick salvaged the situation on the front lines."

"But you saved the king in the Chinensian castle, right? I heard you wiped out the entire invasion in the south without any help."

This finally got a reaction from him. He frowned at the reminder of the amazing things he'd done during the war, things that made it way too unfair for him to be demoted to vice captain.

"I didn't do much."

"Neither did I, Captain."

A shadow passed over his face. He kept his arms folded but tapped irritably at

his elbows. "Arthur Beresford, you're...a lot like the commander."

Why the sudden change of subject? I thought he was trying to dodge the issue again, so I demanded he stick to the subject. But Captain Harrison kept going.

"You're also *un*like him. You're immature in how you speak and act. Most of all, you don't have a shred of majesty."

That knocked the wind out of me like a punch to the gut. I knew I couldn't compare to Dad yet, but he didn't have to put it so bluntly. Besides, none of the things he listed were requirements for being a commander in the royal order.

"You're not even wise like the vice commander. You're alike, but also not. Besides, you chose to be in the Eighth Squadron."

The captain was on a roll, but I had no idea why. We weren't in battle, and Dad and Clark weren't around. What was he saying these things for? Joining the Eighth Squadron shouldn't have anything to do with Clark. Maybe I'd finally pissed him off, the thought of which weirdly brought me down a few notches.

"You also managed to win the role of Princess Pride Royal Ivy's imperial knight by demonstrating your skills," he said. "That's why I..."

Nope, I was totally lost. I'd come here to protest my title being swapped with Captain Harrison's, but I couldn't even get a straight answer out of him.

"That's why I like you."

I seriously have no idea what he's prattling on about anymore! I wanted to ask him to repeat himself. All I could do was blink at him over and over, but he held steady, as unyielding as ever.

"Your break's almost over," he noted.

There was no clock in the room for me to check. I wondered how he could know what time it was at all, but I said goodbye anyway and rushed out of the room. Once again, he'd gotten through that entire conversation without giving me a real or comprehensible answer. Although, in the brief moment when I looked up at him to say goodbye...

I felt like I could see the tiniest hint of a smile on his face.

"Oh, I wonder if Arthur managed to catch Harrison. What do you think?"

Captain Alan glanced at the clock as he lobbed that question at Captain Callum, who stood beside him. He smirked before Captain Callum could even reply. Even I looked up to check the time, ignoring the letters I'd been sorting through as part of my usual "crown princess" duties.

Arthur had been exhausted when he showed up for his first imperial knight shift that morning. I thought he would have had time to recover, considering the royal order returned two days ago, so I asked him what was wrong. He explained that he'd wanted to ask Captain Harrison something, but the captain spent the whole morning fleeing from him. I found that pretty impressive, given how fast Arthur himself was.

He wouldn't tell me what he wanted to ask Captain Harrison about, but Captain Callum, who came with him, and Captain Alan, who took over for his shift, seemed to have a good idea. The two captains smiled awkwardly when Arthur raged about how he swore he'd catch Captain Harrison on his next break. The same went for when he took off in a full sprint toward the training grounds as soon as his shift ended. It was all extremely strange, but no one would tell me what was going on.

"I wonder what Arthur's so anxious to ask him about," Tiara mused, peeking up at me from her book with a tilt of her head.

I sympathized with her. At least she was in good spirits again, unlike five days ago when she was so upset...

"Tiara, will you please talk to us already?"

Stale had pressed Tiara the day after we returned to Freesia. Tiara's knifethrowing skills impressed all of us during the war, but they also left us confounded. Where had she learned a thing like that?

Tiara slowly confessed, dragging out each word. She said she'd spent the past two years secretly honing that particular skill. She brought us to her room to show us how she'd covered two walls with book pages from floor to ceiling. Removing the pages revealed countless marks left from throwing knives. She even kept a locked box full of knives. As though that weren't shocking enough, she also said she kept a *dozen* knives hidden on her body at all times! Finally, she hit us with one more surprise: it was Val who'd taught her how to throw knives in the first place.

Val, the brown-skinned man with dark-brown hair and eyes always fixed in a menacing glare, served as a deliveryman for Freesia. The moment Tiara uttered the felon's name, Stale teleported Val to our location, bringing Sefekh and Khemet along with him. This was our first reunion since returning to Freesia, and it was coming in the form of an interrogation.

Val and the children explained that he had been teaching Tiara to throw knives in total secrecy, hiding behind the excuse of Tiara "playing in her room" with Sefekh and Khemet. I'd always assumed they were just reading books or something like that, when in reality those innocent get-togethers were knifethrowing lessons, ones even Khemet joined in on. Tiara explained that she'd given Val the money to buy all the knives and equipment required.

"What are your intentions with Tiara?!" Stale demanded.

"I just did what Miss Princess asked," Val said. "Don'tcha know? I'm not allowed to say no to her."

Although the two men were close to trading blows, Val seemed to be enjoying the rage twisting Stale's face. He laughed at Stale's mounting frustration. In the end, we agreed that Tiara's knife-throwing would stay between us.

"I'll ignore it for now...but don't think you'll be able to keep practicing once you're married and living somewhere else," Stale told her.

"I know that, Big Brother. It's all right. I only do it here in the castle."

Despite Stale's warning, Tiara smiled cheerfully. It made my heart ache to think that she wouldn't be living in Freesia much longer. Regardless of whether she married Cedric or someone else, most princesses left the country once they were sixteen and married foreign royalty. I still couldn't forget the heartbreak and sorrow on their siblings' faces when that happened in the game.

"Is Captain Harrison a difficult person?"

Back in the present, Stale happened to be on break from his duties as a seneschal in training. He directed his question at Captain Callum and Captain Alan.

Since I'd finished with my letters, Stale started collecting the ones set for disposal, but I couldn't stand to watch him simply discard all the letters from my suitors so casually. Stale always reminded me that the letters had no sender listed, and that they'd just take up space, but I still felt guilty about it.

"I'd say he's...definitely difficult, yes," Captain Callum replied.

Captain Alan smiled awkwardly, exchanging a meaningful look with his cohort. The unusually evasive response only left me more curious, and I turned in my chair as I waited for him to continue. It was Captain Alan who eventually spoke.

"That Harrison... He sure does love Arthur."

Huh?! Stale and Tiara were as startled as I was. We knew Captain Harrison from the war, and Arthur had told us a little about him as well.

"Arthur described him as a rather strict individual," Stale said carefully.

That was a nice way of putting it. To be more accurate, Captain Harrison sounded terrifying, but Stale clearly didn't want to offend the captains. The pair smiled stiffly again.

"Yes, he is," Captain Callum said. "And that's besides the fact that he's the captain of the Eighth Squadron, which is built around its members' merits. He's always evaluated people based purely on their skills. That also means that once

he opens up to someone, he has absolute faith in them."

"So Captain Harrison took a liking to Arthur because he's good with a sword?" Stale asked.

That made sense to me. Few others could wield a blade as Arthur could, even among the knights. I remembered hearing Captain Callum speak of Captain Harrison's praise for Arthur on the night of my sixteenth birthday.

Yet now Captain Callum merely said, "Yes, that's part of it." He then looked at Captain Alan, clearly unsure if he should continue. I hadn't expected this to be such a touchy subject.

Captain Alan forced a grin. "Harrison is really devoted to Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark. He's loyal to them above all else."

That was no surprise either. The knights adored their commander and vice commander. They were brilliant knights, after all. Even the taciturn Captain Harrison clearly respected them. The three of us nodded and waited for the captains to go on.

As though seeking permission to continue, Captain Alan cast a glance at Captain Callum before he spoke again. "Harrison is part of the same generation of knights as we are."

Wow, what an amazing generation! The year the three of them joined the royal order must have been a golden age.

"Callum and Harrison joined the royal order at the youngest possible age the first time they applied as rookies. I failed the first year."

I was a little startled by Captain Alan's confession. I could hardly picture him failing his entrance exam.

"But then I joined the main forces the same year that Callum did."

Hm?

"I was promoted to vice captain of the First Squadron the year that Callum became a captain. It was the same year that Harrison joined the main forces."

Hmmm? Something's not right here. The math doesn't add up.

Stale's face went taut as he discerned the problem as well. Even Tiara's brow was furrowed.

"Of course, Harrison easily surpassed his current captain the next year. He became captain before I did. He's a real elite to skip straight to the top like Callum."

Every word only left me more confused. Captain Alan didn't seem bothered at all by our reactions, though.

"In other words...Captain Harrison spent a long time as a rookie knight?" I said as I worked through the implications.

Stale and Tiara had reached the same conclusion I had, and the captains confirmed it. I couldn't quite hide my shock. Captain Harrison was universally acknowledged as a talented knight. I hadn't seen much of his skills for myself, but I knew that his strength alone was overwhelming. I looked to the captains, hoping they'd clarify.

"He's got that unique personality of his..." Captain Callum said. "During his first battle in his attempt to join the main forces, he ended up getting himself disqualified."

Disqualified?!

The entrance exam to join the main forces consisted of a tournament. It was hard to imagine how Captain Harrison could get himself disqualified from that. I cocked my head, waiting for an answer.

"He beat up his opponents way more than he had to," Captain Alan explained. "Even when they surrendered or relinquished their swords or lost due to a ruling, Captain Harrison just kept going. He injured some of them so badly, they couldn't use a sword for a while. This violated the knights' code, so he wasn't allowed to join the order despite his skills... He almost got banned entirely."

Oh dear. I can kind of picture that.

I thought back to the terrifying stories about Captain Harrison that Arthur had told me, as well as that bloodcurdling smile he wore throughout the war. Stale nodded as the same understanding struck him.

"Alan was just about the only knight back then who could sword fight with Harrison and come out of it in one piece."

Captain Alan chuckled. "Nah, I really thought I was gonna die too."

"The vice commander was the one to recognize Harrison's skills. He negotiated with Commander Roderick and got him to petition the other captains on his behalf. They ended up giving Harrison special permission to join the order. The vice commander started looking after him and made him join the Eighth Squadron. He even personally educated Harrison himself."

Captain Alan had a dreamy, nostalgic look on his face as he thought back on it. "Harrison started obeying everything the commander and vice commander asked of him once they defeated him in sword fights."

That sounded like the commander and vice commander I knew. Not only were they good at taking care of people, but they'd managed to make Captain Harrison yield to their strength.

"That's why Harrison is completely loyal to the commander and vice commander," Captain Callum said. "And it's why he cares so deeply for you, Princess Pride, ever since you saved the commander's life. As for Arthur, well..."

Hang on, what's this about Captain Harrison "caring deeply" for me? We've barely even been in the same room together! I don't understand why my name's coming up! And why did he stop talking all of a sudden?!

Despite my frantic thoughts, I could kind of see where this was going. Arthur was the commander's son—beloved by both his father and the vice commander. There was no way that Captain Harrison wouldn't care for him too. Stale and Tiara seemed to agree; it appeared Arthur was the only one who didn't realize that the captain was fond of him.

As though he'd read my mind, Stale asked, "Does Arthur know how he feels?"

The captains replied in tandem:

"No..."

"Not really..."

"Harrison really isn't the type of man to say how he feels," Captain Callum added. "But everyone who knew Harrison back in the day can tell that he looks after Arthur."

"Sometimes you can read the guy like a book," Captain Alan said.

"I'm sure he wouldn't want to hear that from you," Captain Callum retorted, and I had to wonder what that was about.

"Arthur doesn't know?" Stale asked, bewildered.

"To be honest, Arthur is Harrison's favorite in the whole royal order," Captain Alan said.

It's that extreme?! I couldn't seem to close my mouth. It was like Arthur was Captain Harrison's favorite child, spoiled in the only way he knew how.

"That's true," Captain Callum agreed.

I'd never heard any of this from Arthur himself. He usually talked about Captain Callum, Captain Alan, or Vice Captain Eric.

"He was in a great mood when he and Arthur were assigned their first mission together," Captain Alan said. "He fought in perfect form for that one, even though he wasn't fighting anyone particularly strong."

Arthur had told me that much. They'd found nothing worse than some petty thieves, but Captain Harrison had roared with laughter as he beat them all to a pulp. Which was kind of terrifying when I thought about it. A laughing Captain Harrison sounded even scarier than his usual impassive self.

"He doesn't usually break into laughter unless it's an important mission from the commander or vice commander," Captain Alan said. Oh, does that mean the part where he beats people to a pulp is normal? I kept my many concerns to myself, but Captain Alan seemed to sense my confusion.

"Oh, your orders put him in a good mood too, Your Highness."

That's not what I was hoping to hear at all.

"He was happy when Arthur joined the royal order, and he was practically cheering when he was promoted to the main forces and joined the Eighth Squadron."

"Aside from combat situations, how do you know when he's in a good mood?" Stale asked.

I was wondering the same thing. If Captain Harrison was so blatant with his moods, then surely Arthur would pick up on it.

"He'll attack his subordinates more often," the two captains said simultaneously.

I swayed on my feet. What did they mean, he attacked his subordinates? At this wild reveal, Tiara's and Stale's mouths were agape just like mine.

"Huh? Has Arthur never told you about that?" asked Captain Alan.

Captain Callum ran his hand through his hair before explaining. Apparently, Captain Harrison would ambush the members of his Eighth Squadron whenever he spotted them. The vice commander had strictly instructed him not to beat them senseless anymore, but even so, I could see why Arthur was scared of him.

That was when something struck me. "Wait. I thought you said Arthur was his favorite?"

I could tell that Captain Harrison thought very fondly of Arthur, but I didn't understand how the captains knew he was the man's favorite. I sure hoped that favoritism didn't play a role in Arthur becoming his vice captain. I thought a promotion to captain or vice captain only happened once a knight met the requirements for their specific unit. Then the majority of the captains in the

royal order needed to be in favor. Arthur had the skills to back up his position, so I didn't want to believe favoritism might have played any role in his promotion.

Stale narrowed his eyes; he must have been thinking the same thing. It was like he'd just been told that Arthur wasn't good enough for his position. Even Tiara tilted her head from side to side in thought. Captain Alan merely scratched his cheek and smiled at us.

Captain Callum hesitated before saying, "Harrison had short hair until six years ago, you see."

What? That was way too weird.

"Don't tell me..." Stale muttered, his lips curving into a smile.

The captain nodded. "It happened when Arthur vowed to Princess Pride that he would become a knight. After that, all the knights wanted to talk about was the two of you. They just didn't mention Arthur as much in front of his father, obviously.

"Back then, some of the knights got drunk and talked about something very frivolous. They wanted to know if Arthur would have to cut his long hair." Captain Callum rubbed his temples as he spoke, as though fighting off a headache.

"It gets in the way during combat, that's all," Captain Alan chimed in. "There aren't any regulations about hairstyles, but no knights in the order at the time happened to have long hair..."

I was starting to understand. A smile tugged at my lips. But the more the captains spoke, the more fragile that smile became.

They explained the situation as they'd seen it for themselves:

Arthur had appeared before the knights for the first time six years ago. Every knight who was serving at the time had witnessed him declare that he would join them. Later, when Arthur delivered a sword his father left at home,

everyone saw him with his hair up for the first time. At that point, his resemblance to his father was undeniable.

"I'm excited to see him return to us as a knight."

"I was surprised to see he had long hair, but he's got the same face as Commander Roderick, all right."

"Is he gonna cut it short like his dad once he's a knight?"

"Probably. All that hair'll get in the way, and it puts him at a disadvantage in battle."

"But then he'll look exactly like the commander!"

The knights weren't trying to be mean; they only worried that if Arthur started looking any more like his father, he'd be treated like the commander's son instead of his own person. That was when Captain Harrison, who had been with the main forces for about a year by then, wedged himself into the conversation. He tossed his knife straight at his fellow knights. They'd barely dodged his attack when he began to speak.

"Hair length doesn't matter. I could defeat the likes of you no matter the length of my hair. What would you have to say then?"

The usually quiet Captain Harrison spoke up merely to threaten the knights who'd called long hair a nuisance. Though Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark had defeated him half a year ago, everyone knew how strong he was—he was famous within the order for his terrifying skill. His lethality was common knowledge, even when he was still a rookie. Still, those knights had never expected their conversation to inspire such rage in him.

"If you want to complain about Arthur Beresford, then say it once you've defeated me."

Vice Commander Clark had scolded Captain Harrison after that. The vice commander barely managed to prevent a brawl from breaking out. Regardless, that was when Captain Harrison started growing out his hair. He defeated the

previous Eighth Squadron captain within a year and took his place. Captain Harrison never kept his hair tied up either—he always let it fly around wildly, like he wanted to make his point every time he was in battle.

He really was affectionate toward Arthur. In fact, he was kind of like an overbearing parent.

Compared to Captain Harrison's long, unkempt hair, Arthur's ponytail didn't seem like much of a burden. Maybe Captain Harrison didn't want Arthur to feel out of place in the royal order...or maybe it was a reminder to those knights that Captain Harrison would beat them up if they ever complained about Arthur's hair again. Either way, that long hair kept everyone in check. Arthur had always had long hair, but he probably would have cut it the second a senior knight said anything about it. The fact that his hair was still long today probably meant no one had commented on it.

Never had I expected a hairstyle to come with such a complex backstory.

"Harrison never interacts with others if he can avoid it, but he went out of his way to support Arthur," Captain Alan said, smiling at the memory. "All the knights were really shocked when it happened. He sure loves Arthur, all right..."

Laughter broke out, startling me. I found Stale shaking as he tried to tamp down his reaction.

Captain Callum ignored him and said, "Harrison's the only one who speaks to Arthur as though they're friends."

That was kind of refreshing, given how standoffish he was with everyone else. It helped me understand just how much Captain Harrison cared about Arthur.

"He resembles the commander, he's doted on by the vice commander, and he made a declaration to protect you, Your Highness," Captain Callum went on.

"He met every requirement for winning Harrison's favor before he even became a knight."

Now I felt a little sad for Arthur, who probably never realized how much the

captain loved him. I said as much, and Captain Callum explained that Captain Harrison would probably never acknowledge his feelings out loud.

"He doesn't have the personality for that sort of thing," he told me. "He may be hard to communicate with, but he's said all he wants from people is for them to fight as hard as they can. The only person he wants praise from is the vice commander."

So he still yearned for approval from the man who trained him. I was relieved to learn he had such a human facet to his personality.

"You could say Arthur is the one person Harrison protects, in a way."

He protects him, I mused. Captain Callum emphasized how much Captain Harrison cared about Arthur. It seemed the captain showed Arthur even more favoritism than Commander Roderick, his own father, did. Captain Harrison must have been so happy when Arthur joined his unit and got promoted to vice captain. Yet Arthur didn't have a *clue* this was going on.

"That being the case, all the knights agreed that Arthur deserved to be vice captain. It wasn't just Harrison's decision."

Captain Callum might have gone on, but a knock at the door interrupted him. Then we heard an exhausted greeting from none other than Arthur himself. "Sorry I took so long..."

The two captains quieted immediately and told us not to repeat anything they'd said; they had divulged way too much information about Captain Harrison's private life. Only after we'd nodded our agreement did Jack, my guard, open the door for Arthur.

Somehow, Arthur's break had left him even more worn down than before. Mary, my personal maid, fetched water for him the moment she heard his hoarse voice. Arthur told us that he'd finally managed to talk to Captain Harrison, but never got a firm answer out of him.

"So you ran here as soon as your break was over?" Captain Alan said pityingly.

Judging by Arthur's limp state, he hadn't used his break to rest at all.

Concerned, Tiara and I fanned him with our handkerchiefs. Stale simply sighed.

"He answered my question...but I just don't accept it," Arthur said. "Captain Harrison's being his usual self, but still..." He downed a glass of water in one go, then realized Tiara and I were fanning him. He thanked us, but hastened to add, "You don't have to do that! I'm fine!"

"Of course you managed to get invited to Harrison's room. What was it like?" Captain Alan asked.

Arthur took a moment to catch his breath. "I don't know what you mean by 'of course.' It was...totally empty. I'd never seen anyone with fewer personal items than me." He chugged a second glass of water offered by Captain Callum. Slowly, he pushed himself upright in his chair and sighed. "I just don't get that guy at all."

I didn't know what he'd chased down Captain Harrison for, but after hearing all those stories about him, I found the whole thing kind of sweet.

Arthur clenched his fists. "Next time, I'm gonna talk to him in a place where he won't be able to escape!"

Evidently, he had no intention of giving up until he got the answer he was after.

"What do you think of Captain Harrison?" Stale said, a twinge of anger in his voice. I found myself leaning forward, curious to hear the answer.

"He's really damn scary," Arthur replied. "I don't know what else to think."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that answer. His description added yet another facet to the captain's character.

"Th-then what do you think of Captain Harrison's hair?!" Tiara blurted, abruptly changing the subject.

Arthur blinked, taken aback by the sudden shift, but answered swiftly: "I always wonder if it gets in his way when he's fighting, but I don't really think it's

a bad thing... I think it's so cool how he can defeat anyone he fights even while having that long hair. Although, it's scary too..."

I wanted to scream. If he'd just say this directly to the captain, he'd get most of the answers he'd been looking for!

Nevertheless, with Arthur here, Captain Alan got to take his break. He headed for the training grounds, but not before smiling at Arthur's repeated sighing over Captain Harrison. Giving Arthur a pat on the back, he said, "Don't think about it too much."

I relaxed a little. If Captain Alan—who knew what Arthur wanted to ask Captain Harrison—could be so casual, the situation must have been under control. Arthur still seemed troubled during his shift, but I hoped that he would someday be able to forge a friendly relationship with Captain Harrison, just like he had with the other knights.

Interlude:

Visit from the Working Princess

"AH, THEY'RE finally here."

I chuckled softly to myself. I'd been passing by a window when I happened to see a carriage rolling up. My lips curled into a smile; they'd arrived exactly on time. Although this was just another one of our monthly visits, I'd been awaiting it oh-so-eagerly. All day, my entire being had thrummed with anticipation.

Humming cheerfully, I watched the carriage approach, until a guard ran in from outside and called out, "Prince Leon!" The guard got on one knee and delivered the news. "The carriage from Freesia has just arrived!"

I knew this, of course, but smiled again. "I see," I replied, thanking the guard. "I'll be there shortly."

I strode to the front doors with an envoy of guards clustered around me. A pleasant breeze blew in from the windows, brushing against my long eyelashes. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of the fresh air from outside.

"Such great sailing weather today."

I gazed out of the castle window at the peaceful scenery of Anemone. The Freesian carriage trundled up to the castle, but my thoughts had already turned to the harbor and the state of today's trades.

"Leon! Thanks for coming out to greet us. I really missed you."

Leon was waiting for us when we exited our carriage for our monthly visit to Anemone. It was the first time I'd gotten to see him since the war.

"Thank you for having us over today, Prince Leon!" Tiara said with a curtsy.

Stale had remained home, assisting Uncle Vest like usual, but Tiara had

agreed to accompany me on the trip. Leon flashed his customary charming smile when we greeted him.

"I've missed you too, Pride," he said. "And I'm so pleased to have you here with us, Tiara."

Leon kissed the backs of our hands. He radiated a casual sensuality that had heat creeping into my face the moment he drew near. I glanced over and found Tiara blushing as well, pressing her lips together. The ever-beautiful and alluring Leon was a force to be reckoned with.

Our greetings complete, Leon turned gracefully to the people behind me. "Alan, Callum, I welcome you both to Anemone as well."

Captain Callum and Captain Alan straightened when the prince directed his charming smile to them, and they bowed in return. As they met more frequently, Leon had begun to call the two captains by their first names alone; the same went for Arthur and Vice Captain Eric. He still took care to speak formally during official business, and the knights themselves never wavered from their strict manner of address.

Compared to these skilled communicators, I felt guilty for keeping the knights somewhat at arm's length—aside from Arthur, that is. I mean, they were famous captains and vice captains of the royal order. Then again, I was a princess and Arthur was a vice captain himself now, yet I still spoke with him like he was my friend.

"Thank you for everything during the war," I said. "I meant to tell you that a lot sooner."

"Don't worry about that," Leon replied. "I only did what was natural as your kingdom's ally and as your sworn friend."

With that, Leon showed us inside to the parlor. He smiled kindly and reminded me that I had thanked him already in Hanazuo. Once we were all seated, he had his servants bring in black tea for everyone.

"But Anemone successfully guarded the gate into the country," I said. "You saved the lives of many civilians, and you even supplied us with weapons. The United Hanazuo Kingdom and Freesia can't thank you enough."

"It warms me to hear you praise us so. You'll be sure to come to me if you ever need anything else, right?" Leon's jade-green eyes shimmered as he tilted his head to confirm.

"Yes, of course," I replied automatically, too overwhelmed by his mere presence to think on my feet.

He stuck his pinkie out toward me. "It's a promise, okay?"

His playful smile had me bewitched. Leon's sensuality enveloped me like a rose-scented shawl. Tiara and I both swallowed hard and blushed. Why are you being hot in a moment like this?! We helplessly nodded over and over in response to his request.

"That's a relief."

His smile relaxed into one of usual charm, and the conversation turned toward milder topics. We spent our time catching up on each other's lives, and I invited him to our upcoming victory banquet, but it turned out he would be unable to attend. My shoulders slouched with disappointment, so Leon quickly placed his teacup on the table and changed the subject.

"What shall we do today?" he asked. "If you'd like more tea, I have plenty of rare delicacies we could pair with it. We could also head to the harbor and see the ships, or visit the newest shop opening up in town."

All the lovely suggestions left Tiara and I gulping again. During these visits, Leon always served us unique food and treats or escorted us to some special event in town. I could never get enough. Trying to settle on just one of the wonderful plans that Leon had laid out was a fun time in itself.

"What should we do?!" Tiara asked, delighted.

As I weighed our options, I caught Leon grinning at us. "If you have the time,

we could do them all," he suggested.

I suspected he would have loved anything we chose. Once, we'd asked if we could do everything he proposed and spent the entire day traveling around, taking in all of the sights he wanted to share.

"What's the new shop that's opening?" I asked.

It must have been incredible if Leon selected it for us to visit. The last place he'd suggested was a refurbished tea shop catering to the nobility. When we ended up going there ourselves, the selection of foreign, imported teas had enchanted us. If this world had guidebooks, that shop would have been worth an entire page. So, suffice to say I was eager to hear about this new shop as well. Tiara watched Leon with eager anticipation.

"It's just a small place," Leon said. "From what I've heard, they sell clothing inspired by foreign cultures. The young women here are eager to see all their unusual designs."

Foreign clothing! Tiara and I met each other's wide eyes. We wore whatever dresses were prepared for us each day; the idea of something from another country immediately excited us. Leon described it as an Anemonian shop that modeled its clothes after foreign cultures, which only made me more curious about what unique flair the outfits might offer. I can't wait to see!

"I'd love to go!" Tiara cried, and I nodded my head eagerly beside her.

We arrived at the shop just as customers started to stream in. The Anemonian knights explained our situation and asked the staff to temporarily close shop... or rather, to let us reserve the place. I felt bad about interrupting their opening day, but Leon told us the staff were pleased to have royalty from Anemone and Freesia in their shop, as it was sure to lead to more business. I remembered how, in my past life, a visit from a celebrity usually led to long lines at stores the next day. But I still felt I needed to buy something to fully take advantage of this opportunity. As Leon had said, the shop was small compared to other

establishments in the royal capital—but even from the window of the carriage, I could make out the adorable pink roof accented with lace. It made the entire place look like a stylish cupcake instead of a store.

"Is there anything you'd like to buy, Pride? Perhaps a hat or a dress?" asked Leon.

I wanted to at least look at dresses while we were here, but now that I really thought about it, accessories sounded lovely too. More than anything, I wanted to pick out some clothes for the much-more-adorable Tiara.

"Does that mean I can choose anything I like for you?" Leon said. "Giving you a dress as a present might not be appropriate, but I hope you'll at least let me choose one."

Oh! Leon has great fashion sense. Having him pick something out will be really helpful! In all honesty, my scary last-boss face made it hard for me to tell which clothes suited me. It was a relief to have someone else do it for me, especially someone as stylish as Leon. He beamed when I told him I would love that.

"Big Sister! Prince Leon! It looks like they're ready for us! Come on, let's get going!" Tiara said. She tugged on our hands and grinned.

Leon and I exchanged smiles. Seeing Tiara this excited was a treat on its own.

But the moment she dragged us into the store, I gasped. The entire place was a sea of pink, ribbons, and frilly lace. It reminded me of the "Lolita" fashion style from my past life. The dresses were akin to clouds of cotton candy, nothing at all like what Tiara and I normally wore. My eyes sparkled, and a blush rose to Tiara's cheeks as she clutched at her chest and relished in the dresses on display. These outfits would *definitely* look good on Tiara. The shop was practically made for her.

My sister ran full speed toward the white and light-colored dresses. I joined her, soaking up her joy as she rifled through fluffy garments unlike anything we donned in our day-to-day. She handed me what resembled a furry Russian hat with rabbit ears on top.

"We could buy two of these and match!" she exclaimed.

She was so adorable, and I loved the idea of matching with her...but I couldn't pull off this hat the way she could. We both tried them on regardless, standing in front of the mirror together. It was as though I were visiting an amusement park in my past life. Tiara made a perfect bunny princess, but I looked like a tourist who'd picked a random souvenir.

"You look so cute, Big Sister!"

I considered buying the hat just to use it like a fluffy plush doll. That was when I looked behind us in the mirror and caught Captain Callum and Captain Alan blushing and covering their mouths. When I whirled around, they immediately averted their eyes and started whispering frantically to each other.

"Alan! Are you hanging in there?!" Captain Callum asked.

"No way! I can't do this!" Captain Alan said.

From what I could make out, it sounded like they were painfully embarrassed by the sight of me wearing bunny ears. I quietly returned the hat to its shelf and moved on before my own blush reached my face.

"You're not getting it? But it looked so good on you," Leon said, his gaze sliding from me to the hat. He seemed sad, but I hadn't even realized he'd been watching us try them on. I offered him a vague excuse, and Leon responded by bringing me a frilly pink dress. "How about this, then?"

Pink?! And so lacy too! A giant bow sat on the hip, like the dress was a birthday present. I let out an involuntary, "Huh?!"

"I've noticed you don't have many girly dresses like this one, Pride. It seems like a waste, since I can't picture anything that wouldn't suit you. Here, you'd look lovely if you wore a bow in your hair."

No way, no way, no way!

While I floundered, Leon returned with a gigantic pink bow that looked like something a child would draw. I've only seen bows like that on the walls of

kindergartens! I was scrounging for the words to refuse when Tiara joined in, insisting that it would be so cute on me.

"There's a fitting room over there," Leon told me. "Why not try it on and see?"

So pushy! Leon had used my idle moment of panic to place the giant bow on the top of my head. I was dying of embarrassment as I squeaked out feeble protests. "But...this is...!" I looked like a little kid in elementary school. Just having a bow on my head was mortifying enough—adding a *dress* with a bow would surely kill me.

Leon noticed my distress. "What's the matter?"

I peered up at him, the bow still on my head and a furious heat in my cheeks. "I'm...I'm embarrassed... Please don't make me..."

I couldn't find any better words. My plea was like a child's. I knew my face had to be bright red at this point. Leon's jade-green eyes went wide—maybe he was surprised that I'd rejected his taste in clothing. Then a blush burned in his face as well.

"Leon?!" I yelped louder than I intended.

He must have been really confident in his choice if this rejection was so hard on him. Leon covered his mouth and turned away from me. I grabbed the ribbon and held it to my head before it could fall, but Leon wouldn't look at me. Although I couldn't figure out why, I realized I could seize this moment to sneak the giant bow back onto the shelf.

Unfortunately, I struggled to reach it. Captain Callum had to take the bow and return it for me—and that was when I noticed his face was red, his eyes unfocused. Even Captain Alan had broken out into a full-body blush. He stared at me in a daze. He must have been embarrassed to see his princess wearing something so childish. But hey, this thing wasn't my first choice either!

"S-sorry, Pride. I was just teasing, but I went too far," Leon said once he

recovered from his shock. Pink lingered in his pale face. "I really did think it would look good on you," he added while returning the dress to its shelf. I was glad that it was mostly a joke, or else I would have felt guilty for upsetting him so much.

Thankfully, Leon went a different direction with his next choice. Not only was it a nice style, but it came with a matching hair ornament. I loved it at first sight. It was the sort of girly design I never wore, but chic at the same time. When I thanked Leon and accepted the dress from him, he scratched at his cheek, blushing and smiling. Perhaps he was still embarrassed over my previous rejection. But a moment later, he flashed that bewitching smile of his and said, "I look forward to seeing you try it on." Even that simple statement was enough to have blood rushing back into my face.

A loud *thud* sounded behind me. I spun and found the unfortunate female employee of the store suffering the impacts of Leon's allure. I could certainly understand her.

Tiara hopped over and cheered, "It's like that dress was made for you, Big Sister!"

I couldn't help but be excited after the previous choice. I held the dress up to my body and asked the two captains if it looked all right. The knights blushed even redder in response.

"I think it quite suits you!" Captain Callum told me.

"It's cute, yes!" Captain Alan said.

They'd replied simultaneously. I wondered if they were trying so hard to praise me because this dress was much better than the previous one. It wasn't the kind of dress I could wear to formal events, but I decided it would be nice to have for a special occasion someday. I really did love it.

Tiara purchased three dresses for herself—one of them being the same one I was buying, only in a different colorway. "Let's wear them together!" she said, and my heart skipped a beat.

Leon made one last purchase. He bought the bunny-ear hats as presents for Tiara and me to take home. I was actually a little excited about this, but I tried not to let it show. I didn't mind taking it home if it was a gift, and I really did think it would make a cute stuffed animal. Tiara and I both hugged our hats like plushies, even though it felt rude not to use the gifts as intended.

The prince smiled shyly when we thanked him. Tiara's grin had clearly done him in.

We returned to the Anemonian castle and spent the rest of our time together having tea. Leon chose some rare sweets to accompany the drinks. Then, when it was time to leave, he escorted us to our carriage. He held his hand out to help me up, but I stopped him. Tiara and I climbed into the carriage ourselves, then pulled out something sitting next to the pile of clothes we'd bought. There would be no hiding these, so I called him over to see what we had. Tiara and I reemerged from the carriage, clutching the gifts in our hands.

They were two massive bouquets of Freesian flowers.

Captain Callum and Captain Alan helped me alight safely, given that my hands were occupied. When I searched for Leon, I found him blinking at me with wide eyes. I smiled and approached with Tiara at my side. A breeze brushed past us, scattering a few purple petals through the air.

"Thank you so much for coming to our rescue, Leon," I said. "It's not much, but I hope this will help express our gratitude."

"Big Sister selected the flowers herself!" Tiara added.

Leon's mouth fell open. "She did?"

"I really, really wanted to thank you in a formal way, and these just happened to be blooming in the garden when I was thinking about it," I said.

I'd come up with other options too, but once I saw those flowers, my mind was made up. Leon might not remember, but he'd taken a liking to these particular flowers when I showed him around the garden on his first trip to

Freesia. Now, his jade eyes wavered with emotion. He gazed at me with a look of pure affection.

The prince approached us, a gentle smile spread across his lips. "You... remembered?" His voice was so quiet, the wind nearly stole his words away.

"Of course," I replied with a smile of my own. "It's a precious memory we share!"

And to think I was worried *he* wouldn't remember. I could never forget my first meeting with Leon, before we became sworn friends and he risked so much to come to our rescue in the war. His first visit to Freesia had been three days of pain for him, but I still thought of it as the reason we became such good friends in the first place, and that made it precious.

At my response, tears shimmered in Leon's eyes. He pressed his lips together into a hard line and brought his hand to his chest, squeezing his shirt. Then he reached out and gently took the bouquet from me. It was large and heavy, but he handled it with great care, like it was delicate enough to collapse from his touch. The purple flower petals rustled as I turned it over to him.

Tiara presented him with a bouquet of her own. Clutching the purple bouquet under one arm, he accepted her offering of blue and white flowers. They were the same kind of flowers as the ones I'd given him, just in different colors. The petals' delicate shape resembled someone spreading their arms wide in joy. The castle gardens also contained red flowers of the same variety, but Tiara and I had asked the gardener to pick these in particular, since we felt they suited Leon best.

Leon's face flushed pink as he took in the sight of the bouquets under each arm. "I'm so happy. Yes, these are beautiful flowers indeed..."

He pressed his face into the flowers and breathed deeply. He was like a living painting in that moment, and Tiara and I couldn't help but smile when we saw him so happy. Unfortunately, it was time to say our goodbyes for real and get into the carriage.

"Until next time, Leon," I said. "Thank you for all you did today. It was so much fun! I'll be looking forward to our next visit."

"Hang on!" he said, jerking his head up.

He passed the bouquets gently to his knights, plucked one flower from each, and approached the carriage. Then he took my hand and escorted me inside.

Once I was seated, he tucked the purple flower into my hair.

"Yes, flowers truly do suit you," he said. "I've fallen even more in love with this flower now."

With his cheeks flushed, his smile was more captivating than ever. My face heated as the full force of his allure hit me.

"Thank you for the lovely gifts," he murmured, his voice tickling my ears.

Leon helped Tiara into the carriage next and placed one of the white flowers in her hair. The shy smile on her face gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling.

"I'll take good care of your flowers," Leon told us. "Next time, I'll be the one to come and visit you two."

With a charming grin, he took the bouquets under his arms again, raised his hand, and waved goodbye. He kept waving until our carriage was completely out of sight.

A sigh escaped me once their carriage disappeared from view. "What an incredible time..."

Pride made me so happy whenever she came to visit my kingdom. She listened to me speak with such enthusiasm and enjoyed her time in my beloved country with all her heart. Her love for Anemone filled me with incomparable bliss. Today was my first time going to a clothing store with a woman, and I never expected it to be so much fun. I would never forget her adorable embarrassment when she wore that funny hat, or how she placed it back on the shelf like she couldn't stand to admit she liked it. She didn't hold herself like

stiff royalty, instead switching from joy to fear and back again like the common people. It spurred me on to embarrass her even more, just to tease out more of those earnest reactions. Which was probably the first time I'd teased anyone like that *and* had such fun doing it.

Truly, every item in that entire store would've looked good on her. She would have been adorable in the dress with the bow, as much as it flustered her. If only I could've gazed at that shy, blushing princess with a bow atop her head forever.

"I'm...I'm embarrassed... Please don't make me..."

I didn't expect that counterattack. My heart almost stopped when she said such things in her sweet voice. Just thinking back on it had my pulse racing all over again. She was just so, so cute... If only I'd made her try on that dress.

She was pleased with the second dress I selected, and I learned for the first time how nice it was to have her agree with my choice in clothing. It made me want to buy her new things on a daily basis.

And after all that, she'd left me a physical reminder of her visit before heading home.

"Such lovely flowers..."

I clutched the purple bouquet to my chest, then looked to the blue and white flowers my knight was carrying for me. I sighed once again.



I'd only wanted to help her as her sworn friend—that was why I joined her cause in the war. My beloved Anemone was proud to come to Freesia's aid, which made the choice easy. But now that Pride had given me such a wonderful present to thank me, it felt like I'd received the ultimate blessing. Every act of giving and receiving had me over the moon when it came to her.

As I returned to the castle with my knights, I couldn't drag my eyes away from the purple flowers in my arms.

"It's a precious memory we share!"

With those lips—and that smile that bloomed like a flower—she had called that day a "precious memory." Back when we first met, I'd arrived in Freesia as her fiancé. Yet even when she discovered that my feelings for her weren't true, she continued to get closer to me. Those kinds of memories should have brought her discomfort. I could hardly believe she'd think back on that time and remember anything positive, let alone such a tiny, tiny detail. Still, it had filled me with joy when she described that small moment as a "precious memory."

"I'm truly no match for Pride," I said with a dry chuckle. I was positively tickled.

I took Tiara's bouquet back from my knight so I could carry both myself. Servants opened the castle door for us. Once we were inside, my maids complimented the lovely bouquets.

"These flowers are very important," I said. "Please display them in my room.

I'll be heading to the harbor now."

I gingerly handed over the bouquets. Unwilling as I was to relinquish them, I still had work to attend to. I shot a parting look at the bouquets...and noticed a card stuck in one of them. It barely peeked out between the stems and the wrapper. I plucked it free and found the words "To Leon" written there in Pride's handwriting. I stopped, startled, and opened the card right then and there. I couldn't believe it. Neither of the princesses had mentioned this.

Her lovely handwriting flowed across the card. My face warmed as I took in her kind words, and I realized with great embarrassment that my maids were watching.

"In flower language, purple flowers mean 'I wait with faith in you.' I'm looking forward to the many more times we meet."

Those words, of all things. This timing, of all times.

One year ago—no, it was closer to two now—Pride had explained the meaning of those flowers to me. She was intelligent and knew all kinds of things about plants, including how to grow them, the seasons in which they bloomed, tales that involved them...and even their individual meanings.

Regardless, I never would've imagined she'd put such thoughtful attention behind the flowers she gave *me*. I simply thought she picked out ones she knew I liked. Now I burned with shame for having sent her home with one of those flowers tucked into her hair, given their true meaning. She'd told me their meaning before, but I didn't think she'd read my true intentions so easily.

Purple flowers with jade-green stems, the colors of our eyes in one harmonic embrace.

These were the flowers I'd praised in the garden with her. Their color came from the two of us. It started to feel like destiny was at work here, which only made me love these flowers all the more intensely.

I hurried back to my carriage. Emotion welled up inside me, clogging my throat with so many words, I couldn't contain them.

"I'll wait for you...always."

Wait for me too. I'll be with you as many times as you let me. I'll run to you, if that's what you want.

My beloved Anemone and I will always be there for you.

"The carriage has arrived at the castle, Princess Pride."

A month had passed since the war in the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Jack, my guard, alerted me that our visitors were here. I stopped sorting through my letters, then hurried out of the room with Tiara beside me and Arthur leading three other knights at my back.

Two weeks ago, Vice Captain Eric had made a full recovery and returned to work. Thus began Captain Alan and Captain Callum's month-long suspension. Commander Roderick and Mother had reduced the captains' punishment so that Stale, Tiara, and I could be properly protected. They weren't going to be demoted after the suspensions either. Mother said their futures were in their own hands, but I wasn't sure if this was a happy ending or not.

Then, on the night their suspensions were set to begin...

"Farewell, Princess Pride. We're terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

"Our fourteen replacements were all selected by the commander and vice commander, so please know that you're in good hands."

Captain Alan and Captain Callum had emphasized that this would only last a month and that these men were just replacements. I only hoped that meant what I wanted it to mean. And while I yearned to ask them directly, it would've been wrong to guilt-trip them into staying in the order just because I wanted it. Thus, I never pushed them to reveal their intentions for after their suspensions ended, and the next two weeks had dragged on interminably.

At least Vice Captain Eric was back. Tiara and I had welcomed him with genuine joy when he showed up for his first imperial guard shift. His face flushed red the moment we rushed up to him in our excitement. Perhaps he'd been startled by Tiara's presence, or maybe the combined welcome of two princesses made him feel out of place. Arthur had touched his shoulder when they switched shifts, so I knew Vice Captain Eric wasn't flushing because he was sick.

For now, Vice Captain Eric or Arthur worked every shift, with the fourteen other knights rotating as needed. Stale had explained that two knights weren't

nearly enough to replace the two captains, and Commander Roderick agreed, so a few served each shift. It made me feel kind of awkward to monopolize so many knights for myself, but I couldn't let myself dwell on it. I had to be more protective of myself.

My convoy of guards had changed constantly over the past two weeks, and today we expected Hanazuo's representatives to make their first formal visit as our new allies. We'd planned a lively party in the castle tonight to celebrate our newfound friendship and the end of the war.

As I watched, the carriage from Hanazuo arrived at last.

"Tiara, are you all right?!" I asked. I'd been whispering with her as we walked, but Tiara had suddenly stiffened.

"Yes!" she squeaked, and I chuckled at the cute reaction. She was obviously nervous as she stuttered out, "I-I'm fine!" The way she squeezed my hand only emphasized this.

Stale was waiting for us by the front doors, since Uncle Vest had left him in charge of escorting our guests. The three of us stepped outside just as the carriage came to a stop in front of the castle. Servants and guards exited from another carriage first, then opened the doors for the royal family. The leaders of the United Hanazuo Kingdom stepped out of their respective carriages.

Yohan Linne Dwight, the king of Chinensis. Lance Silva Lowell, the king of Cercis.

They greeted me with smiles the moment they spotted me. I returned the warm welcome as another figure emerged from behind King Lance. Having exchanged letters about this visit in advance, Tiara, Stale, and I all knew he would be coming.

Unlike his previous visit, Cedric had brought the kings along with him—as well as a large group of palace officials, including the seneschals. At a glance, I could tell he was wearing fewer accessories than usual. He met our gazes, returned our greetings calmly, and took his place behind the kings.

"The royal prince, Cedric Silva Lowell."

In the letters, he'd been referred to as the "royal prince" instead of the second-born prince. That alone was enough to reveal a profound change in Cedric.

The knights made space for King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric to approach us.

"It's been too long, Princess Pride," King Lance said.

"Lance and I have been eager to see you again," King Yohan said.

The kings nodded to me, then to Stale and Tiara. We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

After that, Cedric stepped forward. His golden hair fluttered in the wind, but he'd brushed back that lion's mane, taming it somewhat. Most of his jewelry was gone. Cedric had dressed formally for the visit, of course, but he no longer jangled with each step. The finger with the ring he'd given me remained unadorned, as did the earlobe with the earring he'd given Tiara. The effect was mature and masculine, which made him even more handsome than usual.

"It's been quite some time since we last saw each other, Princess Pride," he said. "I do hope you've been faring well. My brothers and I are most honored to receive your invitation."

...Huh?

Something wasn't right.

My head throbbed by the time I returned to my room. Arthur and the other knights remained outside my chambers with Jack so I could change for tonight's party, but I was too busy pondering Cedric's strange behavior. Cedric had come to visit alongside the kings, but as soon as he opened his mouth, I knew there was something odd about him.

By contrast, the kings acted perfectly normal. They greeted my mother, the

queen, then discussed some conditions of our alliance. The United Hanazuo Kingdom planned to open its borders to Freesia within a year, and they'd already begun preparations for the trade of their minerals and gold. King Lance and King Yohan went even further, informing us that both resources would be available for trade with Anemone as thanks for their help in the war.

Hanazuo had already been planning to open its borders, with Cercis's harbor set to become a trade route in the near future. Most countries surrounding the United Hanazuo Kingdom were under Rajah's control, so traveling by ship rather than by wagon was essential for trade. I suspected their connections with other countries would gradually increase once they began trading with Anemone and Freesia. Mother also told the kings that, as our allies, she would gladly help them establish new trading partners.

During the entire meeting, Cedric never said a word other than his initial greeting. He sat quietly from start to finish—perfectly mature and composed. When King Lance and King Yohan were shown into and out of the room, he stayed right on their heels, never making the slightest disturbance.

I had to presume he was preparing for the party tonight and resting from his long journey, but my worry lingered. Knowing Cedric, I'd expected him to try to approach Tiara as soon as he saw her. It was more frightening than reassuring that he didn't. Not that it was a bad thing, of course! I just felt a bit sad that he was treating Tiara and me like strangers after only one month apart.

I glanced out the window before Mary and Lotte, my personal maids, could close the curtains and begin preparing for the party. Outside, the gardens sprawled and dazzled, the plants in full bloom. Brilliant bursts of color decorated the foliage in splashes of red, blue, pink...and gold?

"Huh?"

At that involuntary reaction, Lotte worriedly asked me if anything was wrong. I was too distracted to answer. Instead, I stared out the window, following that streak of gold. At first, I thought it must be King Lance, but I was wrong. It was

Cedric on his way to the garden.

Why in the world would he be visiting the garden? Whatever the case, I couldn't waste this opportunity. When I asked, Mary said I could push back my plans to get ready by half an hour or so and still make it to the party in time.

Resisting the urge to jump out of my window, I rushed from my room, gathered my guards and knights, and headed down the staircase toward the garden.

"Cedric?"

I spotted him the moment I set foot in the garden. Of course, it helped that I knew exactly where he'd be.

When he saw me approaching, Cedric's eyes went wide. "Princess Pride..."

I could never forget this place. This was where we'd found each other a month ago. He'd grabbed me, I'd kicked him, and Tiara had thrown knives to keep him in check. We were both a mess by the end of it. I knew Cedric's perfect memory would lead him here. Besides, he had guards, soldiers, and our own palace's guards with him, so it wasn't like he was trying to sneak out quietly.

Arthur hurried protectively to my side, obviously wary given my past run-ins with Cedric. The other knights were on high alert too. Not that it came as a surprise.

"Sorry to bother you," I said. "I just happened to see you coming to the garden from my room."

I kept my eyes locked on his, but I still saw him twitch as he replied, "Is there... something I can do for you?"

"You came here last month, didn't you?" I asked, gaze sweeping across the garden. "What is it about this place that draws you here?"

Back then, it didn't seem like he'd been searching for me or anything, so I

never could figure out why he picked such an isolated area.

Cedric studied a nearby flower rather than meeting my eyes. "I see these flowers a lot at this time of year in Hanazuo," he said. "I spotted them from my room last time I was here."

Now that he mentioned it, I'd seen flowers like this in Cercis—the pretty little ones with the large yellow petals. The room we'd prepared for him last time he was here would have given him a perfect view of those. Meanwhile, Tiara and I were probably hidden by the trees when we came out that day. I could imagine the Cedric from back then, ducking into the bushes to avoid drawing any attention. Tiara and I just so happened to be settling down for a nap in that very same spot.

"I feel much more at ease when I'm around things from my homeland," Cedric added. He noted that the palace guards and his brothers had given him permission to visit the garden, so perhaps they'd noticed that he was feeling anxious about something and wanted to give him an opportunity to go calm down.

"Cedric, you're acting so different," I said. "Did something happen?"

I met his fiery gaze, searching for a clue. At first, his eyes widened in shock, and then a blush stole into his cheeks. The change came over him so quickly that I worried he had a fever or something; I couldn't help but stare.

When Cedric caught himself, he clapped his hands over his face and turned away. I called out to him in concern, but he only said, "M-my apologies!"

What was I supposed to make of all this? At least he wasn't being so serious anymore. Cedric was much easier to read when he was upset about something.

Slowly, he turned back to me, pink lingering in his cheeks. He took a shaky breath as he lowered his hands. "I don't want any untoward rumors about the two of us to spread if we're seen in a place like this," Cedric said. "May I ask that we continue this conversation tonight, during the victory celebration? I apologize if this causes you any inconvenience."

His request was perfectly polite and reasonable. He was right—this wasn't a good place to talk. Even with guards around, meeting alone in an empty garden could spark nasty rumors. Not that any of that explained Cedric's odd behavior. This wasn't a formal meeting, so why wouldn't he just speak to me normally?

"Very well," I said. "I'm sorry. Oh, but may I say one thing?"

I didn't mind if there were things he couldn't say here, since we'd agreed to talk during the party. I had to go get ready anyway. But first, I needed to make one thing clear. I stepped closer, stood on my tiptoes, and brought my lips to his ear. Seeming to understand, Cedric bent down so that I could reach him. At this distance, I was tempted to tug on his ear, but I resisted and whispered sternly instead.

"I don't care how you treat me, but don't be cold to Tiara at the party. It's only been a month since you said those sweet things to her, so you'd better act accordingly!"

As Tiara's big sister, it was my duty to scold Cedric and make sure he didn't do anything to hurt her. At my words, Cedric's whole face burned red. I just barely stopped myself from crying, "Oopsie!" Despite my intentions, this whole thing had taken on a silly rather than serious note.

Cedric pressed a hand over his mouth, but even his *hand* was turning scarlet. Reaching his boiling point, he stumbled backward.

Arthur slipped between us and cried, "Everything all right, Princess Pride?!"

He and the knights couldn't have overheard me, but Cedric's reaction must have scared them. My jaw dropped, and I struggled to come up with an explanation. Even in the game, I'd never seen Cedric blush so hard. What on earth had happened to him over the past month?

"I-I understand," Cedric stammered. "I thank you for your concern. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way."

He said a hasty goodbye to me, then to my entourage, before rushing out of

the garden. I suddenly felt bad that I'd interrupted his alone time.

"Did Prince Cedric do something to you, Your Highness?" Arthur asked me. His eyes were as wide as saucers. I couldn't blame him, given how flustered Cedric had been.

"I just gave him a little warning." I brushed off the topic, telling him I wanted to go prepare for the party. I certainly couldn't tell Arthur that it was *Tiara* who'd truly caused Cedric's reaction. Tiara and I were the only ones who knew about his confession. At least I'd confirmed that Cedric wasn't mad at me and that he hadn't forgotten what he told her. I would have to pry the rest out of him during the victory celebration.

Before leaving the garden, I took one last glance at the flowers Cedric had come here to see. With his perfect memory, it was no wonder Cedric had sought out a connection with Hanazuo even here in our castle. It came in the form of these cute, yellow flowers, a precious thing that let Cedric feel closer to home even when he was far away. Thanks to his abilities, he could spot even the smallest similarities between these flowers and the ones he had back home.

What would have happened if he'd never spotted these flowers from his room? Perhaps that incident that had caused so many problems never would have occurred. If only he hadn't found these flowers, and the trees and bushes around them that allowed him to hide, Cedric and I never would have fought. Tiara might not have come to despise him either. But at the same time...

"They're such lovely flowers," I murmured.

I grazed the flower petals with my fingertips, enjoying the delicate softness against my skin. I should have predicted Cedric's recklessness and put a stop to it before he made things worse, but I hadn't, and we all had no choice but to move forward.

With that thought in mind, I finally left the garden. Judging by Cedric's reaction to my words, things would probably remain peaceful for a while. I hummed a little tune to myself, filled with relief.

One month ago, Freesia had joined a defensive war in the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Today, the castle bustled with activity as we held a joyful banquet to celebrate our victory and our new alliance. Roughly half the knights who'd fought in the war gathered at the banquet. The Freesian royal family, palace officials, and guests from Hanazuo mingled with one another, turning the event into a lively celebration.

We had invited Anemone to join as well, since they'd aided us in the war, but Leon had politely declined during my last visit to Anemone. "I don't need any repayment. I want to prove that we'll come to your aid without getting anything in return," he'd told me. My disappointment only deepened when Captain Alan and Captain Callum couldn't attend either due to their suspensions.

Regardless, Mother led us all in a toast. We had to greet every guest at the beginning of the party, but I eventually managed to find a little time to myself amid the commotion. I'd greeted King Lance, King Yohan, and Cedric, but only in an official capacity. Once I finished welcoming Commander Roderick and the other officers, I turned my attention toward Cedric. Stale and Tiara were still tied up with official business.

I'd glanced in Cedric's direction many times throughout the night and always found him engaged in conversation with Freesian officials. Both men and women spent lots of time talking to him. Perhaps he was that good a conversationalist.

"Prince Cedric, may I have a moment?" I said.

The person he'd been chatting with graciously stepped aside when I approached. I felt bad about barging in on his conversation, but I couldn't let the party end without talking to him. Cedric turned toward me, a glass clutched in his hand. His face was already twitching, but he smiled politely and tried to stuff down his anxiety.

"Let's go over to a wall to speak more privately," I told him.

Cedric's looks would definitely make him stand out if we lingered in the center of the ballroom for a long chat—especially since we'd already greeted each other twice now. I suggested we stay away from the crowds; Cedric agreed and led me toward the edge of the party. He found a spot away from Mother and the palace officials. Most of the people closest to us now were knights. Still, Cedric made sure to position us so it didn't look like we were being wallflowers.

Vice Captain Eric happened to be nearby, and I gave him a small wave. He blinked with surprise at seeing two members of royalty amid the knights. The vice captain blushed nervously, but thankfully he realized that I was trying to be discreet, so he merely nodded and didn't mention the oddity.

At last, Cedric and I could have a real conversation. I held up my not-yetempty glass and met his eyes. He swallowed so hard his throat bobbed, tension written all over his face.

"Thank you for waiting for a better venue for this chat," he said. "Allow me to apologize for earlier."

"Enough of that already," I snapped. "Talk to me like you used to. Why are you pulling away from me? We've only been apart for a month." I dove straight to the heart of the matter, ignoring his stiff facade.

"But I..." He trailed off, then took a deep breath. "I...mastered manners and etiquette."

Despite the noise of the crowd and the distance between us, Cedric was near whispering. I leaned in closer, straining to catch his quiet admission. When I finally processed it, I replied, "That's incredible." It had only been a month, and I knew he was starting from close to zero. This was no small feat; he really was a prodigy, all right. But Cedric only turned redder and scrunched up his face, his eyes darting away from me.

"That's why I was allowed to attend this party. But..."

Cedric held a neutral expression, but he was so stiff the wine in his glass trembled in anxious little waves. Clearly he was pushing himself too hard, but I

didn't understand why. Before I could ask if he was all right, he covered his face with his free hand and hung his head, his golden hair concealing his expression.

"I'm so embarrassed... I feel like I'm gonna burst into flames!"

Huh? I couldn't hide my utter confusion.

Now that the dam had burst, Cedric rushed on: "I was only at this castle for three days, but I did more shameful things than I can count. I know no one can forgive any of it, obviously, and I don't ever wanna embarrass myself like that again, which is why I wanted to apologize to all of you, at the very least. This would have been the time for me to do that, so I sincerely apolo—I mean, I'm sorry. It's just that whenever I look at your faces, it's hard to pretend nothing's wrong. All the places and people here make me think about the stupid stunts I pulled, and remembering them with perfect clarity makes me wanna die. The stuff I did to you alone makes my head feel like it's gonna explode with guilt, and worse, I did it all in front of Tiara! The thing I always wanna ask you is why you still supported me during all of that, but no matter how long I think about it, I can never come up with a good answer..."

He rambled out his confession, tripping over his words until I could barely follow him. It seemed that mastering manners and etiquette had shown him just how rudely he'd acted before. He must have relived each and every impolite word and action in agonizingly perfect detail. The guilt was enough to make his face burn with shame every time he glanced at a person who brought back those memories.

His long speech left him flushed and out of breath. I stood there, face frozen in a polite smile, as Cedric downed the rest of his wine. "I truly regret conducting myself in such an improper fashion," he said, returning to that stiff, formal speech. "Thinking about my disgraceful behavior makes me feel like I shouldn't speak to you the way I used to..."

He sighed and covered his mouth again. I wasn't sure if the wine was making him blush harder or if it was just the humiliation of his painfully vivid memories.

"But...weren't you speaking formally when you did those things to me?" I asked.

"I am aware of that, of course."

My merciless question turned him a bit redder. I quickly apologized; I hadn't meant to make things even worse for him.

Cedric shook his head. "I am the one who is ultimately responsible."

I understood what he meant, but hearing him speak so rigidly made me feel like I was talking to a different person.

"While I may have received your permission to speak with you as friends, I currently feel too much guilt to go without such formalities. I would appreciate it if you allowed me more time. Someday, I promise to live up to your expectations."

He was really beating around the bush when he talked like this, but I understood that he just needed more time before our conversations could go back to normal. I wished he would make *some* attempt to sound a little friendlier. Or maybe, despite having perfect memory, he wasn't as talented when it came to applying the information in his head—like he would ace the multiple-choice part of the test and scrape by on the essays. Although any essay coming from Cedric's brain would surely contain a shocking amount of information.

Regardless, he clearly wanted to remain polite and distant. It was kind of like talking to a machine. I understood a little better how the evil Queen Pride had deceived this natural-born genius—even if the man hardly studied. Thinking back, he'd spoken somewhat formally during his first visit to Freesia, but he'd used ordinary words and phrases that made him sound a bit less stiff. Everything else was short and to the point.

"All right," I said. "If it's easier for you to speak that way, then fine. Shall I speak formally to you too?"

"No!" he said, nearly shouting over me. "Please pay me no such mind and speak however you please."

Well, I was already used to talking to him like a friend, so I agreed to take him up on that offer.

Cedric sighed in relief. The blush receded to just his cheeks, though I was starting to worry that maybe he really *was* under the weather after being so flushed for so long.

"I wouldn't mind if your words were the only thing that changed," I said. "But you've also been avoiding us, haven't you?"

"Absolutely not! Why, I could spend a lifetime making amends and offering apologies and still have leagues more left to give."

His speech was getting weirder and weirder. So basically he was saying, "No, I'm not avoiding you! Even in an entire lifetime, I wouldn't be able to thank and apologize to you enough." I appreciated that, but I wished he'd just act normally. This was like hearing Prime Minister Gilbert using internet slang.

I was really starting to feel like I would have to help Cedric recover from this phase. I scanned the room and found Stale and Tiara finishing up their greetings with officials. They met my eyes, and I saw the worry in their faces. Perhaps finding Cedric and I together had given them cause for concern—especially Tiara. Suddenly, I was very nervous; that wasn't what I'd intended at all!

Tiara hated Cedric, so maybe she didn't care that I was talking to him and would simply dismiss him entirely. But after that bomb he dropped on her when we left Hanazuo, I suspected this conversation wasn't good for her heart.

Besides, sneaking away for a long talk during the party wouldn't look good for Cedric, who actually had feelings for Tiara. We needed to clear the air.

"Let's explain the situation to Tiara too," I said.

Just as I was about to signal Tiara to join us, Cedric croaked out, "No, don't do that!" He stared down at the floor, pressing his lips into a hard line. I could

almost hear him picking each of his next words with care, and that blush had crawled back into his face.

"Should I not tell her about this?"

"No, it's not that! I wholeheartedly agree with that choice... I am simply...not emotionally prepared yet!"

Even after we just finished talking about it? This was like trying to deal with a difficult child. Cedric's eyes flitted all over the room. I was the person he'd treated the worst, so it didn't make sense that he was so panicked over talking to Tiara.

Wait a second...

Could it be? My mind raced. How hadn't I noticed before now?

"Are you saying..." I began, before realizing I'd asked him something similar a month ago. Cedric was clearly remembering the same thing I was, but he simply watched me and waited. "Are you saying that the mere sight of Tiara makes you feel too embarrassed to speak?"

Steam practically gushed out of Cedric's ears. That was all the answer I needed. He stumbled backward, covering his trembling lips with his hand, but it was too late now. I understood why he'd been so blunt during our initial greeting.

"And to think, you tried to kiss me in front of her on the day we first met," I said.

"Please, no more!" he begged. "My face is going to burst into flames!" Cedric keeled over like he was about to collapse. I hadn't meant to pour salt on the wound like that, but...

"Heh!"

A chuckle escaped me. It was no use—thinking about it only made it worse. I had to focus on my wine to avoid spilling it as I quaked with laughter I couldn't contain.

"Heh... Heh heh heh... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha!"

I covered my mouth in a vain attempt to remain even a *little* ladylike, but I was going to explode if this laughter didn't get out of me. There was no suppressing it. My shrill cackling echoed through the hall. When I looked around, the knights weren't the only ones staring at me—even Stale and Tiara were gawking in my direction.

"Princess Pride!" Cedric hissed, but I was already doing what I could to hold back my laughter, even wrapping an arm around my stomach.

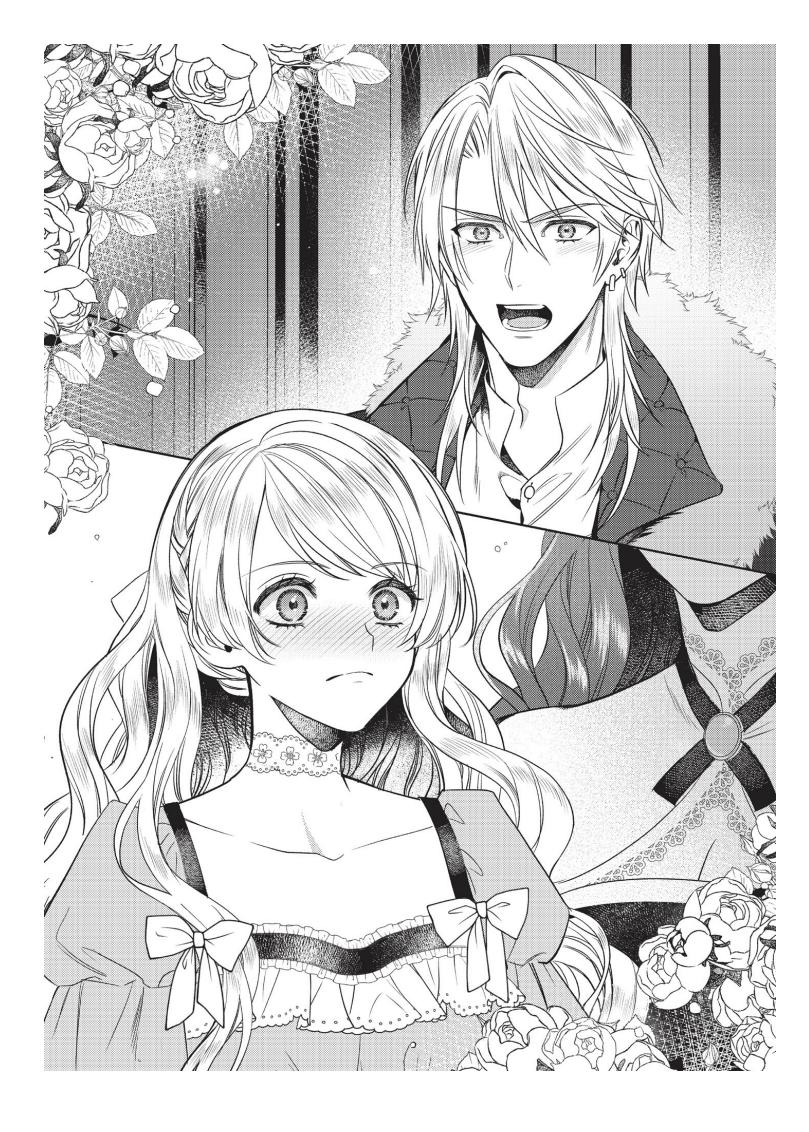
Cedric! That cocky, narcissistic prince! The same man who tried to kiss my hair and then my lips! Just being around Tiara leaves him speechless?! He can't even look her in the eye?!

It was just too funny. I laughed even harder when I thought about how such a sappy change in personality could never have happened during Cedric's route in the game. Once I finally managed to get myself under control, I downed the rest of my wine. When I looked up at Cedric, his face was scarlet and his eyes fixed on me, awaiting an explanation for my behavior. The Cedric of before would have definitely shouted, "What's so funny?!"

My lips curved into a mischievous smile. "She's cute, isn't she?"

Cedric choked out a cry of shock. I turned, signaling for Tiara to join us. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes wavering, but then she hurried toward me.

I didn't have to look at Cedric—I could tell from his shaky breaths that he was panicking with each step Tiara took toward us. When I sensed he was about to flee, I shot him a smile and said, "This is revenge for kissing my hair." That stopped him in his tracks.



"You called for me, Big Sister?" Tiara said timidly.

I gently wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Now Cedric had no choice but to face her. He blushed furiously and stood stock-still while Tiara glared up at him.

I started by clearing the air. I explained to Tiara that Cedric had worked hard to learn manners and etiquette, and through it, he'd come to realize just how badly he'd disrespected me. Now, I said, he was too nervous to talk naturally around us. Tiara's eyes widened at this explanation. My gaze flicked to Cedric, silently warning him not to say anything to contradict me.

"I...apologize for behaving rudely this morning," he said. "When I think of how I disgraced myself last month...I simply can't find the words. However..."

It came out slightly stilted, but at least he was trying to clarify things to Tiara. She listened patiently, wincing when he trailed off. Clearly she knew where this was going.

"However...my feelings for you remain unchanged," Cedric said. "I won't be retracting my vow or the words I said to you when we last parted."

Well, that was blunt. Even with me there listening and Cedric trying to tone down his words, his statement left no room for misunderstanding. I supposed he'd never learned how to express himself in more roundabout ways.

Cedric's fiery eyes, even redder than his cheeks, never left Tiara as he spoke. The intensity in his gaze made me nervous, as though *I* were the one he was staring at.

Tiara's shoulder grew warm beneath my hand. I glanced over and found her nearly as red as Cedric. Maybe she was embarrassed by his blunt confession, or perhaps she was angry that he was trying to win her over at all.

I rubbed her shoulder to calm her down. This isn't good. Cedric getting all flustered was one thing, but if people see the two of them blushing at each other like this, they'll definitely think they're lovers! Rumors will fly all over the

castle!

Tiara stood in front of me, so only Cedric could see her face clearly, but just to be safe, I used my body to shield her from onlookers.

"I...I...h-hate you!" she said in a shrill, stuttering rasp. She'd said it under her breath, but Cedric and I were close enough to hear.

I timidly shifted my gaze to Cedric, bracing for the hurt I'd surely find on his face.

"I'm perfectly aware," he said without hesitation. The prince was still blushing, but he didn't shy away or back down, even as the silence stretched on.

Tiara stared at the floor. Worried, I pulled her into my embrace, and Tiara squeezed my hand. After a few deep breaths, she broke the tense stalemate.

"P-please...fix your...funny way of talking!"

Oh, what an adorable demand.

I knew Tiara hadn't meant it as encouragement, but Cedric was clearly delighted to hear something other than a declaration of hatred.

"As you wish," he said, sounding much more relaxed.

When Tiara looked up at him, she was still blushing all the way to her ears. "I just said to stop that!" she snapped, squeezing my hand harder.

It seemed I wasn't the only one bothered by Cedric's fancy, uptight speech, even though he'd been formal in most of Tiara's conversations with him. Tiara's blush receded after a few seconds, though Cedric's held strong with Tiara facing him like this.

That was when I felt eyes on me. I glanced behind me and caught Stale and Arthur staring at us. I didn't know when they'd found each other at the party, but they were definitely trying to see what we were up to. Maybe they didn't like being left out. Maybe they were worried Cedric was going to do something inappropriate again. Or maybe they were jealous of Cedric getting to chitchat

with the lovely Tiara...though they must have been able to tell that Tiara and Cedric weren't enjoying their conversation.

They must be worried about us, then.

Bashful about their concern but pleased at the same time, I waved to them. They kept their eyes fixed on me as they bowed in response.

"Prince Cedric, it's nice to see you again."

Stale wore a pleasant smile as he approached the prince after finishing up his conversations with Freesian officials. Earlier, I'd watched Princess Pride chat with Cedric, laughing so hard at his jokes. The whole thing had my stomach in knots. Then he'd talked with Tiara for a while as well! Princess Pride assured Stale and me that it was just a nice talk, adding that we'd understand if we talked to him too.

So, Stale dragged me over for a sneak attack on the prince.

Prince Cedric blinked in surprise when Stale called out to him. "Prince Stale," he muttered, then looked at me.

Stale took the chance to introduce me to him. "This is Arthur, vice captain of the Eighth Squadron," he said. "The two of us were just chatting. Would you care to join us?"

This was so awkward. I didn't know if Prince Cedric remembered me, but if he did, he would definitely hate me. Even though I had done it to protect Princess Pride, I'd still threatened and disrespected him. I couldn't bear to meet his eyes and instead rubbed the back of my neck. When Prince Cedric audibly gulped, I realized Stale made him nervous too.

"I'd be delighted, Prince Stale, Vice Captain Arthur Beresford. I wished to speak with you too. Might we find someplace more private to talk?"

Seriously? He actually remembers me? I didn't expect him to know my full name. When I glanced up in surprise, I found Prince Cedric flushed bright red,

perhaps from anger. Maybe he still held a grudge against me, but I found no hostility in his eyes. Right then, it dawned on me that Princess Pride had called him "God's Child" and explained that Prince Cedric remembered everything that ever happened to him.

"Of course," Stale replied.

The three of us stepped out onto the balcony connected to the ballroom. It provided a much quieter space, with only the evening breeze to whisper in our ears. Prince Cedric looked around, like he was making sure there weren't any witnesses. I had no idea what this was about, but his attitude put me on alert. Stale and I straightened up when he turned toward us. Then the prince addressed me and bowed.

"I wish to apologize...for my many impolite actions," he said.

We were caught completely off guard. Our mouths hung open. Even Stale didn't know how to respond. Hearing the prince apologize was shocking enough, but his face was bright red as he did so. I had no clue why he was blushing around us; it wasn't like we were Princess Pride.

Prince Cedric couldn't stem the flow of words after that. He rattled off a whole list of wrongdoings. He apologized for making me get between him and Princess Pride twice and thanked me for my good work. Then he thanked Stale for the warning and for helping his country during the war even after everything that happened. It was like he was trying to list every single mistake he'd ever made. It was crazy enough having a foreign prince bow to us, but this overly thorough apology left me at a loss.

"Were you apologizing to Elder Sister and Tiara earlier too?" Stale asked once he'd regained his composure.

"That wasn't the entire conversation, but it did contain an apology," Prince Cedric replied, covering his red face with one hand.

He explained that he'd been studying hard over the past month to comprehend how badly he'd treated Princess Pride. It made me wonder how a

member of royalty could ever *not* understand something so obvious. Had he actually studied a single day in his life? Either way, Prince Cedric's dramatic change in demeanor shook us.

"I apologize for behaving in such an unseemly manner," he went on.

"Whenever I think back on my misconduct, the shame is enough to overwhelm me...and I understand that a prince shouldn't be so flustered when he talks about these things..."

You're doing a lot better than you were a month ago. I kept that thought to myself.

"That's all right," Stale said. "Thank you for offering such a thorough apology." He spoke kindly, but I wasn't sure if his opinion on Cedric had actually changed or not.

Still beet red, Prince Cedric extended his hand toward Stale. Stale accepted his handshake, and Prince Cedric made me the same offer. I felt bad about shaking his hand with my gloves on, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Prince Stale, I've never known such a wise person in all my life. Vice Captain Arthur, your bravery and strength are unlike anything I've ever seen. I respect the two of you more than I can say. I understand exactly why Princess Pride is so proud to have the two of you in her life."

As Prince Cedric heaped praise on us out of nowhere, he kept his fiery gaze fixed on us. This guy could say really heavy stuff without any hesitation or embarrassment at all. I'd noticed that back when he tried to seduce Princess Pride and when I'd healed King Lance. Oddly enough, this was the only time in our conversation when his face didn't flush.

For some reason, I was the one now hot with embarrassment.

"May the three of us continue to have a favorable relationship," Prince Cedric added.

I hastily agreed, suddenly understanding why Princess Pride had wanted us to

talk to him.

"What are your feelings toward my elder sister?" Stale asked abruptly.

Prince Cedric blinked. Then a gentle smile crossed his lips. "I owe her everything," he said. "I'll never be a match for someone like her. She is invaluable, in a way unlike anyone I've ever met."

I found myself completely agreeing. Stale and I acknowledged his response with short nods.

"I'm sorry to keep you outside for such a long time. Why don't we head inside?" Prince Cedric said, guiding us back into the ballroom. "Thank you for spending your valuable time with me. I hope you will continue to support my brothers in the future."

I barely recognized him as the prince I'd met a month ago.

With that formal thank-you, Prince Cedric left us to greet the other knights. Just when I felt like I could finally relax and catch my breath, however...the guy spun around like he'd forgotten something.

"One more thing," he said, lowering his voice so only Stale and I could hear. "Someday, I hope my life will be closely entwined with Princess Pride's—and yours, Prince Stale. I'm sure I won't be perfect, so I ask for your grace if I make any more missteps that inconvenience you."

Then he bowed deeply to us before finally leaving.

What was that last part all about?

Maybe he meant that he wanted a strong alliance between their countries, and he'd work toward that by getting close to Princess Pride and Stale. But that didn't explain why he was worried about bothering Stale. There was definitely more to this...

That was when I sensed a menacing aura beside me. I turned around to find Stale shrouded in an air of hostility. I stepped between him and the other knights, hoping no one else noticed, but I was too late. Dad and Clark were

already starting our way, and I panicked.

"Stale, what's wrong?" I asked, trying to be as quiet as possible.

"Closely entwined with...Elder Sister?" he growled, his voice deepening to an earth-shaking rumble.

I asked him to repeat himself, but he ignored me. He was gripping his wine glass so hard that cracks webbed through it. More and more knights took notice as Stale's homicidal urges surged.

"Talk to me about it later. This isn't the time or place!" I said into his ear.

That finally got him to calm down some. Still, he muttered under his breath, "But...he's a second-born prince! It's not like he's beneath her in status... Yet everything he did to her... Besides he's... Well, maybe now he's not, but..."

I wasn't sure what he was wrestling with, but it clearly had him shaken. I'd hear him out after the party, once we were someplace where he wouldn't terrify half the guests. If I prodded for information now it would only make things worse. I couldn't pat him on the back at a formal ceremony, so instead I pried his poor glass from his hand and passed it off to a maid. She shot me a terrified glance, assuming I was the one who'd nearly crushed it.

I handed Stale a new glass. A lot of knights and officials were eyeing up Stale like they wanted to ask for an explanation. Plus, there were the officials who always wanted some of his time and attention. Even the knights had grown closer with Stale after what he'd done in the war. I had few details, but the knights seemed to feel the same about Tiara too. Of course, Princess Pride was the most popular of them all.

After a few deep breaths to regain his composure, Stale headed off to greet some knights and officials. Outwardly, he wore a friendly smile, but I knew his mind was still racing if he'd forgotten to even say goodbye to me.

I was about to return to the knights now that Stale had left, but then I happened to catch a glimpse of Princess Pride. I watched her chat pleasantly

with the knights, and for a moment, I recalled how hard she'd started laughing during her talk with Prince Cedric. A prickle of jealousy burned in my chest, although I didn't understand it.

"Prince Cedric once called Elder Sister 'a beautiful person."

Stale's words echoed in my memory as I studied both Prince Cedric and Princess Pride from a distance.

"Come in," I called.

I sat in my office, a formal room reserved for the queen of Freesia. This room was just as significant to the royal family as the throne room itself. Vest, my seneschal, and Albert, my beloved, stood at my sides.

My guests entered the office nervously. I'd ordered out every guard and maid, so once the guards shut the door, we were truly cut off from the outside world. I gestured for my visitors to sit on the opposite side of the table.

"Pride, Tiara...I'm sorry for calling you here so suddenly," I said. "There's something important we need to discuss."

My daughters sat on the sofa as instructed, keeping their backs perfectly straight. I suspected they had some idea about why I'd called them here. After all, it was a meeting not even Stale, the next seneschal, and Gilbert, the prime minister, could join them for. I smiled at Pride and Tiara before glancing at Vest. At my look, he nodded and presented the girls with a few pieces of paper and a bundle of documents.

"What I'm about to tell you must remain absolutely confidential," I said. "As the firstborn and second-born princesses, you are the only two who may know of this."

They both gulped and nodded in agreement. Then they looked down at the documents before them with grim anticipation.

"This is regarding a new method for selecting your fiancés...and about suitable

candidates."

Pride's own engagement had come to an end two years earlier. We had to change our method of choosing her fiancé after that, but the girls hadn't been aware of it until today. I wanted them to not only understand this but also make a decision on their own. Pride and Tiara nodded again when I explained all this.

"Thank you, Mother. I greatly appreciate this," Pride said.

"I think this is wonderful," Tiara said. "It will be good for Big Sister...and for me too."

I smiled as an unseen weight lifted from my shoulders. I could tell Albert and Vest were just as relieved, and we gazed at the two girls.

"If you have no objections, I'd like to announce this new method next month at Pride's birthday party," I said. "I also need to ask the two of you what you've decided after reading the documents in front of you."

"That decision can come later, if necessary," Vest added.

Pride and Tiara scanned the documents before them, leafing through dozens of pages. Then, one at a time, they made their decisions.

Chapter 3:

The Domineering Princess and the Exhibition

"ALL RIGHT. Let's do this."

In our respective rooms, Alan and I were busy donning the armor we'd worn so many times as imperial knights. It was an extension of our own bodies, especially the swords we hooked onto our belts.

"It's time."

It was the same old process for us both. First, we stuck our arms through the sleeves of long coats that fluttered behind us like capes. Then we placed our guns in our breast pockets and adjusted everything until it sat just right on our bodies. At last, we opened the doors, the ones we'd opened many, many times. I stepped out of my room just as Callum stepped out of his.

"Good morning, Captain Alan!"

"Good morning, Captain Callum!"

A chorus of knights' voices greeted us the moment we emerged. Alan's First Squadron was thrilled to see him, nearly as thrilled as my own Third Squadron. But it wasn't just our own knights who stood arrayed before us; so many others had gathered here to witness our homecoming.

Alan let out a cry when he saw the huge crowd waiting outside his door. He forced an awkward smile and bowed. "You're making too much of a fuss for us," he said, patting his subordinates on the shoulder. Eric, his vice captain, was among them.

Meanwhile, my eyes had gone wide at the sight of our reception. I smiled softly, my heart overflowing with gratitude that so many knights from the Third Squadron and beyond would welcome us back. I even spotted Arthur at the rear of the throng.

In an attempt to match their kindness, I stood up straighter and said, "We're back."

"Sorry to be gone so long," Alan said.

Our month-long suspension was finally over. At this acknowledgment of the end of our punishment, the knights around us cheered.

"Good morning, Princess Pride," Captain Callum said.

"It's been a while," Captain Alan said.

One month after their punishment began, the two captains finally greeted me as my imperial knights again. Vice Captain Eric had also been back for about a month.

Thank goodness. They really did intend to stay on as knights. I'd barely slept for the past few days, so worried that they would retire after being formally punished.

"Captain Callum, Captain Alan..."

It was such a surprise to see them after all this time that I could hardly continue. I'd been thinking maybe *one* would show up for the morning shift if I was lucky. If not, I feared I would have to get the news from Arthur or Vice Captain Eric that the captains were leaving the royal order for good. But then they showed up together. After expecting to bid them farewell, the moment had me so overwhelmed I was almost frozen, even as my heart raced.

"We're sorry to have inconvenienced you over the past month."

"We hope you'll continue to put your faith in us from here on out!"

Continue to—?! My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I heard that. I searched their faces to confirm that this was true, that they were really staying, but they'd already bowed. All I could do was stare and wait as emotion welled up within me.

When they finally raised their heads again, they were smiling.

"We wish to keep protecting you, Your Highness."

"We'll never allow harm to come to you again."

I couldn't have dreamed of a better response. Joy and relief had tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. I had only a moment to register the shock on their faces before I looked away.

"What's wrong, P-Princess Pride?!" they called out simultaneously.

Lotte rushed up to me with a handkerchief when she saw me wipe my eyes.

"I'm so happy..." I said.

The way I said it made me sound like a child, but it was all I could manage. I smiled at the knights as Lotte dabbed away my tears. Embarrassing as it was for the captains to see me in such a state, I needed them to know how thrilled I was to have them back.

Once my eyes cleared, I faced the captains again. They'd both flushed red, perhaps because they were upset to see the crown princess cry. Maybe I'd made them worry again.

"I'm so glad you've returned," I told them. Then I reached out, took their gloved fingers in my hands, and squeezed. "Welcome back. I'm delighted to have you with me."

Tears threatened to well up anew, but I held my breath and pushed through it. I gripped their fingers tighter, imagining I could feel their body heat through their gloves.

...Or maybe it wasn't my imagination after all.

"Um, are the two of you all right?"

Both of their gloves were burning up. I lifted my gaze and found the captains even redder than before.

"Ah, no, I'm just...!"

"I-I-I-It's nothing!"

Captain Callum was rigid, his spine stiff and straight, while Captain Alan's stammering voice emerged hoarse. He was struggling to move, like when he first became my imperial knight. It startled me to find them so nervous around me after only a month apart. Yet as upsetting as that thought was, at least I had them back. I smiled and asked them if Arthur and Vice Captain Eric knew they'd returned, and the captains said yes, they did.

"I'm sure they're just as delighted as I am," I responded.

It was then that Tiara found us. She cried out in shock to see the captains with me, then broke out in a wide grin. "Big Sister, Big Brother, Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and the replacement knights were all so worried about you! You must be looking forward to seeing Arthur and Vice Captain Eric this afternoon!"

I expected the two knights to smile shyly back at her...but instead, Captain Alan let out a tentative, "Uh..."

Tiara and I stopped right there in the hallway and turned to face him.

"We were going to tell you after breakfast," Captain Callum said with some reluctance. "My apologies, but I don't believe we'll be seeing Arthur for a few more days..."

"Arthur had some urgent business come up this morning," Captain Alan chimed in, wearing a pained smile.

The two captains exchanged worried glances, but said no more on the subject.

"Let me ask you now, Arthur Beresford," I said, unsheathing my sword.

I faced Arthur Beresford in the order's training grounds, a place reserved for one-on-one practice bouts. Knights clustered around us, hoping to catch a glimpse of the duel between captain and vice captain of the Eighth Squadron before their own morning exercises began.

This all started when Alan Berners and Callum Bordeaux returned from their suspensions. At that time, Commander Roderick Beresford officially announced Arthur Beresford's promotion to captain. I knew the unorthodox change shocked many of our fellow knights, but none more than Arthur Beresford himself. When the morning meeting ended, just before the commander could dismiss us, he formally raised his objections in front of the other knights.

"I still refuse to accept this. I'm not the only one who thinks Captain Harrison is better suited to lead the Eighth Squadron than I am."

In the face of such a public demand for an explanation, there was only one thing I could say.

"Then fight me."

I drew my sword and pointed to the sparring area. Arthur Beresford stiffened at my blatant thirst for blood, but I simply grabbed the front of his uniform and dragged him in front of the commander. I asked Commander Roderick Beresford to arrange for a day-long duel. He wasn't thrilled, but he also knew that his son wasn't the only one who had some doubts about this promotion. Nearly half of the knights had protested, feeling it was too soon for Arthur to move up. He'd only been promoted to vice captain three months ago, and he was still the youngest knight in history to reach that rank. The other knights had concerns about him climbing the ladder so swiftly. But between my fierce endorsement, Arthur's contributions to the war, and his more responsible personality when compared to me, the vote for his promotion had just barely passed. Still, knights who weren't captains or who didn't know of his actions on the front lines remained doubtful about his promotion—especially older knights who knew how I doted on him.

Seeing the shock and confusion over Arthur's promotion, the commander had to admit that my request for a duel was appropriate.

"All right, Harrison. What's your plan if Arthur wins?" the vice commander

asked.

My response came instantly: "I'll make him captain of the Eighth Squadron, obviously."

In a unit where practical strength was all that mattered, it was only natural for the strongest to rise to the top.

"And what if Arthur loses?"

"Then it will mean I misjudged him," I said, shooting a glare toward Arthur Beresford. "If it happens, I'll take responsibility and relinquish my position as captain."

Now we were finally facing each other. We raised our swords, both of us waiting for the other to make the first move. The cheers of the crowd and wind blowing past us faded into white noise as we narrowed our focus to nothing but each other.

"You'll still become the captain no matter what happens in this duel," I said. "It makes no difference either way."

Arthur Beresford clearly didn't know how to respond to that. He simply held up his sword and narrowed his eyes, focusing intensely on me. I was sure he was thinking about my special power of speed and how I might use it to charge at him. Even though I spoke more than usual, given the thrill of battle humming in my veins, Arthur Beresford didn't let his guard down for an instant.

"Did you ever think that I might go easy on you and let you win?"

He didn't even pause to think it over. "You'd never do that." My surprise must have shown on my face because he smirked a little.

I took off into a sprint. "But what if I did?" I asked from behind him.

"I'd be really pissed."

He swung his sword back at me without even turning around. Metal met

metal with a *clang* that rang through the practice area. The knights around us murmured as we pressed our swords together in a contest of pure strength.

"You know...it's not that I have nothing to lose," Arthur Beresford said. "I'll lose a *lot* if you defeat me."

His voice came out a bit weak, but he never let his sword slip. I pulled away at max speed and swept my sword at his side, but he parried me again, meeting my pace like it was nothing.

"But that's how I know you're not the kinda guy to throw in the towel, Captain Harrison."

His deep-blue eyes flashed. He strengthened his grip on his sword, still blocking me from hitting him, and clenched his fist behind his back. Then he took a wide swing at me, but I managed to jump out of the way just in time. Apparently he'd been expecting that, as he calmly stepped backward.

"I'm fighting with everything I've got. That's why..." He trailed off, took a confident step forward, and launched himself at me.

This was hardly the first duel between us. In addition to the surprise attacks I'd regularly launched at him, we fought formally within the Eighth Squadron, with both sides allowed the use of their special powers. But that was always just sparring or practice—the matches stopped before a final blow, and we couldn't use deadly weapons like guns.

This time was different. We had no limitations and plenty of witnesses.

"If I win, I want a real explanation this time!" Arthur Beresford cried.

I made to dash off again, but Arthur Beresford predicted my path and fired his gun right where I would have run to. I skidded to a halt, and he used the opportunity to fling his sword at me. I dodged it, then tried to pry the blade out of the ground so I could use it myself. But before I could yank it free, his foot came up and struck me right in the solar plexus.

A crack resounded through the practice area when something inside me

snapped. I lost my grip on Arthur Beresford's sword as his kick sent me careening across the practice area. Around me, knights cried out in alarm to see my special power of speed so thoroughly defeated. They all knew the story of how I'd gone from a rookie to a full-fledged knight, then straight to captain after defeating the unit's previous captain. No one had ever before questioned my prowess in battle.

"Don't you get that I'm just as confused as the rest of 'em?!" Arthur Beresford shouted.

Good. If he could yell at me, he wasn't winded. I was still on the ground, calmly readying my sword. He knew better than anyone that I wasn't fighting at my full potential yet.

My laughter rang out in cackling peals. The knights who didn't know me as well looked around in confusion. Slowly, I dragged myself up off the ground. I ignored the messy state of my black hair and the dirt smeared on my face, focusing all of my attention on the knight who'd sent me flying. I could almost feel the delight dancing in my purple eyes as a wicked smile twisted my lips.

"Ahh... That's it, Arthur Beresford. Fighting any other way is boring."

I sprang into motion, using my speed to vanish and reappear with my sword at Arthur's neck. He blocked the blade with his own. I came to a stop, my long, black hair fluttering around me. This time, I stayed put and swung at Arthur Beresford as swiftly as I could, aided by my special power. He gritted his teeth and deflected the flurry of rapid blows. Each time our swords met, the metal screeched in protest. To the others, our battle likely consisted of nothing but those noises and the afterimages of our strikes.

Our blades met once more, but this time, Arthur Beresford managed to overpower me. He pushed me backward, and I had to use my speed to retreat. I leapt into the air, hurling ten knives I'd hidden in my breast pocket. It only took Arthur Beresford one swipe of his sword to deflect the blades and send them

back at my chest. Unable to move freely in midair, I took out my gun, aimed it at Arthur Beresford, and pulled the trigger.

Bang, bang! Two shots rang out. Arthur Beresford slashed his sword twice, and both of my bullets fell to the ground.

The knights around us were temporarily at a loss for words when they witnessed this display. Arthur Beresford wasn't the only knight who could deflect bullets with his sword—but not even I could knock them out of the air.

Having seen this, and Arthur Beresford's actions in the war, some of the men cheered.

"That's it!"

"That's what he did back then!"

"He's amazing!"

Those unfamiliar with Arthur Beresford's wartime accomplishments just watched in awe.

"So this is the swordsmanship I've heard so much about?!" I said. "Show me more! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

I fired again, aiming for vital points on Arthur Beresford's body without hesitation. He simply knocked my bullets away, and all I could do was laugh even harder.

Every time I aimed at him, whether with knives or guns, Arthur Beresford swept my attack away with a slash of his blade. He countered my speed without the slightest misstep. Aside from his initial surprise attack, though, his hits weren't landing either. Whichever one of us stood down first would surely lose his life. This *had* to be changing the minds of the knights still questioning Arthur Beresford's premature promotion. Surely they could now see his true destructive potential for themselves.

"Try and kill me, Arthur Beresford!"

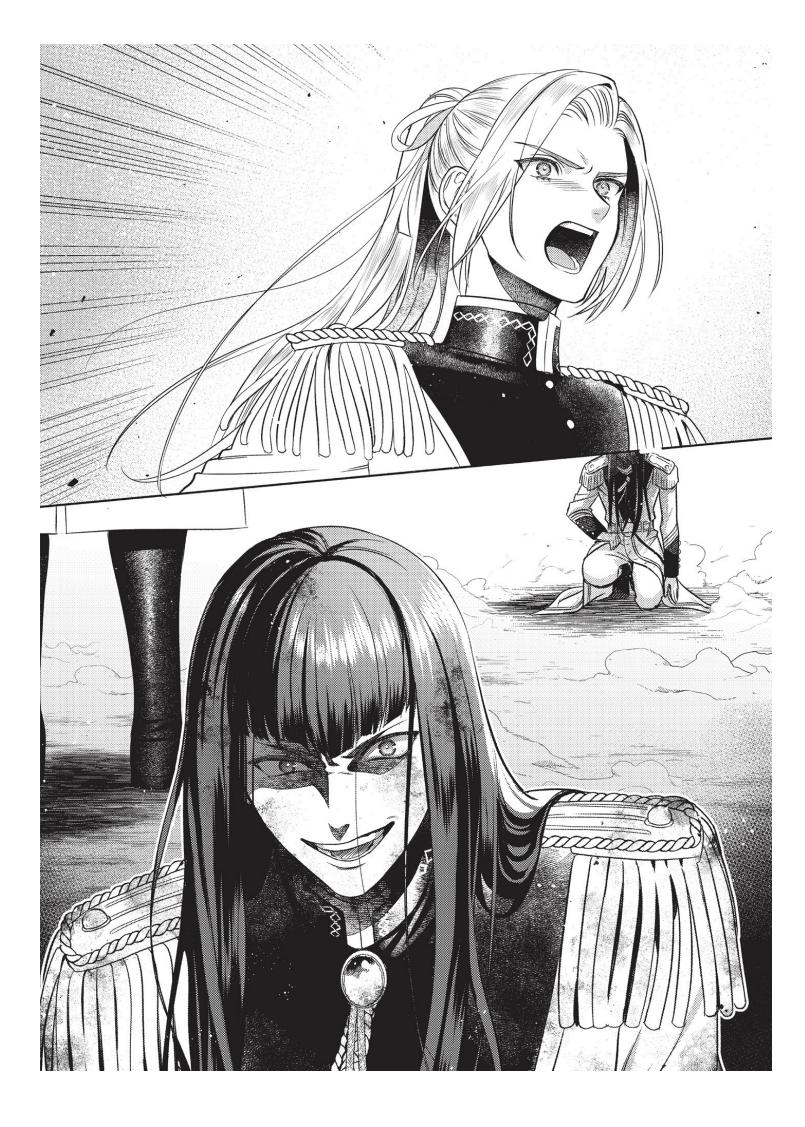
"Absolutely not!"

I cackled, dashing around at lightning speed, but Arthur kept up. My sword never slowed down, and he drew his gun. I backed away to dodge his bullet. But as I rushed back in, he grabbed my arm and hurled me over his shoulder.

No one could possibly doubt Arthur Beresford's promotion after beholding such a feat. Whether they knew of my fondness for him or were seeing it for the first time, every knight assembled must have reached the same conclusion by now: Arthur really got the scariest knight of them all to take a liking to him...

Sympathetic sighs and conflicted smiles abounded.

Yet the knights went on watching our battle, practically taking shifts as they came and went. Arthur Beresford and I both refused to back down, and our bout stretched into the next morning.



ORL:

Disqualified, but Worthy as a Knight

"Harrison, it's been six years since you joined the royal order. Don't you understand why you haven't made it into the main forces yet?"

It was the same question I got every year, and there was only one person who could be asking. I turned to find precisely the person I expected. He wore the same expression as he always did for this exchange, but since he ranked much higher than I did, I had no choice but to respond.

"Of course I understand, Vice Commander Clark Darwin."

I'd always understood. I didn't need someone questioning me to know what I did wrong.

"You were disqualified in your first battle of this year's trial, just like always. Do you not want to enter the main forces?" he pressed.

"If I didn't want to enter the main forces, I wouldn't have qualified to join as a rookie in the first place."

They let me join the knights as a rookie, yet I never made it past that stage. The trial to advance was a tournament that pitted all the rookies against each other. I easily blocked their attacks and overwhelmed them, but then I was disqualified for using excessive force. According to our leadership, it was a foolish act unbecoming of a knight.

Why didn't they struggle more? Why did they admit defeat so easily? Why did they think they could become knights when they were capable of so little?

Whenever my opponents collapsed before me, trembled in fear, and gave in so easily, my blood boiled. What "future" awaited them? Would they really accept becoming a knight when they were so pitiful? Were they after nothing more than the honor and medals they would receive?

I wasn't like them.

"Then why do you repeat the same thing every year?" Clark Darwin said. "You know you'll just be disqualified."

"Because I can't allow it."

Only a few of the rookies I'd fought were worth acknowledging, and only one was worthy of joining the main forces. His name was Alan Berners.

The vice commander scratched his head, unsure how to respond to the same answer I always gave him. "I see." His tone told me he still hadn't accepted it.

For the past five years, he had come to question me after my entrance exams every time, asking me why I did it—wanting to know if I was told to behave differently or if I was taking revenge on the other rookies for something. But my reply never changed. I made to return to the dorm room for rookies, figuring I'd said my piece, but he stopped me.

"Harrison, what made you want to be a knight?"

"I wanted to be someone who protects others... Violence is all I have."

I was part of the lower class for as long as I could remember. The only "power" I had was in overwhelming people to the point that they didn't want to fight back anymore. Strange men attacked me; even my own father exploited me. The only things that weren't stolen from me were the things I learned. Once I gained my special power, I went from someone who endured violence to someone who conducted it. I became the perpetrator, not the victim.

I was seven years old when I saw the knights carrying out a mission. It was the first time I learned what a knight was. They eliminated the looters who were attacking a small farming town.

Watching those knights changed me. They used the same violence I did, but they were dazzling and beautiful...even protecting weak, penniless people like me. They fought for their country and their people, breathtaking as they served others instead of themselves. Their "violence" was nothing like mine, which I

used only for myself. Their lives and deaths had meaning.

If a puny runt like me could protect things as important as the kingdom and its people, I would never find a happier life no matter how hard I worked.

I spent the next seven years learning how to use a sword entirely on my own. But...

"Violence, huh?"

Clark Darwin contemplated my answer, but I didn't care if he understood. There was no longer another way for me to live in this world.

"Your name came up at the last captains' meeting," he said. "We discussed removing you from the order."

My mind went blank; I hadn't expected that. I didn't even have time to get angry or think of some sort of counterargument. It wasn't unusual for some knights to remain rookies for very long periods—even up to ten or twenty years. But my problem was a different one.

"They don't want to hold on to a knight who violently injures his brothers every year." He told me this calmly, yet his words may as well have been a death sentence. "They decided that if you can't pass the entrance exam this year, or you severely injure anyone again, you'll be expelled."

It was too much; I wanted to refuse. Ever since the day I first laid eyes on them, I'd spent my life trying to become a knight. It was too late for me to find another purpose.

Clark Darwin smiled at me as I stood there speechless. "I've never seen you make that face before."

I didn't know what I looked like, but my chest had tightened in despair, and a pain unlike anything I'd ever felt seared every nerve.

"You don't want to be expelled?"

"Of course not. Anything but that."

Anything. Just not that. I didn't want to be a rookie either. I knew I was stronger than the others. That was exactly why I couldn't accept that such weaklings would become knights before they were ready.

"I see. Then come with me. I have Roderick's permission for this."

With that, Clark Darwin led me to a corner of the royal order's training grounds.

"If you can defeat me, I'll defer your expulsion for this year," he told me. "If you lose, then you'll do whatever I say. You can use your special power if you like."

Clark Darwin raised his sword, though I hadn't even accepted the offer yet. I'd defeated knights from the main forces during my entrance exams. I didn't know how powerful the vice commander was...but this felt like my final opportunity. He probably wanted to stop me from going on a rampage or causing any more damage if I was expelled, hence his little challenge. But if I won, I could stay on as a rookie for at least another year.

"Is the loser whoever drops their sword or takes a knee first?"

"We can fight until one person acknowledges defeat, or until they can't fight anymore. Come at me with everything you have, like this is your last chance."

In the time it had taken us to discuss the terms of the fight, knights had surrounded us to watch. Maybe they wanted to laugh at my expulsion, or maybe they came to see how strong Clark Darwin was. Either way, this bout worked in my favor. I wouldn't let him go back on his word. If I won, I would be exempted from expulsion—there were many witnesses here to attest to that.

But within seconds...Clark Darwin thoroughly and utterly thrashed me.

"Looks like I'm the winner," he said. "Are you all right?"

He placed his hand on my back. I'd collapsed to the ground and dropped my sword, unable to move or respond. With this overwhelming victory, Clark Darwin had demonstrated the strength of the royal order—or rather, of its vice

commander. I managed only a single swing of my sword during the fight. It was unfathomable.

Since the day I'd gained my special power, this was the first time I'd truly faced death.

"Sorry about that," Clark Darwin said. "I knew you were strong, so I couldn't hold back. I'd have been dead if I let my guard down."

The calm and collected Clark Darwin... *Vice Commander* Clark Darwin picked me up and dragged me to the infirmary, where special power users treated my injuries. As I lay on the bed in a daze, the vice commander spoke up.

"Do you remember the promise you made? Will you be able to keep it?"

"Yes."

I thought it was all over. I was just happy to have experienced the vice commander's intense strength before I was expelled. But then...

"Good," he said, nodding and smiling. "Harrison Dirk, you're going to join the Eighth Squadron, where you're to obey my orders."

I was startled; I must have been hearing things. I forced my aching body to sit up so I could gape at him. That sunny smile he wore didn't belong to someone who was joking.

"I'm going to look after you," he went on. "The Eighth Squadron is a combat unit where each member may act independently. I think it will be a good fit for you. I'm also going to educate you, so that you can grow into a fine knight—or at least the bare minimum of one."

My body shuddered with joy in that moment, a feeling I still remembered vividly to this day. I would carry my gratitude toward the vice commander with me for the rest of my life. I was going to become a *knight*. I'd expected to hear that I was being expelled, but instead, my entire life changed in an instant. The pain of my injuries vanished. Hope replaced the sting of my defeat and the despair I'd felt contemplating my future.

Too shocked to question, thank, or reply to him, I just sat there.

"Don't you want to be a knight?" he asked with a grin. "You have talent and know how to use it. You also have the will required of a knight."

The vice commander placed his hand on top of my head. He ruffled the hair I'd hacked short with a knife. I was twenty years old now, but he treated me like a child.

"I'll teach you how to turn that violence into power. So be sure to stick with me. You can do that, right?"

There was only one possible answer. He was going to give me the life, existence, and death I'd dreamed of. He was going to change my violence into power. The man who'd utterly defeated me in battle would be the one to change my life. I would get to be a knight. Contemplating that made my vision go blurry, strangely enough.

The vice commander laughed and said, "You can cry, but only for today. Your investiture is tomorrow." Then he covered my eyes with a cloth that had been sitting next to me, granting me a bit of privacy.

"Rest up. After tomorrow's ceremony, you'll get beat up a lot worse than you did today."

He snickered, and I heard him leave the room before I had a chance to respond. In the dark shroud of the towel, my joy and gratitude finally overflowed.

Vice Commander Clark Darwin.

That man was my savior.

The vice commander had taken me in and made himself my mentor. The next day was the investiture and celebration. Afterward, the commander himself came to spar with me.

"All right, Harrison. Ready for a beating?"

No matter how much I relied on my special power, I could never defeat him. It wasn't just an issue with my sword—I couldn't hit him with my fists or gun either. He deflected everything. This didn't come as a surprise now that his vice commander had already stomped me. I wasn't going to beat someone even higher up the chain of command.

The commander knocked me down with his sword and fists over and over again. Each time, he made me pick up my blade and said, "Stand up. Make me glad I have my special power." No matter how many times I used my speed to charge at him, my blade never once reached the man. He didn't even need his special power of invulnerability to cuts—he simply knocked my sword aside any time I got close. By the time the sun started to set, I'd completely run out of stamina.

"Listen well, Harrison," he said. "Once you're a knight, you must carry out your oath, even if it means death. Clark saw something in you. Don't betray his trust."

With that declaration, he reached out to help me off the ground. Even though I'd failed to land even a single hit against him, he still spoke so kindly to me.

"You have an incredible gift for fighting. If you learn how to use it, you're sure to rise to the top of the royal order. I have high hopes for you."

The commander pulled me up with one hand and patted my shoulder in front of all the knights who'd been watching us. I'd spent my time in the royal order ignored, hidden, feared, and disliked. But the vice commander plucked me out of that, and the commander acknowledged my strength in front of others. The two men had learned of my abilities and defeated me, but they still said they needed me. I could hardly imagine a greater blessing. I owed them everything, and they came to occupy my thoughts over and over again.

Once I joined the Eighth Squadron, the vice commander still took time out of his busy schedule to look after me.

"Don't worry about those things. Harrison will definitely succeed in

tomorrow's mission."

Since I rarely spoke, the vice commander often smoothed things over with the other knights for me.

"They're only joking, Harrison. They don't mean it. They're all good knights who fight for each other during missions."

He stopped me when I was on the verge of fighting with other knights, calmed me when I complained about trivial things, corrected my behavior, and sometimes even used the proper words when I couldn't find them.

"Harrison! Think before you act! Save your fists and your sword for the enemies."

He forced me to stop and think about why I was using violence.

"Do you understand, Harrison? Using your weapon without proper cause is no different than pure and simple violence. But if you're using your sword as a knight, no matter how vicious you must be, we call that 'power,' not 'violence.'"

He taught me the proper way to live. He taught me how to behave.

"Harrison? Goodness. What made you attack that knight this time?"

He would always listen to me—even when I couldn't find the right words—and he understood just what I meant.

"I was watching you. You put your sword away, didn't you? I can tell you've grown."

He saw my growth and praised me.

"Hmm? You'll listen to orders, but only from Roderick and me?! Then stop starting fights. If someone makes you mad, you can talk back, but that's all. On the off chance someone actually challenges you to a fight, get permission from Roderick or me first. Can you do that?"

He was always leading me down the right path, and so...

"I'm...very grateful to you, Vice Commander."

Half a year had passed since I'd joined the main forces. When I put my feelings into words for the first time, Clark Darwin chuckled and asked where that had come from. But I pressed on.

"I deeply revere you. I adore you more than anyone."

I knew my poor way with words meant he wouldn't understand everything I meant. But I still had to say it.

"I'm happy to hear that," the vice commander replied with a shrug. "But you should save exaggerated words like 'revere' and 'adore' for Roderick. I couldn't have taken care of you on my own back then."

I revered the commander too. I was grateful to him, of course; without his permission to stay, I would have been kicked out of the royal order after that vote at the captains' meeting. The commander had allowed me to stay, thanks to my strength, and he'd even let me join the main forces. I owed him more than I could ever repay in my lifetime.

"I'm just the second-in-command," Clark Darwin said. "I'm not your captain either, so don't treat me like I'm top dog around here. I've had enough of being number one." He punctuated his point with a wistful chuckle.

I knew it was wrong to revere the vice commander more than the commander. It could come across as disrespectful, even. But I, of all people, could never insult our beloved commander. He'd granted me mercy after all the trouble I caused, allowing me to join the main forces.

"I love and respect you," I said. I resisted the urge to add "more than anyone."

"Right, thank you," the vice commander said. He chuckled again and rested his chin in his hands. "You're very honest, aren't you? If only everyone were like you..."

I wasn't sure what he meant by this, so I asked who he was talking about.

"Just a kid who's going through a rebellious phase," he replied with a smile.

I asked if it was his son.

"No, I have no children," he said with a wave of his hand. "But this kid is like a son to me...or maybe a little brother. I hope he grows up to be like you someday. Although, if the two of you met now, it might come to blows."

The vice commander didn't explain further. I didn't know who this child was, what he was like, or if he belonged to the royal order. Yet I was happy. Now that I had become a knight, I spent my days studying, practicing with a sword, and growing into the person I wanted to be.

Less than two months later, my life would take another dramatic turn.

"There you are!"

A voice snapped me out of my thoughts. What was I doing just now?

I'd been reflecting so deeply on the past that I lost track of where I was. A familiar knight was running up to me. *Oh, that's right. I'm...*

When he reached me in a corner of the training grounds, he bowed deeply.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He stood up a little straighter at my tone. "It's about the knight who was taken to the infirmary after your sparring match."

"That wasn't sparring," I said. "It was a duel. I was prepared to kill him."

The knight had complained about one of my decisions, so I'd challenged him to a battle in which I could silence him permanently if necessary. I cut him down over and over, crushing his body and mind so that he would never defy me again.

The knight apologized and continued his report. "He's just awoken. The doctors say it will take time for him to fully recover, even if they treat him with special powers. The knight is still in a weakened state and unwilling to talk."

"Of course. That's why I punished him."

He'd acknowledged his defeat in the middle of the duel, begging that I spare

his dominant arm. But I cut him down without mercy. It was ultimately a boring battle.

The knight in front of me balled his hands into fists, trembling with indignation. "Did you really have to go that far?" Before I could ask what he meant, he glared at me, hatred glinting in his eyes. "I don't understand why you would injure a fellow knight so badly. We're *knights*. That behavior goes against our code. Whatever he did—"

"You're just as righteous as your father, Arthur Beresford," I interjected, glaring right back.

A breeze picked up, tousling my short, messy hair and what remained of Arthur Beresford's chopped-off silver locks. He quietly squeezed the handle of his sword, his expression tense. Then he swallowed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his deep-blue eyes—so similar to his father's—seemed to bore through me.

"My apologies, Commander Harrison," he said.

He wore a grim look. His features, hairstyle, expressions, and manner of speaking all perfectly resembled the commander... Well, the *former* commander.

Last year, Arthur Beresford had slid right into the main forces, appearing before me like a perfect replica of his father. But he was not Roderick Beresford... Nor was the vice commander at his side.

"The vanguard can kill the enemies on the cliffs first, don't you see? Or do you plan on defying an order from the queen, Vice Commander?"

That was the day I lost my pride and my future. The queen trampled everything that I...that we held dear.

"The cliffs!"

The roar of the avalanche assaulted our eardrums through the transmission. I

would never forget that image of a boulder crushing the commander. A crazed howl rang out alongside the thunder of the collapse as the man's son watched his demise. The vice commander barked orders amid the wails of the knights. It was pure and utter hell.

"Now that the commander's dead, you can step up and take his place, right? Seems simple enough."

That woman insulted our dignity. We were nothing to her. I made up my mind in that moment: I was going to kill the queen someday.

"Hurry and search for any survivors! Don't let Roderick's death be for nothing!"

The vice commander's screams turned hoarse as he held back tears. Roderick Beresford wasn't just his dear friend, he was also our leader. Yet I couldn't move a muscle. I was paralyzed by despair, rage, and an overwhelming sense of loss.

Weeping, Callum Bordeaux shook the shoulders of the commander's son. "Snap out of it, Beresford! Please...you have to get a grip!"

The screaming, wide-eyed boy had plunged into a senseless rage. He muttered under his breath, "Dad... That woman... I'm going to..."

Callum Bordeaux wrapped his arms around the boy. It didn't seem like the kid was still sane.

"I'm going to the cliffs! I'll take directions as the vice captain! Please let me go there!" Alan Berners said, his voice raw from calling for the commander. His eyes were red as he begged the captain of his First Squadron for permission to go. Finally, he raced from the room with a group of other knights.

I was happy, once. But that happiness had lasted less than a year.

"Roderick!" Vice Commander Clark Darwin cried out.

He managed to issue orders and ensure the knights cleaned up any remaining enemies. Only then did he slam his fist against the wall so hard that he drew

blood. After a few seconds and several deep breaths, he approached Callum Bordeaux and the boy.

"Thank you, Callum," he said. "I'll look after him from here."

He took the trembling boy out of Callum Bordeaux's arms. Then he fell to pieces.

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

I'd never seen him sob like that before. I'd never seen him in such anguish. In fact, I'd never seen the vice commander cry at all.

Six years passed.

The royal order lost its central pillar. The vice commander had to support and guide us after that. He worked himself to the bone, getting the royal order back on its feet after we'd lost so much. He even led us to victory in the pointless battles the queen demanded of us. And then...the vice commander withered away. With his knights gathered around him as he lay on his deathbed, the vice commander issued one final wish. Then he took his last breath. He was gone.

"Commander, why are you doing those things to your fellow knights?" Arthur Beresford asked me.

He'd joined the main forces one year prior and already risen to the rank of vice captain. But that wasn't unusual anymore. The number of knights in the royal order had dropped significantly. The strongest ones died in droves, leaving the squadrons as empty husks without direction. Anyone strong could work their way to the top. Knights became things that were merely restocked when their numbers dwindled.

Arthur Beresford was a talented swordsman, which made it even easier for him to climb the ladder. After all, he was the commander's...the *late* commander's son. Now here he was, chastising me again. He seemed to hold it against me that I'd injured another young knight in what I called a duel.

"Resisting the queen will get the entire order destroyed," I said.

If we didn't obey her, we'd be killed. One person's foolish mistake could get their entire family slaughtered. A protest from any knight could result in a threat against the entire order.

"But..." he began, then fell silent.

While he remained lost for words, I returned to the commander's office. I strode there quickly, but didn't use my special power, and reflected on the past while I walked.

"Ha ha! Don't cry, everyone. I'm the one who wants to cry. I wish I could have left you more before I died. For Roderick's sake too."

That was what Vice Commander Clark Darwin said in his final moments. He'd served as a knight for all of us until the very end.

"Don't make that face, Harrison," he'd told me.

I never did manage to reply. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't help the commander, to whom I owed so much. I couldn't support the vice commander after everything he did for us. All I could do was keep myself quiet so that I wouldn't be a burden to him.

"There's one last thing I want to ask of you. This comes directly from me, not your vice commander."

He'd chipped away at his health by working for the royal order, for the people, for the kingdom. The last thing he requested...

"Arthur Beresford, Roderick's son..."

It was the boy he'd once told me was like a son to him. For the first time, I realized the boy he meant was the commander's son. With his final breath, his voice dry and hoarse, the vice commander asked us to look after Arthur Beresford—to support him if he showed up on the order's doorstep. Those were his final words.

I'd never sobbed as hard as I did that day. My throat had never gotten torn

raw from wailing. I refused to accept that he had died in front of me. I cried, screamed, howled...but none of it brought him back. Eventually, I was the only one left who remembered that day.

"Commander Callum Bordeaux and Vice Commander Alan Berners both died for defying the queen."

I found myself having to tell Arthur Beresford this news.

With Alan Berners and Callum Bordeaux gone, everyone who'd witnessed the vice commander's death and heard his last wish was dead. One opposed the queen, one was sent out into a fruitless war, one was worked to death, and the last one took his own life before he could bring shame to himself as a knight.

I was the only one remaining.

"In the end, my way of life didn't change after becoming a knight," I mused.

I only became the next commander because Callum Bordeaux and Alan Berners died, making me the strongest knight in the order. That was the only requirement for promotions these days, even though I didn't feel like I should be in charge of anyone.

I killed if the queen ordered me to kill. I destroyed any country she told us to destroy. If she told me to put down rebellion among the knights...I would eliminate the threats by any means necessary, cutting down one knight after another before they could act.

But I couldn't let her destroy the royal order yet.

"Arthur Beresford...don't end up like me."

I turned my head just slightly to address the man at my back. I didn't look at his face—I couldn't bear to see features so similar to the commander's twisted with anger.

"Commander?" he called out, but I pretended not to hear him.

The vice commander would be disgusted if he could see me. The commander's pride, the royal order that the vice commander had helped get

back on its feet, the order they'd loved and protected until the end—I had turned it into an army that served the queen's amusement and facilitated her massacres.

I wasn't like Callum Bordeaux. I didn't have his noble blood, his ability to see the bigger picture, the heart he offered to everyone he met, or his clever brain.

I wasn't like Alan Berners. I couldn't lead people like him—couldn't guide or motivate people.

Kenneth Aldridge, the current vice commander, was much better suited to be in charge. All I had was power...or rather, "violence." I had no right to lead others.

Yet I couldn't leave the royal order. I couldn't abandon this title I held. I couldn't bring about the end of the order, no matter how many knights or innocent civilians I had to cut down.

It didn't matter to me if people hated me—I wasn't worthy of esteem anymore. The people who saved me, who acknowledged me, who praised me were no longer part of this world.

But I still had things I had to do for their sake.

"Oh, are you awake, Harrison?"

I pried my eyes open. Where am I? This wasn't my bedroom. When I found someone sitting next to me, I tried to jerk away, but my body refused to obey. I couldn't remember what I'd been dreaming about, but I knew I'd been trapped in some dark, endless nightmare that filled me with despair.

How did I get here?

"You were fast asleep. How do you feel?"

The person spoke again, and I tried to turn my head to figure out who they were. A man just barely came into view. His horribly nostalgic voice stirred a memory inside me. I strained to see who he was, only to find a familiar yet

startling face.

"Vice Commander?" I croaked.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I shouldn't have been so shocked, but my heart was racing. I blinked over and over, yet he didn't disappear like some ghostly apparition. I couldn't quench the desire to ensure it was actually him.

"Is it really you?"

I heard myself speak, but I didn't understand my own words. Who else would it be? Still, when I looked at the vice commander, it was like seeing someone who'd come back from the brink of death. The thought left me trembling.

The vice commander squinted at me. "Are you still half asleep?" he asked, sounding completely normal. "I heard you and Arthur really went at it today. You never spend this much time in bed unless you're sick."

He chuckled, and that sound sent relief flooding through me that snapped me out of my strange thoughts. Why *had* I asked him that? Maybe he was right, and I hadn't fully woken up yet. Now that my mind was clear, I remembered what brought me here.

"Where's Arthur Beresford?"

"He's been ordered to get some rest, just like you. He kept up with you for an entire day." The vice commander leaned back in his chair. "The fight ended at dawn, and it's been about half a day since then. You've been asleep that entire time. So? How was the duel?"

"Don't you know what happened?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Plenty of people had witnessed the duel. Surely he knew the outcome by now.

He smiled awkwardly and sighed. "Let me ask a different question, then." The vice commander leaned in a little closer. "Did you have fun dueling Arthur?"

"Yes. I was thoroughly defeated."

The vice commander burst into laughter at my immediate answer. I didn't know what was so funny.



"Well, that's good. I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be happy to lose."

I cocked my head. Was I really happy? I wasn't sure of that myself. But I was satisfied. I had battled Arthur Beresford, ready to fight to the death, and I was trounced by him like I'd expected. There was nothing wrong with that. I had proven to all those knights that Arthur Beresford's promotion was justified. If anyone still doubted him, I'd handle them.

"Are you thinking about doing something reckless again, Harrison?" the vice commander asked.

He peered closer at me, and I broke eye contact. The man who'd become my mentor only needed a year to learn how to read my thoughts on my face with eerie accuracy. He sighed at whatever he found now.

"You didn't endorse Arthur's promotion because of Roderick or me, right?"

Why would he bring that up? I narrowed my eyes at him. His voice had gone quiet, but he should've already known the answer to that question.

Despite my confusion, I attempted to give him a reasonable answer. "Arthur Beresford is a wonderful knight. He's much more wonderful than me."

"Is that right?" The vice commander nodded to himself. But strangely enough, he urged me to continue.

"He deserves a fair appraisal," I said.

"That's true."

Arthur Beresford was young, but not *too* young. The Eighth Squadron was all about personal merit. But most of all...

"I became a captain one year after joining the main forces," I pointed out.

"That's right. You really surprised us."

As always, the vice commander could interpret the deeper meaning behind my simple statements. He crossed his arms and smiled, like he was enjoying the

memory.

"Vice Commander," I said, "Arthur Beresford was a major player on the front lines in the war."

"Yes, I heard those reports."

Arthur Beresford had made tremendous contributions. He'd rescued his father multiple times and even knocked bullets out of the air with his sword. My heart had raced when I first heard about how he saved the commander. Every one of us who'd been there six years ago rejoiced over the news.

Six years ago, he wasn't even a rookie, much less a full-fledged knight. He was just the commander's son, weak and unsure of his future. But the boy was determined to get back on his feet. He even made that vow to Princess Pride Royal Ivy—he swore to protect her for the rest of his life. I understood how he felt when he offered everything he had to the princess that day. I'd done much the same with the commander and vice commander.

Princess Pride Royal Ivy—the woman who saved our beloved commander.

Princess Pride Royal Ivy—the woman our vice commander, whom I so deeply respected, was indebted to.

I knew Arthur Beresford would protect her until his last breath, no matter what it cost him. He needed "power" to protect her. Without power, he couldn't protect anyone. It wasn't enough to simply get stronger, though. If he did that for his own sake, and she remained out of his reach, it would all be for nothing. We'd all felt that the day we were forced to watch our commander nearly die in that cliff collapse. We were too far away to do anything in that moment, so all our power was useless.

When Arthur Beresford showed up at the royal order, he didn't waste a single second. He was only a rookie, but he was already aiming for the top. He'd do anything to reach the princess's side as quickly as he could. He didn't stop until he'd earned the power and position necessary to protect her. Somewhere along the way, I started eagerly anticipating his growth.

During the war, Arthur Beresford used his blade to save the commander. Just like six years ago, I wasn't able to get to the commander in time. I didn't even know he was in danger. But Arthur Beresford dashed to his rescue, saving the lives of him and the knights around him. And then...

"I also protected Princess Pride Royal Ivy," I said.

"Oh? Do you want me to praise you for that?" the vice commander asked, amused.

He smiled and studied my face as I stared up at him in silence. Finally, he nodded.

"All right," he said. "You did well, Harrison. I'm glad I sent you to fight in the war. I'm proud of you."

He chuckled, but those words were all the reward I ever needed. I was useful to the man who found me, saved me, and took me under his wing. Six years had gone by since the ambush at the cliffs, and I was achieving things as a knight. The better I performed on missions, the more praise the vice commander deserved as the man who'd educated me.

He also gave me some of my own responsibilities to take care of. Once I reached the rank of captain, I accepted missions directly from him and the commander. Then Arthur Beresford, the young man who'd made a vow to protect Princess Pride Royal Ivy, joined the order. He was the commander's son and someone dear to the vice commander. Still, I'd never expected him to end up in the Eighth Squadron with me.

Lately, with these people around me, every day filled me with happiness. The vice commander took me in, the commander acknowledged my strengths, and I got to know Arthur Beresford as a person. If Princess Pride Royal Ivy hadn't been there on that day...

"Take me to that battlefield!"

She was a princess, and only eleven years old at the time. Yet she'd put

herself directly in the line of fire.

"Prepare to meet your end, you demons."

The way she'd danced across the battlefield, never losing her smile even as blood stained her fine dress, had been a thing of beauty. Her ferocity had stolen the eyes and hearts of many knights, including me. If she hadn't been there...I would never have known this happiness.

Just thinking back on the despair I felt that day turned my stomach. It came back to me so vividly. When I thought the commander was lost, it was like the ground suddenly gave out beneath me. My stomach still plummeted just thinking about it.

"I give you my most profound gratitude for saving the life of my dear friend Commander Roderick. I cannot thank you enough."

I'd never seen the vice commander so completely overjoyed. I'd never seen him express his gratitude so openly either. For the first time, I watched the vice commander weep.

She'd saved the commander's life, and it had left the vice commander overwhelmed with gratitude toward her. That was reason enough for me to serve her faithfully. I'd vowed to do anything I could for the princess who'd saved the people I treasured the most. I wouldn't let harm befall a single finger—no, not even a *fingernail* on her body. And yet...

"Alan Berners and Callum Bordeaux let her get hurt," I muttered.

The words came out on their own as I recalled the memories. The vice commander frowned, but not because of the captains. It was because of me. If Princess Pride Royal Ivy said the captains weren't at fault—that they'd been the ones to save her life—then it must be true. I had no right to chastise or judge them if that was how she felt.

"Their punishment is over now," the vice commander said. "You understand that they did the best they could, right?"

"I do. But they weren't fully prepared."

They couldn't do what it took to protect her. They should have thrown away their titles after that, regardless of how the princess felt about it. Perhaps that would mean she required more imperial knights, but she always had Arthur Beresford, the man most suited for the job.

I was still mulling this over when a deep, exhausted voice said, "Please don't speak ill of Captain Alan and Captain Callum..."

I turned and found someone lying in the bed across from mine. He was slumped over, like he was too weak to sit up. His long, loose silver hair spilled to the floor.

"Arthur Beresford." I hadn't known he was there.

I looked to the vice commander, who simply laughed. "Remember? I told you he was in the same situation as you."

That much was true, but I hadn't realized it meant we were both resting in the same infirmary.

"Captain Alan and Captain Callum...were really, *really* prepared to protect Princess Pride. So don't...talk about them like that..." Arthur Beresford rasped.

Watching him make his case while slumped over his bed, I wondered how fatigued he still was. His eyes were dimmer than usual. When I didn't reply, Arthur Beresford scowled at me.

"You know what?" he said. "You're so cruel, Captain Harrison. I was waiting to hear how you'd explain your dislike of the captains, yet the moment the vice commander asked you about it, you had nothing to say but a one-line answer. I was out there practically fighting to the death and everything..."

He slid out of his bed until his head hit the floor. Clearly he didn't quite have control of his limbs yet. Bandages covered him head to toe, just like me.

"Stop moving or you'll hurt yourself," the vice commander said. He rose to pull Arthur Beresford up and set him back in his bed. "I forgot to mention this,

but the two of you are ordered to strict bed rest for two more days. You've already been treated with special powers, so don't you dare move around, got it?"

Two days. That meant neither of us were gravely injured.

"You haven't broken any bones, but you won't fully heal in just two days," the vice commander said. "You'll need more treatments with special powers, then two more days of bed rest."

"So I can't see her...for another two days?" Arthur Beresford groaned. "That's so long."

The vice commander chuckled. "The three other imperial knights have already agreed to take over while you're away. Princess Pride has been informed as well."

This got another groan out of Arthur Beresford. The vice commander turned to me and told me that Isidore, the former vice captain of the Eighth Squadron, would be replacing me until I returned. He was definitely up to the job, but...I wasn't the one who needed that information anymore.

"Give your reports to Arthur Beresford," I said. "I'm not the captain of the Eighth Squadron."

"Ah, that's right," the vice commander said. He repeated himself for Arthur Beresford, who said he understood.

"Captain Harrison," Arthur Beresford called out.

"I'm not the captain."

He shifted uncomfortably at that reminder, and the vice commander told him to hold still. With yet another groan, he obliged.

"Then...Harrison, can I ask you a favor?"

"What do you need?"

He was hesitant, even though he was my superior now and I would obviously

obey him. With a sigh, he said, "Fine, I won't hesitate then. Even if I'm captain now...can you still treat me the same as before?"

What does that mean? He'd very publicly defeated me in a duel for my title, and I had no complaints. He'd earned his new title, and I owed it and him due respect. The vice commander chuckled at my confused scowl. Before I could ask him what was so funny, Arthur Beresford spoke up again.

"I just...seriously won't be able to stand it...if you talk to me all formally and stuff..."

I heard the rustling of fabric and looked up to find him draping his arms over his face.

"I'd have been really happy...if I got the position because I'd reached your level. But I still have so much to learn... You're more mature and better at making decisions in battle and stuff, so I don't want someone like you talking to me like I'm special..."

He trailed off weakly at the end, almost like he'd been muttering in his sleep.

Someone like me?

Did he really mean that, or was he just flattering me? I couldn't imagine him wanting to be more like me, of all people.

"What, you don't want Harrison to show you respect?" the vice commander teased.

"You wouldn't like it if the commander spoke formally to you, right?" Arthur Beresford replied, glaring at him. His voice was harsher than usual.

"Ah, I guess not," the vice commander said with a chuckle.

"Why should you show me respect when you defeated me?" I asked.

I didn't care how we addressed each other. I'd been prepared to work under him for a long time.

Arthur Beresford mumbled something, then turned onto his side to face the

wall. "It was really close, and I barely won. Captain—I mean, Harrison, I've always known you're an amazing fighter. I can't think of any reason why I wouldn't show my respect for you..."

It sounded like he idolized me or something. He told us he was going to get some sleep, then stopped speaking altogether. I wondered if I should sleep too. The vice commander nodded, although he was smirking for some reason. He closed his eyes, though I didn't get why he was so emotional. And why was he bobbing his head up and down? I figured I'd ask, but he beat me to the punch.

"You've really grown, Harrison."

It was so sudden, I doubted I'd heard him correctly. The vice captain had praised me for a second time. I could hardly believe it. For a long, breathless moment, he held my gaze while I sat there unblinking. Once I recovered a little, he went on.

"I'm so glad to see how much your subordinates love you," he said, smiling softly. "Keep taking good care of Arthur and the Eighth Squadron. Now then, I'm heading back to my room. Stay in bed, you two. No bickering either."

With those gentle orders, the vice commander left us. He seemed very insistent on us not moving around too much once we awoke. Was that why he'd come here? Or maybe he wanted to make the order clear to me especially.

Once the vice commander left, I stared up at the ceiling for a while. *He praised me*. Everything that had just happened replayed in my mind. *Am I dreaming?*

The vice commander had praised me twice. He was glad that I had grown. Arthur Beresford said he respected me. Was there even a word to describe the joy swelling in my chest?

"I'd have been really happy...if I got the position because I'd reached your level. But I still have so much to learn..."

Reached my level? I remembered him saying he wanted to be like the

commander six years ago. Did that mean he wanted to be like *me* too? A smirk crept onto my face as joy flooded my body. I probably could have smiled through anything in that moment, even death.

"You can do it," I said quietly.

My smirk widened into a true smile. I didn't know what glorified version of me he saw, but I knew that Arthur Beresford could easily surpass me. I'd spoken no louder than a breath. My words dissipated in the air, but I didn't care if he never heard me. He didn't need to. From here on out, I just had to devote myself as a knight to the right people.

Commander Roderick Beresford. Vice Commander Clark Darwin. Princess Pride Royal Ivy. Captain Arthur Beresford. Everything I did, I did for them. I used my power to protect this country's people and dedicated myself to those four. It was my pride as a knight.

A meaningful life and a meaningful death. I would never find any greater happiness.

Chapter 4:

Knights and Toasts

FOUR DAYS HAD PASSED since my duel with Capt—with Harrison. We fought until dawn, then I spent an entire day out cold. On the second day, I was awake, but confined to a bed. The men who'd watched the duel and the other imperial knights came by to visit me one by one. On the third day, Dad and Clark stopped by.

This was day four. My injuries were mostly healed, and the doctors gave me permission to take off my bandages. It hurt like hell to move, but I could at least function relatively normally again. To be honest, I'd never gotten injured badly enough before to need more than a day to recover. I never got hurt this much on missions, not even during the defensive war.

Harrison and I went to see Dad and Clark in the morning. I also apologized to Captain Alan first thing for making him pick up more imperial knight shifts. But at least I'd be able to jump back in and help out again starting today... Or so I thought, until something else turned my day upside down.

The Eighth Squadron relied less on paperwork compared to other units, which was why we could switch captains with nothing more than a bout to show off combat skills. But becoming the captain meant I had to start submitting written reports to the commander every single day.

I hadn't moved for four whole days, so I had yet to fill out any of the documentation that came with my promotion. The task was truly daunting, and a stark reminder of why captains were always so busy.

Since three of Princess Pride's imperial knights were captains now, we could either hold captains' meetings first thing in the morning, so we could get to Princess Pride right after the royal family's breakfast, or send Vice Captain Eric with a bunch of replacement knights to guard the princess. It was just another

way things were changing now that I wasn't vice captain anymore.

I got permission to move into my new room that day, which was reserved for captains—the one that had belonged to Harrison not that long ago. He had packed up all his stuff and moved into my former room, the one for the vice captain, before I'd even cleared out. That was pretty unfair, since he didn't have many personal belongings; moving was a lot easier for him than for me. Plus, it made me feel like I was getting kicked out. Nevertheless, I gathered up my stuff and carried it to my new room.

When Vice Captain Eric saw me, he laughed and offered to help. "Vice Captain Harrison is as merciless as ever," he said.

I couldn't agree more. The vice captain suggested I get rookies to help me, but I didn't have many things, and I would feel bad making them come out here to carry my stuff around.

With all my stuff in place, I set the stack of documents awaiting me on my desk. It consisted of a few dozen papers, but they mostly required the same notes over and over. Captain Alan told me I could just write it the way the last captain did. Since my predecessor was Harrison, I figured that meant there wouldn't be too much to write. Hopefully, I could rush through it and get back to my imperial knight shift that afternoon.

Except...all Harrison had written on every one of his documents was "nothing to report."

I sprinted right back to him. He was supposed to document battle formations, shortcomings among his knights, and general observations, but his daily, weekly, bimonthly, and monthly reports only contained a single sentence. There was no way he never spotted something worth writing down, and besides, I sure couldn't copy one sentence over and over!

When I finally got a hold of him, I cried, "A third party is supposed to go over these records if anything happens to the captain! What if you'd died before we switched positions and the Eighth Squadron was wiped out?!" "It's fine."

Harrison, now vice captain, spoke as if nothing was amiss when he submitted his paperwork to me. When I asked him how he'd submitted reports to Dad on a daily basis, he said he was more detailed on those.

"I have to do it properly if the commander is going to see them," he added.

My head throbbed. Then why couldn't you keep proper records for the Eighth Squadron too?!

He wouldn't do the paperwork correctly for our title swap. On top of that, he used his special power to run away in the middle of our conversation. He was giving me a worse headache than the paperwork itself. Plus, I needed his signature on the documents, so I had to go chase after him. I barely got him to sign before the submission deadline, and as a result, I missed my afternoon imperial knight shift.

Late that night, after training, Captain Alan wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "So you spent the day chasing Harrison even though you just recovered from all those injuries?" he asked with a smile.

"Well...he *did* show up to the Eighth Squadron's training session," I replied. "But I didn't want to interrupt him, so I worked on other documents and records and chased him again during his breaks..."

"That honor of yours must make life hard for you, huh?"

Captain Alan burst out laughing and pulled me closer. The sudden jerk almost made me collapse after all the running I'd had to do today.

"So...why is it just us?"

I glanced over at the captain as he dragged me along and found him grinning at me. All the senior knights were supposed to take me out drinking tonight to celebrate my promotion, but they'd postponed it until tomorrow—an order from Captain Alan, apparently.

"What's the matter? You don't wanna drink with just us imperial knights?"

"No, I'm really glad you invited Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric. We just never do this kind of thing..."

"Don't we drink all the time?"

Well, that was true. But they usually invited people to their rooms to celebrate things, like when Vice Captain Eric or I were promoted to vice captain. But Captain Alan had stepped in this time and bumped the celebrations a day, telling the others I was busy tonight. I didn't really mind, since I liked drinking with the three of them.

"Where are Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric?"

"Getting booze and snacks. They said we could start drinking without them."

"Okay... Wait, Captain, your room's over—"

"Oh, let's drink in your room tonight! You haven't unpacked yet, have you? I'll help you out while I'm there. Eric said you could use a hand."

He was right that I still had some unpacking to do. While I appreciated his help, it also made me feel a little guilty.

"I really don't have much," I insisted, but the captain said it was fine since I'd have more things soon.

The two of us headed to my new room while I wondered just how much food and booze the other two planned to bring back. Cleaning up the empty bottles could become a bigger chore than unpacking my boxes.

We reached the door, and I was just about to unlock it when I realized I'd forgotten to tell Stale I'd changed rooms. That meant he might teleport into my old room by mistake. He could still teleport to my direct location, which wouldn't be a problem, but if he went straight to Harrison's room, he might end up with a blade to his throat before he could announce himself.

I tried to justify my thoughts with these kinds of practical concerns, but really, I was looking for a reason to tell Stale about my promotion as soon as I could. It was embarrassing to admit, but I'd spent the past four days desperate to see

Princess Pride and tell Stale and the others my good news.

"Wow, so this is what my room would look like if I didn't have so much stuff. It's so big!" Captain Alan said as he took in the room. His shouts of awe echoed in the empty space. When I warned him my neighbors would hear him, he said, "Captains' rooms are farther apart and soundproofed, so it's fine."

"Oh, you said we could start drinking when we got here, but I don't actually have any alcohol."

When I asked if we should get some from his room, Captain Alan grinned mischievously at me. I staggered backward in the face of that eerie expression. Then he brought his fingers to his mouth.

Tweeeeet! He let out a shrill whistle.

"Arthur!"

The person I most wanted to see had appeared right then and there, calling my name.

"Huh? Princess Pride?! And Tiara too?! How did you—"

Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric appeared alongside the two princesses. My voice gave out as the shock hit me. I was dimly aware that something smelled absolutely delicious, but before I could focus on that, Val, Sefekh, and Khemet showed up. I didn't have time to ask why they were here too, since Princess Pride and Tiara were already leaping toward me. Princess Pride spread her arms, a basket hanging from one of them. Realizing what was about to happen, I froze up.

"Arthur! Congratulations on your promotion!"

When Princess Pride and Tiara leapt into my arms, I embraced them on pure reflex.

[&]quot;Arthur! Congratulations on your promotion!"

As soon as Stale teleported us to his room, Tiara and I jumped into Arthur's arms.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum had told us about his duel with Captain Harrison four days ago. That afternoon, Stale informed us of Arthur's promotion to captain of the Eighth Squadron. He'd become the youngest knight in the history of the royal order to achieve two incredible advancements, surpassing Captain Callum's record for youngest promotion to captain. Captain Callum himself remarked that Arthur was the first teenage captain in the history of the royal order.

Stale and I had asked to see Arthur and congratulate him, but Tiara had another idea.

"We should throw him a surprise party for real this time!"

We'd been planning to surprise Arthur when he was promoted to vice captain, but we'd had to cancel for unfortunate reasons. Stale and I were therefore eager to take Tiara up on her suggestion—as were Captain Alan and Captain Callum, although they only agreed with certain stipulations.

"I really mean it! Congratulations, Arthur! Becoming a captain in less than three months is incredible!"

"Congratulations! Big Sister and Big Brother were thrilled! I'm really happy too!"

Tiara and I hugged Arthur even harder. My sister wrapped her arms around his waist, and I hugged him at the chest so that we wouldn't suffocate him as we had once before. I'd seen the look of shock on his face when we sprang at him, so I knew our surprise was a success. We were finally able to celebrate his achievements! But just as I was about to release him...

Arthur hugged us back just as hard.

The knight's arms, so sturdy and strong, made my breath catch. When I looked up, Arthur screwed his eyes shut and buried his face against the top of

my head.

"I missed you...so much..." he said, pulling us closer.

He looked a bit worn out; he was probably still exhausted from that fight with Vice Captain Harrison. Plus, he now had all his captain's work to do. While Captain Alan and Captain Callum said they'd make sure he stayed in the royal order, he was undoubtedly swamped with paperwork.

When Arthur pulled back a little, I got a better look at his face. I traced my finger along the delicate skin under his eyes. While he looked tired, he thankfully had no dark circles quite yet.

"We missed you too, Arthur," I said with a smile. "I'm sorry I didn't come visit you."

Arthur slowly opened his eyes at the sensation of my fingers on his skin. His skin abruptly flushed with heat, like he was about to burst into flames.

"Huh?! Oh! Umm...!" He muttered something unintelligible before whipping his arms away from us at lightning speed.

Oh no, he's really flustered.

Arthur staggered backward, his eyes darting all over the place. "I-I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..." His lips trembled, and I felt guilty that Tiara and I had jumped on him so suddenly. He was also probably concerned about freely hugging two members of royalty.

Smiling, Tiara and I exchanged glances before turning back to him.

"Don't worry, we're friends, right?" I said.

"Big Sister, Big Brother, and I love you a lot, Arthur!" Tiara added.

Arthur, still blushing, murmured, "But...you're princesses... And at our age, it's..."

It sounded like he was concerned about Tiara being of marriageable age. His sense of honor was endearing and awkward all at once. I searched for Stale and

found he'd finished teleporting in the other guests and the food. He was smiling too, so I assumed he was pleased about the success of our surprise—but the moment my eyes met his, he shifted his attention to Arthur with a devious glint in his eyes.

"It's not every day that three members of the royal family visit a knight's room," he said. "You'd better be thankful, Arthur."

"That's right! P-Princess Pride, why are you all in my room?!" Arthur asked, his head snapping up.

He was looking around frantically like he'd only just realized what was going on around him, and Stale burst into laughter.

"I don't even have anything to serve you!" Arthur said in a panic, even though he was the guest of honor.

"Don't worry! Prince Stale teleported a table full of food," Vice Captain Eric said, amused.

Finally, Arthur noticed all the food. We'd cooked lots of his favorites from the world of my past life—ginger-fried pork and miso soup in particular. It wasn't too exciting, but Tiara and I had worked really hard so that Arthur would enjoy them.

While we'd all been eager to surprise Arthur for real this time, no one had been more motivated than Stale himself. When I first told him I had asked Leon for more cooking ingredients, Stale had instantly declared, "Then let's prepare right away, before anything else can delay us!"

The second I agreed, he'd teleported directly to Leon. Anemone was right next to our homeland, so Stale could teleport to their castle without my permission. I had asked him what he planned to do if anyone other than Leon saw him do it, and he'd eagerly replied, "Prince Leon would be sure to order the silence of anyone who happened to see. Besides, this is urgent!"

Stale had then teleported back with a huge haul of ingredients. He told us

that Leon had prepared them all for us so that my next surprise party could go off without a hitch. But in all honesty, we now had far more food than Arthur could ever eat on his own.

At the time, I was worried we'd overdone it, but Stale was emphatic. "Prince Leon said he prepared it all just for you, so he doesn't want you to have any reservations about using this."

It seemed the two had grown close while I wasn't paying attention.

Nevertheless, I was super grateful. Stale and Leon were always good at getting things done, and Stale never let up once he set his mind on something.

He flew into motion, ordering us all around: "Big Sister, I'd like to place these ingredients in storage for now. When should I request that we borrow the kitchen? Captain Alan, Captain Callum, please inform me as soon as you know when Arthur will return. I'll use my break to come up with an airtight schedule!" He tackled the preparations for this party like he was strategizing for war. Tiara seemed to enjoy it, but the captains and I had been overwhelmed by his intensity.

The next day, my imperial knights reported that Arthur would need three days of bed rest after his duel with Captain Harrison. That gave us time to sit down and plan what to cook and how to surprise Arthur.

Tiara and I worked out a good plan, with a little outside help. We'd even finished our cooking in time to serve it to Arthur while it was still hot and fresh. The ginger pork and miso soup were still steaming when Stale teleported them into the room.

"I thought we could all enjoy your favorite foods," I told Arthur now.

"Big Sister worked really hard to cook this!" Tiara added.

Arthur seemed too dazed to respond, but Captain Alan blurted out, "Huh?! There's some for us too?!" His eyes lit up at the prospect.

Unlike Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric, who had seen us cooking,

Captain Alan didn't know we'd made enough for everyone. The actual cooking process was simple, and we had plenty of ingredients to work with, so Tiara and I had easily prepared enough for everyone. We simply needed the right utensils and dishes. That being the case, I had to admit my arms were a bit sore from all that hard work.

Arthur's hands trembled, revealing his nerves now that everyone was focused on him. With our encouragement, he stuck his fork into the ginger pork and brought a bite up to his mouth. The moment he chowed down, his tired eyes went wide and bright. He squeezed the fork tighter, cheeks going pink. I hoped it wasn't because the food was too hot, but everything about his face seemed to say that he loved it. Tiara and I high-fived.

"It's sooooo good!" With a loud gulp, Arthur gave us his heartfelt praise. "Thank you so much!"

My smile turned bashful, but I couldn't be more pleased by his reaction. "There's still more than enough for everyone, so have as much as you like. We're here to celebrate *you* tonight, Arthur!"

I urged the others to take plates as well. Everyone aside from Tiara and me swarmed the table with such ferocity, it was practically a race. How glad I was that there was so much pork left on the platter. The way they went at it, they might as well have been starving. It was a good thing I'd asked Stale to bring enough for everyone to have seconds.

Grinning, Tiara held a bowl of miso soup out for Arthur. It made her look so grown-up, like a wife serving a meal to her husband, and the image warmed my heart. "Please have some soup too! Big Sister made this as well!"

Arthur accepted the bowl. I thought it might be hard for him to balance both that and his plate, but then Stale teleported the table directly in front of him. I had a feeling that table was from the dining hall... I would have to ensure he put it back when we were finished.

Offering Stale his thanks, Arthur set his plate on the table. Then he focused on

the bowl and slurped up his miso soup. He smiled from ear to ear, looking like a weight had lifted from his shoulders. "It's really good."

Tiara beamed proudly.

"Leon supplied the ingredients, and Stale picked them up for me," I said. "Stale even helped come up with the plan. He worked so hard for y—"

"Elder Sister, you don't need to tell him about me," Stale cut in. "Why not talk about the food instead?"

He looked embarrassed by the praise, so I politely—albeit awkwardly—changed the subject. "Captain Callum remembered that you loved these dishes at the last party, and I thought it was best to celebrate with your favorite foods. It's a special occasion, after all."

Some of Arthur's silver hair was stuck to his face after all the running around he had to do today. I gently tucked the strands behind his ear so they wouldn't end up in his mouth while he ate, but when my fingers grazed his ear, he flinched.

"I can't congratulate you enough, Arthur," I said. "I'm so proud of you."

No matter how many times I said it, it never felt adequate. I was so, so, so, so happy. That boy from six years ago had returned to me as a knight, become a vice captain, and then achieved the rank of captain. It was proof of his hard work coming to fruition and everyone around him acknowledging that.

Arthur blushed at that. Perhaps the reality of his promotion had finally set in once the crown princess congratulated him one-on-one. He stood there, his mouth opening and closing a few times, while Stale and the knights smirked. Val and the children were doing their own thing, eagerly enjoying their ginger pork and miso soup.

"Thank you...so much!"

Arthur's blue eyes shone with emotion. Though his mouth was empty, he swallowed hard, and then he smiled with genuine joy. Seeing him so happy, I

"Elder Sister, Tiara—you should eat before it gets cold, Elder Sister."

I handed the two of them plates once Arthur and Pride's conversation petered out. Neither of the princesses had taken a single bite yet, too busy focusing on the man of the hour.

Pride placed the basket she'd hung on one arm on the table and thanked me. Once she and our sister had taken plates, I turned my focus back to Arthur. He was still in a dreamy state after his talk with Elder Sister.

I caught his eye and smiled at him. "What's wrong, Arthur? If you don't want your food, then give it to me."

"Don't!" he cried. "Of course I want it! You've already got your own plate!"

Arthur shielded his plate with his body. He must have been distracted enough to take my threat seriously. Only when I ate from my own plate did Arthur relax.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, incredible."

All the flush finally left his cheeks. "Thanks, Stale. I'm sure you helped a lot with all this." He spoke quietly enough that only I could hear. I knew he probably didn't want to talk about it, but now that he'd said something, I had to respond.

"Why wouldn't I celebrate my partner's promotion? Congratulations."

The last word came out quiet as a wave of embarrassment hit me. I looked away and heard him mutter a simple thank-you. Instead of looking at Arthur, I searched for Pride and Tiara; they were heading toward the knights, probably to thank them for their help with the surprise party. I considered toasting with Arthur, then realized he only had food in front of him, not glasses.

"We'll do it later," he said, apparently thinking the same thing.

After that, I dug into my own food. The fragrant pork paired perfectly with the sweet sauce and vegetables. I could eat that dish forever.

"It tastes better when you know that Elder Sister and Tiara made it," I said.

"Yeah, it sure does," Arthur agreed.

"Sorry that we all barged in. It was supposed to be a celebration for you."

"Food tastes better when everyone eats together. I like it better this way."

That response was so like him. I almost spit out my food laughing, and I coughed a few times before I managed to swallow. With food like this, I kind of wanted it all to myself or just the two of us, as selfish as that was.

"Do you want any presents for your promotion?" I asked him.

"No, no way. This party already feels like too much."

"I'll get you a nice chair, at least. Your room barely has any furniture in it."

"That's for you to sit in when you visit me, isn't it?"

I simply smiled in response.

"I guess I wouldn't mind having that then," he said, reading my answer on my face.

That settled it. I was about to warn him that I was getting busier, thanks to being Uncle Vest's steward and assisting Father and Gilbert, but Arthur spoke up before I could.

"Hey, why's he here, anyway?" he asked, and I followed his gaze. "Past Sefekh and Khemet. *Him*."

I sighed. Val was sitting against the wall, glaring at Arthur and me like he had something to say.

"It's a reward for their help in the war," I replied. "I teleported them here while they were making a delivery, so he's probably mad at me. Of course, I did bring them to the castle parlor first to explain the surprise."

"He's probably mad that it's a party for me, right?"

That was possible, knowing Val, but there was nothing I could do about it. Pride had invited them, and I was at fault for forcibly teleporting them here while they were working. In fact, they'd just returned from a delivery a few days ago, one in which they captured a thief. I understood why Val was mad, since I'd dragged them back here right after they left again.

With another sigh, I plucked the last bite off my plate, then rose to get soup. "I'll be back. Go say hi to the other knights. They helped prepare for this party too."

I nudged Arthur with my shoulder as I passed him, and he nearly spilled the soup mid-sip. He managed to rescue the bowl, but he still glared at me like I'd committed a grievous offense.

Val deserved my gratitude as well, so I had to be the one to go hear his complaints.

"So that's why you told me to put my belongings in one corner, right, Vice Captain Eric?" Arthur said. "Thanks so much."

Arthur bowed to the vice captain, who smiled and waved him off while he tried to thank the three knights who'd helped set up the party. Tiara and I had just thanked them too. They really were a tremendous help, even pitching in outside of their shifts. Captain Alan and Captain Callum's conditions had surprised me at first, but it all worked out well in the end thanks to the other three knights.

Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum had watched over us while we cooked. Meanwhile, Captain Alan had stayed with Arthur and signaled for us at the right time. Captain Alan had once said that he wanted to watch me cook, but he'd volunteered to distract Arthur this time. He told me that he was the one who could most naturally lead Arthur to his room—and that he also wanted to experience the act of signaling Stale with a whistle. Captain Callum immediately

scolded him for being disrespectful, but I understood. Stale's instant teleportation was like summoning someone with magic, and Stale himself didn't seem to mind it. He'd even chuckled at Captain Alan's explanation.

"I wish I could have seen what your room normally looks like," I said. "Please invite me over if you have the opportunity, okay?"

"It's really nothing special!" Arthur replied, shaking his head vigorously. "I barely keep anything in my room!"

I didn't mind if it was empty. In fact, a lack of personal items was true to the Arthur I knew. He seemed to be panicking over the invite; I figured it wasn't that easy for a man to ask a crown princess to visit his personal quarters.

"That's too bad," I said.

When I didn't push the issue, he breathed a sigh of relief, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. Then he noticed that his plate was empty and returned to the table for seconds. I wasn't surprised that he could still eat after finishing that big plate. If the other knights weren't busy talking to me, they probably would have followed Arthur back for seconds too.

"I'm so glad he likes the party, Big Sister!" Tiara told me. "The food is really delicious!"

"Yes, it all turned out great," Vice Captain Eric agreed. "I like this even more than the last pork dish we tried."

"We can't thank you enough for including us in this feast," Captain Callum said.

"It tastes great!" Captain Alan gushed. "Please let me be the taste tester the next time you cook!"

I appreciated their praise. A smile overtook my face, and heat rose in the knights' cheeks, like my bashfulness was contagious.

"Please feel free to have more, everyone," I said. "Everything on the table is for you."

Leon had gone above and beyond to gather ingredients for me, so there was plenty left. I was planning to either have them take leftovers home with them or give them to the other knights without telling them I'd made it. Thankfully, it looked like that wouldn't be an issue.

Arthur returned with two more plates packed with ginger pork. At first I couldn't believe he was about to inhale two servings at once, but then he placed one of the new plates on the table and offered it to the others. He must have been worried that his fellow knights were being modest and not eating their share.

Captain Alan ruffled Arthur's hair, grateful for the gesture. "You don't have to be so nice to us now that you're Captain Arthur."

"That's true. Now that he's a captain, should I treat Arthur like my superior?" Vice Captain Eric asked.

Captain Callum nodded. "Yes, you probably should."

Only then did I remember that Arthur now outranked Vice Captain Eric, which really highlighted just how quickly Arthur had risen in the ranks.

"Give me a break!" Arthur yelled at them. "The three of you have been knights way longer than me, so let's just keep things the same as they've always been."

Arthur bowed while the other three smirked. He clearly didn't want to change the power dynamic among senior knights he respected. Vice Captain Eric patted him on the back and reminded him not to call Vice Captain Harrison "Captain" by mistake.

"Everyone accepted Arthur's promotion to captain after his duel with Harrison," Captain Callum said. "All the knights know how seriously he takes his title. I'm looking forward to the next captains' meeting."

Arthur blushed in response. He turned his face away, stopped eating, and said, "I'm already so busy with all the paperwork."

I'd heard that Arthur and Captain Harrison were practically out for blood in their duel. The knights had buzzed at the sight of Captain Harrison pulling out all the stops. But Arthur had managed to defeat him after a full day of fighting, elevating his combat skills in the minds of his brethren.

"When it comes to combat, Arthur's probably top five in the royal order. Maybe top three," Captain Alan said.

Arthur humbly deflected, saying he had a lot to learn about swordplay. But if he could beat Captain Harrison and his special power, his abilities were as strong as Captain Alan said. Captain Harrison had defended the southern border of Chinensis entirely on his own, after all. The more I thought about it, the more amazing Arthur's promotion felt. We hadn't been able to celebrate his promotion to vice captain when it happened, but at least we got to mark this incredible occasion.

"I'm so glad we could have a real celebration this time," I said. "I was really sad that you didn't eat what I made for you last time."

"Huh? Did I turn down your cooking?" he asked.

Oops. That's not good. I didn't mean to let that slip!

My happiness and relief had made me forget that Arthur had no idea about what happened last time.

He was wide-eyed with confusion. "Did I really waste an opportunity like that?!" He was panicking now, making me break out into a cold sweat.

My smile was frozen on my face. Tiara was equally lost for words, and the other knights stared awkwardly at me. Maybe Stale could bail me out of this? No, he was still talking to Val and the children on the other side of the room. Arthur was getting paler and paler the longer the misunderstanding lingered.

"No, you didn't waste anything!" I cried. "Before we could bring it to you...
Well, you see, we wanted to celebrate your promotion to vice captain, but
something came up and the food we cooked was lost..."

I wondered if I should tell him my cooking attempts ended up producing some kind of burnt liquid again. *No! I don't want that image back in my head...*

While I flailed for an explanation, Arthur muttered, "Cooking... You mean... back then?!" He gasped, but at least some color returned to his face. Except his expression had turned grave, like he was facing down an enemy. The other knights had also gone stiff. Had I said the wrong thing again? Tiara tugged on my dress, flustered, but all I could do was stare at Arthur, concerned by his sudden shift.

"It can't be..." he said. "Don't tell me that was the cooking incident where you cried!"

Agaaahhh! How?! How does he know about me crying?! I winced, giving away my thoughts. Now I was the one turning pale. This seriously wasn't good! I knew that Arthur could carry a grudge over food for a long, long time.

When Tiara and I kept our silence, Arthur turned to his three senior knights, blue eyes flashing. "Am I right?!" The others forced smiles to cover for me, but they also made no reply. "That's why Captain Alan said I should be angry?!"

Arthur gasped when he looked at Captain Alan, who quickly covered Arthur's mouth. It seemed that something had happened privately between the imperial knights. I'd only be digging my own grave if I spoke up now and said the wrong thing, but I was downright rattled.

Just then, someone at the table cackled. "You actually cried 'cause someone ate your cooking, Mistress?" Val asked, smirking at me.

It was just my luck that he'd finished talking with Stale and come to the table for seconds at that very moment. Khemet and Sefekh were with Stale, but Val had detached from them just in time to hear this whole embarrassing conversation. The way he looked at me like I was just a kid crying over food left me nowhere to run, and I cringed.

Yet here you are, eating more of my pork and soup!

I puffed out my cheeks, refusing to admit that I'd also cried back then because of Val himself. Seeing me like that only made his smirk grow. He was treating me like an idiot.

"It's just a little food," he said, rubbing salt in the wound.

But I made that food for Arthur! We all worked together just like we did for this party! Besides...

"I made cookies for you too, Val!" I blurted out.

"Cookies?!" came a chorus of voices.

Oops. I can't believe I just did the same thing twice!

It wasn't merely Arthur this time; Val and the knights gaped at me in shock. I felt like I'd opened Pandora's box and couldn't keep the whole truth from slipping out. Tiara, my only ally, desperately fumbled for an excuse, but she wasn't having any luck either.

As we flailed for words, I sought out the person I least wanted to hear of this. Stale turned his head in short, jerky motions, like an unoiled machine. He had shifted his full attention from Khemet and Sefekh to me.

"Big Sister? What do you mean by...'cookies'?"

Um... What do I tell him to get through this? My smile faltered, but Stale showed no signs of helping me change topics. In fact, he stomped straight toward me. *Eek!* I turned around, but the questions didn't stop.

"Mistress, what's that supposed to mean?" Val said. He set his plate down and scowled at me suspiciously, looking more villainous than he had in a long, long time. Sensing this transformation, Khemet and Sefekh rushed to his side. I had no escape.

"It's not like that!" Tiara protested. "We weren't talking about *your* cookies, Big Brother!"

Tiara got between Stale and me. My goddess of salvation gave me a single breath of reprieve before—

"What's this about my cookies?"

Never mind! Stale can always read between the lines!

Tiara fell silent. She was going pale as well, so I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. *This is really scary!*

I retreated to the knights for help. They shielded me from Val, but there was no escaping Stale, who strode straight up to us. I looked to Arthur for help, but rage boiled off him. He's definitely figured out that Cedric was the culprit!

Sefekh and Khemet clung to Val to keep him in check, though they were staring up at the two of us.

"What's wrong?" Sefekh asked.

Val clicked his tongue and stepped back. "It sounds like that idiot prince ate more than just pork and soup." He'd cut straight to the heart of the matter.

The children cocked their heads in confusion; I couldn't bear to keep lying to them.

"You made cookies for us?!" Khemet said, far too clever for his young age.

"And he ate those too?!" Sefekh added.

"N-no, Cedric ate the other food before we could make the cookies... That's why we ended things before they were finished. I'm really sorry."

This was it. It was all over. Sefekh and Khemet told me I shouldn't apologize. The three knights comforted me. Tiara even added, "It's all Prince Cedric's fault!"

"Hey, Prince," Val said. "Let me kill the idiot if you want to repay me."

"I'll consider it," Stale said darkly.

No, don't do that!

Stale's calm demeanor was more frightening than if he'd shouted or snarled. It gave me the jitters, and I hadn't even told them the worst part yet.

When I reminded them that they couldn't hurt people without my permission, Val reluctantly concluded, "Fine, I won't kill him. I'll just make it close." He was acting like this was a negotiation.

He said it jokingly, but I saw the lethal intent in his eyes; he certainly looked ready to commit a crime. His grudges over food were truly terrifying. I stressed that he really *wasn't* allowed to harm Cedric.

Sefekh shot her water in Val's face and yelled, "Don't talk about killing people! It's a bad influence on Khemet!" That cooled him down a bit.

Khemet took Val's hand and pulled him back to the table, urging him to eat more. I could sense his lingering bloodlust, but he clicked his tongue a few times and let the children drag him away. That was a big relief. He muttered, "Damn brat," under his breath as he left, but I didn't know if that was directed at me, Cedric, or both of us.

"Hey, Stale, think I can get permission to punch him at least once?" Arthur asked.

"It would cost too much," Stale said. "In his current state, Prince Cedric would probably gladly let us get at least two punches in."

Now it's Arthur making terrifying suggestions!

He put his arm around Stale's shoulders and turned him so they faced the pile of personal items in the corner of the room. There was no humor in their eyes, however. Stale sounded as eager to hit Cedric as Arthur did. Cedric might have been a genius, but I didn't see him surviving a combined attack from Arthur and Stale when they were in this state.

I shared a look with Tiara. The cat was out of the bag. I'd wanted to wait until the end, but I was going to ruin the surprise if I let anything else slip. Tiara nodded firmly in understanding. I rushed to the table where I'd left my basket—desperate to get away from Stale's intensity. The people behind me called out to me, but I ignored them and removed something from the wrapped bundle in the basket. Then I read the names on the attached cards and clutched them to

my chest as I returned to the others. Tiara stood next to me, and we both faced Stale.

Surprised, Stale pushed his glasses back up his nose. He slipped free of Arthur's arm around his shoulders.

"I-I wanted...to give you these at the very end..." I said.

It was embarrassing to do this so formally. My desire to give him his present and my desire to abandon the whole thing battled for dominance in my mind. I struggled to keep my lips from trembling, but I couldn't back down. I shoved the bundle toward him.

"You've been working so hard as a steward," I said. "These are from Tiara and me."

Stale blinked as he gingerly took the bundle in his arms, like he expected it to vanish into thin air any moment. "Can I open it?" he asked.

Tiara and I nodded, and he carefully unwrapped the bundle. We waited for his reaction, nervous that the contents hadn't survived the journey to the party.

When Stale unwrapped it at last, he found...a batch of cookies that looked like his own face.

I thought I'd finally solved the mystery. Even back then, I realized Pride was crying about something she didn't want to talk about. Her confession about Cedric—and Tiara's fluster—only confirmed that I was right.

"It's not like that! We weren't talking about your cookies, Big Brother!"

So they *had* made cookies for me after all. Knowing Pride, she'd probably planned to make sweets for us after she finished cooking Arthur's dishes. That much was obvious. Yet *something* had prevented me from ever trying those sweets, something that currently had me spiraling into a rage. I didn't want to ruin Arthur's promotion party, but...

"I-I wanted...to give you these at the very end..."

Pride's shy smile brought butterflies to my stomach. My pulse quickened at her feminine features and gestures. There could only possibly be one thing in that bundle she'd taken out of her basket.

"You've been working so hard as a steward. These are from Tiara and me."

Even so, I couldn't believe my eyes. She smiled gently and held the gift out to me. They'd apparently planned to give me these way back when Prince Cedric visited, and they had no idea I'd broadened my studies to include the duties of a prince consort and not just a steward. What reason did they have to celebrate me now?

I couldn't contain myself. With Pride's permission, I opened the present. Immediately, I had to fight to compose myself, but I knew Pride, Tiara, and Arthur probably saw right through me. A delicate, sugary smell wafted up to my nose, and my stomach clenched in anticipation. Within the wrapped bundle I found...adorable cookies in the shape of a smiling boy. How much time had it taken to make even a single one of these? When I took one out, I noticed an uncanny resemblance. *No, it's just my ego getting the better of me.* But the more I looked at the boy's face...

"That's you on those cookies, isn't it?" Arthur said.

Blood rushed to my face. He was pointing at me, apparently having reached the same conclusion I had.

I was too surprised to speak, but Arthur grinned and added, "They look exactly like you."

My face burned hotter. I returned the cookie to the bundle and took out another one. The face was slightly different, but there was no denying it was me. The cookie faces even wore glasses like mine.

"We baked a lot because we had so much time," Pride said. "I'm sorry if it's too much, but I hope you'll eat them while they're still fresh."

How can I eat these at all?! I thought, but I kept it to myself. Pride and Tiara

looked utterly pleased. I couldn't waste these things after they'd decorated them so cutely to look like me.

"There's plenty, so please try at least one or two," Tiara said while I floundered.

Her logic was sound, but I hesitated. Not too long ago, Tiara tried to have Pride feed me bread, and I hesitated to eat then too. I couldn't do that to them again; I had to comply. Thus, I bit into the cookie. It had a nice crunch, and the more I chewed, the more sweetness filled my mouth. When I swallowed, a pleasant taste lingered on my tongue.

"It's delicious," I said. "Thank you so much."

I never knew gifts outside of special occasions could bring so much joy.

A memory from nine years ago barreled into me, and suddenly Arthur was slapping me on the back as a swell of emotion clogged my throat. He smiled knowingly. When I met his eyes, his grin spread.

"It's a waste to eat them all," he said.

That snide remark meant he'd figured out exactly what was going through my mind, much to my annoyance. I grabbed another cookie and shoved it in Arthur's mouth. He let out a comical grunt and then fell silent, his blue eyes lighting up as he chewed.

"Good, aren't they?" I asked.

That shut him up. A smile seeped across my face before I could contain it.

Arthur swallowed and said, "Yeah, they're amazing."

Tiara and Pride exchanged pleased grins.

Arthur suddenly grabbed my head and shouted, "Hey! These are all supposed to be for you!"

"I'll be sure to savor the rest." I brushed his hand away, then turned back to Pride and Tiara. "Thank you both. I'll keep working hard." "You're welcome."

"Do your best!"

I really do have a happy life, don't I?

"You did a good job with the fine details." I stared into the bundle, not wanting to waste another cookie. A sweet aroma tickled my nose, and my own face stared back at me.

"Tiara was great at that," Pride said. "She's the reason they turned out so good!"

"It was Big Sister's idea to draw you with a smile! That's why they're so cute!"

Their eyes were sparkling. The other knights peeked over Arthur's shoulders, curious about the treats. I opened the bundle to show off the cookies and received a chorus of gasps in return. When I smiled at their well-earned wonder, Arthur pointed out that I looked just like the cookies. Instantly, I flushed again, and the knights started laughing.

"You're right!" Pride cried happily, which only left my face even hotter. "I love your smile, Stale!"

Heat rushed through my body like I was a pot about to boil over. Distantly, through ringing ears, I heard Tiara saying she agreed. Stars popped before my eyes. I pressed my lips together to try to control my expression, but it was a losing effort. It was all I could manage to keep the cookies in my hands relatively safe as the rest of my body locked up.

My glasses fogged, obscuring Pride's smile. Then someone snatched them away, and her face suddenly came into focus. Arthur was grinning mischievously at me. "You've got a nice face," he said.

I couldn't possibly win here. "I-I don't want them to break...so I'm going to take them home..."

It was no use. I couldn't answer Arthur, much less thank Pride and Tiara for the cookies. My vision had cleared, but I couldn't meet Pride's eyes, so I stared

at the bundle of cookies instead. The two girls sounded cheerful as they agreed with my suggestion.

I folded the bundle back up and teleported to my room. I could have sent the cookies there on their own, but I wanted to ensure they ended up safely on my desk. Most of all, I just wanted a few seconds alone.

"They hit me with a surprise attack!"

After setting the cookies down, I crumpled to the floor. Only I moved too quickly, slamming my forehead into my knees as I sank down. Still, the throb that followed was the least of my worries right now.

It had all happened so fast. I'd assumed I was just a guest at Arthur's party; the last thing I'd expected was such a thoughtful gift. Worst of all, Arthur and the other imperial knights saw me totally lose my cool.



I'm so embarrassed! I'm so happy! I'm so embarrassed! I'm so happy, so happy, I'm sooooo happy!

My smile grew and my cheeks flushed now that I knew no one was watching me. This wasn't good, since I had to go back before they suspected something was up. I slapped my cheeks and urged myself to get a grip. After a few deep breaths, I managed to get it together. I reached to push my glasses up only to remember they weren't there. *Damn you*, *Arthur*.

A glance at the clock told me it was almost time to head back. I took one more steadying breath before teleporting to Arthur's room. The world around me changed from my familiar bedroom to the lively party venue.

"Stale! What took you so long? I was getting worried," Pride said with a smile.

I returned the gesture. "I'm sorry, Pride. I accidentally knocked some papers off my desk."

"You must've been really flustered," Arthur said. "C'mon, you still have food left."

He set my glasses back on my face from behind. Then he shoved me toward the table where I'd left my plate. I adjusted my glasses and retrieved my plate; the food had grown cold, but it still looked delicious. I stuck my fork in for a hurried bite and enjoyed the tasty feast.

"By the way, Big Brother, isn't it getting close to that time?" Tiara said. She was looking at Arthur's clock, but I'd just checked the time myself, so I was well aware.

"That's right."

The other imperial knights set their plates down and headed for the door. Pride caught on and headed that way too. Val and the kids were still eating, but they realized what was happening when they noticed us all looking in the same direction.

"Time for what?" Arthur asked, looking around for an explanation.

Knock-knock. The sharp raps rang out at just the right time.

Pride and Tiara went to open the door, but Vice Captain Eric stepped in and said, "Allow me."

While Arthur sat there in his confusion, Vice Captain Eric opened the door with a flourish. I set a hand on Arthur's shoulder, watching his face. He deserved this for stealing my glasses. As the door swung open, Pride and Tiara greeted the night's final guests.

"Welcome, Commander! Vice Commander! We've been waiting for you," Pride said.

Arthur, along with the other knights, instantly went ramrod straight. *Serves him right*.

"Wha—?! Commander! And the vice commander too?! Wh-what are you doing here?!"

Arthur's eyes almost popped out of his skull when he saw tonight's special guests. I understood how he felt, of course. Who wouldn't be surprised to see their father—who was also their boss—waltz into their miniature party? If *our* father showed up, I would sprint straight to Stale and have him teleport us away. Stale himself was enjoying the dumbfounded look on Arthur's face. In a way, this was probably the biggest surprise of the day.

We'd discussed Arthur's promotion party with the commander as soon as we began planning it. Well, to be more precise, Captain Alan and Captain Callum had told us they'd only participate on the condition that we informed the commander. This wasn't the first time they'd agreed with my idea to hold a surprise party for Arthur, but for some reason, it came with a catch now.

"I'll be sure to get permission from the commander!" Captain Alan had declared.

"We'll be taking three members of royalty out of the palace, so us four knights

alone won't be enough protection," Captain Callum had added.

While the royal order training grounds technically lay within palace territory, and we'd have Val there for extra protection, the captains hadn't been convinced of our safety. They ended up negotiating with Commander Roderick on my behalf. He agreed to the party under three conditions: First, it would take place in the dormitory, where there were plenty of knights around. Second, the commander and vice commander would join us when they were finished with work. Third, we could not drink alcohol until they arrived. This all sounded really strict, but it was worth it if they would help make this a truly splendid party—or so I hoped.

"Forgive us for arriving late, Princess Pride," the commander told me. "We were making our scheduled report to Her Majesty and encountered a bit of a delay."

"We're sorry to intrude on the special celebration," the vice commander said.

Vice Captain Eric closed the door, and the two eldest knights bowed. I told them it was no trouble and invited them to have some food. The vice commander held up bottles in both hands.

"It's finally time for a drink," he said. "Although we'll only be having one glass. We have to toast to Arthur, after all."

Captain Alan whooped and took a massive bottle from Vice Commander Clark. "We've been waiting for this!"

I snuck a look at Val when the topic of alcohol came up, only to find he'd built a wall out of the bag of sand he carried, completely separating himself from the rest of us. Clearly he didn't want to meet the eyes of the commander, whom he'd tried to kill in the past.

These days, Val captured thieves and kidnappers during his deliveries. He brought them back to the royal order, but he kept his hood up even off the clock. He didn't want anyone other than the knights he interacted with directly to see his face. Many of the knights knew of his past offenses, but Val hated

knights, so that relationship wasn't improving anytime soon.

For his part, the commander was chatting with Arthur. He gave off an air of imposing dignity with his arms crossed over his chest, while Arthur frowned like a child who'd been caught doing something bad.

"Why...are you here, Commander?" Arthur asked.

"To protect Princess Pride. The party may have been a secret, but I decided four knights alone weren't enough to safeguard three members of the royal family."

"Right..." Arthur's eyes darted around, and he shifted awkwardly.

Stale jabbed him with an elbow. "Don't worry, we got all the permission we needed."

Arthur glanced nervously at his father. "I'm sure you're tired from work. But..." He trailed off, bowing to the commander.

Stale's brow furrowed. The commander's face remained stony.

"Thank you for coming...Father." The last word came out as a whisper. No longer crying "Dad!" as he had in his younger years, Arthur had certainly grown.

Commander Roderick's expression softened a little. He placed his hand on Arthur's shoulder and said, "In that case, come with me after this."

"What for?"

"We're going to go tell Clarissa."

At that explanation, Arthur flushed. He pressed a hand to his forehead and groaned, "Give me a break..." His eyes flicked around the room, but most of the others' attentions were elsewhere. The imperial knights and vice commander were preparing a toast, and Val and the children were behind their wall. Regardless, Arthur's blush deepened when he saw that Stale, Tiara, and I were watching.

"Who is Clarissa?" Tiara asked, cocking her head.

With Arthur slouched over, Commander Roderick answered, "That's my wife." The commander's wife—Arthur's mother.

"Can't we go on my next day off?" Arthur murmured. Talking about his mother publicly must have been embarrassing at his age. "I was late telling her about the last promotion too," he added.

"It'll be quick," Commander Roderick said curtly.

Arthur gave in. "Couldn't we at least have talked about this when we were alone?" he grumbled.

Across the room, Vice Commander Clark smiled and called out, "What's the problem, Arthur? I'm sure Clarissa will be delighted." Either he'd heard the conversation or he'd known this would come up.

Meanwhile, the imperial knights picked up on the name and chimed in.

"Clarissa?"

"Is that your girlfriend, Arthur?!"

"No, she's probably his—"

Arthur whipped around to address the vice commander. "Damn it, Clark! Don't butt into our conversations!"

He scowled at Vice Commander Clark for a beat before going stiff as he realized the other knights had witnessed something they shouldn't see.

"My bad, my bad," the vice commander said with a chuckle.

But the others were staring, their mouths hanging open. Arthur had referred to the vice commander by his first name in front of everyone, and his face drained of color.

"I haven't heard him call the vice commander that in a long time," Captain Alan remarked.

"It's been about six years, hasn't it?" Captain Callum said.

"Arthur, be careful, even with people you're close to," Vice Captain Eric said. "You don't want others hearing you talk like that."

The knights were all grimacing. Stale, Tiara, and I had witnessed Arthur speak to the vice commander many times, but he usually didn't act like *that*.

Arthur's face flashed from pale white to warm pink. He hung his head and pressed a hand to his temple. "I'm sorry..." His murmur was probably directed at the rest of us more than the vice commander, who seemed to be suppressing a smile.

"Come on, it's a party. Let's get on with the toast," Vice Commander Clark said.

Without any further fuss, the vice commander brought us glasses. Captain Callum, Captain Alan, and Vice Captain Eric helped pass them to the three of us. Sefekh and Khemet each grabbed a bottle of alcohol from the table and carried them back to Val. I wanted to tell him to get his own bottles, but I knew how desperate he was to avoid the commander.

Lastly, the vice commander handed a glass to Arthur, who accepted it with a glare. Now that everyone was ready, we raised our glasses. Then they signaled for me to give the toast.

"To Arthur's promotion to captain. Cheers!" I said.

The crowd toasted Arthur with a chorus of "Cheers!"

Clink!

"Thanks, everybody," Arthur said shyly amid the chime of glasses colliding.

I tipped my glass back along with everyone else, taking a sip. This is delicious.

Stale teleported in more ginger pork and miso soup, which we'd specifically prepared for the commander and vice commander. Tiara urged them to take their plates. "Big Sister and I cooked this together! There's more if you want seconds!" At the sight of her sunny smile, the two knights couldn't help but accept. Having already finished their drinks, they eyed up the food from my

world.

"I've never seen this dish before," the commander said. "The same went for the chicken you prepared for the knights last time."

"Did you create this recipe yourself, Princess Pride?" the vice commander asked. "She's brought you another delightful treat, hasn't she, Arthur?"

Commander Roderick looked bewildered, whereas Vice Commander Clark prepared to enjoy himself. Arthur and the other knights also used the opportunity to go back for more food.

"This was Arthur's favorite out of all the dishes I cooked last time," I told them.

They snuck a glance at Arthur and Captain Alan, who were focused on packing heaping piles of pork onto their plates. When they saw how enthusiastic Arthur was about the food, the two most senior officers dug into their first bites of ginger pork. Their eyes went wide as they chewed. By the time they swallowed, they'd fixed their eyes on me.

"I've never tasted anything like this before. It's delicious. I understand why the other knights can't seem to stop eating it."

"You're certainly an excellent cook, Princess Pride. Your sweets were delicious too."

I smiled at their praise. I knew they were just being polite, but it still made me happy. I reminded them to have some of the miso soup Stale had left for them on the table, and they obediently sampled it.

"I bet you'll like this one even more," Vice Commander Clark told his cohort. "Oh, that's right! Arthur, did you ever manage to catch up to Harrison?"

"What the hell?!" Arthur shouted—then went stiff again at his own casual attitude.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Why don't you just tell him?" Commander Roderick said.

Arthur stared aghast at Vice Commander Clark as realization dawned on him. "Don't tell me the reason Harrison spent all day running from me was..."

"That's right," the vice commander said. "I asked him to do that. Princess Pride needed someone to keep you busy today so she could prepare for tonight."

I smiled awkwardly. It was true—I'd spent most of the day cooking for tonight's surprise party, and it was important not to let Arthur tell us about his promotion before we could surprise him. When I asked my other imperial knights how we could keep Arthur out of the castle for the day, they went to the commander and vice commander for help, since they knew about the surprise party already. They could issue orders that could help keep Arthur busy for the day. Thanks to them, we could finish cooking without Arthur realizing what we were up to.

"So that's why Harrison kept running away?!" Arthur shouted.

After all this, it was actually Capt—Vice Captain Harrison who kept Arthur occupied.

Arthur whirled on the other knights, his eyes wide as saucers. "You knew about this?!"

Captain Alan burst out laughing. "Gosh, Harrison really knows what he's doing! He actually kept running away and didn't stop?"

"I'm impressed with Arthur too," Vice Captain Eric said, chuckling right along with him. "He spent the whole day chasing after Harrison."

"Harrison wouldn't have bothered if we were the ones telling him to run from Arthur. It had to come from the top."

"But it's hardly the first time he's run away from me!" Arthur cried.

This time, Captain Callum was the one who cracked up. Arthur still hadn't figured out how much Vice Captain Harrison loved him, by the sound of things. Perhaps their duel had worsened their relationship.

"How was the duel with Vice Captain Harrison, by the way?" Stale asked, cradling a bowl of miso soup.

Arthur's face clouded over, and his shoulders slumped. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I really thought he was gonna kill me. That man is terrifying."

So it really was a fight to the death. Arthur had gone pale just remembering that day.

"But you won, right?" Stale asked, confirming what the other imperial knights had told him.

"Yeah, but juuust barely," Arthur said, and his fellow knights smiled begrudgingly. "Fighting the soldiers from Copelandii was way easier. I only won because it became a war of attrition in the end."

Considering all he'd achieved on the front lines, Arthur's words carried a lot of weight. And that wasn't even accounting for how Vice Captain Harrison took out an entire part of the army on his own.

Captain Alan swallowed a bite of ginger pork. "Yeah, it was really amazing. There's barely anyone in the order who can keep up with Harrison at his maximum speed, and by the time I got there to watch, they were already neck and neck." He sounded amused.

"Arthur has defeated just about all the other knights in swordplay," Vice Captain Eric said. "Although, that's probably why Vice Captain Harrison tried shooting him at first."

Captain Callum added, "A few knights from the Seventh Squadron had to come in at the end, since we thought one of you two might actually die."

Captain Alan finished with, "I thought one of you was dead by the end."

The others nodded in agreement, and I shivered. Even without being there, the intensity of this battle was clear.

"I'm...glad you're both alive."

It was the best response I could manage. Arthur thanked me, but I was trying

not to cringe as I imagined how bad his injuries must have been. Even with treatment from special powers, he'd needed three days to recover.

"He's the one man whose bad side I never want to get on," Arthur said, half-sighing.

I resisted the urge to tell him that Vice Captain Harrison was no enemy of his
—in fact, he was Arthur's ultimate ally.

"Hey, how long are you going to stay in there?" I asked.

Once I'd wrapped up my conversation with my knights, I stood in front of Val's sand enclosure in a corner of the room. I wondered if he didn't have enough sand, since the enclosure didn't quite cover all three of them. When I peeked around the back, I saw Val enjoying the alcohol Sefekh and Khemet had retrieved for him—though it didn't seem like his mood had improved.

The guests had finished every last bite of food Tiara and I had made, thanks to their second helpings. The knights had to stick to one drink each and now chatted pleasantly, which didn't improve Val's demeanor at all. This was nothing like the story of Amano-Iwato I knew from my past life, where the sun goddess Amaterasu was enticed enough by the other gods' rowdiness to peek out of a cave she'd sequestered herself in. As the person who'd invited Val, his desire to shut himself away left me cringing with guilt. His whole posture screamed that he hated being here.

Khemet raised his head and said, "Hi, Mistress."

"The food was amazing!" Sefekh told me.

"I'd love to eat more!"

I smiled at them, then turned my focus back to Val. "I'm sorry that you hate everyone else here," I said. "I just wanted to thank you properly."

"Don't need it," Val snapped. "I told you, just order me to do whatever the hell you want." With that blunt rejection, he brought the bottle to his lips again.

"If you wanna give me something, then let me beat that stupid prince half to death."

Yeah, that wasn't happening. It would cause an international crisis.

I wasn't sure if he was just upset about missing out on the cookies or angry that Cedric took the ones meant for Khemet and Sefekh. Maybe he wanted more than food in compensation. I'd heard about the mind-boggling amounts of alcohol he drank during his visits to Anemone.

"Did you not like the food?" I asked him.

"Why the hell would I eat so much of it if I didn't like it?"

Annoyed, he showed me his empty plate. I remembered him going back for seconds, and he couldn't lie to me thanks to our fealty contract. Plus, I seriously doubted he was trying to be polite or avoid hurting my feelings.

"It was delicious!" Khemet and Sefekh said in unison.

At least none of them hated the food. That much was a relief.

"There's too many people here who make me wanna puke," Val grumbled while wiping alcohol off his lips. "It's not the food or the booze. This whole room's stuffed with knights."

There was no one Val hated more than royalty and knights, and that was currently everyone in the room. Perhaps I should have had Stale bring Leon so that Val would have someone to talk to. But this was a party to celebrate Arthur's promotion, so it would be a little strange to invite Anemone's royalty. Anemone valued rules and decorum when it came to *their* royal family, so I doubted Leon would have accepted my invitation either way.

"Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, Captain Callum, Captain Alan, and the commander are all grateful for your help," I said.

"Talk about annoying. Makes me sick," Val grumbled. He sounded peeved, but that wasn't unusual for Val.

Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and Commander Roderick had all told me that Val's

efforts on the front lines had helped us end the war so quickly. I'd let Val know he could earn a reward if I reported his actions to Mother, but he'd bluntly refused, asking me to cover it up. It seemed he wanted to erase saving knights from his history.

Regardless, I was so grateful that he'd saved Captain Callum. I was sure the two captains were just as thankful, but I hadn't actually seen them approach Val about it. The other knights, like Commander Roderick and Arthur, never brought up Val's heroics outside of reports. Therefore, even if someone recognized Val, they never tried to speak to him. Captain Callum in particular struck me as an earnest person who'd want to thank Val for saving him, yet I never got the impression he'd so much as considered it.

I shouldn't have been surprised by that. Val was the one remaining perpetrator of the ambush six years ago. Just as Val didn't seek any thanks from Captain Callum, the captain didn't show any interest in thanking him. The best compromise was for neither party to acknowledge the other. But still...

"I'm grateful for you too," I said. "You were a tremendous help."

If the knights wouldn't say it, then I would. Val's absence would have led to tragedy. There were probably civilians we would have failed to rescue as well.

Val cocked a brow, then took another swig without saying a word. He gulped it down, and I spotted several empty bottles hiding behind him. Stale, Tiara, and I didn't drink much, and the knights were limited to a single drink; someone might as well enjoy the alcohol.

Now that I thought about it, why *had* the commander and vice commander brought so many bottles in the first place? They could have brought half of this amount and still had plenty to drink. Curious, I took a look at the label on the unopened bottle by Val's feet. This brand was pretty expensive and very high-quality. I saw plenty of fancy wine in the castle, but this was something even I rarely encountered.

The imperial knights had told me they'd provide the alcohol, and Commander

Roderick had shown up with it—the catch being that the others couldn't drink until they both joined us. I'd assumed they splurged on alcohol because they wanted to celebrate Arthur's promotion, but... No, I couldn't think too hard about it. I teetered on the edge of a breakthrough as my thoughts veered in a dangerous direction. Val seemed pleased to have so much to drink, so I wouldn't kill his mood by voicing my suspicions.

"Thank you. I'm sorry that I don't have more to give you," I said.

I doubted my food alone was enough to express my gratitude. Besides, dragging him here against his will may have canceled out any good I did for him. I only hoped the next part of the party would please him, if only a little.

Val put his bottle down and scratched his head. "I'm the one paying you back. You don't owe me anything."

He was still being so grumpy. His gaze slid toward Khemet and Sefekh.

I wonder what that means? Is he irritated that I tried to thank him in the first place?

I cocked my head in confusion. Val scrunched up his face like he had a headache, then killed the half-full bottle sitting next to him. After polishing it off, he took a deep breath and the mocking smirk returned to his face.

"If you really wanna thank me, then why not come here and have a drink with me, Mistress?"

He tapped the floor next to him with the empty bottle, a challenge in his eyes. Sefekh and Khemet had glasses to drink from, but a princess couldn't drink straight from the bottle like Val. I wondered if he wanted me to pour him a cup as a gesture of gratitude.

I stepped around the sand wall and joined him, as requested. A flicker of surprise crossed Val's face; it made him resemble Khemet a little. With my dress, I couldn't sit on the ground, so I stood beside him and leaned against the wall. The sand barrier cut us off from the rest of the room and provided our

own sort of private booth.

"Shall I pour you a drink?" I asked, picking up a bottle...but I couldn't pop the cork. I tugged with all my might until Val snickered and reached for the bottle himself. Reluctantly, I handed it over and watched him pop the bottle open with his fingers. I deflated in defeat.

I tried to take the bottle back, but Val stood and kept hold of it. His smirk grew as he pressed his free hand to the wall at my back and leaned in close. I tried to keep a cool head, but one word kept flashing in my mind: *kabedon!*

"If you wanna make me happy so bad, then why don't you spend a little quality time with me?" Val said. "How about...all the way until morning?"

He leaned in closer, his gaze boring into mine. Sweet alcohol wafted off his breath.

"What do you say?" he continued, his voice deepening. "In fact, why don't you invite me to your room tonight so we can—"

"What are you doing over there?!"

"Val! You bastard!"

Stale and Arthur barged in on us with a shout. They'd only had a single drink, but their faces glowed red. I spun to address them and heard Val click his tongue behind me. When I shot him a look, he was smirking at Stale and Arthur like before.

"I'm not doin' anything," he said. "Didn't you see? The contract stopped me."

"You stopped because we caught you, didn't you?!" Stale demanded. "You dragged Elder Sister over where we couldn't see her!"

"My bedroom isn't your playground!" Arthur said.

The thing was, I was the one who entered the sand enclosure of my own free will. I couldn't blame this on Val, yet Val himself seemed much happier for some reason. Maybe he enjoyed riling them up so much.

Arthur jumped between Val and me, while Stale grabbed me and teleported me away. I understood why they were anxious. From the side, it probably looked like some drunkard on the street was harassing me. Except that I knew Val wasn't drunk at all, and he was just messing around like usual. I couldn't even be mad at him. He knew our fealty contract banned all sexual activity without consent on both sides. To be honest, I was pretty used to these jokes after two years of hearing them.

"Don't be so stingy," Val said. "Mistress and I have already spent a night together, y'know."

N-no!

That bombshell tore me out of my thoughts. Stale and Arthur looked equally stunned.

Sefekh and Khemet are nodding along, which probably makes it seem even more credible! Oh no!

"Please don't say it that way! They'll misunderstand!" I cried.

Val smiled wider. "But it's true, isn't it?"

I know you're not technically lying, but still! The three of you only slept in a corner of my room after the war! Don't make it sound like we did something else! Besides, if you put it like that...

"I've spent the night with Captain Alan and Captain Callum too!" I said, jabbing my finger at the captains like a little kid trying to win a silly argument.

The captains started coughing hard, their faces bright red as they covered their mouths. Captain Alan wiped at his lips, so he must have spit out some water. They'd *actually* started choking, from the looks of it. Even Vice Captain Eric had rosy cheeks. Commander Roderick was pressing his fist to his mouth and coughing, but I wasn't sure if he'd choked too. Vice Commander Clark was the only one smiling like he relished their discomfort.

I didn't realize they all heard me...

The vice commander patted Commander Roderick on the back to help him stop coughing. The moment he could breathe again, the commander furrowed his brow and glared at the two captains.

"It's not true!" they insisted.

No, I'm certain they were there! They were guarding me that night!

"You slept like a baby, didn't ya, Mistress?" Val said.

"Sefekh and Khemet were there too!"

"I watched you sleep all night, y'know."

Why does he get talkative at the absolute worst times?! Since he wasn't technically lying, I couldn't refute his claims. Val soaked up my anger as I fumed helplessly. Arthur and Stale were watching us without a word, which only seemed to amuse Val more.

I puffed out my cheeks and raised my voice. "Like I said, when you put it like that, then the captains and I have also—"

"Please don't say any more, Your Highness! Y-you're only confusing the others!" Captain Alan cut in, tense and desperate.

He'd gone even redder than before, but I had no idea why. Why would he interrupt me and not Val? *Wait...*

"N-n-n-no, it's not like that! That's...that's not what I meant! Captain Alan and Captain Callum spent the night in my room after the war because they were guarding me! Val, Sefekh, and Khemet happened to be in the room too!" I rushed to clarify, mostly directing my plea to Commander Roderick.

The captains had just finished their punishment, and here I was putting them in another precarious situation. My face was also heating up because of the embarrassing things I'd said.

Commander Roderick let out a long, exhausted sigh. Vice Commander Clark chuckled and set his hand on the commander's shoulder. Captain Alan and Captain Callum slumped with relief. Vice Captain Eric was still blushing, but he

rushed over with water for the others.

Arthur and Stale were bright red as well, breathing so hard that I could see their chests puffing. I wasn't sure if it was shock, but they didn't look too steady on their feet.

Tiara helpfully offered, "I-I was in the room with Big Sister all night too!"

Val howled with laughter throughout this harrowing ordeal. Clearly he was savoring our reactions to his nasty joke. He chugged his freshly opened wine while Sefekh and Khemet watched us with utter confusion.

"Big Sister, it's getting late. We need to head home," Stale said.

He pushed up his glasses and derailed the conversation before it could go any further. I glanced at the clock and found it was indeed getting pretty late.

Arthur and Commander Roderick had to head home, so it seemed like a good idea to wrap things up.

"Right," I responded.

Vice Captain Eric sprang into action, cleaning up the party.

Stale sighed as he approached Val and the children. "I'll start with you. I can put you back where I found you, right?"

Val acquiesced, breaking down his sand wall. The sand slithered back into its bag like a magical snake familiar. He swiped a couple more bottles of alcohol on his way out. "You don't mind, do ya?" he asked me.

I checked quickly with the commander, since he'd brought the drinks, and he gave me a quick nod. With our permission, Val snatched up even more bottles, his mood lifting immediately. The man really did like to drink. He rolled them up securely in a carpet of sand, giving me the impression he intended to keep on drinking after he left the party.

Just then, I remembered something extremely important. "Oh! W-wait, Stale!" I rushed to stop him before he could teleport Val away.

Stale turned at my shout. Val raised an eyebrow, annoyance flashing across

his face. I ignored him and hurried over to my basket; Tiara was closer, so she handed it to me. I thanked her and turned my back to everyone but Stale and Val.

"Tiara and I prepared one last gift for you," I said, then grimaced. "Actually, they're just cookies, so it's nothing much."

The cookies didn't even have a fancy design like the ones with Stale's face. They were just simple flower-shaped cookies. At least we'd wrapped them up, so they looked nice.

Captain Callum and Vice Captain Eric already knew we'd been baking cookies, so they smiled knowingly at our reveal. Everyone else went wide-eyed with shock. The cookies were nothing special, though. I let my basket hang on my arm as I approached Val and the children, since they were set to leave first. Each bundle of cookies bore a card with a name on it. I distributed them one by one to Val, Sefekh, and Khemet.

The two children giddily offered their thanks. Val, on the other hand, clammed up completely. I'd really hoped for more of a reaction. I thought he might be happy, since I'd heard him imply he wanted cookies earlier. I supposed he was still angry that something I'd made for him was taken away.

Though he didn't respond, his sand rug started to crumble, dropping the wine bottles onto the floor with loud *clanks*. They didn't break, thankfully, but Sefekh and Khemet rushed to retrieve them.

"Hey! What if you got broken glass all over the floor?!" Sefekh shouted, but Val still didn't reply. He kept his eyes on the cookie bundle and silently rebuilt the part of the sand rug that had collapsed.

Val blinked twice, then removed the card from the packaging and...

"Please don't open that!"

I didn't mean to yell, but my order stopped Val in his tracks. Sefekh and Khemet grabbed the last bottle and looked at their own cards, eyes going wide.

That was close!

"Please...don't open the cards right away, everyone," I went on. "Read them when I'm not around. I'm too embarrassed by them."

I sighed with relief. I'd managed to stop *them*, but not the blush crawling into my cheeks. It wasn't like I'd written anything too heavy—just the kinds of things I didn't want them reading in front of me. If one of them repeated my words out loud, my face would erupt in flames.

Val scowled, but he released the card as ordered. "Always such a pain," he griped, half-sighing. He cradled the cookies in his arms, but exhaustion clouded his face. I thought he liked sweets, but maybe that didn't include cookies.

"You can give them to Sefekh and Khemet if you don't want to eat them," I said apologetically.

He waved me away like I was only irritating him more. "I won't," he growled, then snapped out of his bad mood and stomped on his sand carpet. Khemet and Sefekh grabbed hold of him while Stale approached the group, adjusting his glasses.

"All right, Elder Sister," Stale said. "May I send them back now?"

I gave my approval this time and bid the trio farewell. Sefekh and Khemet waved at me, but Val just went on glaring. Then they were gone, their bottles of alcohol vanishing along with them.

Once Stale returned, he clapped his hands. "By the way, Elder Sister, was that the right card that I got with my cookies?"

"Oh! Yes, that card only has your name on it, Stale," I said with a smile.

I fished around in my basket for the others' cookies and cards. Stale must have examined his gift thoroughly the moment I handed it to him and noticed his card wasn't folded like the others.

I retrieved two more bundles for the commander and vice commander. For some reason, Tiara was stifling a giggle. When I glanced in her direction, I found

Arthur setting a hand on Stale's shoulder while Stale stood stiff as a board.

"Here you are, Commander Roderick, Vice Commander Clark," I said. "They're not much, but I hope you enjoy them."

The men accepted their gifts. Vice Commander Clark immediately asked if he could try a cookie now, and I said yes. He dug into his bundle for a flower-shaped cookie and took a bite. "As expected, they're wonderful," he said. "How sweet and delicious. I'll be sure to savor the rest."

"That's wonderful to hear," I replied.

Tiara and I smiled shyly, and the two of them thanked us.

"Here. These are for my imperial knights," I said, moving on to Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric. Captain Alan was particularly excited, since he hadn't known about the surprise. The other two knew about the cookies but not the cards, which was probably why they went for the cards first.

"Big Sister wanted to make cookies for her imperial knights last time too!" Tiara said. She beamed proudly, and all three knights turned their eyes on me.

I felt embarrassed, so I smiled bashfully and pushed myself to elaborate. "Since you told me you'd eat what I made for you...I'm glad I finally had the opportunity to give you these."

Maybe they were only being polite, but I was thrilled to repay their kindness. For whatever reason, my words turned them red again. I hoped they didn't feel like the crown princess was pressuring them to say nice things.

Concerned that my gifts might put them in an awkward position, I quickly added, "Oh, but I only made these for them because I wanted the three of you to try them!" That only made them blush harder.

It was no use. No matter how much I tried to convince them, it seemed they felt I only made for them out of obligation after they'd said such kind things to me. I fell silent, giving up on reassuring them.

"I-It's an honor," Captain Callum said. "I never imagined you'd be so kind as to

include us!"

"Th-th-thank you very much!" Captain Alan said. "I look forward to eating them!"

"Yes! I...I can't thank you enough!" Vice Captain Eric said.

Their faces were still flushed, thanks to their nerves. Tears shimmered in Vice Captain Eric's eyes. As pleased as I was that they liked their gifts, I also now realized that receiving gifts from princesses might cause more tension than celebration. What a depressing thought.

Tiara's smile grew. "I'm so glad you like them!"

"Yes, so am I," I agreed.

Now I had one more gift to give; I made my way over to Arthur.

"Huh?! You made some for me too?!" Standing beside Stale, Arthur blinked like he couldn't believe his eyes. "But you already treated me to a feast!"

That only made me more relieved that I'd prepared cookies for him as well.

Tiara retrieved the final bundle from my basket and handed it to him. "Here!" she urged him with a grin.

Arthur thanked her, looking genuinely giddy. He reached out to pat her on the head, then apparently thought better of it in the presence of the commander and the other knights, who were still technically working as our guards right now. Tiara noticed him pull back and giggled.

"Oh," Arthur said as he stared at his bundle. "Mine...only has my name too."

Stale, who was still rigid with tension, blurted, "It what?!" He plucked out Arthur's card to examine it. I wondered if Stale felt left out and thought he was the only one who didn't get a message in his card.

Tiara smiled mischievously at the confused pair. She looked at me and giggled again. Stale and Arthur turned their attention to us when they noticed her reaction.

"Elder Sister," Stale said hesitantly, "if you don't mind...could you explain why only Arthur and I received cards without messages? Of course, the mere fact that you gave us presents is more than enough!"

He just barely got the words out. Arthur didn't offer any help, simply nodding along. Tiara and I laughed at their adorable reactions.

"Go ahead, Big Sister," Tiara whispered to me.

I reached into the basket and retrieved the last two items hidden within it.

"That's because you two get these," I said.

My joyous smile stiffened as I nervously handed an envelope to each of them. My lips twitched.

These were letters I wrote to Arthur and Stale.

Had I died and gone to heaven? My overheating brain couldn't make sense of what was happening right in front of me. My pulse raced, my heart beating so hard that its frantic drumming nearly drowned out Pride's voice. I couldn't possibly control my expression in that moment.

When Pride said my card bore nothing but my name, it floored me. I genuinely didn't mind getting just cookies from her, but when the rest of the party guests got cards personally addressed to them, I didn't understand why I was the only one excluded. Perhaps she wouldn't write something so personal for her own brother. I mean, she *did* say nice things when she gave me the cookies. I was trying to convince myself that those words and that smile alone were all I needed. But then...

"Oh. Mine...just has my name too."

Arthur somehow received the same treatment, even though Pride and Tiara had done all that cooking to celebrate Arthur's promotion. I wasn't sure if they'd excluded him because the food was his main gift, or if Pride had some other plan. Then she smiled at both of us and presented us with something.

"That's because you two get these."

She offered us sealed envelopes that said "To Arthur" and "To Stale." Arthur and I both locked up when we glimpsed those thick envelopes in her hands. As I stood there staring, wondering what could be inside, Pride smiled shyly.

"I actually wrote these before the war, but I added to them after that, and they turned out really long," she said. "I'm sorry if they're hard to read."

"No, they're perfect!" Arthur and I said automatically.

Those thick envelopes contained letters. Pride had taken all that time to share her feelings with us. If she'd started before the war, she'd probably planned to give them to us when we celebrated Arthur's promotion to vice captain. The longer I thought about it, the hotter my face got.

My vision blurred as I stared at the letters in her hand—and I realized Pride's fingers were trembling. I carefully raised my eyes to her face...to see that she was red as a tomato. She held fast to her smile, but her lips twitched. I almost stopped breathing. As my mind went blank, Pride watched me nervously, lowering the letters in her hands.

"Will you...accept them?" she said.

With a jerk, Arthur and I snatched the letters at the exact same time. I'd made a mistake. I'd frozen up for too long. My mind was still churning, trying to make sense of this, and in my shock I'd never actually accepted the letter.

I thanked her and clutched it in my hands. The weight of the envelope brought home the reality of this moment. Had she ever written letters like this, ones that weren't for political purposes or to maintain some social connection? *Personal* letters? The thought had me desperate to tear open the envelope and start reading, but I had to hold strong until I returned to the safety of my room.

"I'm relieved," Pride said with a smile.

My heart tried to jump out of my chest. I clutched at my shirt, worried I could drop dead of a heart attack any moment.

"I'm not really used to writing these kinds of letters," she said. "I'll have to practice more."

When she covered her mouth with her hand out of embarrassment, I stared at her even longer than I'd stared at the letter.

"I'm not really used to writing these kinds of letters. I'll have to practice more."

I really thought I was gonna die. I couldn't pry my eyes away from Princess Pride when she blushed and covered her mouth. I tucked the card into my breast pocket for safekeeping, all the while wary that if I let my guard down at all, that smile of hers would do me in.

At first, I didn't get why Stale's card was blank. I wouldn't have been surprised if my card were the only empty one, since she cooked my favorite foods and congratulated me on my promotion already. Again, it made me so happy I could die.

Well...okay, maybe I was a little jealous.

My card held no message, but I got a letter instead. It was unfair. Spending more time around Princess Pride as her imperial knight taught me to treasure a letter from her above all else. Her Highness received a mountain of letters every single day. Some were simple exchanges, people trying to connect with her, invitations to events. Others were from men of various social standings in foreign countries. She read every last one of those too, but I'd never seen her answer a love letter.

She could respond to an invitation or social call on a single sheet, yet whatever she'd written to Stale and me required this thick bundle. How could a guy like me, who wasn't Freesian nobility or even foreign royalty, deserve a letter like this?

My head boiled the more I thought about it. I was overheating, forgetting to

breathe, yet deliriously happy at the same time. My desire to tear into that envelope and start reading right away battled with the feeling that I didn't deserve it. It left me struggling to open the envelope at all, even with Princess Pride standing before me. When would be the right time to do this?

"I thought about rewriting them," Princess Pride said. "I just couldn't seem to stop the more I thought about you two."

She was blushing for *us*. It was like a blow to the head, and her smile left me dizzy. I rocked where I stood, like there was an earthquake beneath my feet. The thought that she'd written this while thinking of nothing but me sent my heart racing around my chest. If I wasn't careful, this was going to leave me with a big head. I just couldn't help being overjoyed that Stale and I were the ones to receive this adorable expression of care from Princess Pride. I hid my grin behind my arm, but my eyes remained glued to the princess.

"What exactly did you write about us?!" Stale said, his voice hitching.

He swallowed hard after he spoke but stood firm, determined to get an answer. I listened eagerly, amazed that he would ask that so bluntly. Slowly, I lowered my arm and awaited Princess Pride's response. She stiffened for a second, eyes darting away from us. Her mouth opened and closed a few times as her blush deepened. Finally, she whispered something I barely caught.

"I'm...too embarrassed to say it out loud..."

What?! Really?! Princess Pride can't say it?! My shock stole the words out of my mouth. My blood ran hot. Stale stood just as still as me.

Princess Pride had said so many things to me throughout our time together, so I couldn't picture what would leave her so embarrassed. Although, in fairness, my brain was barely functioning anymore.

"Th-there's nothing weird in them!" she added. "I am embarrassed for others to hear it, though! Just please don't read or discuss them in front of me!"

For my part, I would never show my letter to anyone. I would never read it in

front of her for that matter, since I'd definitely get way more embarrassed than her.

When we didn't respond or move at all, Princess Pride shifted nervously. I needed to say something, but my mind had gone blank. Just as I wondered if I was going to suffocate from forgetting to breathe, Tiara stepped between us.

"I'm sure Big Sister wrote you such lovely things! Aren't you looking forward to reading them, Arthur? And you too, Big Brother?"

Startled into motion, Stale and I nodded emphatically. I finally found my voice and managed to thank Princess Pride, and a smile flickered across her lips.

"But, you know..." The elder princess trailed off and scratched her cheek shyly. "The food and the cookies are just as special."

The dazzling grin on her face was like a punch to the gut. Just how many times would she steal my breath away before this day was through?

"Isn't that right?" she said, turning that lovely smile on Tiara. Princess Pride was so beautiful and charming when she was happy. "Tiara helped make everything. We worked hard to cook for the two of you, since we had to make up for last time."

Last time. The joy Princess Pride's smile brought me whooshed out when I remembered how Prince Cedric had ruined her previous cooking attempt. Her Highness didn't seem upset, but I could sense Stale's anger building up beside me. Actually, he seemed way more intense than usual.

"Last time..." he muttered.

Only I heard him, but his rage at Princess Pride's cooking being wasted was clear in those quiet words.

Wait. She said she had to cook for the two of us again. Does that mean she cooked for Stale too back then? Oh crap...

As the pieces clicked into place, similar understanding dawned on Tiara's face. She met Stale's eyes and nodded—and then Stale's aura erupted with fury.

"Stale, what—?!" Princess Pride gasped, apparently realizing what she'd revealed.

Stale growled low in his throat. "Does that mean it wasn't just Arthur's food but my cookies too?!"

His eyes burned black as smoldering coals. Prince Cedric had eaten Stale's cookies back then. I'd already figured that out, but I understood why he snapped as soon as the truth hit him. Part of me feared he'd teleport straight to Prince Cedric to beat him up.

"But that's why I made so many for you this time!" Princess Pride said.

That didn't subdue Stale at all. In an attempt to avoid a murder, I slapped him on the back and said, "Calm down!"

The force of my slap sent him stumbling forward with a cough, but it worked. Despite the rage in his eyes, his aura wasn't quite as intense. He glared at me and crossed his arms, and I knew this grudge wasn't over.

I tried not to focus on him, and I caught Dad and the others gaping at us. I wasn't sure if it was from the cookies or Stale's scary reaction. If he weren't a prince, the knights would have drawn their swords for safety. Dad and Clark definitely had no idea what we were talking about.

"So that's why you were mad enough to cry, Your Highness," I said.

I draped my arm around Stale's shoulders to calm him down. At least I could speak to Princess Pride normally again. Tiara nodded at my words. She must've been carrying a grudge too.

"That's right." Princess Pride's smile turned a bit fearful as she addressed us. "I'm sorry to do something so childish." Before I could tell her it wasn't childish at all, she went on, "But it's all right now. Thank you for getting mad for my sake."

Stale and I raised our eyebrows in surprise. Did that mean she'd forgiven Prince Cedric?

Princess Pride stepped behind Tiara and set her hands on her sister's shoulders. "Thanks to Tiara, I was able to give special gifts to the people special to me in such a lovely way."

Special... That word threatened to raise my body heat again, when I was just beginning to cool down. I could tell Stale was in no better state.

I couldn't take my eyes off Princess Pride's smile of genuine happiness. It was hard to believe that I was "special" to someone already so special to me. I couldn't ask her to repeat something like that, but I didn't know what to say instead, so my mouth hung open uselessly. Our lack of response didn't faze her this time.

Even as I tried to convince myself I'd misheard her, Tiara's and Stale's reactions told me the truth. The letter almost slipped from my hand; I tensed my grip in a panic. This was real. They'd heard it too! I'd just been told one of the greatest things I could possibly hear, and it was *real*. I couldn't manage to care about anything else right now. My heart swelled like it was going to explode. My legs went weak and I leaned against Stale. He stumbled, and I had to pull myself together to keep from toppling over.

"Sorry," I said, but he wasn't in a state to talk yet. Likewise, the mere thought of what a person who said such wonderful things could have written in my letter made my heart race.

After looking at the two of us, Tiara squeezed Princess Pride's arm. "Big Sister, we should be going now!"

That was when I remembered they had been heading home before this detour with the letters. Stale took my arm off his shoulders and murmured, "That's right..."

Tiara beamed at us. "I'm really happy! I hope we can have another party again someday!"

"I agree," Princess Pride said, stroking her sister's hair.

"But this is an unofficial party," Stale replied. "We can't do it very often."

He'd apparently recovered enough to push his black-framed glasses up his nose and issue that warning. Tiara puffed up her cheeks. To avoid a counterattack, Stale touched the table he'd brought here and teleported it away, plates and all, instantly transforming the room from a party venue to mostly empty space.

He tucked his letter into his pocket and offered his hand to Princess Pride. He and the two princesses said their goodbyes, then disappeared in a flash. The moment Princess Pride was gone, everyone opened the cards she had given them. I was the only one to keep mine tucked away.

"'Thank you for helping me. I love you.' Hey, am I reading this right?!"

Sefekh spun toward me as she read the letter that came with our cookies. She pushed the letter at me, urging me to read it. Tiara had been teaching the brats to read and write a bit during their knife-throwing practice, but Sefekh wasn't confident she'd understood the words.

I grimaced, but I plucked Khemet's card from the kid and read it. "Yeah, that's right."

When I shoved it back at Sefekh, she asked me to read her card too.

"'Thank you for helping me.' Then it says you're a dumb little girl."

"Doesn't it say 'wonderful young girl'?!" she countered.

"Why'd you even ask if you can read it yourself?" I growled, shoving the cookies back at her.

We'd been in a country near Freesia for a delivery when Stale came and got us for the party. Once he returned us to our original location, we rented a room at an inn near the country's castle. Sefekh and Khemet now sat on the bed looking over the cookies our mistress had given them. In the next bed over, I was busy getting drunk on one of the many bottles of booze I'd smuggled out of

that stupid party.

The kids excitedly read Pride's messages, paying no attention to the ocean of empty bottles building on the floor.

"Sefekh and I could both read them! She said she loved me!"

"Our mistress said I'm wonderful!"

They were yelling despite the late hour. I used my free hand to cover one ear.

"Hey! What did your card say, Val?!" Sefekh asked.

I grunted and looked at my own bundle next to me. I'd already read the card, so I stuck it in my pocket. "Nothing." I gulped down the rest of my current bottle and tossed it under the bed. Then I uncrossed my legs and leaned back.

"Did she write a lot?!" Khemet said.

When he saw me preparing to go to bed, he snuggled under the sheets of his own bed. Sefekh pouted because I wouldn't read them my card, then climbed into her bed as well. We were lucky to get a room with three beds this time; it meant we all got to sprawl out. Khemet was still small, but Sefekh could kick someone out of bed if she stretched out during the night.

I clicked my tongue and rolled away from them, tugging up my blanket. "Just one sentence."

"Really? Just one?!" the kids cried.

I didn't respond, reaching over to extinguish the light on my bedside table. After that, the kids said good night. In the dark, we couldn't see each other at all, but I reached into my pocket for the card. I had decent night vision, so I could still make out the words.

"'I'm so glad to have you,'" I read, quietly enough so they wouldn't hear. "Did she write this because she remembered?"

She had written the same thing she'd said to me a year ago. "Thank you so much. I'm so glad to have you." I remembered Pride's words, her voice, and

how she looked like it was yesterday. I furrowed my brow. If she *did* remember, then she was being a real nuisance. If she didn't remember what she'd said before, and the same words just happened to come to her again...

She's a nuisance either way.

I kept those words to myself and squeezed my eyes shut. I put the card back in my pocket and heaved a sigh.

As I lay there in the dark, it occurred to me that it was getting harder to keep calling Pride a "brat." She'd developed a more womanly body over the past year. But if I truly stopped thinking of her as a "brat," the fealty contract might prevent me from calling her that out loud too. I could disrespect her, but I couldn't lie.

She's a brat. She cried about someone eating her food and got all pissed about me implying stuff.

I sighed every time I remembered how upset she got about what I said. Her face was so red when she complained about it. I repeated the word "brat" in my mind, like I could convince myself if I just used it enough. I turned over to find Sefekh and Khemet breathing deeply and peacefully behind me. They'd turned to face the same wall I was facing, wrapped up in their blankets and sound asleep. I couldn't believe the kids were learning to read. They even had a conversation with Stale on their own without needing me as an intermediary.

Brats sure do grow up way too fast.

I caught the smile trying to creep onto my lips. I clapped a hand over my mouth, even with no one awake to see me, and forcefully dragged my lips back down into a frown. Then I shook my head, wrapped the blanket tighter around me, and turned to face the opposite wall again. When I realized that meant we were all sleeping in the exact same position, I clenched my jaw.

"Damn brats."

I didn't care if they heard me that time.

My last thought before sleep took me was how relieved I was that I could still call them names, even if I was only talking to myself.

"So? What did yours say?"

After joining the knights in cleaning Arthur's room and helping him unpack, the others and I saw him and Roderick off at the gates. Now the knights stood around me, preparing to head back to the training grounds. They seemed surprised by my question—probably not something they expected to hear from their vice commander—and they tilted their heads, weighing whether or not to bite. Hopefully, they took Pride seriously when she'd said they could discuss the letters, just not around her. They all reached for the cards attached to their gifts.

Eric looked down at his card with a shy smile. "Mine says, 'I'm so glad you're back. Please take care not to get hurt again." He kept it attached to the bundle of cookies, not wanting to ruin the presentation by taking it off.

I laughed. "I guess you can't get yourself injured for her sake anymore."

"Mine says, 'Thank you for staying on as my imperial knight. Please continue to keep us safe,'" Alan said. He nudged Callum beside him. "Yours is the same, right, Callum?!"

Callum flinched and replied, "Y-yeah."

Eric and I grinned at the guy's flustered response. It came as a relief to all of us that the two captains stayed in the order after their suspensions.

"What did yours say, Vice Commander?" Alan asked me.

I showed him my card. "Thank you for protecting our country. I know you'll keep taking good care of the commander and your knights." I smiled, delighted. "As a knight, it's a true honor to hear that."

The other three men nodded in agreement. I hadn't participated in the war in Hanazuo, instead staying behind to keep Freesia and the queen safe when

Rajah came for their visit. Obviously Pride understood and was thankful for my contribution.

My men were still watching me reverently, and I stroked my chin. "By the way, Roderick's said, 'Thank you for always worrying about me. You've taught me important things, and I respect you very deeply.' He showed me before he left."

The knights let out cries of awe; the commander had lived up to their expectations once again. There could be no greater honor for a knight than to receive such words from the crown princess herself. I suspected they had even more respect for Roderick knowing how Princess Pride felt about him. They were around her a lot, so they knew how few people were as strict with her as Roderick was. The man was one of the rare few who could lecture her.

"The commander's just so amazing," Alan murmured, a faraway look in his eyes.

I had to agree there.

After Vice Commander Clark revealed the contents of the commander's letter from Princess Pride, my admiration only deepened. The man had done so much for the princess's sake over the last six years; even my and Callum's suspension had been part of his efforts.

I removed my card from the cookie bundle as I walked through the night. I put the cookies in my pocket and let the moonlight illuminate the card. I'd chosen not to read the last sentence to the others when they asked. I figured Callum would do the same, so we wouldn't contradict each other.

"I commend you for your strength and reliability, Captain Alan."

"I commend you immensely for your bravery and kindness, Captain Callum."

We received almost the exact same message. Those sparse words were enough for both of us. While that final sentence was also similar, I was sure

Callum's heart raced just like mine when he thought about it.

"I commend you."

Princess Pride had kissed us when she tried to stop us. Neither of us would ever forget that moment for as long as we lived, especially now that we had these words to remind us all the time. Embracing the feeling, I gently pressed my lips to my card.

"Hey! Alan, what are you...?!" Callum recoiled, his voice shrill. He blushed like he was the one who'd been caught kissing his card.

I, however, was unconcerned. "Hm?"

Eric and the vice commander turned to see what the fuss was about, but I didn't pay them any mind. I just smiled at Callum's flustered state.

"What's wrong with doing it to a card?" I asked. "It's not like I'd ever kiss her."

This caught Eric's and Vice Commander Clark's attention, so I gave my card another shameless kiss. This time, it was Eric who blushed and squeaked.

Vice Commander Clark snickered. "You sure love Princess Pride, don't you, Alan?" He was clearly enjoying Eric's and Callum's meek reactions, but he knew as well as anyone how much all us knights adored Princess Pride after what she'd done six years ago.

"Of course I love her! I'm so incredibly glad I get to be her imperial knight. I still remember how she fought in that battle! Besides..." I trailed off.

Princess Pride's bravery and fighting skills had initially charmed me, sure, but what about now?

"These days, Princess Pride gets my heart racing no matter what she does," I finished with a chuckle.

Callum and Eric only blushed more furiously, embarrassed by my bluntness. I suspected that wasn't *all* that was going on, though. They must've been jealous that I could talk so openly about my feelings for her.

"Don't you dare say that around anyone else, Alan," Eric said, glancing down at his card.

Callum pressed his own card to his brow, flushing even redder. I knew his feelings had grown right alongside mine ever since she stopped him, but he refused to say it out loud. Odd, considering his vow to protect her burned in his heart hotter than ever. He tucked the card into his pocket, his eyes lingering on his fingers—the same ones Princess Pride had kissed.

I could relate. Like Callum, my body only existed to serve the princess, to protect her. The intensity of his feelings washed over me, but I couldn't agree with him more.

"Lately, I've been starting to imagine..." Eric spoke so quietly, he may as well have been talking to himself. He cradled his cookies, card still attached, in his arms. He looked off into the distance and smiled, his cheeks tinged pink. "What if Princess Pride really was just a commoner named 'Jeanne'? I know that's silly."

Though Eric cringed, embarrassed by his own fantasy, no one else laughed or sneered. Although Eric hadn't been commended like Callum and me, Princess Pride had still visited him when he was confined to bed. I knew how bashful he'd been during those visits, and how it pained him to learn of her injury.

It sounded like he was imagining a world in which Princess Pride had visited him not as a princess but as a commoner. His reddening face summed up his thoughts: could he have reached out and touched her if that were the case? I had to wonder if he regretted not making his feelings known when he'd had Princess Pride at his bedside.

"If she was a commoner, I'd be the first to propose," I declared. My total lack of subtlety left both Callum and Eric sputtering. Vice Commander Clark burst into laughter.

"Alan! Why do you have to go to such extremes?!" Callum said.

"Captain Alan, do you understand what you're saying?! You could be locked

up for that!" Eric shrieked.

"You're exaggerating," I said, grinning at their reactions. "I'm speaking hypothetically. I know where the line is. But what about you, Callum? Considering your family, you could—"

"Don't involve me in this disrespect! I would never speak so crassly about her!" Callum said, smacking me in the head.

I apologized to the blushing Callum, adding with a smile, "I'd give you my support, you know."

Callum turned even redder. I was lucky he hadn't used his special power to send me flying.

"That's enough of that, you three," Vice Commander Clark said. "We're almost at the dormitory. Make sure you hide your presents."

We heeded his advice and tucked our cookies and cards away under our clothes. When I grumbled that I wanted more to drink, Eric laughed.

"Let's drink until dawn tomorrow at Arthur's official promotion party," he said.

Callum, Vice Commander Clark, and I all readily agreed. Prepared for another day of sleep deprivation, we parted ways and returned to our rooms.

"I thought we were going home, Dad," I said as the old door creaked open.

"We'll leave soon," Dad said simply, striding into the room.

After my promotion celebration ended and Princess Pride went home, Captain Alan and the others helped clean up and even unpack my things. I tried to insist that I could do that part myself, but Clark said it would go quickly with all six of them there to help. Even Dad got dragged into it. And to Clark's credit, we finished unpacking really fast.

But it was already late when we started on that, so Dad and I ended up

leaving the training grounds after midnight. The others saw us off at the gates. I was still worried that Mom wouldn't be awake, but Dad ignored me and we pushed on in silence—until he suddenly pivoted away from home. I asked if he was too tired to navigate or something, but he said there was somewhere he wanted to stop by. I had no choice but to follow as we headed into town and ended up at a tavern.

I had a weird sense of déjà vu when we stepped inside, and I had the feeling Dad had brought me here when I was really young and he wanted to go drink with Clark. My only memories of the place were of Dad and Clark downing booze, but I was pretty sure this was the same tavern. Evidently, one drink wasn't enough for my old man. I stood in the entryway while Dad chatted with the tavern's owner, who handed him a key and led us into a back room. I was getting flashbacks of that time I'd come here as a kid. This *had* to be the same place.

Dad took a seat at the bar, set down a bottle, and told me to close the door.

"You still want to drink?" I said.

Personally, I wanted to hurry home, tell Mom the good news, and open my letter. But I kept those complaints to myself and closed the door as ordered. Dad set a glass down before the seat next to him, which I knew was for me. A happy thrill went through my chest. I got to take the seat next to Dad that used to be reserved for Clark.

I sat down as Dad filled my glass with liquor, then his own. In my surprise, I dipped my head in thanks, suddenly timid. Dad was being quieter than usual, so I was worried he planned to lecture me about something.

"The other knights and I acknowledge what a large role you played in the defensive war," Dad said without preamble.

He kept his eyes on his glass as he poured, but there was no one else he could be talking to right now.

"Arthur...outside of combat, you're still immature."

I went rigid. Just when I thought he was praising me, he cut in with criticism. He was right, though, and I couldn't deny it. I had a lot to learn about things like strategizing and commanding subordinates. Even when it came to my captain's paperwork, I didn't know what I was doing a lot of the time. I'd been planning to ask Captain Callum for help tomorrow if Harrison couldn't advise me. But hearing that criticism from my dad took the wind out of my sails.

"And yet..." Dad said, voice deepening as he set the bottle down on the bar. "You told me you would become the commander someday."

I flinched. Dad slumped, a hand pressed to his temple before he'd even taken a drink. I didn't know if he was angry; I couldn't see his face. I guess he remembered that after all.

"I need my dad to live so he can see...the moment I become the next commander!"

I'd gotten carried away and let that slip in the heat of the battle on the front lines. I wasn't planning on telling anyone about that secret goal of mine, and definitely not the current commander—my own father. I cringed with embarrassment. There went my hope that he'd either never heard me say that in the first place or forgotten all about it.

"Was that a declaration of war against me?" he murmured, and I broke into a nervous sweat. "You haven't even been a knight for ten years..."

Dad wasn't touching the glass in front of him. His fists lay balled on his knees and his shoulders shook. *Oh crap. He's pissed!*

I gulped when I realized why he'd brought me here. He must have wanted to warn me not to get too full of myself before we went home and told Mom about my promotion. As I watched, his shoulders trembled even harder...

Then he burst into laughter.

At first, I didn't realize that raucous cackling was coming from him. I could barely believe it was him laughing like that at a time like this. With his head

hanging low, I couldn't see his expression, but I could hear him say around choking laughter, "You're not even twenty years old!"

My face burned hot, and anger bubbled inside me. Was he really laughing at my dream?

"Please stop that!" I shouted.

Dad turned away with a "Pffft!"

I felt like an idiot for being so nervous a moment ago. Annoyed and ashamed, I spun away from him. "Wh-what's wrong with that dream?! I wanna be the commander in the future. It's not like I'm trying to get there before I'm ready."

I knew I still had a long way to go. I could barely handle becoming a captain in the royal order, much less the commander. That dream lay well out of my reach for now—but one day, I'd grab hold of it.

"I'm keeping my title for the next twenty years," Dad said, still snickering.

"Fine," I said forcefully. "Just watch me! In twenty years, I'll be sure to take that ti—"

"Twenty years? You really want to wait that long?"

At his calm interjection, I turned back to him. He smiled as he met my eyes, but I wasn't sure what he meant by any of that, so I just stared at him with my mouth hanging open.

Dad shifted to face me fully. "I'll be the commander for the next twenty years," he said. "But promise me something."

He raised his glass. Instead of taking his first sip, he swirled the liquid around, creating little waves within the glass.

"If you manage to become more qualified than me before that..."

His tone was gentle. He rested an elbow on the counter, his gaze tender. My palms sweated, and I swallowed hard. I'd just had a whole feast, yet my body felt hollow and my heart was racing. Dad smiled and tipped his glass toward

me.

"Then I'll hand my seat to you."

My heart skipped a beat. I shuddered all the way down to my fingertips, feeling clammy all over. My eyes nearly popped right out of my head.

Dad's smile grew. He'd expected this reaction.

"I want to see you surpass me, Arthur Beresford."

Another chill zipped through me. I gulped, smiled, and watched as Dad nudged his glass again. He looked so cool with that big smile on his face.

The desire to be like him reignited within me. I lifted my glass with a trembling hand and took a deep, steadying breath. I couldn't find the words to express how proud I was that the man in front of me was our royal order's commander and my own father.

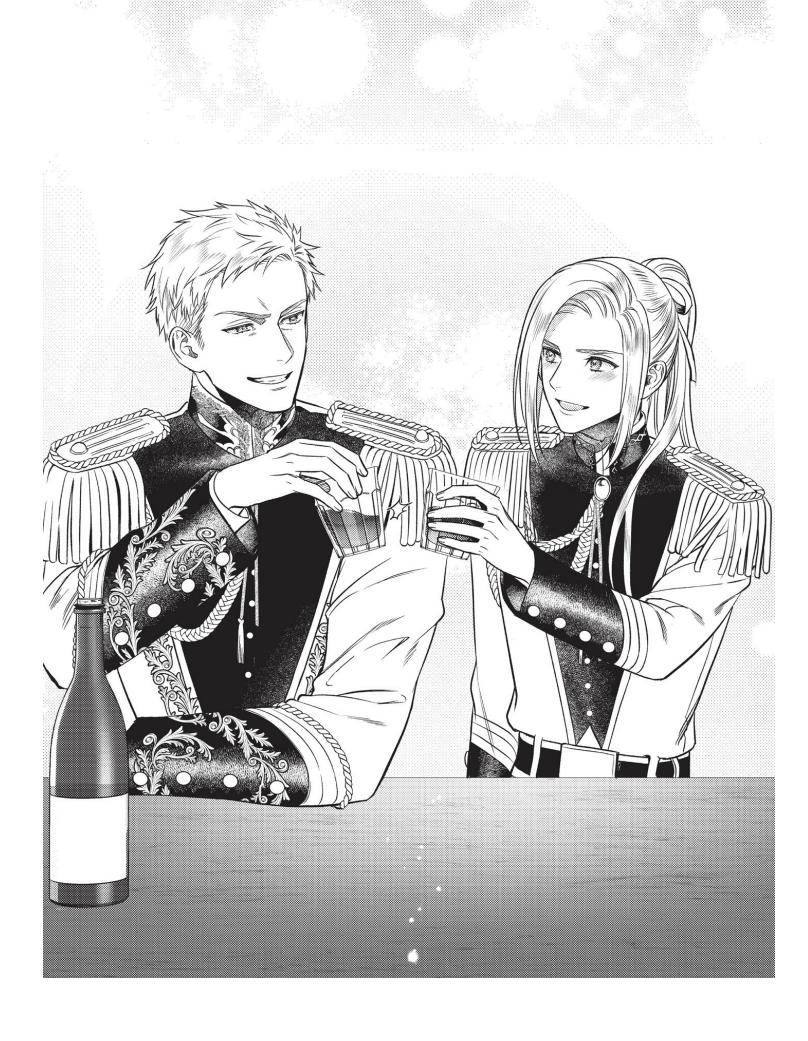
I tapped our glasses together a little too hard, splashing alcohol onto the bar. "I will!"

The *clink* of our glasses echoed through the tavern. I downed the cold liquor in one large gulp, hoping to cool my burning face and body—only it was stronger than I realized and had me choking right away.

"Congratulations on your promotion," Dad said.

I scolded him for congratulating me while I was coughing, but he beamed at me in response.

Seeing my dad so happy...for just a moment, I felt like I might cry.



Everyone Has Their Own Stories

Has your condition changed at all now that you've been back at work for a day, Vice Captain Eric?" Princess

Pride asked me.

"Not at all," I replied.

I'd been ordered to rest and get medical treatment after the war in the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Princess Pride seemed pleased that I returned safely as scheduled, but after only a day, she started asking me about my health. She visited me in the morning, worried that my wound had reopened during the trip or that I might need more treatment.

Prince Stale pressed his glasses up by their black frames, evidently just as concerned about my health as his sister. I supposed that made sense, what with a couple of the other imperial knights absent for the time being. Being so shorthanded had to be a stressor.

"Physically, I'm doing just fine," I assured them, forcing a smile. "I don't want to get rusty from spending too much time at rest, though."

The treatment I'd received, both from medical doctors and knights with special powers, had brought me back to full strength. I'd even participated in guard duties and the knights' daily training the day before. My wound didn't hurt anymore; it was just a dull ache these days. Far worse was the strain on my heart when I saw Princess Pride's face for the first time in far too long, but I would keep that particular hurt secret.

I hadn't spoken directly with her since her infirmary visit after the war.

Unprepared for the emotional ambush, her worried smile floored me when she brought her face inches from my own. It was a moment I would never forget— and the reason my heart raced when I returned home and saw Princess Pride running up to greet me.

"How is your injury? I'm so glad to see you doing better."

Her relieved smile sped up my heart like a jolt of adrenaline. Even thinking about it now sent heat rushing to my face.

"Does that mean your body doesn't feel the same as it did before the injury?!" Princess Tiara asked as we headed toward the dining room.

She blinked her golden eyes at me. As usual, she'd joined Stale in Princess Pride's bedroom so the three of them could have breakfast together. Princess Tiara seemed equally worried as Prince Stale about the health of her sister's imperial knight. Yet we all now knew that she spent her days secretly training with knives. Perhaps that was why she seemed surprised that a knight like me could get rusty after an extended period without practice.

My smile turned to one of embarrassment as I dredged up an answer. It wasn't that I felt *very* different from before, but going so long without training or working out would dull my senses and stamina. I'd participated in the order's morning training exercises yesterday and didn't like how fatigued I felt afterward. I was already all too aware that my sword skills, hand-to-hand combat abilities, and firearm proficiency had fallen since the war. But that was the first time I really felt it, and after that point, I couldn't possibly sit around thinking about resting and recovering. I had to get back out there and come up with an individual training regimen in addition to group exercises. Or, well, if only I could.

"I have to take on the captain's duties while Captain Alan is on leave, so unfortunately, I don't really have time to do much training at the moment," I admitted with a weak laugh.

I scratched my head to hide my disappointment. Princess Pride and Princess
Tiara both fell into a sullen silence. I was supposed to take over for the two
captains while they were suspended, though none of us ever said the word
"suspension" out loud. Those of us serving as their replacements knew why
they'd been punished, but we also knew how faithfully they had served Princess

Pride, and we felt no shame about their actions. All we could do was pray they returned to their posts in a month.

As a fellow member of the First Squadron, I'd had plenty of chances to witness how amazing Alan was for myself. In addition, I was taking over his captain's duties while he was away. That included supervising the squadron, which left a mountain of paperwork on my desk.

All in all, I had a *ton* of work to do. I had to write up reports with instructions for the unit, propose ways to coordinate with other units, and come up with alternatives. I also had to submit a report to the commander when we trained with other units or carried out combined missions—a report on that unit's flaws and suggestions for their improvement, as well as our own.

Aside from the daily reports, there were also weekly, bimonthly, and monthly reports to submit. That didn't include subjects outside of the First Squadron's normal scope, however. If we went on a mission, that of course required a *separate* report. I used to submit the vice captain's write-ups to Alan. These included reports on missions and training exercises, as well as suggestions for our squad members, and means for personal improvement. But as soon as I returned to Freesia, I got a crash course in how much deskwork Alan did as captain.

It was hard to imagine Alan was actually completing all these reports when he worked out every morning and night, trained regularly on his own, and often attended drinking parties too. With Alan's permission, I had referenced the previous months' records and finished yesterday's entries, but those records left me in shock when I saw how detailed the captain got in his writing.

I remembered Alan once revealing how many reports he had to write when we finished a mission, so I wasn't surprised to see my great captain never cutting a single corner, even when faced with all that work. I refused to be the weak link while he was gone, and I poured hours into writing down every last detail I could in my own reports.

Meanwhile, the other members of the First Squadron helped me fulfill my vice captain duties—including yet more paperwork—but that meant I had to delegate the captain's jobs *and* get enough training to return to peak performance.

"I'm sure the vice captain of the Third Squadron has it rough too," I said.

Captain Callum's unit had to be struggling without him. One member of that squadron, who happened to be helping out with Princess Pride's security that day, nodded in commiseration.

The Third Squadron had the same administrative tasks as the First Squadron. Only the Eighth Squadron was excused from most paperwork, since they rarely coordinated with fellow knights, much less other units. The Third Squadron's vice captain hadn't missed training due to an injury, like I had, but he still faced a large burden trying to take over Captain Callum's duties. Everyone in the royal order knew it too. The man's records were lengthier and more detailed than any other captain's—that wasn't easy to replicate.

"Are you sure you're getting enough sleep?" Prince Stale asked. "You've only just returned, so I hope you're not overworking yourself."

"I'm humbled by your concern," I said, bowing deeply. "But knights are quite used to getting little sleep, so please don't worry about me." I would never admit that my main concern wasn't my sleep schedule but how quickly I could return to proper form.

The doctor forbade me from doing any intense exercise until the wound fully healed, but the longer I had to hold back, the antsier I became. Just like Alan, I was a member of the First Squadron—an offensive unit. Yet as substitute captain, I had to spend most of our training sessions supervising other knights instead of doing the actual drills. Suddenly, I understood why Alan was always barking orders at us during training.

"Oh! That reminds me," Princess Tiara said, looking up at me. "How are Captain Alan and Captain Callum doing?"

Everyone else looked my way as well, including Princess Pride and the other three knights with us. Neither Princess Pride nor Princess Tiara knew how Callum and Alan were spending their suspension, which had begun yesterday.

"Captain Alan is currently on the training grounds," I said, starting with the captain I knew better. "He's been training on his own since last night, when the other knights finished theirs. During the day, he...joined the rookie knights."

"The rookies?!" Princess Pride and Princess Tiara cried out in tandem. Prince Stale's glasses slipped down his nose a bit. All three royals stopped as they were descending a staircase.

Alan joining the rookies was a far bigger surprise than his ceaseless commitment to staying in top form. When Princess Pride and her siblings asked why a captain would train with rookies, all four of us knights grimaced.

Commander Roderick had granted the captains permission to use the training grounds and equipment while they were suspended. Problem was, one group of knights or another was always using the facilities during the day, and the captains couldn't kick them out to train. That was the whole reason Captain Alan chose to do his training late at night. He refused to spend his entire day sitting around, though.

I'd never forget the jolt of shock when I found the man out on the training grounds before anyone else. It was only the first day of his suspension; I figured I wouldn't see him for a few days at least. Yet there he was, and he wasn't wearing any kind of uniform, not even the white one the rookies wore. When the knights around him pressed him about what happened or whether this meant he was leaving the royal order, he gave us a simple answer:

"Well, I thought maybe I could help you guys or the rookies out now that I'm gonna have some time on my hands."

To punctuate his point, he'd put his hands on the back of his head and smiled like usual. He seemed so carefree and energetic, like he might take off running any moment. It was still morning then, but Captain Alan's words sent the

knights into a spiral—it sounded like he wanted to return to basic training, or maybe even make some memories before retiring. We didn't know if his latenight training sessions were an effort to stay sharp or a means of wrapping up his career without regrets. I recalled looking off into the distance and commenting that Captain Alan was acting the same as always.

With Commander Roderick's permission, Alan took on odd jobs normally assigned to the rookies, such as setting up and taking down the training equipment. He was always either training on his own in a corner of the training grounds or carrying out these odd jobs, which worried the knights of the royal order. The rookies were getting a rare opportunity to interact with a captain, yet seeing someone they so admired joining them in the same low-level work sent a ripple of unease through the whole order. Captain Alan hauled equipment that usually required a few rookies to carry. He settled into the routine quickly and with more ease than the low-level knights who'd been doing it for years.

Thus, Captain Alan finished the rookies' jobs quickly and used the periods in between tasks to spar with the younger knights, taking on several of them at once. None of this surprised me, though I still couldn't figure out his true intentions. He ended up getting about as much exercise as he would have gotten with the main forces. In fact, many knights respected him even more for the sheer amount of training time he was putting in.

"It's true that captains far surpass all the other knights, no matter who they're training with," I told the princesses.

"I-Is that so?" Princess Pride replied, lips twitching. "Well, I'm just glad that Captain Alan is in good spirits..."

She agreed that he sounded like the same old captain, but she was concerned about his plans for the future, like many of the other knights. His new training routine left a lot of uneasy questions in people's minds. Still, she seemed glad that Alan had high spirits and as much energy as ever.

"What about Captain Callum?" Prince Stale asked.

I could tell he suspected that Captain Callum, who cared so deeply for his subordinates, might have joined Captain Alan in training with the rookies.

"Captain Callum told me that he's visiting his family for the time being," I said. "He wanted to be the one to tell them about this incident."

He'd promised the commander and his fellow knights that he would return before his suspension was up. Then he headed home, leaving his uniform and belongings behind.

Princess Pride and her siblings didn't seem sure of what to make of this. I knew they trusted that Captain Callum wouldn't lie and fail to return, but he could have been planning to take on a different role after his suspension ended. He might even return just to say goodbye. The siblings shared a look, their faces taut with worry.

I wasn't sure how to assuage their fears. I wanted to keep things feeling as normal as possible, but I was just as concerned as anyone about the captains' futures. They would never abandon their responsibilities without cause, but I knew how heavily that guilt they carried weighed on their shoulders. Only the commander, vice commander, and Arthur knew what they truly desired. The rest of us could only hope they were doing these things because they were eager to return their positions as imperial knights after their suspensions.

I hoped Captain Alan had faith that I could manage the First Squadron in his absence. Perhaps that was why he was focusing on the basics again. If that was the case, Captain Callum might be doing something similar, leaving the training grounds specifically so he could come back and be reinstated. Commander Roderick had given Captain Callum the same permission to use the training grounds as Captain Alan, but it didn't seem like the former wanted to appear before the knights while suspended and potentially disrupt their training with a reminder of his uncertain fate. Still, if he did plan to come back, I knew he wouldn't want to come back rusty—and solo, nighttime training sessions

wouldn't be enough to keep his skills sharp. He couldn't have known that Captain Alan was going to spend his suspension with the rookies when he made the decision to stay with his family outside the city.

"Arthur seems lonely with his two close captains on leave," I said into the looming silence. Hopefully, this was a less harrowing topic. "Captain Callum in particular has often looked after him. He's always supporting knights from other units, as well as the rookies."

Arthur had already told Princess Pride and her siblings how much he cared for Captain Callum, but when they heard it from me, all the siblings smiled. The other knights nodded their agreement.

Even yesterday, Arthur had seemed more rigid and formal than usual with the other knights. He still felt uncomfortable with all this.

That sparked another question from the crown princess. "Captain Callum started looking after Arthur once he'd joined the Eighth Squadron, right?"

"That's correct. Captain Callum always keeps an eye on the other knights, even if they're not in his unit. He looked after me as well, even before I joined the main forces."

"And...what about Arthur's relationship with Captain Harrison after joining?"

Another beat of silence. My attempt to smooth over the conversation thwarted, I froze up and my jaw tensed.

Vice Captain Eric had gone stiff, so I reviewed the situation in my mind. I already knew that Captain Callum looked after Arthur, since the captain cared about *everyone* in the royal order. But once Arthur joined the Eighth Squadron, it was his fellow squadmates, vice captain, and captain who should have supported and led him. Yet Arthur only ever described Captain Harrison as "really scary" and never noticed how much the man actually doted on him.

I wanted to hear more about how Captain Harrison treated Arthur once they

were part of the same unit—and not just from Arthur himself. I needed to know how, specifically, Captain Harrison showed affection toward Arthur.

Captains Alan and Callum had asked me to keep Captain Harrison's fondness for Arthur a secret, so I didn't know any real details. But once I saw how the knights' faces clouded, I regretted asking about it at all.

"Well, let's see..." Vice Captain Eric began in a scratchy voice. His gaze wavered, like he felt the urge to avert his eyes. "Captain Harrison...is like the embodiment of the unique traits of the Eighth Squadron. He doesn't interact with his subordinates much at all."

He struggled to find the right words, leaving me floundering. I murmured a brief acknowledgment, studying the faces of Vice Captain Eric and the other knights. The knight from the Third Squadron shared Vice Captain Eric's pained expression, while the oldest knight of the four exchanged an awkward smile with the vice captain of the Sixth Squadron. There was a clear difference between those who knew of Captain Harrison's affection for Arthur and those who didn't. Even Stale had to look away as he suppressed laughter.

I hadn't expected Vice Captain Eric to be just as clueless as Arthur himself about Captain Harrison's affection, but it made sense in retrospect. Vice Captain Eric had joined the main forces six years ago, after the ambush on the royal order at the cliffs. He probably never knew the story behind why Captain Harrison started growing out his hair.

"From what I've heard," he said, "Arthur was assigned to the Eighth Squadron based purely on a performance evaluation and nothing else..."

I examined the strained smiles of the two knights at his side. Those two, at least, clearly knew about Captain Harrison but didn't want to speak out of turn. After all, they were substitute imperial knights serving temporarily. It seemed Captain Harrison's method of expressing love confounded not just Arthur but any knight who lacked the years-long rapport with him. As for those who had known Captain Harrison that long, well, he was very easy to read.

We continued our conversation all the way to the dining hall, only stopping when my siblings and I took our seats at the table. The knights took up their posts in silence, standing at the wall so as not to disrupt the meal. I got the feeling I wasn't the only one contemplating the day Arthur received his squadron assignment.

"We will now be assigning units to all new knights joining the main forces!" I declared.

The investiture ceremony this morning had just concluded, and Roderick and I faced a sea of rookie knights standing in neat rows. Every knight here had earned a formal place within the main forces. The established members of each squadron stood off to the side, ready to accept their new initiates as Roderick and I doled out assignments.

The knights had submitted their requested units directly after the ceremony and banquet, with the commander and I judging each and every one. This assignment would determine their futures as knights—the trajectory of their career. And although they could submit a request to us, that didn't guarantee them a spot in any particular unit. They had to be strong enough to earn it. As vice commander, I didn't get the final say. The commander, as the ultimate authority, could order them to join any of the squadrons, and they would have no choice but to obey.

In past years, we had a lot of knights graduating all at once, so we could only announce the assignments for the top performers. Everyone else could find their assignment on the bulletin board. This year, only three rookies would be joining the main forces, so Roderick would announce their positions personally.

"Arthur Beresford."

Arthur was only fifteen, but he'd received the top score on his entrance exam, so the commander called him first. The boy shook as he approached his own father. He stood up straighter as all eyes landed on him.

The top scorer and the commander's son. Everyone wanted to know where the young man, who'd vowed to become a knight only two years earlier, would end up. Would he join the First Squadron like his father or intentionally choose to walk a different path? I knew as well as Roderick that every unit hoped to have the brilliant young knight join them. But that was partially up to Arthur, in theory. The top scorers in the entrance exam generally got their first pick of units.

The knights around us tensed as Roderick prepared to make the announcement.

"I appoint you to the Eighth Squadron," he said.

Stunned silence fell over the crowd.

"Yes, sir!" Arthur replied instantly. He kept his expression serious, but he must have been thrilled to get his desired placement. He rushed over to the Eighth Squadron as instructed and bowed to its captain, shouting, "It's an honor to serve alongside you!"

Meanwhile, the other knights looked like they couldn't believe their ears. Some murmured that Roderick must have made a mistake. They'd made many predictions for Arthur's placement, but the Eighth Squadron wasn't among them.

Roderick and I sensed their doubts and misgivings. No one dared speak up during the assignment ceremony, but I saw several faces go pale. I couldn't fault them entirely. Neither Arthur's own father nor I—a man who'd known Arthur for years—understood why Arthur chose the Eighth Squadron out of all his options.

Arthur faced the Eighth Squadron, bowed, and then...

"Eeek!"

His shoulders, stiffened from joy and nerves, lurched upward. He clenched his jaw, flushing with embarrassment at making such a ridiculous squeal in the

middle of an important ceremony. But something had startled him enough to make him recoil in fright. Arthur tightened his hands behind his back, but he managed to still himself. His gaze, however, remained fixed on the shocking sight before him.

Harrison was staring at him with eyes so wide, the whites were on full display.

The captain's expression was far more dramatic than any of the other knights around them. I feared his eyeballs might pop out of their sockets. Harrison's head was angled down to follow Arthur's bow, causing his black hair to droop over his shoulder. His blunt bangs and the rest of his hair partially covered his face, making him seem like a ghost peering down at Arthur from the shadows. That visage must have been what had spooked Arthur so badly.

Given the circumstances, Arthur clearly thought Harrison was upset with him. He struggled to approach the Eighth Squadron now, as he was supposed to. Even from where I stood with Roderick, I could see Arthur sweat as he stood rooted to the spot, like a frog sitting before a hungry snake.

A roar from the commander snapped him out of it. "Arthur Beresford!"

Hearing his name for the second time struck Arthur like a bolt of lightning. He jerked and corrected his posture. Then he apologized, though he seemed ready to flee at any moment.

"What the hell did you do?!"

That curt question snapped Arthur's attention back toward Harrison. The captain stared dead ahead. Arthur continued to the back of the line, but Harrison's question surely haunted him while Roderick and I announced the other two knights' assignments. The poor kid couldn't even savor the joy of being assigned to the squadron he wanted. His captain had glared daggers at him—certainly not a welcoming gesture—then lobbed an accusation his way. If ever he realized the trouble that lay ahead for him, it was now.

Roderick and I brought the ceremony to a close. We ordered the knights to begin their morning drills, but I doubted Arthur's fears had quieted. This was a

ceremony many of us would remember for a long, long time to come.

"Let's see... This is where the Eighth Squadron practices, right?" I said.

I'd finished my breakfast and was racing toward the meeting area for my brand-new Eighth Squadron. Regardless of which unit the knights belonged to, all of them welcomed me when I arrived in the dining hall. Though they all also had plenty of questions about what had happened at the ceremony...

"What the hell did you do?!"

That question from Captain Harrison repeated over and over in my mind. Only when the others in the squadron explained did I finally understand what he'd been asking. The Eighth Squadron was a unit that specialized in individual combat. Most of its members were skilled fighters, but they also had a hard time coordinating with other knights. The knights assigned to the Eighth Squadron had either proven themselves unable to work with others, or they already knew this about themselves, so they'd volunteered to join of their own free will.

I was actually pretty good at cooperating; I knew how to interact with other people, and everyone seemed to like me well enough. When the others explained all that, I understood why it would seem strange for a person like me to end up in the Eighth Squadron. They all thought I must have caused some sort of trouble or had a major flaw. I denied this, explaining that this was the unit I'd requested. But the whole thing only proved to me how bad the Eighth Squadron's reputation was.

I'd heard rumors about them from the older knights when I first joined as a rookie. The longer time went on, the more I learned how the rest of the units saw them. I hadn't expected such a fuss over something as simple as my own assignment.

Despite the backlash, I didn't regret choosing the Eighth Squadron. Working alongside them showed me just how different they were from the other

squadrons, but that only strengthened my resolve to join this elite group.

Daily life as a knight got underway. We did group exercises first thing in the morning, then split up into our squadrons for team training. Sometimes we also paired up for joint training, depending on that day's focus. On those occasions, one squadron would take directions from the other squadron's captain. But outside of special cases like that, we all had our own space for our own training.

Shortly after our assignments, all three of us who'd joined the main forces left the dining hall and headed to our respective units' training areas. Most knights moved in groups of two or more, joining their cohorts along the way. Older knights greeted me as they passed, but none of them belonged to the Eighth Squadron. I was the only one who had to make the trip alone.

The Eighth Squadron fought independently, so we came and went from the dining hall independently as well. Some didn't bother eating breakfast at all, doing things on their own schedule instead. As I watched all the others traveling with their fellow knights, I was hit with a pang of jealousy. Nevertheless, our squadron's meeting point came into view.

"Arthur Beresford."

"Ack! Uh, wh-what?!"

A shadow flashed past my eyes as someone called my name. I whirled around and bent backward. The tip of a blade severed a few unwary strands of hair that hadn't managed to evade the slice.

I had no idea what had just happened. I'd leaned so far to dodge the attack that I lost my balance and fell. Even when I recovered from the initial shock, I still couldn't work out what that blur had been. It wasn't over either—this time, a kick flew directly at me while I picked myself up off the ground. This time, I was ready. I held my breath, kicked off the ground, and leapt back up to my feet while avoiding the blows. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a foot slam through the air where my head had been only seconds ago. This time, I caught the assailant's face.

My first reaction was to assume this was an enemy. That notion evaporated the second I got a look at the guy, though. The man before me was a knight—the captain of my squadron, in fact. *Captain Harrison!* I stood up straighter, scrambling to greet my captain, but the formalities didn't even last a full second.

"Capt—"

"Get your sword out."

"Captain Harrison, it's an honor to be here! I'm looking forward to working with you." The captain cut short all the things I'd prepared to say. Instead, he pointed his blade at me, oozing with malice. I drew the sword at my hip and readied myself. Metal collided with metal with a loud clang as I desperately parried Captain Harrison's strike. Was this how our training started? I'd left the dining hall with time to spare; I should have been early.

As a freshly graduated rookie, I couldn't very well demand answers from my new captain, no matter how badly I wanted to. All I could do was deflect each strike as it came. At one point, Captain Harrison hurled a knife at me. My blood ran cold, my body bracing for death. But before the blade could slice through my brand-new uniform...

"Captain Harrison, it's time for training to start."

"Fine."

A knight stepped calmly between us. Two things shocked me: first, that the captain looked like *this*, and second, that I was going to be late on my very first day. Captain Harrison sheathed his sword, and I lowered mine while I tried to catch my breath. The moment I did, a kick landed on my shoulder and threw me sideways.

I screamed, skidding across the ground. I hadn't taken my eyes off the captain, so I had no idea where this second surprise attack could be coming from.

"Too slow. Hit back next time."

"Huh?! I-I'm sorry..."

I clutched my aching shoulder, stood up, and sheathed my blade.

Not only had the attacks come without any explanation—they'd earned me a scolding too. I would know better next time and counterattack as soon as I got a chance instead of blocking to avoid showing aggression toward a superior. I didn't voice any of this aloud, lest I show insubordination toward my captain.

The man was charging toward our training area like he hadn't heard a word of my apology. I chased after him, refusing to arrive any later than he did. I ignored my aching shoulder and focused on picking up the pace, but I was still out of breath from the surprise attack. Even when I took my place in line, my mind raced to figure out what I'd done wrong. I bowed and apologized for my lateness, but none of the other knights seemed to care. Then Captain Harrison announced the day's training regimen.

I let out a quiet sigh as I listened to the captain. This was *not* the most auspicious start to my career as a knight. It was only my first day in the Eighth Squadron, and the man was already keeping an eye on me.

Once Pride, Tiara, and I finished breakfast, my younger sister asked Vice Captain Eric to continue his story about Arthur. He easily obliged; it seemed he'd been reflecting on the past, and it was all fresh in his mind.

"In a normal year, Captain Harrison might watch over new members of the squadron, but he never took notice of any one newbie," Vice Captain Eric said as he recalled the story. "He didn't seem all that interested in his subordinates. Yet when Arthur joined the unit, he zeroed in on him like he was wearing a target on his back. The moment they announced the assignments that first day, Captain Harrison ran straight to Vice Commander Clark to grill him about Arthur."

We listened intently to this tale of Arthur's past.

"Of course, Arthur never knew any of that. He told us nothing happened afterward. He also found it creepy that Captain Harrison would glare at him but not try anything else. He was pretty perplexed by the end of his first day."

Pride's lips twitched as Vice Captain Eric described how completely exhausted Arthur was by his initiation into the Eighth Squadron. She'd only recently learned about Captain Harrison's surprise attacks on Arthur, after all.

"Captain Harrison also attacked the rest of the members of the squadron later that day, so Arthur quickly realized that he wasn't the only one being targeted. But Captain Harrison is always putting his knights' skills to the test." The vice captain forced a smile. The other knights, who'd witnessed Captain Harrison's methods for themselves, kept their expressions blank.

Captain Callum and Captain Alan had already explained the emotions behind Captain Harrison's ambushes, so my siblings and I were at risk of overreacting too. We tried to respond neutrally, but it was hard while picturing just how enthusiastic Captain Harrison must have been on that day—especially since he lost track of time during his battle with Arthur and was almost late to their training. In a way, he'd given Arthur the warmest welcome possible. Clearly, Captain Harrison's eyes had been glued to Arthur from the moment his assignment was announced—out of shock, not anger.

All the while, Arthur had no idea what was going on in Captain Harrison's head. To him, it was a trial by fire, a harsh initiation that called him out in particular. Not only had Captain Harrison swung at him with a sword, but he'd also made Arthur late to their training exercises, where he found that none of his squadmates would interact with him.

"He never once opened up to us about that," I said, pushing up the black frames of my glasses.

I wished I had known about this sooner, but I knew Arthur wanted to keep his friendship with me quiet. He had told Pride, Tiara, and myself frightening stories

about Captain Harrison, but this account of his first day in the unit was new to us. Pride and Tiara couldn't hide their smiles as I pouted. They likely also wished Arthur would open up to them, but this wasn't out of character for him. Plus, we all knew he wasn't as lonely in the Eighth Squadron as he thought he'd be. Still, as his close friend, I couldn't help wanting Arthur to share his complaints with me in particular.

"Well, you know how Arthur is," Vice Captain Eric said when he noticed my displeasure.

Arthur had only shared a little even with his fellow knights like Vice Captain Eric.

"Captain Harrison ran at me with his sword!"

"What was that for?!"

"My squadmates never talk to me unless I talk to them first."

Vice Captain Eric said the other knights in the dining hall had all tried to cheer up Arthur as he sulked, his face proving just how vividly he remembered the occasion. According to him, the other knights knew of the Eighth Squadron's odd initiation process, but they were too busy trying to figure out why Arthur had volunteered for such a unit to think about the challenges he might face. Thus, no one ever thought to offer him any advice.

"Arthur carries his own pride as a knight," Vice Captain Eric said. "He was quick to adapt once Captain Harrison gave him permission to fight back."

I knew that Arthur wanted to protect Pride, Tiara, and even me. I also knew that made it harder for him to share his weaknesses with us—he wanted to overcome them instead. The three knights alongside Vice Captain Eric all nodded solemnly at the rehashing of Arthur's early days in the order as the vice captain attempted to explain Arthur's reasoning for us.

According to Vice Captain Eric, the other knights heaped praise on the depressed Arthur, who sat with his head slumped on the dining hall table. It

only took a week for him to learn how to handle Captain Harrison's surprise attacks. His squadmates were as unfriendly as always, but Arthur was good at building relationships, so he got along well with knights from other units. Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and the other knights—all of whom had high hopes for Arthur's future—swept in to reassure him, so he never seemed lonely.

I pursed my lips, my shoulders relaxing as Vice Captain Eric explained all of this. "I see," I said, my voice emerging in a half sigh.

This was just the sort of person Arthur was. He had to adapt quickly, but he'd managed it, proving he could overcome this obstacle. And even after all of that, he became the vice captain at a young age.

Relieved, I said, "I have to go assist Uncle Vest now. Please look after my sisters."

Pride and Tiara bid me farewell, telling me to do my best. I nodded, then rushed off to find the seneschal.

Hearing the story of Arthur's rise to vice captain amid so much adversity only boosted my determination to serve flawlessly at Uncle Vest's side today. The others smiled at me as I left, but I hoped I could show the same sort of strength my good friend Arthur did.

"I really should have bought souvenirs for Stale and Arthur after all," I mumbled once Stale left.

Tiara caught my muttering and hopped up.

"From Anemone, I mean," I added when I saw the look in Tiara's round eyes.

Tiara certainly hadn't forgotten our wonderful shopping trip with Leon—nor our discussion of buying clothes for Stale and Arthur.

"What's this about a souvenir for Arthur?" asked Vice Captain Eric.

He was aware of our close friendship with Arthur, so he probably wasn't

surprised that Tiara and I wanted to get him a present. Unfortunately, he also knew how the party for Arthur's promotion to vice captain had been ruined. It was all the more reason to get Arthur something nice now.

I exchanged a quick glance with Tiara, and we both grimaced. "We wanted to buy something for Stale and Arthur, but I'm sad to say we never found anything that seemed like it would suit them."

"But there were lots of beautiful outfits for us!" Tiara chimed in.

Our shoulders slouched, but we really didn't want the knights thinking Leon had recommended a store of poor quality. If anything, Leon had been super supportive of our desire to find something for my brother and my knight. But the things in the store Leon brought us to just weren't the right style. We'd considered looking around for anything that would suit the men, but we gave up in the end.

Now I really wished we'd come home with something to convey our appreciation for the hardworking Stale and Arthur—even clothes that they would never wear in a million years.

"Leon, what the hell happened in here?" Val snarled at me, recoiling in disgust.

He'd come to Anemone for a delivery like usual, and now he planned to join me for a drink in my room. But he froze when he spotted what was hidden within my room. Sefekh and Khemet marched on in, completely comfortable entering my chambers after their many previous visits. They also stopped when they noticed a plethora of strange, sparkling baubles.

I smiled awkwardly, turning to get a good look myself. Their hesitation did not come as a surprise. "A clothing shop I visited recently sent me home with all these gifts," I said. "They told me they were trial products, so I'm not sure what to do with them."

"You're gonna have to burn all this junk," Val replied.

I shrugged. I explained that rumors of my visit to the clothing shop with Pride and Tiara had made the store extremely popular among the Anemonian people. The citizens flocked to the place like it was a tourist destination, but the three of us had only purchased clothing while we were there, making those the hottest commodity. Both nobles and commoners now sought dresses made by the same designers and with the same embroidery that the princesses purchased.

This put the shop in a tight spot. It was hard to sell the exact same dresses, since they were one of a kind, but all the fashionable women of Anemone at least wanted similar garments, whether or not they had any real opportunity to wear them. The more money they had, the more striking the dresses they procured.

The clothing shop had then sent a mountain of prototype designs to my castle as thanks for this surge in sales. I gave my staff permission to put them in my bedroom once the garments passed inspections. This was in keeping with the decree that members of the royal family would deal with gifts sent to the castle. We could use them, give them away, sell them, or even throw them out.

Val's scowl told me these items were certainly not appealing to everyone, no matter how popular the shop they came from. These gifts in particular had been made with the utmost care and effort—bright and flashy, with high-quality fabrics and overly intricate decorations—but that didn't interest Val whatsoever. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't just burn them. The easiest thing to do would probably be to break the gifts down into their component parts and sell them off that way.

"What about you, Sefekh?" I asked. "You're a lady. If you like any of the dresses, feel free to take them with you. We can have them fitted if they're too large."

"No, thanks. They would just get dirty when we're out making deliveries. They

look hard to move around in too."

Sefekh's blunt rejection came as a huge disappointment. The rows of dresses drooping from hangers weren't like the ones Pride and Tiara had picked for themselves when we went shopping together. These had massive ribbons, colorful flower accents, metal ornaments in the shape of birds and other animals, and butterflies embroidered into the fabric. Layers of lace adorned the cuffs.

Although Sefekh wasn't wrong when she said this type of clothing would inconvenience her, I wondered if she would feel differently if one managed to catch her eye. The ones currently arrayed didn't seem to be to her taste, but perhaps if I could get ones like those Pride and Tiara had chosen, it would spark her interest. Not that I said so aloud, of course.

Khemet's mouth hung open as he took in all the fancy clothing. He finally settled on a particular item. "Excuse me!" he said. "Are these clothes for women too? They're so frilly!"

"Actually, those are for men," I told him. "Everything past that one is formalwear for parties..."

I smiled at his innocent assumption. He'd seen the frills and lace and understandably jumped to the wrong conclusion, thinking it was some strange new trend for women. The outfits were made with lustrous fabric and colorful lace. They came in sets of shirts, jackets, and slacks. They weren't so different from the outfits Pride, Tiara, and I saw at the shop.

Come to think of it, the clothes had triggered something in Pride. She'd muttered something about "visual kei" and "chuunibyou," but I hadn't a clue what either term meant. I chuckled, recalling a moment when Pride had stopped Tiara and told her an outfit looked like it belonged to a vampire. Tiara had suggested it for Stale, then pivoted to a white jacket with black and silver belts wrapped around it for Arthur. Pride seemed like she was going to approve of that one, but Captain Alan and Captain Callum had swept in to stop them.

"It's all too jingly," Val griped.

He'd finally taken a step into the room. As he examined the clothing more closely, his grimace deepened. All the colors, lace, ornaments, and fabric looked like it made him queasy. He wouldn't even touch them, sticking his tongue out and making his way to the opposite side of the room to sit on the floor.

"That's what upper-class clothing looks like," I said, stiffening. "Haven't you seen how Prince Stale and I dress?"

Royalty and the nobility had to dress in glittery, decorated clothes to a certain extent—it was a way of demonstrating our class. Would Val consider even my normal clothing "jingly"? I looked down at my outfit, seeing it in a new light. If Val, someone much more familiar with the commoner's mindset than myself, disliked my clothes, it might mean my beloved Anemonian people felt the same. This was quite a conundrum.

Val raised an eyebrow and cocked his head to one side. Apparently, he hadn't made the connection between the gifts and the things Stale and I normally wore. We did dress in fancy outfits during our day-to-day lives, but we almost never wore clothes with as many frills as the things here. Val never seemed nauseous like this when he saw Stale and me in our usual clothing, but he glanced between myself and Khemet nervously.

"I'm used to looking at your clothes," he said.

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

Val glanced aside with a scowl, but I simply grinned, relieved by this unusually neutral response. It seemed I didn't have much to fear when it came to my own ensembles. If Val's response was anything to go by, the commoners probably saw my clothing as a display of dignity. As for the outfits arrayed around the room...I suspected all this glittery stuff didn't hold much appeal.

"Maybe I should just send all these clothes to the Freesian castle," I mused.

"To harass 'em? Good choice."

"Oh, what I'd give to see their faces!"

Val yawned in response.

If Pride and Tiara suggested it, it might not just be Stale and Arthur who tried on these clothes—they could persuade the other imperial knights to give them a try too. I smirked at the very idea of the knights wearing all the glittery garb, dropping my gaze and heading for my liquor shelf before Val noticed.

"Val, it's time to drink!" I said. "Let's sit at the table."

"I'm not gettin' anywhere near all those sparkly clothes."

"Then just move them, duh! Do we get any snacks today?!" Khemet said.

He tugged on Val's arm while Sefekh squinted past the piles of clothing. I grabbed four bottles off the shelf to get us started while this adorable exchange unfolded. I'd expected them to dislike the clothes, but the force of their reaction was still a little disappointing.

One thought lingered in the forefront of my mind: I wished I'd encouraged Pride and Tiara to purchase those striking outfits for Stale and Arthur. Perhaps that mischievous urge was proof of how much my drinking buddy was rubbing off on me.



The Captain's Struggles

Y OU HAD NO IDEA how much work a vice captain has to do, did you?" I said with a huff as I handed Harrison the

next batch of documents.

He'd finally finished taking over my old duties as his vice captain. I slumped a little as the burden of all this work was lifted off my shoulders. I didn't have much to take over from Harrison after swapping roles with him. In fact, it was a huge relief to lay out all my previous duties for him.

"I didn't," Harrison said bluntly.

I glanced up at him. "Harrison, I've heard how you skipped ranks and were promoted straight to captain...but wasn't that hard on you? One day, you suddenly had to do all the captain's work."

I used to think that rapid promotion was amazing, but now that I knew what it was like to work as a captain, I realized Harrison must have had more burdens than simply the new responsibilities of his role.

Harrison pondered the question for a moment. I supposed the immense responsibility wasn't much of a problem for him; I could imagine him hoping for a role like that. Surely that didn't mean he *never* struggled.

"It was hard," he admitted.

"Really?! It was?! What about it?"

"I wasn't used to writing for so long."

Huh? Okay, that was not the answer I expected. I figured that if Harrison struggled with anything, it would be the missions or the expectations placed on him. Instead, it was something entirely unrelated to combat.

Knights got a compulsory education when we joined the main forces. Most of

the men knew how to read and write before entering the royal order—or so they claimed while they were rookies. But Harrison only learned to read after he'd joined the main forces and Vice Commander Clark taught him. He was promoted to captain within the next year and found that the worst parts of the job were keeping logs and writing reports, or so he said.

"Is that why the Eighth Squadron has so few records?" I asked.

"No."

I slouched even further. Just when I thought I'd solved the mystery of our unit's sparse record-keeping...

Evidently, Harrison didn't feel that he was slacking when it came to documentation. In fact, he said he thought he was extremely thorough, but only when those records related to the commander or vice commander.

"Please be sure to keep adequate records now that you're vice captain."

"Fine."

I sighed at Harrison's curt response. If he's so ready to oblige, why didn't he do it while he was still captain?

Unbeknownst to Arthur, I'd agreed so readily simply because the order came from him. If Arthur was going to read the reports, I finally had a reason to actually put some time and care into them. Before him, it didn't really matter to me.

Not that I'd ever say as much to Arthur himself.

Afterword

H ELLO, THIS IS TENICHI.

Thank you very much for purchasing Volume 7 of *The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior*, aka *Last Boss Queen*.

It's thanks to all of you that Suzunosuke-sensei and I were able to release a seventh volume. This book covered the period after the defensive war and the groundwork for how the story will continue. I named it "the postwar chapters" and kept the story the same, while reorganizing it to make it easier to read.

The bonus chapter is a little different this time; it contains a flashback and some stories I wanted to write for the web version. If you've read up through this installment and enjoyed the story, or if you have characters or chapters you're interested in, I hope you'll give the web novel on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* a try too.

Thank you for another batch of beautiful illustrations, Suzunosuke-sensei! I always gaze in awe at your magnificent art. Your illustrations really capture the relationships between characters and make the story shine.

Now, I have a few wonderful things to report with the publication of Volume 7. A new chapter of the manga adaptation has started up, an official anthology is on sale, and finally...

The Last Boss Queen anime is currently airing on television!

I'm just so grateful to all of you for these wonderful things. The world of *Last Boss Queen*, which once existed only inside my head, became visible thanks to Suzunosuke-sensei's lovely skills, grew more vivid with the manga adaptation, and was brought to life through the movement and voice acting in the anime. It makes me so happy, I hardly know what to say. I hope you'll enjoy the anime, which was put together with the help of lots of wonderful people.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Kawano Akiko-sensei, Kogawa Misaki-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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