

NOVEL **6**
Written by
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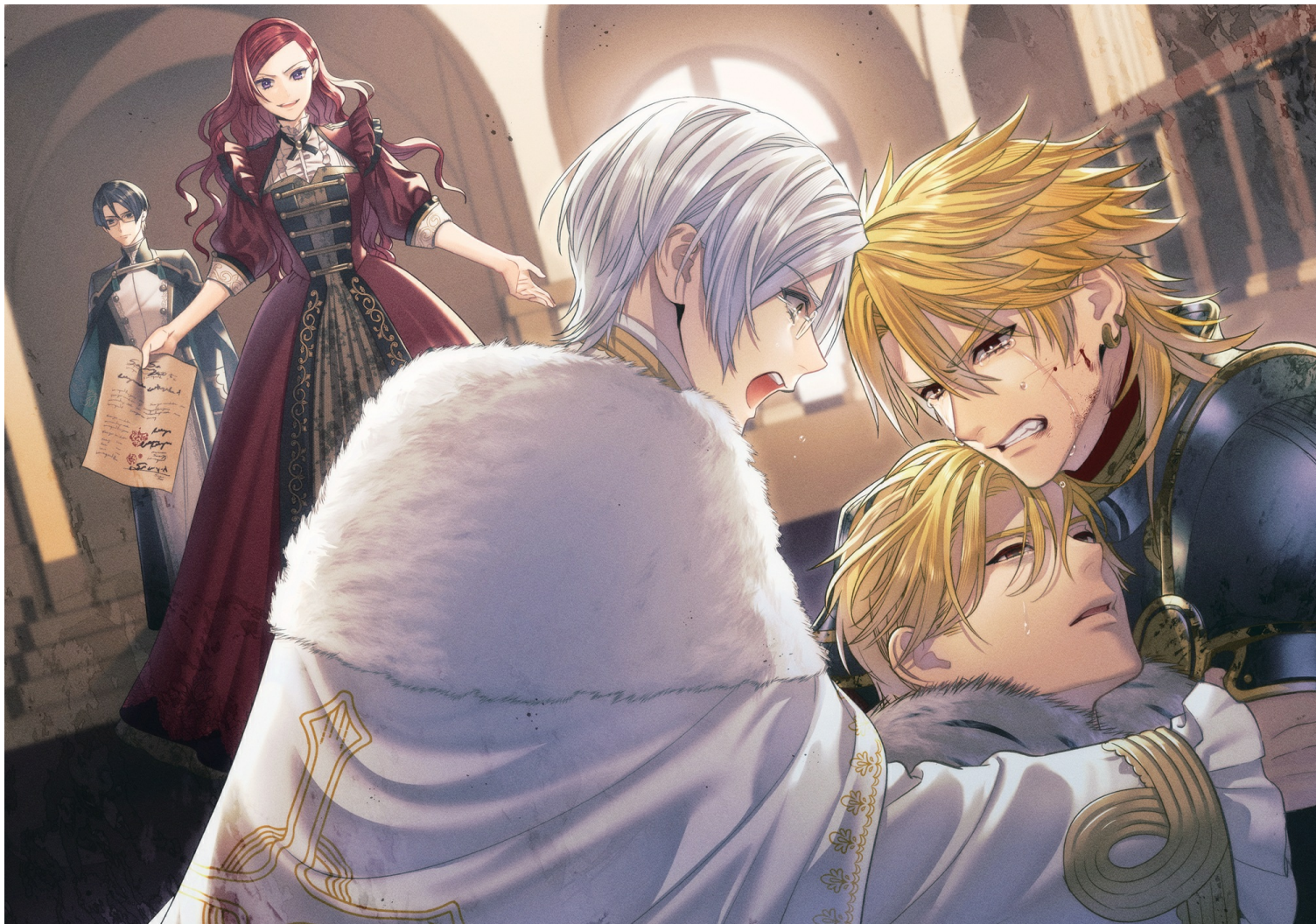
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THE MOST
HERETICAL
LAST BOSS QUEEN
FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR

NOVEL
6

WRITTEN BY
Tenichi
ILLUSTRATED BY
Suzunosuke



Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters



❧Pride❧

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

❧Stale❧

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

❧Arthur❧

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

❧Tiara❧

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

❧Rosa❧

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

❧Albert❧

Pride's father and prince consort of Freesia.

❧Vest❧

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

❧Gilbert❧

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

❧Roderick❧

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

❧Clark❧

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

Alan

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

Eric

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

Callum

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

Harrison

Captain of the Eighth Squadron of the royal order.

Val

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

Khemet

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

Sefekh

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

The Kingdom of Anemone

Leon

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

The United Hanazuo Kingdom

Cedric

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

Lance

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

Yohan

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

Vocabulary

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

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

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

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

Our Ray of Light (ORL): The otome game Pride played in her past life. This series was so popular, it was later given an anime adaptation.

Higeki no Genkyoutonaru Saikyou Gedou Rasubosu

Joou wa Taminotameni Tsukushimasu. Vol. 6

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Chapter 1:

The Blasphemous Princess and the Next Day

CLACK, clack, clack.

Heads turned as that ominous sound rang throughout the great hall. Several people gulped as their eyes locked onto the source.

The woman who made her way through the great hall had wavy crimson hair and purple eyes that tapered at the corners. That woman was me, Pride Royal Ivy, the firstborn princess of Freesia. I propped myself up with a crutch under one arm, taking slow, careful steps.

Behind me stood Stale Royal Ivy, the firstborn prince, silent and severe with his jet-black hair, dark eyes, and black-rimmed glasses. Tiara, the second-born princess with her wavy golden hair and bright eyes, was beside him.

A large group of knights encircled us. Among them was Arthur Beresford, one of my imperial knights, his silver hair tied up in a long ponytail. The Freesian knights had gathered eagerly when they heard that I wanted to address them, as had the soldiers of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. It seemed they all wished to confirm with their own eyes that I was still alive.

I took my place on an elevated platform, meeting their earnest gazes. "Everyone, I'd like to thank you for what you've done. By the name Pride Royal Ivy, I give you all my heartfelt gratitude."

The assembled knights sighed with relief once I made my pronouncement. They weren't merely happy to see that I had arrived; they also looked pained by the sight of my injury. Most maintained their composure, but I knew my injury served as the ultimate proof of how much I had risked for our victory.

Today marked the first day after the fighting concluded. Our brutal defensive war for the United Hanazuo Kingdom had arrived with incredible ferocity and

ended just as suddenly.

The kingdoms of Cercis and Chinensis had joined hands to become one country: the United Hanazuo Kingdom. It wasn't long before the infamously aggressive Rajah Empire and its dominions bared their fangs and came to conquer. As Hanazuo's ally, Freesia sent out what reinforcements we could to protect them from the invasion. As crown princess, I had commanded that army.

Thanks to our efforts—and some unexpected support—the United Hanazuo Kingdom emerged victorious. They'd successfully defended the pride and sanctity of their country. As foreign royalty, I never should've been on the front lines to begin with, and I'd suffered a grievous injury during the fight. Though I had exposed myself to the dangers of the battlefield of my own volition, the citizens and knights of Hanazuo agonized over the fact that I'd put my life on the line for their country.

With every eye fixed on me, I praised and thanked those present for their valiant efforts. I also revealed that I would be staying in the country for a few more days.

"Finally, as I'm sure you all have guessed, my leg injury is the reason for my prolonged stay. I could have suffered more harm if it weren't for the knights who put their lives on the line to save me. I'd like to use this occasion to thank them profoundly as well."

I had essentially declared martial law for a section of my knights up to this point, but now I smiled at those guarding me and ordered them to stand down. They bowed in response, stony expressions flickering for an instant.

"I'm so very sorry to make you worry about me," I went on. "But as you can see, I'm alive and well, so please get plenty of rest over the next few days. We will withdraw from this country as soon as I'm ready."

Our knights acknowledged the order, their practiced response echoing through the great hall. Soldiers from the United Hanazuo Kingdom responded

just as loudly and powerfully. I gazed over the assembly, wondering if the guard we'd saved yesterday was among these men.

"Let's get going, Elder Sister," Stale said.

I nodded in reply, taking up my crutch to make my way through the crowd once more. Orders from the commander of the royal order echoed through the room as we exited, sending the knights and soldiers flying off to their various tasks. The entirety of the United Hanazuo Kingdom—not just the residents of the Cercian palace—was in an uproar over the injury of the Freesian crown princess.

"What?! Princess Pride was hurt?!" I cried, then grunted as a fresh surge of pain shot through my body. As vice captain of the First Squadron, I was surrounded by my subordinates. They grabbed my shoulders, asking if I was okay.

Just like everyone else who was wounded during the defensive war for the United Hanazuo Kingdom, I was unable to attend Pride's public address. I'd been forced to stay in one of the cots for the gravely injured, waiting for the other knights to return from the great hall.

Pride's leg injury was the very first thing the First Squadron reported when they arrived at my bedside. I hung my head, chestnut-colored bangs draping over eyes the same shade. When I heard how Pride appeared before the knights with a crutch, her leg wrapped in bandages, panic and impatience shattered my calm facade.

"But, Vice Captain Eric, Her Highness said she'll be fully healed after a few days' stay here. It doesn't sound like she'll suffer any permanent harm."

Worried, I asked, "Where are Captain Alan and Captain Callum?! I was told that no knights perished!"

I hadn't laid eyes on either of the captains since the end of the war. *Don't tell*

me they were hurt too!

“They’re both safe,” the knights assured me. “We’ve been told there was no threat to Princess Pride’s life, thanks to their efforts!”

At that, I breathed a sigh of relief. Tension seeped out of my shoulders now that I knew the captains and the princess were okay. The knights went on to tell me that Pride seemed to be in good spirits in spite of her injury, and I sank back into the stiff bed.

Having regained my composure, I scanned the room and saw that the other wounded knights were reacting just as I had. It was hard to believe that Pride could be hurt with two captains at her side, but that was just proof of the incredible peril they’d all faced. Moreover, it gave me some comfort to know that the two men who got her out of there with no more than a broken leg were her imperial knights.

Rumors about the specifics of the event were starting to spread among the knights. I couldn’t hear them clearly from my bed, but I could still make out cries of “Captain Alan really is the best!” and “I can’t believe Captain Callum made it out!” For a moment, hope surged through me. Had the captains finally returned?

Unfortunately, it was just gossip. Stories of heroism bounced around the room, every eye twinkling with respect and esteem as the knights recounted tales of the brave captains. There was also plenty of anxiety; I heard questions like, “So where’s Captain Alan?!” and “He wasn’t escorting Her Highness just now, right?” One man even rushed into the infirmary and asked, “Has anyone seen Captain Callum?!”

I held back my desire to contribute to the speculation filtering into the room from the hall outside. Instead, I simply patted the back of the knight who’d come to report to me, urging him to join the others. Any knight would be just as eager to hear stories of Alan’s heroism.

“Yes, sir!” the knight said before eagerly running off. I watched the man

disappear from my place in bed—but he immediately returned, pale and quavering. I tilted my head just as an intense commotion poured in from the hallway.

No, it can't be! Before I could confirm my suspicions, the corners of my mouth started to twitch. As my subordinates rushed back to my bedside, a majestic voice carried through the room.

“Apologies for the intrusion... Ah! Vice Captain Eric!”

Clack, clack, clack.

That wooden clicking sound accompanied each step of our unexpected visitor. I tried to sit up at the sound of my name, but pain lanced through me. I bit it back, but not in time; Pride was already hobbling toward me with her crutch, looking flustered. On either side of her were Stale, the firstborn prince and Pride's younger adoptive brother, and Tiara, the second-born princess and Pride's younger sister, with the knights guarding them close behind.

“P-Princess Pride! Wh-what are you doing here?!” Shouting only made the ache in my side worse. My head jerked up and I clutched at my torso, which was bare save for bandages.

“The knights told me you were wounded,” Pride said. “How are you doing?”

I recoiled a little when the two princesses leaned in close to get a look at me, their faces clouded with concern.

“Oh! I-I'm just fine!” I said a little too loudly, enduring the ensuing ache. I glared at the knights behind Pride, trying to discern which one had betrayed me by telling her about my injury. Everyone, including Arthur, looked away in shame.

I wasn't just the vice captain of the First Squadron; I was also one of Pride's imperial knights, just like Arthur. I had a certain amount of dignity to uphold, injured or not. I sat up straighter to greet her and winced from the pain.

“Please rest, Vice Captain,” Pride said. “I'll make myself comfortable too, so

there's no need to worry about me."

Smiling, she strode straight for the chair at my bedside. Stale asked if she needed a more comfortable chair, but she refused. Tiara, still wanting to look out for her injured sister, took the chair next to Pride's.

"I hear you were shot while protecting the commander. It sounds like you were incredibly brave." Her smile turned sympathetic, and her shoulders slumped.

I, on the other hand, felt my blood pressure skyrocket and briefly wondered if I was about to start bleeding through all my bandages. Words escaped me; I was too nervous to speak.

"Still," Pride went on, "I'm truly glad you're all right. I look forward to having you serve as my imperial knight again. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

She reached out and caressed a part of my torso that wasn't bandaged. The chill of her delicate fingers brushed against my flushed skin. I flinched from this surprise attack.

"You feel a bit warm! Do you have a fever? Are you dizzy? I know the members of the Seventh Squadron have already examined you, but..."

I only started feeling warm and dizzy right this second! I would die before anyone wrenched those words out of my mouth, but I didn't know what else to say in the face of Pride's genuine concern. Witnessing this, Arthur and the other knights grew just as flustered as I was, and Stale politely suggested to Pride that it was time to get going.

"Please don't overexert yourself," she told me. "I would cry if anything ever happened to you, Vice Captain Eric."



The princess gently drew her hand up from my torso to cup my cheek. The smile she gave me was tinged with melancholy. At first, Pride's hand had a cooling effect on my skin—but then I felt hot all over.

Pride squeaked when my face turned as red as a beet. "Vice Captain?!" she cried, touching me everywhere—my face, neck, and bare torso—to see if I was feverish. But that only caused my body to burn hotter.

As much as I wanted to insist that I was all right, Pride's ferocious attack had left my head completely empty. The crown princess had come just to see *me*. Then she leaned in close, touched me, and said comforting words meant for me and me alone. Furthermore, she'd done so right when I was wallowing in my disappointment after going so long without seeing her. That made her sneak attack all the deadlier. I could tell the other knights were starting to worry I'd get so overwhelmed that I would bleed out on the spot.

"I didn't know you were here, Princess Pride."

A husky voice interrupted the moment, causing Pride and all the knights to turn toward the speaker. Roderick, our commander, had joined us. He loomed behind Pride's chair with a furrowed brow.

The mood in the room took on an edge now that the commander was among us. We knights greeted Roderick in almost perfect unison—and at the same time, Pride and Tiara said, "Commander!"

"I thought I ought to report on Her Highness's condition while things quieted down for the knights, and yet..."

Roderick studied my flushed face. Pride's touch on my exposed shoulder and neck had sent me into a near panic, and Roderick clearly knew it at first glance. He pressed his fingers to his wrinkled brow.

"Your Highness, it is improper for the crown princess to thoughtlessly touch a man's skin," the commander said.

His calm words served as a wake-up call to Pride. She looked nervously back

at me. My accursed blush had already spread from my face to my chest.

Pride shrieked, her own cheeks flushing this time. “I-I-I-I’m so sorry!” She scuttled backward, only for the cast on her left leg to catch on her chair. Stale and Arthur steadied her before the chair could tip over.

“Every knight in this room has been ordered to be on strict bed rest, just as you have,” the commander continued. “Please come back to visit them some other time.”

“Erm, at least allow me to address the knights with minor injuries...”

“No can do. They need to go without visitors so they can make a full recovery.”

Roderick shot a look at me that clearly said, *Especially if that visitor is the princess*. Pride nodded, still blushing. Stale smiled awkwardly at his sister’s rattled state and once more encouraged her to depart.

“Vice Captain Eric and all other knights—please take good care of yourselves!” Pride said.

Tiara and Stale all but dragged her out of the room. She waved as best as she could at all of us resting in our beds, but Arthur and her knights rushed her out before she could say more.

Roderick sighed. “I wish Her Highness would realize that bad habit of hers.”

The commander ordered me to lie back down, then turned his attention to the other knights. Everyone had forced themselves to sit up to catch a glimpse of Pride, with some equally flushed after witnessing that spectacle. If she’d gone through with her plan of visiting every last one of us, the Seventh Squadron would’ve had their hands full healing all the injured knights all over again. The crown princess’s powerful effect on us was no laughing matter.

As ordered, I collapsed back into bed. “I didn’t get to ask Her Highness about her injury,” I muttered, sulking. When I placed the back of my hand against my brow and slumped over, a member of the First Squadron rushed to my side,

fanning me and offering me a damp cloth to cool down.

“Good morning, Princess Pride,” Captain Alan and Captain Callum said as they appeared in my room for their shift the next morning.

The Chinensian maids had already finished helping me dress, and I said hello. I was in a good mood, as my leg could move freely again thanks to treatment from knights with special powers. I was certain that I would be fully recovered after two more days in this country.

Stale, meanwhile, filled me in on the state of things and our plans for the day, then gestured toward the door with his eyes. “The knights are already gathered outside. What would you like to do?”

“There are just as many here as there were yesterday,” Tiara added with a chuckle. I rubbed my temples.

Yesterday, after I announced my leg injury and visited Vice Captain Eric, all the knights with healing powers—even those outside of the Seventh Squadron—clustered outside of my room. One person with the power to heal injuries was all you needed to get the job done. They were capable of managing the pain, preventing decay, and reducing any bleeding or swelling. From there, all the patient had to do was wait and keep the injured part still to make a full recovery. Of course, the degree and speed of that recovery depended on how powerful the healer was. But being healed by multiple people wouldn’t increase the speed of the recovery. Though synergizing multiple healing powers could make the effect a bit more potent, such a technique was only necessary in the event of major, life-threatening injuries—not a simple fracture like mine.

There were plenty of knights and soldiers who needed treatment more desperately than I did, and if the healers were capable of synergizing their powers, I wished they would save it for Vice Captain Eric or the other severely wounded men instead. But Stale told me that those men had been the ones

who insisted on this in the first place. I thought the knights simply wanted their injured princess to heal quickly, or to send me back to Freesia as soon as possible, but it seemed more likely that it came purely from a place of concern.

Unable to reject such compassion, I'd ended up allowing the knights to treat me yesterday. I'd thanked them all and apologized for scaring them, but I never expected them to show up again today.

They had all returned, and this time they even came with Jael and Mart—two knights who had already been examining my leg. I felt guilty about making them attend to me two days in a row, so I glanced at Captain Alan and Captain Callum, who led all the Freesian knights. Captain Alan, with his short, dirty-blond hair and orange eyes, led the First Squadron; Captain Callum, whose eyes and hair were a matching reddish-brown, led the Third Squadron. The two of them grimaced and awkwardly rolled their shoulders at my cry for help.

"There was quite a commotion in the rest area already by the time we got back yesterday," Captain Alan remarked.

"Some of the reactions were a little unexpected," Captain Callum said, averting his eyes. He seemed to be enduring some uncomfortable recollection.

Captain Alan understood whatever it was and murmured in agreement. I cocked my head, but they both refused to explain any further.

"If it's an inconvenience to you, we can turn them down on your behalf," Captain Callum offered.

While I appreciated the sentiment, it didn't feel right to shoo the knights away when they were so anxious about my recovery. After mulling it over, I decided to accept their help.

I informed Stale of my decision, and he replied, "Yes, we'd all like for you to make a full recovery as soon as possible." Then he smiled and added the knights' visit to my morning plans.

Now that the knights had the chance to examine me, they surrounded me as

though I were about to undergo surgery. “We will now confirm the state of your injury, Your Highness.”

I shifted in place, uncomfortable with all the attention. They took a look at my right leg, which was almost completely healed. A doctor would’ve been equally capable of this evaluation, but medical treatment carried out by those with special powers was no normal doctor’s visit. People who hailed from countries without special powers wouldn’t understand it.

Thanks to their generous attention, my right had healed right up and would no longer require a cast or bandages. As for my left leg, well, it still needed another two or three days of treatment. Only yesterday, however, the knights estimated it would take another four or five days. Their combined treatment really did seem to be expediting the process.

“Thank you all very much. You’ve been a terrific help. Now please take good care of the other injured people too,” I said, smiling at them.

They responded in perfect unison, their shout making my ears ring. The strongest among them made the room’s curtains and decorations quiver. A few of them flushed red as they realized just how loud they’d been.

Tiara giggled, her hands clapped over her ears. “We’ll probably have a victory banquet once we’re back in Freesia, don’t you think?”

The knights held back from yelling this time, but enthusiasm shone in their eyes at her suggestion. Once my leg was healed and my return home was assured, the United Hanazuo Kingdom was going to host a victory banquet for us. Tiara was right, though—we would probably have one in Freesia as well. It probably wouldn’t occur till everything had settled down, maybe in a month or so. If possible, I wanted to invite King Lance and our other allies to join us.

“Yeah, you’re right. I can’t wait,” I said.

I smiled, feeling oddly like this conversation was raising a death flag. The knights’ eyes lit up at the confirmation of a banquet in their future. I wished that everyone, including the captains, could attend. Judging by the way some of

the knights glanced at them, though, that much was still uncertain.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum had famously saved Freesia's crown princess, but they had also allowed me to suffer an injury. This complicated situation, which had the potential to bar them from the banquets, must have inspired in the other knights a blend of envy, respect, and concern.

Knock-knock.

"Yes? Who's there?" I called.

After a moment or two of silence, someone responded, "It's Gilbert, Your Highness."

Eeeeeek! His deep tone made me stiffen. My smile wavered, and when I looked at Tiara, her lips were twitching too. The knights visiting me for treatment glanced my way, perhaps wondering if they should vacate while Prime Minister Gilbert paid me a visit. *No, please stay here with me!*

Prime Minister Gilbert's imposing presence on the other side of that door terrified me, and I hadn't even answered yet. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a memory of my past life rose to the surface: the ominous number that played as one very famous shark drew closer and closer to its unsuspecting victim.

"P-please, come in!" I said, correcting my posture as Prime Minister Gilbert slowly opened the door and entered. His already narrow eyes scrutinized me. Those eyes of his matched the light-blue hue of his hair, which was tied at his neck and draped over one shoulder.

Prime Minister Gilbert was smiling, but I almost wished he wasn't, given how terrifyingly hollow it was. *Yes, I get it, I get it! I know exactly why you're here! That's why I want to flee the scene!*

"Good morning, Princess Pride," he said. "I'm sorry to disturb you. May I have a moment of your time?"

The prime minister explained that he'd managed to work a break into his

packed schedule to come see me. I knew I couldn't send him away. He then motioned toward the knights, asking if it was all right to speak in front of them. I nodded and gestured for him to sit in a chair next to my bed. The knights quickly pulled the chair out for him as he approached. Even as he took a seat, Prime Minister Gilbert's piercing gaze never once left me.

"My apologies for interrupting your treatment. I believe you already know what I'm here to ask you about."

I knew it! I was right! Unable to contain my fear any longer, I shouted, "I'm sorry!" The knights at the foot of my bed startled at my scream.

"The blood oath, right?!" I continued. "I really am sorry that I never told you about it! It was so reckless of me to do! I simply didn't tell you because—"

"You didn't want to cause me unnecessary concern. I'm aware."

He spoke politely, but the ice-cold sharpness to his words sent a chill down my spine. Quivering, I pressed my lips together and stayed silent. I stared at the prime minister, unable to move a muscle. Some of the knights, raising their heads, sensed the unusual atmosphere of the room.

The blood oath was a ceremony I'd performed in front of the Chinensian people on the eve of the war. Prime Minister Gilbert had only found out about it now that the war was over.

"Princess Pride," he said, "I already said everything I wanted to say to you when you were hurt. However, I am *not* implying that as long as you're free from injury, you may do as you please..."

Of course not. I swallowed the response on the tip of my tongue.

Prime Minister Gilbert sighed, then closed his eyes to center himself. He kept them closed when he spoke again. "I hesitate to say all this in front of others..."

His murmur was eerily quiet; I braced myself.

He then rattled off such a firm lecture that it had me reeling: "Seeing as how you've already taken a blood oath, I gather there's no need for me to explain

the ritual. However, consider the *unthinkable* outcome of King Yohan or someone else infringing on the contract. What was your plan in such a case? Saying that you simply trusted them isn't a good enough excuse. If something really *had* gone wrong, saving Chinensis only to lose you would bring Freesia no joy or pride whatsoever. Did you take any of that into account? On top of that, what if the terms were broken and, as you so *willingly* promised them, you were to be burned at the stake? Do you think we would simply smile and wave goodbye as they carried you off? Perhaps you would accept such an outcome, but the country of Freesia most certainly would not. Did you consider that, in a worst-case scenario, a fruitless war between the kingdoms of Chinensis and Freesia could break out? I am not angry that you failed to inform me about the blood oath. In fact, as the prime minister of Freesia, I am responsible for my own failure in this matter. I was incapable of finding out something that even the Freesian knights and Chinensian soldiers were privy to."

Each and every word out of Prime Minister Gilbert's mouth was like a knife to the heart. I had no idea what to say. I should have carried myself with dignity in front of the knights, but throughout the speech, I just wanted to shout, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! You're right about everything!" I felt even worse about keeping the secret from Prime Minister Gilbert once I thought back to yesterday's conversation with Commander Roderick. As a cold sweat dripped down my neck, Prime Minister Gilbert resumed his persistent attack.

"Think about what would have happened if our country lost the war and you were forced to go through with the oath's terms. I would be responsible, despite failing to find out about it until after the fact."

Prime Minister Gilbert's rant was a match held beneath my hand, the scorching sensation worsening at a steady rate. If we'd lost the war and Prime Minister Gilbert found out afterward, he would've been tortured by his own perceived failings. Just picturing the outcome made my heart throb painfully.

"I hope you'll reflect on this and never act so rashly again. We could have lost the war, suffered massive damages, and had to witness your execution on top

of all the rest.”

I squeezed the blanket on my lap and chewed my lip, desperately fighting off the tears stinging the corners of my eyes.

“We still would have fought to the death to protect you,” he added.

This admittance emerged so soft and quiet that it chilled the entire room. It was the most tender tone he’d used this entire time, and it made my heart ache worse than all his biting recriminations.

“That’s right. We would have fought, all of us. The knights, the royal family, the citizens, and myself too. It may have become a historic tragedy. That is simply how motivated we are to keep you in our lives. That would be the outcome, no matter what your own wishes were, Your Highness. There can be no doubt that everyone else feels the same.”

He glanced at the knights clustered around us. The men flinched as Prime Minister Gilbert’s cool eyes turned on them, but they held their composure as best they could. Most bowed their heads when I tried to look their way. I very well could have forced these men into yet another unnecessary war. Oh, what a fool I’d been.

I bit down on my trembling lip, dredging up the words I’d been chanting inside my head this whole time.

“I’m sorry.”

Prime Minister Gilbert closed his eyes and dipped his head. Then he leaned in close so he could speak to me directly. “I said it once, and I’ll say it again: you are precious to us, Princess Pride. Too precious to simply let go of. Just as you are willing to put yourself in harm’s way for the sake of a single soul, we are willing to do the same for you.”

I nodded at his explanation. It hurt to hear how much grief I’d caused others, but he was right.

“Please be sure not to forget that,” the prime minister said gently.

Then he stood up as if nothing had happened. He bowed to Tiara and me, thanked each knight, asked them to look after me, and left without another word.

Despite the scolding, I was grateful. It was just like when Commander Roderick came to the infirmary the other day. Having people in my life willing to scold me at my age wasn't cruel; they were helping me. I could still see Prime Minister Gilbert's pained expression in my mind's eye.

I don't want to hurt them like this ever again.

I recited those words in my head like a prayer, then let my lids flutter shut.

Pride Royal Ivy.

The otome game titled *Our Ray of Light*, also known as "ORL" by its fans, was popular enough to be turned into an anime series. I, Pride Royal Ivy, was the unbelievably wicked last boss queen from the first game. I'd regained my memories of my past life when I turned eight years old in this world, and now that the war was over, I'd prevented every last tragedy in the lives of the game's love interests.

Cedric, this country's prince, had been the final love interest to appear. The two of us had managed to prevent the United Hanazuo Kingdom's invasion and capture. Except, no, it wasn't just us. All of the love interests from the game—as well as many, many others—banded together to save this country. Without them, we wouldn't have been able to protect the United Hanazuo Kingdom. The enemy was just too cruel and ferocious.

The battle began long before the eve or the dawn of the actual war.

"May I be allowed to handle this man myself? I'm very interested in hearing what he has to say."

It began the moment Prime Minister Gilbert managed to pin down an informant from Rajah.

Chapter 2:

Companions and the Start of the War

IT WAS THE NIGHT before our war for the United Hanazuo Kingdom began.

“Forgive me for failing to introduce myself. My name is Gilbert Butler, and I serve as the prime minister of Freesia,” I said to the old man who entered the parlor. I kept my tone cheery, and the fellow responded with tired eyes and a curt nod.

King Lance was currently delivering his address before the start of the war. With the clock ticking toward a late hour, I sat in a parlor of the Chinensian palace with this old gent as my guest. I gestured for “Lord Hanmu,” as Prince Cedric called him, to take a seat. The man cast a suspicious gaze my way but slowly lowered his aging body into the chair before me.

I got right to the point. “My apologies for asking you here out of the blue. I just happened to overhear you mention that you had some information. Would it be possible to discuss this with you? I don’t mind if it ends up taking some time, of course. If you’d please—”

“What, you actually want to hear about that?” he said. “No, first you tell me what you were talking about. Something or other about the sneak attacks in Freesia...”

“We ought to rise up not as the United Hanazuo Kingdom, with those heretic Chinensians...”

“My kingdom recently suffered from surprise attacks, threats made against our maids, intruders in the castle, and all sorts of foolish deeds...”

I knew it. The exchange I’d heard in front of the palace gates replayed in my mind. Although he had so rudely interrupted me, I was more surprised that he shifted so readily to my topic of choice. That must have been why he was so

eager to speak with me all of a sudden.

“What are you referring to, exactly?” I asked, dodging his question.

“Don’t play dumb!” he snapped. “What surprise attacks happened in Freesia? When was this? Why would you leave your country at a time like this just to meddle in my homeland’s war? Do big countries like yours just love strife?!”

The old man jabbed a quaking finger at me. His shoulders shook with each breath after his tirade as he glared at me with bloodshot eyes. I let my face go slack, smiling and shrugging in an exaggerated manner. Growing impatient, the old man slammed his fists on the table.

“Why, you ask?” I said. “Because our country didn’t suffer any damage. The criminals have already been taken into custody, after all.”

“They’ve...they’ve what?!” His eyes went wide. His balled fists shook on top of the table.

“We still don’t know who they are, exactly, but we can tell that they were just pawns. When it was my turn to deal with such insignificant grunts, they were so weak that I ended up breaking their bones. In all honesty, I have no interest in the battles of other countries so long as Freesia is safe. I would like to get home and see my wife and child as soon as possible.” I sighed, staring off into the distance.

The old man held still and silent for a few seconds. I returned my focus to him and donned a pleasant smile once more to smooth over the situation. “Ah, my apologies. Please keep what I just said to yourself. I will devote myself fully to helping Cercis, seeing as how you’ve already compensated us.”

“In that case, how would you like a little extra?” The old man’s voice suddenly deepened. Those bloodshot eyes squinted, carefully watching for a change in my demeanor.

“What do you mean by that?” My smile faded. I looked straight at Lord Hanmu.

The wrinkles on his face tensed as he flashed a vulgar grin. “What if another country—say, Copelandii, for example—were to line your pockets for your cooperation?”

“That’s an interesting proposal. I suppose it depends on what’s being offered. I have devoted everything to my homeland of Freesia and could never betray it, no matter the reward. However, perhaps a small payment to turn on some other country could be arranged. A bribe to a high-ranking Freesian official goes a long way, after all.”

I offered a sardonic smirk, and the old man grinned wider, revealing crooked teeth. “In that case, how does 40 percent of Chinensis’s minerals sound?”

Chinensis was the land of minerals. They produced large, high-quality gems that were treated as luxury items throughout the world. Even now, many kingdoms sought those minerals for themselves and approached Chinensis for a prospective alliance. Cercis, with their gold veins, was in the same position. The old man was offering me 40 percent of their share of gems, worth more than any ordinary person could spend in a lifetime. It could pay the living expenses of Freesia’s entire lower classes—with some left to spare.

“I quite like the sound of that,” I told him. Open. Friendly.

“Of course you do,” Lord Hanmu replied, looking satisfied.

I made a show of swallowing hard. “What, specifically, would I need to do?”

Lord Hanmu’s eyes glinted. “It’s simple: just do as I do. Report everything you know about Freesia’s plans and actions to Copelandii. I can lend you one of my birds to contact them. Since you’re the prime minister, it should be easy for you to gather information. First thing in the morning, I want you to withdraw all Freesians from this country before Copelandii’s invasion can begin. Do that, and all those minerals are yours.”

He punctuated his orders with a nasty cackle. If he was offering me such a generous reward for my betrayal, his cut must have been even larger.

“Who shall I report to? Also, are you quite sure it’s all right for me to take 40 percent? What will be left for everyone else?”

“Just send your reports by bird. It will take the information to Copelandii without delay. Don’t worry about sharing your portion. It’s just the two of us working on this.”

When my eyes flew wide in a display of shock, Lord Hanmu chortled. I opted to press him further while I still had him in a good mood.

“Now that I think of it, what of Prince Cedric? Is he working toward the same end as us?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Prince Cedric will be the one to rule over the entirety of Cercis once Chinensis is destroyed. I wanted his help, but it looks like I’ve got you instead. Aren’t you lucky? Once this is all over, we’ll place him on the throne instead of that fool of a king. *He’s* the reason Lord Bertrand met his fate,” Lord Hanmu grumbled to himself, so I patted him on the back to cheer him up.

“I’m sure it must have been very hard on your old body to do all this alone, Lord Hanmu. But now you have me with you. Tell me, what have you managed to accomplish so far?”

“Damn right it was hard. Not a single soul shared my lofty ambitions, and all my other partners grew old and kicked the bucket... I write down this kingdom’s every move and send those letters out every single day. I nearly collapsed when I heard that Prince Cedric had run off in a carriage somewhere. I never thought he’d bring all of Freesia back with him. After everything I’ve done, my reports don’t hold a candle to the information that comes in from Copelandii.”

“Oh my! Every single day? I can hardly imagine. Have you written today’s letter yet? I’d be happy to write it for you, if necessary.”

“Sure, I’d appreciate that. It hurts my eyes to write in the moonlight. A burden I only have to bear for a little while longer...”

“If it’s such a burden, how about I bring it all to an end for you?”

The old man froze. For a second I thought he’d stopped breathing entirely, but eventually he turned his head toward me, watching me with wide eyes. I gave my most heartfelt smile, dragging my hand from his back up to his shoulder.

“You’ve had a stroke of good luck,” I said. “Starting today, you’ll get to sit in a jail cell with no duties whatsoever. You’ll even get to spend the rest of your life in the same castle as your beloved Prince Cedric.”

“How dare you!” he growled. He shuddered beneath my touch, face flushed with anger. The old man reached shaky hands toward my neck, but I batted them aside and twisted his arm behind his back.

He cried out in pain. I loosened my grip, then rose from my seat to place a knee on his spine and pin him down on his chair.

“Thank you for sharing so much fascinating information with me, Lord Hanmu. Now I see why Prince Cedric calls you an ‘old fossil.’”

Though the United Hanazuo Kingdom was a single country now, it had once been two very different nations. I had heard that the high-ranking officials of both countries held deep-seated grudges against each other, but I never expected to see the remnants of those grievances still alive and well today.

It was fortunate that King Lance and King Yohan had tied the royal families together so closely. At least in their case, I’d truly detected no animosity.

“All right then,” I said. “I’ve heard all I need to hear, so I’ll leave the rest to the Cercian soldiers.”

They would start by searching the old man’s home and capturing all the birds he used to communicate with his sources. Then they would fabricate today’s report. With the attack set to kick off first thing in the morning, the men would be working all night on this bit of subterfuge. Yet the tightness of the timeframe also left us in a more secure position. The old man was probably the one who’d

reported that Prince Cedric had left the country, but he apparently hadn't realized that the prince had gone to Freesia.

"You don't care what happens to your family?!" the old man roared.

A bit startled, I looked down and saw that he'd jerked his head to the side so he could glare up at me.

"What do you mean by that?"

I leveraged my body weight into the knee holding him down. The old man's body creaked and complained. He choked out a scream.

"You're the one who captured our Copelandian spies! Of course we'd take revenge! Mark my words, it's coming, even if we fail to put a stop to the Freesian reinforcements!"

His voice was growing ragged from the pain, but I didn't let up on his wrist or back. Still the old man lobbed out threats.

"You said you have a wife and kid, didn't you?! Then they're the ones who will receive retribution! The men sent to your land are all disposable to Copelandii! They have no home to return to if they fail!"

I see. So they're disposable. Indeed, there was one spy in Freesia who had yet to be captured. This meant the others probably wouldn't flee, as they would know that only death awaited them in their homelands. It all made sense.

I continued to twist the old man's arm, feeling every tiny crack of his bones through my grip.

"I'll take revenge on your family for getting in my way, I swear!" he snarled. "You may be allowed to live as a matter of safety, but that won't last forever! Let me go! If you swear your loyalty to me, I'll put in a good word for you! But if you don't, by the time you return, your home might not even be there any—"

Snap.

"Aaaaaghhh!"

An agonized scream tore through the parlor, loud enough to disturb the rest of the castle. I slapped a hand over his disgusting mouth.

“Oh dear, I apologize,” I whispered in his ear. “It looks like I finally broke it this time. But if you don’t quiet down, I’ll have to break the other one too.”

A cold sweat coated the old man’s skin as he desperately tried to resist.

“Heavens, you truly do have the same mentality as those bothersome spies.”

I released his useless arm and slowly spun the other while he was still writhing in pain.

“You really think I’ll relent because you mentioned my family? As a prime minister who also runs a household, I’m prepared for a little more than that.”

I pressed my knee into his back again. Now more helpless than before, the old man cried out. He thrashed in pain, wriggled off the chair, and fell onto his belly on the floor. I placed my foot on his back.

“Maybe *you’ve* been abandoned by everyone, but I was blessed with people in my life who will save me,” I said.

Slowly, I leaned my weight onto him, feeling his aching bones creaking under my foot.

“However...”

I yanked his wrist around. His breathing went ragged and a fresh slick of sweat coated his body.

“You continue to bring up my family over and over again. That’s what enrages me most of all.”

Snap.

With a simple twist, the man opened his mouth to scream anew—but this time, I was ready; I quickly covered his mouth.

“Don’t worry. I only dislocated the joint.”

I stroked his back as his breathing grew fainter. Releasing his arm, I circled

around to look down at his face.

“All right, then. I suppose I should call the guards. Well, that’s what I’d *like* to do, anyway...”

The old man could no longer manage anything other than labored breaths. I smiled at him, crouching to bring my face close to his. He made to squirm away, and I had to bite back a wicked grin.

Just then, I recalled the words I’d whispered to Prince Cedric when I agreed to take the old man away.

“Please leave all villains to me.”

I had to be the one to deal with scoundrels like this man. Following Prince Cedric and Princess Pride had yielded an unexpected catch: the moment I cast my line, I snagged a rather large fish. The old man had appeared on the eve of the war, acting awfully suspicious. I’d also been a bit curious about his demand for Prince Cedric to join him in abandoning Chinensis.

“I wouldn’t want you raising a fuss while I take you to your cell.”

The others would be worried if they heard him muttering threats against my family the whole way. Prince Stale may not mind, but Princess Pride, Princess Tiara, and Sir Arthur would certainly be upset. That was the last thing I needed. I considered ripping out the last of the old man’s teeth to keep his speech to a minimum, but that would prevent us from obtaining any information from him in the future.

Instead, I struck his neck to knock him unconscious. The blow wasn’t fatal, though I feared I’d broken his neck at first. I called to the guards outside my door, asked them to take the old man to a cell, and instructed them to report this development to King Lance.

I watched them drag him away, the old man’s words still prickling at my mind.

“You don’t care what happens to your family?!”

“They’re the ones who will receive retribution!”

“I’ll take revenge on your family for getting in my way, I swear!”

There was a communication specialist stationed at my home. The castle would receive word if anything happened, and they had yet to contact me about anything relating to my loved ones. For the moment, they were safe.

All the same, it was only a temporary peace of mind. If someone attacked the communication specialist, unthinkable as it might be, the castle would never know. The old man would be proven right—retribution would fall on my family, and I would have no idea it was even happening.

Communication specialists could only use their special powers to transmit one-way. I could go to one in this palace and ask for their help, but it would be a one-way transmission; we couldn’t get information from Freesia in return unless a specialist there sent something back to our coordinates. So long as I couldn’t lay eyes on my wife through a transmission, there was no guarantee that she was safe.

We also hadn’t been able to inform outsiders of our location during the three-day trip to Cercis, so I’d only ever received transmissions from the castle. Once we arrived in Cercis, I became too busy to contact my family.

I could call for a communication specialist right now, have them contact my home, and confirm my family’s safety with my own two eyes...

“But right now, we have to search the old fellow’s home, take one of his messenger birds, and send it to Copelandii with a forged report. There’s no time for anything else.”

I still had a mountain of tasks before me, and on top of that, the invasion would begin at dawn. There was simply no time. Everyone in the castle, myself included, was rushing around to prepare for the troops’ deployment. I needed to focus.

It’s all right. They have guards and a communication specialist with them. I’m sure they’re safe.

My love may have belonged to my wife and daughter, but my life belonged to the royal family, and my time belonged to the citizens.

The vows I'd made four years ago, the ones I'd repeated over and over again, sprang to the fore. Those vows, those priorities, weren't going to change. I'd given my life and time to the royal family and my people. I couldn't wield my power as the prime minister for my family's sake unless it was absolutely necessary.

I was steadfast in my resolve on this, prepared to stick to the path I'd pledged to follow.

“Chaaaaarge! Take the town later! We'll bring the castle down first!”

The invaders screamed with rage, their eyes glinting as they brandished their weapons. Rajah's colonies—Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana—were attempting to invade the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

Dust clouds sprang into the air. Hooves thundered over the ground, joined by the clomp of heavy, armored boots. Debris and gunpowder choked everyone's throats in a grim reminder of the deadliness of the battlefield. All the blood and sweat stank something foul, but not a single man had the levity to plug his nose.

The defensive war for the United Hanazuo Kingdom began with a vicious enemy ambush. Their troops did not only approach by land; they also drifted over the battlefield in blimps, dropping bombs directly on the front lines in the north. That was where Freesian knights had gathered, but the explosions destroyed their weapons and ate away their reserves. Everyone had assumed that Chinensis, one half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, would be the enemy's target, but the ambush shattered that notion. Thus, sending the majority of their firepower to the border of Chinensis backfired, swiftly producing a wave of refugees fleeing Chinensis while totally unprotected from the enemy's aerial barrage.

The refugees ran and ran, only to arrive at what had become yet another

battlefield. They had no choice but to take cover underground or in any building that still stood, whereupon they could cower and pray that the shelter provided some safety from the chaos. Hopefully the invading troops would never spot them on sweeps of the area, lest they suffer the same fate as so many of the structures around them.

“Kill anyone who gets in your way!”

“Push forward as a group! Take them all out!”

The enemy soldiers screamed one after another. They displayed not even the slightest consideration for the lives of the citizens who had taken shelter as they broke through the gates into Cercis. The refugees had nowhere to run.

Enemy troops swarmed through the broken gates. Only when they reached a village farther along did the Freesian knights and Cercian soldiers halt their advance. However, with the gates unprotected, the defending forces were nearly overwhelmed by the never-ending stream of enemies pouring in across the border. Reinforcements were rushed out to the western tower of Chinensis, which Freesian knights guarded under Pride’s command, and to the eastern tower, guarded by the Chinensian army under King Lance. But it still wasn’t enough. Soldiers from Alata flooded past the gates without end. No one could stop them.

Not until now, at least.

BOOOOOOOOM!

A terrific roar erupted, blasting back the enemy trying to get past the gates. Smoke rose up immediately afterward. The ones who’d already made it through had to slow down and reassess their position.

I watched the soldiers slow their pace, combing a hand through my dark-blue hair. A few dozen knights followed me, but we were a tiny squadron at best. Really, we were protecting the large, horse-drawn wagons behind us. Our tiny force likely didn’t seem like much of a threat to the enemy, however. Plus, we weren’t Freesian knights with special powers. These knights belonged to me,

Leon Adonis Coronaria of the Kingdom of Anemone.

“There’re a lot more enemies than I expected,” I said to myself. “More injured too. I wonder if Alata’s entire army is here to invade.”

Our enemies shook off whatever had halted their steps and marched toward us. Some even sprinted at the castle, assuming my few dozen knights couldn’t hold them back. Instead of panicking, I calmly reached into my uniform and pulled out three small metal objects.

Hand grenades.

Removing the pins, I tossed them at the enemy soldiers. Explosions bloomed on the battlefield, followed by screams of agony. A handful of enemy troops tried to flee, but my knights quickly took them out. One of the grenades produced only a cloud of smoke, obscuring the area to confuse and harry the enemy.

“You’re not going any farther than that,” I said.

My vicious smile must have proven a stark contrast to my rather feminine features and jade-green eyes. As the firstborn prince of Anemone, I had no need to be here, yet I’d arrived with reinforcements for Pride and her Freesian knights. To enemy soldiers used to barking out orders in the heat of battle, a calm and collected princeling was surely an unexpected sight.

I strode elegantly toward the enemy soldiers, stopping in the center of the broken gates. My knights stood behind me, forming an imposing barrier. We couldn’t take up all that space on our own; the enemy could still try to sidestep us. Yet they hesitated, clearly worried about that unexplained explosion we’d set off earlier.

“All units, surround me,” I said, quietly enough for only the Anemonian knights to hear.

The knights spread out, encircling me and our wagons. They fanned out their weapons in all directions, looking for all the world like one giant thorny

blossom.

Clank, clank. The strange metallic sound kept the enemy soldiers wide-eyed and wondering, clearly puzzled as to our intentions. We could try firing guns at them, but again, we were so few that it would hardly matter. They held steady and observed us, knowing they had the advantage in numbers. Even so, when I held up a small metal item, they shrank back. Guns could fire a couple of bullets, but an explosive they didn't understand was much more frightening.

I didn't go right for the pin. Instead, I paused, motioning with my free hand for the knights to spread out even more. I narrowed my eyes, glaring resolutely at the enemy.

"Step one: take out the enemy forces around the Cercian border. Begin."

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

Gunshots cracked through the air. Within only a few seconds, dozens if not hundreds of bullets shot at the enemy troops, leaving them no time to react. Men and horses fell to the ground, pierced by the projectiles.

The next soldiers in line cried out in disbelief at the weapons we brandished.

"What just happened?!"

"That's impossible!"

A gun could fire a single bullet at a time and with a limited range. However, the guns we possessed had just fired multiple shots at once, with more force and distance than anyone had ever seen. And just when we seemed to run out of bullets, we rotated while maintaining our circular formation, bringing in the next round of "machine guns."

I was certain they'd never heard of these weapons, and they definitely couldn't make sense of them. The kingdom of Anemone was the only place on the entire continent familiar with these guns. Anemone had obtained this state-of-the-art weaponry—the guns and grenades both—thanks to our trade

agreements with countries from all around the world.

In no time at all, we cleared the Cercian border of enemy troops. Witnessing the massacre, the surviving enemy soldiers gulped, making to flee for their stronghold. But the ones behind them were still marching forward, unaware, and shouted at their brethren to continue the assault.

A bullet came flying toward me, and I casually leaned my head to one side, dodging it with ease. I didn't even need to look toward the source—and although I'd nearly missed him, the gunman's shot had given away his location. As the leader of my detachment, I knew I'd be targeted. I ordered my knights to take down the culprit and everyone around him, an order they executed swiftly.

“Commencing step two: deployment.”

At my signal, the knights around the wagons began to unload a few dozen disc-shaped metal objects. I took one for myself first, adjusted something on the disc, then sent it sailing over the ground, in between the feet of the knights surrounding me. It didn't detonate immediately like the other smaller bombs. It simply slid toward the enemy soldiers before toppling over. They clearly thought it was nothing but scrap metal; one even attempted to kick it away. The moment he did, a deep boom shook the air and tore apart the ground where the man stood.

The explosion didn't have as big of a radius as a hand grenade, but it packed more of a punch. Everyone in the blast zone let out shrieks of panic.

“I wonder if any of them know what makes it blow up,” I murmured to myself.

I signaled again. This time, the knights behind those with machine guns took out more “land mines” and began throwing them outside the gate. The land mines slid across the ground, eventually tumbling over in front of the soldiers or between their feet. In a blink, dozens of explosives surrounded the enemy. Unsure of how they detonated, if they were safe to touch, or when they might explode, the men began to retreat from the border line.

“Stand by and intercept. I'll be back in a moment.”

With these orders, I hefted a large weapon. I stepped outside the ring of gun-wielding knights protecting me, with one hand on the sword at my hip and the other supporting the weapon perched on my left shoulder. My men told me to be careful, but I merely flashed them a charming smile and pressed on past the Cercian gates. Some of the enemy troops had backed away from the land mines. I passed right by them, stepping over the explosives. They didn't know that one had to step on the mines to detonate them, but I did, and I wove through them without a care.

My gentle countenance and casual stride seemed to confuse the enemy even further. I stood in my own knights' line of fire, as well as within striking range of my enemies. If they attacked, my knights would not be able to protect me—as I imagined they preferred their prince *not* riddled with holes.

Yet none of the enemy soldiers stopped me. My bold strides, the mysterious explosives at everyone's feet, and the metal item on my shoulder made them hesitate. They gulped in anticipation, clearly racking their brains for a way to kill me. But it was no use.

"Damn it!"

A soldier raised his sword aloft, enraged at my unbothered presence among his brethren. Just before he could sink his blade into the exposed flesh left unprotected by my armor, I drew my sword and absorbed the blow.

Clang!

Metal collided with metal as I blocked the enemy's attack in a flicker. Then I twisted my blade to free myself and plunged the tip into the enemy's arm. His scream of pain tore through the air.

"Good call on the blade," I said. "You'd hit your comrades if you fired a gun at this distance."

All the other soldiers drew their blades with a loud *shiiing*—then ran toward me at once.

“Whoa!” I sputtered in surprise at this furious assault, but I neatly dodged their initial attacks. I deflected the follow-up hits with my sword, smacking blades away before slicing into shoulders and arms...all from the middle of the group of soldiers.

“An ironclad rule of royalty,” I said. “Kings or those who will become kings must never dirty their hands with blood.”

Even as I spoke, I avoided swords flying at me from every direction and struck out for counterattacks. Then I pressed on, calm as could be.

“A person who takes a life out of spite or for personal gain can never lead his people. Outside of an official execution, such an act would defile his hands. It’s only natural.”

I moved forward, nimbly evading attacks all the while. Sometimes I manipulated the enemy into missing me and striking each other instead.

“However, there is one exception... A reason a future king may get blood on his hands that doesn’t involve a death penalty.”

Just as a soldier raised his sword up high, I ducked low. The blade whistled through the air and pierced another soldier instead of me. I stayed crouched and, spotting a land mine, kicked the device—in a spot I knew was safe, mind you—toward the soldiers behind me. It detonated the instant one of them stepped on it, sending dust particles raining down on me.

“There are times of crisis in which we must protect our fellow royals or ourselves. But that’s not all...”

The moment I regained my footing, a particularly large soldier swung his great sword at me, sending my blade flying out of my hand. Right when the enemy began to swarm me, ready to finish me off for good...I whipped out the concealed pistol in my opposite hand, pointing it right between the big man’s brows.

“We must also put our lives on the line in times of war to bring honor to our

country. I would gladly dirty my hands for that.”

Bang! The crack of the gunshot punctuated my cold pronouncement.

The man before me collapsed, blood gushing from his head, and I calmly retrieved my sword. I leaned forward, then broke out into a sprint. As I dashed, I swung my sword, aiming for the gaps in the soldiers’ armor. One had hardly finished screaming before I yanked out my blade and plunged it into the next. My charge took me farther away from the knights back at the Cercian gate; that meant the soldiers behind me were blocking my retreat.

Finding myself trapped amid the enemy, I smiled to myself—pleasantly, silently. The enemy soldiers raised their swords once more, but I sheathed my blade.

“I’m sorry, but I simply can’t give you my life.”

I could see them wondering if this was some sort of surrender, but I still had my gun. I fired off a round of shots, striking soldiers in the head. They didn’t even have time to react before they toppled to the ground. When I ran out of ammo, I chunked the gun aside for everyone to see. The enemy forces grinned, apparently believing I was truly disarmed.

“Every part of me belongs to my beloved Anemone, you see.”

I threw my blue overcoat open to reveal my shining armor...and a staggering array of weapons. I retrieved one of the two massive guns I kept in my coat and flicked off the safety in one swift motion. There would be no retreating from me.

My small machine gun burst to life.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

I spun in a circle, mowing the enemy soldiers down. Those who weren’t immediately struck screamed and whirled around to flee. Some tripped the land mines in their desperation to escape, setting off a secondary attack from

underfoot.

Machine gun in hand, I resumed my march. Nothing stirred around me anymore, and neither man nor blade came my way. Once I knew I was safe, I broke into a sprint toward the border of Cercis.

“This thing is pretty small. It doesn’t actually pierce armor.”

I smiled mischievously. It didn’t *need* to pierce armor now that the enemy had gotten a practical demonstration. Surely they’d flee at the mere sight of our machine guns. Never mind that my smaller model was nowhere near as powerful as the big ones my knights were carting around. The psychological damage was already done.

Pushing through the crowd of soldiers, I spotted a flag outside of Cercis that likely marked Alata’s headquarters. A long line of troops waited outside it; they must have been on standby this whole time, sending their cohorts in to attack. They sat atop their horses, weapons drawn, glaring at me from a distance. These troops were no fools. As soon as their invasion slowed to a halt, the remaining soldiers had retreated back far enough to regroup and prepare themselves. My small gun alone might not be enough to get through such a large group, but I stayed calm and calculated the distance between myself and their base: about 500 meters.

The soldiers from Alata aimed their guns and drew their bowstrings, prepared to fire at their commander’s order, but I knew I seemed an anomaly to them. Surely it would take more than just one man to break through their advancing forces.

I smoothly returned my weapon to the inside of my overcoat, exchanging it for a small item resembling a hand grenade. I pulled the pin and tossed it underhand at the enemies. It fell far short of the 500-meter target, erupting between myself and the troops. But the smoke it produced provided perfect cover for me.

Enemies flailed within the smoke, trying to figure out if an explosion was

imminent, and I grabbed for the weapon I'd been balancing on my shoulder all this time. In half the time it might've taken any normal man, I made all the necessary adjustments to get it ready to fire. The moment the smoke began to dissipate, I took aim. Their commander noticed what I was holding and roared for them to fire, but it was too late.

I shot my "bazooka" straight at the enemy headquarters. A massive projectile arced through the air, exploding right on the base behind the troops.

Ka-boooooooooooooom!

The enemy spun around, watching in horror as their base crumbled; they didn't even remember to fire back at me. Their headquarters had been reduced to a heap of rubble and flame. By the time they turned back toward me, I was already firing a second shot. This time, it rose up into the air and came down directly on top of them. The ten-centimeter-thick steel plate plunged to the ground, unleashing its full destructive force on the lightly armored troops.

Of all the noble gents in this world, I always felt I had a particularly wounded heart. I hadn't hated studying things like refinement, etiquette, fencing, and martial arts. In fact, I'd enjoyed it. I was supposed to become the perfect prince.

But one day, that future shattered.

Rather than give up, I strengthened my kingdom's commerce. I dealt with many types of weapons through imports and exports, and I learned all kinds of complicated aiming and handling techniques. Anyone could have learned to wield these devices with a bit of proper training, but I invested a substantial amount of time in machine guns especially. The few dozen knights who traveled with me on this day were also skilled in the use of machine guns.

The weapons' deceptively simple appearance hid all sorts of complexities, including their nature; how to handle them before, during, and after use; their weaknesses; their strengths; and their practical applications. A layman would have no idea how to maximize a machine gun's functionality. Furthermore, foreign lands used vastly different weapons, with new varieties always cropping

up and old ones phasing out. There was only one person who understood every last one of the hundreds of weapons within his own country—it was me, prince of the commerce nation of Anemone.

Functioning as a trading hub meant that we were constantly exposed to state-of-the-art weapons. By the time we exported them, we'd already learned a great deal about each weapon's specific uses. This provided an opportunity to test out new weaponry so we could identify which products customers most desired. Normally, this process took quite some time—but I had such a knack for it, I could master a weapon after only a handful of uses.

Though we may have been Freesia's mere allies to some, Anemone had achieved standout military knowledge and power among all the nations on this continent...and now was the time to brandish it. As the perfect crown prince, I would do so with my very own hands.

"All right, then. Looks like I'm not out of shots just yet."

I raised the bazooka on my shoulder, standing there in front of the decimated enemy base and ranks—all of them wiped out by a single weapon. I tilted my head and offered them my most alluring smile.



“Would you like to witness the power of my beloved country one more time?”

My smile reached my eyes as they blanched before me.

“Now’s our chance! All units, charge the castle!”

“Capture King Yohan! Report back once he’s in custody!”

“Don’t kill him! Just take him down!”

In the southern regions of Chinensis and Cercis, ambushes broke out. Even Gilbert, the prime minister of Freesia, hadn’t predicted this sudden assault. We had to turn our attention from the front lines in the north, where the Freesian knights battled troops from Copelandii and Rafflesiana, to the southern strongholds of Cercis and Chinensis. Both castles were under heavy bombardment at the moment.

Due to our lack of foresight, both countries’ strongholds fell into chaos. The enemy destroyed the old southern tower of the Cercian castle. We’d assumed an invasion of the castle was impossible and had left it unguarded. But the person we should have been protecting the most currently hid within that besieged castle: Yohan Linne Dwight, the king of Chinensis.

If the enemy reached him, this war would be over. Chinensis would become a kingdom enslaved, losing both its people and its culture. Worse, Pride—the crown princess of Freesia—had vowed to share whatever fate Yohan met. If she failed to protect Yohan, she would burn at the stake, giving up her life for Chinensis.

Keeping Yohan safe meant keeping the castle safe. But the Copelandii forces, who’d already destroyed the border wall in Chinensis with their bombs, were now storming the castle. Knowing they only had to make it through the lightly guarded castle itself, the front-liners and the rear guard surged up and over the castle walls. That left those of us still within the palace in a difficult situation.

“Ah... Well done. You made the right choice.” I placed myself in the hallway that led to the king’s office. “If you want to take down the king, you’ll have to get past me first.”

A pile of corpses lay at my feet, each a former invading enemy soldier. Another wave of enemies had climbed the staircase and crowded the hall before me already. I cast my eyes toward the ground, my long, black hair draping over my face. I swayed from side to side, never raising my head to react to the clamor of screams and combat leaking into the castle. I focused entirely on the bloodlust rolling down the hall like a wave.

I, Harrison, captain of the deadly Eighth Squadron, was a weapon of Freesia, and I would do my duty. Nothing else mattered.

“It’s been years now. All this time, I’ve waited to use my sword for her,” I said, lips tugging up in a half smile.

I raised my weapon, but the enemy troops weren’t about to stop in the face of one meager sword. They raised their blades and aimed their guns. Before they could fire a single shot, a breeze rustled past them.

Blood spurted out of the soldiers as it passed. One by one, they crumpled to the ground. I flicked the blood off my sword. It had taken only a single motion to clear the hall.

A single soldier still twitched.

“Wow,” I said, crouching down for a better look. I peered at the man’s face through my thick, black locks. “What’s wrong? Why aren’t you standing up? What is it your master wants, and why isn’t it enough to get you to stand...? Hmph. How pathetic.”

I ended the enemy’s life without further delay. But the moment I did, another cry of “Charge!” rang down the hall.

Muttering to myself, I rose, waiting for the enemy to get into range before I slashed through them. This time, I moved slowly enough for them to perceive

my motions. Still, it was only a glimpse. In an instant, I cut through their eyes, turning their world dark for good.

I cocked my head at the soldiers when they dropped their weapons to clutch their eyes. The way they writhed in pain was most displeasing.

“What’s the matter? They’re just eyes. What, don’t have the guts to keep a grip on your swords and come at me?”

A few of them regained their composure, realizing it was kill or be killed. But their agonized, clumsy swings made them even *less* worthy of fighting. I cut them all down, unimpressed with their performances.

I took my time with the job. More enemy soldiers poured into the hallway, but they provided little more than mild amusement. I let myself smile just a bit, a gesture I restrained around my Eighth Squadron and the royal order—except in very special circumstances.

“I was distraught when Prince Stale Royal Ivy stole my freedom and ordered me to guard the castle. Her right-hand man is very clever, though, I must admit. It was the correct move, making use of my role.”

While I kept my head lowered, the enemy could no doubt see my crazed smile. They froze in fear, likely feeling nothing but a gentle breeze before blood gushed out of them and they collapsed to the ground.

“Now what? Come on, why won’t you move? Are you satisfied already?”

My smile withered, my face returning to its customary blankness. Not a single body moved or twitched, even when I poked them with the tip of my sword.

“I’m not,” I murmured, bored. “Not yet, anyway.”

I waited impatiently for the next round of soldiers. As soon as their shouts reached my ears, my heart sped up.

“This is all for her. The woman who saved our beloved commander.”

Earlier, I had ordered the other four members of the Eighth Squadron in charge of guarding the Chinensian castle to allow the enemies past them. I was

prepared to take on hundreds or even thousands of soldiers.

“For the woman to whom our great vice commander is so indebted.”

A hoarse battle cry echoed down the hall. Soldiers sprinted toward me, allowed to pass by the Eighth Squadron just as I’d instructed.

“The woman I’ve always fought for, even if it meant being drenched in blood.”

My blade flashed. The stampeding troops screamed and fell to the ground. I sighed as my special power—speed—coursed through me yet again. Cutting down enemies this fast was a piece of cake.

“I still haven’t been able to give her everything I’ve got.”

However, my special power didn’t last forever. It was only speed and nothing more. Running so quickly still exhausted my body, so I’d often been excluded from vanguard units, being much more suited for short-distance travel. Even six years ago, when the royal order suffered an ambush, I was not allowed to run to the commander’s side on my own.

“Princess Pride Royal Ivy...”

I whispered the name of the woman I adored and respected to the empty hall full of bodies.

Another battle cry rang out. Enemies poured into the hallway, hungry for the king’s head. I greeted them with a huge grin.

“Finally. *Finally* I get to use my sword for her!”

By this point, my smile must have reached my purple eyes. It was a smile I never set free unless I was fighting for one of four people—among them Commander Roderick, Vice Commander Clark, and Princess Pride.

“Burned at the stake? Don’t make me laugh. I’ll never let that happen to her.”

I kept talking to myself as I cut down foe after foe. I stopped using my speed and instead took on the enemies with the raw power of my blade, savoring

every slash, every rending of flesh on the other end of my sword.

“You really think I’d let you lay a finger on her?!”

Troops continued to stream in. With roars, they readied their blades and pointed their guns, ignorant of their impending doom.

“I will *never* let that beautiful lady’s purity be sullied with blood! I won’t let her be corrupted like you foul beasts!”

This time, I let loose a mad laugh. Even Arthur and the Eighth Squadron rarely saw me in such a state of excitement. I reached inward and unleashed a dozen knives from my breast pockets. They pierced the soldiers’ throats, toppling the men before they could so much as cry out. I wasted no time in using my speed and sword to slice into the remaining men, then halted to retrieve my knives from the bodies and return them to my coat. Blood stained my uniform, but I ignored it.

The pounding of boots and throaty yells returned. With a grin, I prepared to indulge in my ultimate ecstasy just a bit longer. I was just one of the many knights who adored Pride. Thus, I brought my sword down upon the enemy without a drop of hesitation.

“My apologies, King Yohan. The members of the Eighth Squadron are a bit unique. None of them will ever fail to complete a mission, though. I hope you can forgive them for the occasional lack of manners.”

I, the prime minister, offered my best explanation to a perplexed King Yohan with the help of a communication specialist. He couldn’t hide his shock that the tide of the war had turned thanks to a mere five knights who’d managed to protect the castle from a full-on invasion by the enemy.

Prince Stale had dispatched five men from the Eighth Squadron to the Chinensian castle. Commander Roderick and I made the selection, heeding Prince Stale’s request for enough firepower to keep the enemy at bay. The men

didn't move in a formation, but that meant that they could spread out and cover more ground. They were also proven fighters, making them the perfect candidates to get the job done.

Captain Harrison had been quite reluctant, uncertain as to whether he would have a real role in protecting the castle. I'd even heard that they had to force him to participate in the war at all. He only agreed to join in at the very end. The order coming from Prince Stale seemed to sway him, as did a direct command from Commander Roderick, who told him, "You've already made trouble for Clark. I'm sure you understand that you only have permission because I believed you would carry out any mission assigned to you, no matter what it was."

There weren't enough men left to send reinforcements to southern Chinensis. Prince Stale had to reinforce the castle security using only five knights. He understood the situation and acted accordingly.

I'd expect nothing less from the next seneschal.

I kept that praise to myself as I watched Prince Stale give his report to King Yohan. I couldn't quite manage to suppress a smirk, and I had to quickly look away when Prince Stale stared me down.

"I've never seen Captain Harrison fight before!" Princess Tiara said. "He's amazing!"

She'd covered her mouth with her hands, and I'd feared that the bloody images being transmitted to us of Captain Harrison's bloodshed might be too much for her. Yet she expressed only mild consternation. I supposed that was about right coming from the second-born princess...no, from Princess Pride's sister, to be precise.

"Who the hell was that knight?! How did he move so fast?! Is his strength part of his special power too?!" Prince Cedric asked, jabbing a finger at the transmission.

I attempted to explain, only for Princess Tiara to grab my shirt before I could

she glared in Prince Cedric's direction.

"His *strength*, at the very least, isn't a special power," she said. "Captain Harrison and all the other knights work really hard every single day!"

She then puffed out her cheeks. Somehow, amid all this, Prince Cedric had managed to earn Princess Tiara's ire. I couldn't help but pity him now that I knew all three siblings disliked him.

Prince Cedric's eyes widened, though he didn't seem offended. He dropped his gaze to the ground, sinking deep into thought. Whatever he was contemplating, it was none of my concern in such dire times. Especially as yet another battle cry rose up in the distance.

"All right," I said. "We can't rest on our laurels either."

Cercis, just like Chinensis, was under attack from the southern border. Our knights and soldiers were exterminating enemy forces, thanks to Anemone halting the invasion at the border, but the inside of the castle wasn't very well guarded. Neither Prince Stale nor I had expected any enemy spillover in Cercis, much less a full-scale assault.

Most knights who specialized in speed were deployed to Cercis as reinforcements. Other knights who'd noticed the unexpected attack would likely rush to the castle any moment now. The knights and guards inside the castle were managing to subdue the attack, but it was only a matter of time before the enemy broke through to reach us. Our group consisted of the Cercian seneschal and prime minister, Princess Tiara, Prince Cedric, knights and guards to protect us, and myself. Between all of us, we could still hold off *some* amount of enemy soldiers, but not all of them.

I racked my brain for the most optimal way to divvy up our manpower before Princess Pride arrived with backup.

"There's not much time!" came a sudden voice from beneath me. "Even if you defend Cercis, you'll still have lost everything!"

Lord Hanmu. Of course. He was still here. I'd had the old man pinned under my foot to interrogate him. He glared at me as he spoke, and I realized I must have accidentally eased my hold on him while I was lost in thought. I blinked down at him, wondering how he was still conscious enough to speak.

"Release me at once! Everything I did, I did for Cercis's future! Gilbert! Do you really want to lose your wife and dau—"

I bent the old man's pinkie finger backward, hard.

Snap.

He shrieked in pain, and I covered his mouth with my hand to stop him from saying anything else. *How troublesome.* I never should have sought to resume interrogating him after the invasion began.

"All you do is cause trouble for me..."

The words slipped out before I could stop them. My irritation had been drumming steadily this whole time, and it finally got the better of me. Prince Cedric cast a suspicious look my way, and Princess Tiara turned to me with worry. I smiled back at them.

"Pardon me, but I'm going to leave for just a moment. I don't need any guards, so please focus on Prince Cedric and Princess Tiara."

I dragged the old man, still screaming in pain, out of the room with one hand. Princess Tiara fretted about the danger, but I simply thanked her for her concern and reassured her that I was only going to a room just down the hall.

I closed the door behind me, relieved when I found no enemies awaiting me in the hall. I wouldn't be able to rush to Princess Tiara in an emergency if I strayed too far. Thus, after greeting the knights and guards outside the door, I tossed the old man down the hall. He tumbled to the ground, unable to steady himself with his arms bound behind him.

"I can't have you running your mouth and scaring the people in there."

I glared down at the old man, his face contorted in agony thanks to the finger

I'd broken.

Pale and trembling, he spat, "Do you know what you're doing?! If you act now, you could still save your wife and daughter in time! Just let me gain control of Cercis and—"

"An old fool like you has no worth. And the proof is all around us. They didn't even tell you that Cercis would be attacked."

I should not have been so shocked that this buffoon refused to learn his lesson. Perhaps he thought mentioning my wife and daughter would be enough to shake my resolve. Either way, one finger clearly wasn't enough.

"The only reason you haven't met a worse fate is because I thought your words might have some value. However..." I stepped closer, cracking my knuckles loudly enough for him to hear. "This is your last chance. Tell me everything you know. After this, I doubt you'll be able to speak without those teeth of yours, even if you want to. Now, shall we move on to the next finger?"

He quaked at my words. His mouth flapped as though he wanted to speak but couldn't manage a sound. I didn't want him having a fit, so I held off on breaking another finger for now.

"Don't believe you'll be able to shake me by threatening my beloved wife and daughter," I went on. "Even if what you said is true and right now my home is under siege—"

"What's the meaning of this, Gilbert?"

I whipped my head up in surprise. The door behind me stood open, and someone had stuck their head out.

"Prince Stale?!"

He was supposed to be with Princess Pride, heading our way with reinforcements from the southern tower. Yet there he was. His eyes, as chilling as ever, bored into me as he slowly propped the door open.

"My elder sister is heading this way on horseback with her imperial knights,"

he said. "She asked me to come here first and bring her back if there was an emergency."

Apparently, Princess Pride wanted to witness the state of the enemy invasion for herself by riding through the streets of Cercis. As he explained, Prince Stale's keen eyes flicked between me and Lord Hanmu.

"I was a little curious too," he said. "I told her my concerns so she'd let me come here early."

Lord Hanmu's mouth hung open. He didn't seem to understand how the prince we'd just seen in the broadcast could now be in the castle. My pulse raced. I understood that Stale must have teleported here, but why had he felt the need to stray from the plan, and just how much of our conversation had he overheard?

"Gilbert, are you hiding something from Elder Sister and me again?"

He opened the door all the way and ordered me inside. Unable to disobey Prince Stale's command, I dragged the old man back into the room. The prince slammed the door shut behind us.

"I heard Lord Hanmu say something peculiar through the transmission earlier," he told me. "There's no time, so tell me what's going on before Elder Sister gets here."

"Gilbert! Do you really want to lose your wife and dau—"

It appeared that I'd been too late in shutting him up. I resisted the urge to sigh, instead pressing a hand to my forehead. Even Princess Tiara had taken notice and was clutching her hands to her chest.

"Did something happen to Maria and Stella?" she asked nervously. Prince Cedric frowned as well, glancing back and forth between me and the princess.

"No," I said. "This old coot is simply trying to trick me."

I smiled to ease everyone's worries, but Prince Stale only narrowed his eyes further. Deception never *had* worked on him.

He crossed his arms and shifted his gaze to the old man, ordering him to speak. Despite his harshness, the prince suppressed anything else he might have felt in that moment.

“I-I’m not trying to trick you!” the old man cried.

He cowered under the prince’s icy glare. From the bottom of my heart, I regretted not ripping his teeth out when I had the chance.

Lord Hanmu launched into a rambling speech. He told us that the Copelandian survivors in Freesia were planning to attack my home, and that my wife and daughter had either been taken as hostages or killed at this point. I couldn’t believe he was still making these claims after all my threats. I quivered with the effort to not end his life right then and there.

“There you have it. What do you say, Gilbert?” Prince Stale asked me.

“What do I say? I believe the old man is either making guesses or outright lying. I have a communication specialist stationed at my home. Anyway, right now I need to focus my attention on this war and nothing else.” I kept my tone steady. Mixing my work and private life was something I would never allow again.

“When did you last contact your house through a communication specialist?”

“I couldn’t send my coordinates to anyone on the outside while traveling to Cercis just to be safe, so I have yet to contact them. I’ve been too busy ever since we arrived here.”

“So you haven’t talked to them or sent them coordinates even once?” Prince Stale asked.

“That’s correct.”

He glared daggers at me again. “Enough of this. There’s no time. Gilbert, I’m ordering you to contact your home at once. There’s a communication specialist available now.” His eyes slid over to the knight in question.

“No, I simply can’t,” I replied. “We’re in the midst of battle, with enemies

pouring into the castle as we speak. I can't attend to personal business while—"

"I told you, it's okay. In fact, I'm ordering you. Or would you prefer to hear the order come from my elder sister?"

I faltered, unable to respond. Prince Stale had effectively cornered me. I could see just from the look in his eyes that he would relay all this to Princess Pride in a heartbeat. I had no choice but to give in.

Damn it! This wasn't the time to be handling such a personal matter. In fact, it was the very last thing I wanted to deal with. Would I really be able to maintain my composure if something *had* happened to Maria and Stella? Fear hounded my thoughts: the fear that I would act shamefully and foolishly, the fear that I would behave the way I had before Princess Pride changed my life four years ago.

I cowered from the truth. I couldn't bear to lose my wife and daughter, but neither could I bear to return to my depraved ways out of grief. Princess Pride had been the one to return joy and color to my world, joy I thought I'd lost forever. I swore to her that I would never waver and betray her ever again. I would do anything to uphold that vow.

"Open a transmission to my house," I said reluctantly.

I gave the communication specialist the coordinates and had him send a feed to the manor. The knight then transmitted our coordinates to the other side. All the knight at my house needed to do was start up a broadcast and send it to the coordinates we provided. If everything was as it should be, it would be a simple operation. I would greet my family briefly, then apologize to Prince Stale and Princess Tiara for scaring them. As long as my family was safe, that is.

The knight sent out the transmission but got no response for a while, even though I'd instructed the knights at the house not to leave the entire time I was gone. My heart skipped a beat; sweat broke out across my palms. I lost track of how many seconds, how many *minutes* we'd been waiting for an answer. Part of me wanted to cut off the transmission and tell the others my family must

have simply stepped out for a moment. But just then...

“I hear a kid’s voice! This way!”

“Damn it! Did someone beat us to the punch?!”

A group of men I didn’t recognize ran through the transmission. That couldn’t be. The transmission had to be displaying the wrong location. I held my breath, lost for words.

The broadcast coming from my house was in a fixed position in the reception room so I could tell at a glance if anything was wrong. I wanted to be able to see as much of the inside as I could so I would know if anyone had overtaken the home.

Sure enough, someone walked through that very reception room even as I watched. He paced from end to end, armed with knives and guns. Stella—my darling Stella—let out a hitching sob somewhere in the distance, and the man stormed off in that direction.

“See? I told you!” Lord Hanmu said with a wild, raspy laugh. “This is all because you didn’t listen to me!” I yearned to end him right there and then, but shock kept me from moving a muscle.

“Looks like you have some visitors, Gilbert,” Prince Stale said calmly.

His composure instantly brought me back to my senses. My body lurched into motion. I turned to find Prince Stale watching the broadcast over my shoulder with his arms crossed. His face betrayed no expression as his eyes fixed on me, gauging my reaction.

“I’d be careful about entertaining them,” he added.

I blinked. Was that a smile sneaking across that blank face of his? What could possibly have amused him at a time like this?

I’d find out soon enough.

“Argh! Wh-wh-wh-what’s going on?!”

“Hey! Who the hell are—?! Gah!”

The men in the transmission shouted in a panic. They glared, raising their weapons to attack. But before they could fire a single bullet, they flew backward out of frame.

“The guest who arrived first is rather violent,” Prince Stale said.

As though on cue...

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

A horribly familiar laugh pealed through the transmission. I knew this man, with his piercing glare, frightening features, dark-brown hair and eyes, and tan skin. He was Val—the Freesian deliveryman with the special power to sculpt earthen walls.

He sent a wave of sand at the men, pinning their limbs down. A powerful jet of water then blasted them out of frame entirely.

“Bwa ha ha! Keep comin’! I never get sick of ya! Or maybe it’d be faster to just build a prison right here!”

My mouth hung agape. I even forgot to blink. I knew this man well, but my family certainly didn’t. A regular deliveryman would never come to my house like this.

“It’s way more fun when you lure in one after another... Oh?” With a smirk, Val turned his attention toward the transmission. *“Well, well, if it isn’t Mister Prime Minister!”*

Khemet, a young boy with messy black hair, clung to his arm. Sefekh, a girl with brown hair, squeezed Khemet’s hand.

“Val, why are you in my house?” I didn’t really need to ask. I knew the answer perfectly well, but the words came out all the same.

Val cocked a brow, annoyed. *“No one told you? A certain little prince ordered me to stay posted at your house for the past five days.”* A vulgar grin spread across his face. *“Your wife invited me in this morning.”*

At that, I thought, *Five days? That means he started guarding my house the day before we left the country.*

"I was watchin' you, y'know. You were very persuasive about your wife and kid bein' used as bargaining chips."

Val's smirk turned sinister. He refused to explain further, however. Sefekh and Khemet nodded along, evidently privy to the situation. Five days prior was the day the Copelandian spy came to me with a deal. It sounded like the three of them had witnessed that entire exchange. *How annoying.*

"I want to hear about that later, Val. I'll be talking to *you* after the war, too, Gilbert," Prince Stale said from behind me. He took a step forward with his arms still crossed. Now that he was within the frame, he addressed Val. "So? How goes progress?"

"Huh? Started this morning. One by one, nasty fellas marched right in. Their boss came with 'em at first, but the rest were Freesians he hired here. They really put up a fight, but they didn't know I captured their boss hours ago," Val explained, clicking his tongue.

He sank onto the nearby sofa, scowling at the transmission. But then something appeared to dawn on him, and he smiled once more.

"Oh yeah, Mister Prime Minister... Or should I say 'Papa'? I heard that when you come home, you've got plans to go eat somethin' nice with your little brat. But what about my brats? Do they get a reward, 'Papa'?"

Val's smile widened as he followed up with a remark about being a "wonderful father," doing his absolute best to get under my skin. And yet, I didn't care about that at all. In fact, I couldn't help a little smile of my own.

"Well...before anything else, is my family safe? How about my employees?"

Before Val could answer, Sefekh confirmed that everyone was okay. Khemet told me the others were waiting in a room farther away from the skirmishes while Val handled the intruders.

“Papa!”

“What the hell?! Keep the brat out of here!” Val snapped his head toward the soft voice I knew as well as my own. *“She woke up as soon as she heard the prime minister yakking!”*

Val grunted in annoyance and dragged Sefekh and Khemet out of the transmission. That was when Stella teetered up to the frame, Maria chasing after her.

“Papa!”

“Gil! Are you all right?!”

My daughter grinned, but my wife furrowed her brow at me. Seeing them unharmed, I took my first good, long breath since this all began. I told them I was safe and apologized for putting them in danger.

Maria smiled kindly and shook her head. *“We’re just fine, thanks to how they’ve protected us. Sefekh and Khemet are very nice children.”*

“Papa! He’s scary!” Stella jabbed a finger at Val.

He instantly stiffened and growled, “The hell’d you say?” Sure enough, Stella burst into tears and ran into Maria’s arms.

Val recoiled in disgust. *“Not this shit again! Do you two spoil this brat or somethin’? She never stops cryin’!”*

“It’s your fault for having a scary face!” Sefekh shot back. *“Stop letting her see your face!”*

She grabbed Val’s arm and yanked him close. Val turned his head away and reluctantly sat down next to her. Khemet rushed over and covered Val’s ears. It was all so peaceful and ordinary, I nearly forgot that we were actively at war.

“Val,” Prince Stale said, “I want you to ask your communication specialist to report this incident to the royal order at once. Have them take custody of anyone you’ve captured, then have them send more guards for Maria and Stella. You can mention my name if it helps.” He glanced my way. “Since they’ve

already been attacked, I'm sure you won't complain, right?" With my permission, Prince Stale went on. "Contact us once the royal order has gathered there."

"Huh? The communication guy already contacted the knights. The asshole went and did it while I was sleepin'." Val brushed Khemet's hands off his ears, scratched his head, and clambered off the couch to turn around. *"They'll probably be here soon."*

Crass as he was, that information lifted a weight off my shoulders.

"That was a good call," Prince Stale said. He sounded calm enough, but I could still see the rage blazing in his eyes. As soon as this broadcast ended, I was in for an unforgettable tirade. For the time being, however, there was nothing I could do but watch.

The prince turned toward me just before the communication specialist ended the transmission. "Gilbert, is there anything else you want to say?"

"Well, let's see..."

I'd already apologized to my wife and daughter. Everything else would best be said face-to-face. Still, everyone was looking at me expectantly. There was one more thing I had to do.

"If alcohol and treats from my home will suffice, then please take as much as you desire," I said.

Val's grin widened. Sefekh and Khemet's eyes sparkled.

"Smart man," Val responded, now in a much better mood than before.

"Don't drink too much today," Prince Stale added, stepping up to my side. Then the transmission ended. His enraged glare darted from me to Tiara to the window and back to me again. I braced for his ire.

That was when I realized something strange.

"Why did you send Val to my house?"

I knew perfectly well that this question would cause Prince Stale to reach his boiling point.

“Why did you send Val to my house?”

The moment the broadcast ended and Gilbert voiced that soft question, the anger simmering inside me surged to the surface. He probably already knew what to expect. Even so, I wished I could have taken my time to lay into him after the war was over rather than doing it here and now. I needed to wrap this up before Pride arrived.

“Because I knew what I would have done if it were me,” I snapped.

Gilbert’s mouth fell open. He stared at me, petrified, giving me the space to continue.

“I knew what would happen ever since I heard you eliminated the intruders in our country,” I said. “If it were me, I would definitely try to take out the man causing me the most problems, or at least get him under my thumb.”

I pointed straight at that very man as I spoke.

Ever since Uncle Vest and I started collecting evidence about the United Hanazuo Kingdom, Gilbert had been hinting at the fact that he was taking out intruders within Freesia. I knew the enemies would set their sights on him if they caught him eliminating their comrades. *Why is he always so careless?! He’s putting his own family in the most danger out of anyone!*

Then Gilbert ended up joining us in Hanazuo as Tiara’s attendant. Chances were that Maria and Stella would be targeted while he was away, but when I asked Uncle Vest about it, he told me all Gilbert had requested from the palace was a single communication specialist to join his usual guards at home. I wanted to scream at him to dispatch some knights too. Guards could handle an attacker or two, but they couldn’t take out a group equipped with deadly weapons or special powers. Gilbert had to understand that, but he kept feigning ignorance,

pretending not to connect the dots—all to minimize the burden he placed on the palace, the royal family, and the Freesian people!

The more I thought about it, the more rage bubbled up inside me like red-hot lava. Judging by how Gilbert voiced his question, he likely noticed the tension tightening my face. I wanted to smack that dazed look off his face.

Does he have any idea how hard I've worked in secret for all this?!

I'd started by asking Uncle Vest about the protection at Gilbert's home and how he'd been capturing intruders. Before Arthur and I left to visit King Lance in his madness, I teleported to Val and asked him to watch over Gilbert's place until I gave him permission to leave. I went to so much trouble, when all I wanted to do was get back to Arthur and Pride as soon as physically possible!

Then in the carriage, when we were working on battle strategies with Commander Roderick and his knights, Gilbert dodged every question about his home, potential attacks, and the protection he'd placed there. He never even contacted his family or asked for knights to be dispatched. And last night, he just took to his work like nothing was wrong, never once reaching out to Maria.

If it weren't for Val and the children, those criminals would have Maria and Stella right this very moment. All this time, I'd been so, so, so desperate to say something to him!

"Is your love for your family really that shallow, Gilbert?!" I shouted.

Gilbert pressed his lips together and did not respond, either startled by the volume of my voice or reeling from what I'd just said.

I pointed an accusing finger at him again, keeping my expression stern. I'd spent these past days desperate to say this to him. "You have us! You have the royal family!"

Even that brief declaration left me out of breath. Everything I'd bottled up inside came bursting out. It was only natural. The words I'd been desperately holding back had quietly simmered until they boiled over completely.

“You have *me*! Why don’t you ever ask me for help?!” I screamed.

Gilbert’s eyes flew wide. He stared at me, frozen and unblinking. I glared right back at him, my body heaving with every breath. Gilbert finally opened his mouth, but I knew just what he was going to say and how I intended to respond.

“I, a mere prime minister, don’t deserve any more special treatment from the royal family than what I’ve already received,” he said. “Any free soldiers and guards should be assigned to protect the Freesian citizens.”

Ah, I knew it. How irritating. This stupid man! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!

“Don’t force your family to pay for your own sins!” I said.

At long last, my emotions had burst free. Gilbert was clearly startled, but he didn’t move after that, standing as still as a doll. I could tell his mind had likewise ground to a halt. It was a good chance for me to continue my attack.

“What the hell does your past matter?! You’re our proud Freesian prime minister now! What’s wrong with having the kingdom protect you and your family if your role puts them in danger?! If working for the good of your country causes some kind of blowback, why the hell shouldn’t you get some extra guards or soldiers?!”

Ever since the day he made his vow of atonement to Pride, he’d forsaken all of the special privileges that came with being prime minister or any other castle staff, for that matter. In the past, he’d abused those privileges to do unforgivable things. To atone for his sins, he now shouldered all of his burdens entirely on his own. This much was obvious; I witnessed it for myself once I started working as Uncle Vest’s steward. Knowing Gilbert’s past, his actions made perfect sense. But things were different now than when he’d committed those atrocities. He was working for Father, Pride, and the good of the people! How could he be so careless when it came to his own loved ones?!

“But I would be using my privileges as the prime minister purely out of affection for my family...” He spoke unusually quietly. His eyes skittered through

the room, unsure where to land.

Once, Gilbert had prioritized Maria over all else, spurring on his unforgivable crimes. Clearly he didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

That was all the more reason for me to say this to him. "What's wrong with a father prioritizing his child? His wife?"

Even knowing all he'd done, I nearly hollered these words at him—needing him to hear me, needing him to understand.

"Let us protect your family too."

With that, my anger finally began to cool. Emotion had made my voice deeper and harsher. Gilbert raised his head to regard me, staring at me with those slender eyes. I didn't back down, holding his gaze.

"Never make me do something like this again," I said. "Elder Sister and Arthur saved those two, so don't ever expose them to danger again. As the prime minister, you need to protect them with every means available to you."

I'd been worried about all three of them all along, Gilbert included.

"Talk to me next time," I went on. "If you want to give up, then get permission from me to give up first. If you're going to use your special privileges selfishly, I'll be the one to stop you, even if it means chopping your head off."

I hated that he didn't feel like he could ask me for help. I'd waited for ages for him to come to me, yet he never once revealed his anxiety to any of us. I was the next seneschal of Freesia, and I knew the full story of Gilbert's dark past, but even that wasn't enough for him to trust me. It made me want to scream all over again.

I had one last thing to say to him—something I wished I didn't have to say at all. I was in no position to forgive Gilbert after he deceived Pride and betrayed the country, so I never thought I would say these next words so sincerely. But right now, this was the only way I had to reach him.

"Both you and your family belong to our country too. We have a duty to

protect you.”

Gilbert finally blinked. A change came over his face, and at last I saw the man who would spend many years beside me supporting our country once I became seneschal.

These next few years would be crucial. I suddenly realized that my role was to train him to be a prime minister who could serve Freesia for the next several hundred or even thousand years.

Prime Minister Gilbert was still in a daze after everything Prince Stale said to him. I myself couldn't fully understand the situation in Freesia, being a prince of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, but even I saw how upset Prince Stale was that the prime minister had withheld information from him.

Then there were those words: *“Elder Sister and Arthur saved those two, so don't ever expose them to danger again.”*

I couldn't believe there were still others Pride had saved. I thought back to what Prince Stale had told me when Pride was addressing the knights: *“We exist so that no one can ever sully that beauty.”*

Just how many people had felt her influence? There were so many already, and those were just the ones I knew about. Why was she so adored and respected? How did she have such influence over them? It was almost like...

“Isn't my big brother amazing?”

I gasped and spun toward Princess Tiara beside me, but I didn't know how to respond to that after all that had happened.

The princess didn't seem to mind. “He's worked so, so hard all this time. He's always been running to catch up to my big sister, Arthur, and Prime Minister Gilbert.” She gazed off into the distance for a bit, then turned back to me. “What have *you* been working on all this time, Prince Cedric?”

Her words lanced my heart. She turned those crystal-clear eyes on me, and I

feared I might dissolve completely. But the moment she noticed me freezing up, she dipped her head and apologized.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I wanted to be with Big Sister and Big Brother too, if I could...”

Leaving that murmur hanging in the air between us, she ran over to Prince Stale like nothing had happened.

“Hey, Big Brother! When is our sister going to arrive?”

“She’ll be here soon,” Prince Stale told her.

“I’m so glad!” Princess Tiara cried, grinning and grabbing hold of the prime minister’s shirt cuff.

The moment she joined those men and smiled at them, all the tension in the room lifted, like a cloud evaporated by sunshine.

Chapter 3:

The Closed Country and Its Companions—the Prince of Gold, the Prince of White, and God’s Child

ONE HUNDRED SIXTY months ago...

Two princes lived in the kingdom of Cercis. I was the firstborn. Even at just eight years old, I rarely interacted with my younger brother, who was four years younger. I was far too busy with my studies. Thus, my brother’s birth didn’t affect my life in any way.

My parents didn’t bother watching me grow up. The same went for my brother, who was nurtured by wet nurses, taught by instructors, and watched over by servants.

I’m the big brother, but I have no role, I thought back then.

As crown prince, I was merely a statue who stood stiffly beside my brother during ceremonies. Still, I tried to be the perfect brother—at least in front of the Cercian people. It was hard, especially because I never truly felt like I had a real brother in this. Living in the same castle as nothing more than two princes who were there to fulfill their duty meant that what little I knew about him came from rumors. I could tell others pitied me, but I didn’t care about that. No matter how wide the gap between me and my younger brother grew, my goals would remain the same.

Two years before this, I laid eyes on a book about the outside world that had been tucked away at the very back of the palace library. This was the moment I learned of the vastness of the world and the tininess of my own kingdom. I dreamed of becoming a good king, of bringing the United Hanazuo Kingdom together as one country, of expanding the world my people lived in. There was no room for jealousy or resentment. I worked tirelessly on my princely duties and dedicated myself to my studies, scraping by on raw determination alone.

As the days passed, I felt less and less like a big brother to the boy who was nothing like me at all. We were far more distant than siblings, existing in two entirely separate worlds.

But all that changed one day. I'd just finished my studies and was walking through the library, looking for a new book.

“Flowers from a foreign land stretched to the horizon and beyond, creating a paradise on earth. Ten days into trudging through the desert, a mirage appeared. Mirages occur in desert regions...”

“Well done, Prince Cedric!”

The voices came from a storage room at the far end of the palace library. An excited adult had praised a child doing some sort of recitation. I sighed at the mention of the name “Cedric,” assuming this was just some basic schooling from one of the high-ranking officials. I ignored it and grabbed the book I was after. When I passed by the storage room, something stopped me in my tracks.

“Seneschal Bertrand, please! No more! Prince Cedric is only four years old and needs to rest—”

“Silence, Dario! I won't take criticism from some greenhorn prime minister! This boy is special! I'm educating him personally, so you have no right to interfere!”

The escalating shouts had me rooted to the spot; I knew the name Bertrand all too well. He was the old man who'd refused to hand over the role of seneschal to a successor, earning him no shortage of contempt.

Cedric went on reading—which I assumed was his task—while the men argued, his voice flat and emotionless. I'd received a royal education myself, yet I couldn't comprehend a single word of whatever language he spoke. My brows came together as questions sprang to mind. Was Cedric just making this up? Had this language come from a different country, or even a different continent? And why was Bertrand with him?

Moreover, Prime Minister Dario was supposed to be Cedric's attendant. Despite his young age, Dario was a brilliant and kind man who had looked after Cedric many times. His timidity got me curious, so I ordered the guards to unlock the storage room door so I could see for myself.

“The fair maiden had brilliant hair of gold and skin as white as snow,” Cedric read, switching to a passage I could understand. “I found myself taken with her otherworldly beauty and gently touched her hair. As I pressed a kiss to the golden strands, her white cheeks glowed rosy pink, invoking the sakura flower of a foreign land. I bent my knee before her and described her beauty...”

I peeked through the crack in the door and saw Cedric sitting at a small desk, surrounded by a group of adults. Seneschal Bertrand was at his side, and Prime Minister Dario was desperately trying to stop him. The most shocking thing of all was that Cedric wasn't reading these complex passages from books. No, he never opened a single page.

“World coordinates 47.194747293736273849, -122.837265393816639. The United Hanazuo Kingdom consists of Cercis and Chinensis, which both have rich histories. The country was founded by Yuda Silva Lowell...”

Bertrand would show him the cover of a book, and Cedric would recite its contents from memory. Books littered the tiny desk; most were in our country's native language, but some were notably foreign.

“Excellent work!” Bertrand said. “Not only can you memorize a book's contents, but you can also translate them yourself!”

“It's like a power straight from God!” said another man among them.

Even as a child, I found this terribly odd—but the truly peculiar one was my brother, seated in the eye of that storm.

“Referred to as a treasure trove of gold, the United Hanazuo Kingdom was targeted for its riches. Some nations were particularly eager to secure the minerals found throughout Chinensis and the neighboring kingdom of Cercis. When both countries were invaded by the kingdom of Copelandii...”

He continued to recite passage after passage. Despite the ease with which he spoke, I could see even from a distance that Cedric's face was grave. His eyes were as blank as a doll's, his face shining with sweat.

I threw the door open, enraged that they would make a four-year-old go through something like this. "Stop it! All of you! What the hell are you doing to my brother?!" I shouted.

Everyone jumped at my scream and covered their faces. I was only eight, but I was still royalty. I possessed far more authority than Bertrand.

"P-Prince Lance!" Bertrand's eyes darted around the room.

I stomped toward the speechless seneschal and his guards. "What is the meaning of this? What are you forcing a four-year-old child to do?! Look at his face! How long has he been locked up in here?!"

"I have been here for forty-nine hours, thirty-two minutes, and fifty-five seconds. That includes breaks to eat, sleep, and use the lavatory," Cedric answered. His voice was as lifeless as when he'd been reciting those books. His cloudy eyes slid toward me, his breathing ragged, even as Bertrand tried to hide the book he'd been reciting.

"You kept him in here for two whole days?!" I cried. "Do Mother and Father know about this?"

Everyone aside from Bertrand seemed to sense danger, so they kept their faces hidden as they made a break for the door. Bertrand hollered for them to stay put. I shouted at them as well, but they scattered like rats. At my order, my guards took off in pursuit.

"Who were those men, Bertrand?! I'm gonna tell Father they were in here!" I said.

"N-no, I have no idea, I swear it..."

"You're gonna play dumb?! Of course you know who they are! If you won't tell me, I'll hunt them all down and—"

“Chuck James, Colin, Eaton Hanmu, Gavin Firth, Felix, Florence Gregory... Chuck James, Colin, Eaton Hanmu, Gavin Firth, Felix, Florence Gregory. Chuck James, Colin, Eaton Hanmu, Gavin Firth, Felix, Florence Gregory...”

Cedric rattled off a list of names before he could even catch his breath. Bertrand’s jaw dropped. He’d clearly never intended for Cedric to memorize—or perhaps even *know*—those names. Cedric must’ve taken note of every single one based on how the men addressed each other.

Dario placed his hand on Cedric’s shoulder. Grief twisted his face, tears shining in his eyes. “Those are the names of the men who were here, right?” he said, evidently unable to bear the silence any longer. “All of them are former officials who have already left their positions here at the castle.”

Bertrand glared at him and yelled, “You bastard!”

The prime minister ignored him, bowing to me instead. “This is my fault for failing to defy Seneschal Bertrand and protect Prince Cedric! My deepest apologies, Your Highness!”

The prime minister fell to his hands and knees and groveled for forgiveness. All the while, Bertrand begged me to keep this situation quiet. I was too stunned to respond, so instead I padded toward my brother. I eyed Cedric’s pale face, the disturbing rumors I’d heard flooding into my mind. One nickname had been the consistent thread through them all.

“Elder Brother...?”

Cedric seemed dazed, completely unaware of what had been done to him. He stared blankly at me, looking sickly and pitiful. This was our first time meeting outside of ceremonies and official business. I could tell he was memorizing my every detail, every single thing about this encounter.

“Let’s go, Cedric,” I said. “We need to see Father.”

“*God’s Child.*” That was what the rumors always said. That was what they called him.

“Once we’re done, we’ll go to my room, okay?”

In contrast to this toddler virtuoso, I was so incredibly average that some doubted my ability to inherit the throne. Crown prince though I may have been, I was merely a boy who’d just had his very first conversation with his own brother.

“What would you like me to do, Elder Brother?”

Even at only four years old, I was already empty inside. Six days after Bertrand’s treatment of me came to light, I finally had something like a normal life. That didn’t mean I could suddenly feel emotion after suppressing it for four years. I’d been used like a tool, absorbing and spitting out information on command. I didn’t know how to live as Cedric—as a human being.

“You can do whatever you want,” Lance told me. “Father agreed to let me take care of you outside of your lessons.”

“Whatever I want?” I replied. “Well, I feel most at ease when I am with you.”

I was “God’s Child,” so they said, and I didn’t speak out of idle flattery. Those were my honest feelings in that moment.

Lance had started inviting me to his room regularly after rescuing me from the library, but he obviously wasn’t quite sure what to do with me yet. All he *could* do was keep an eye on me and permit me some free time.

Seneschal Bertrand had been forced to resign, and a man named Fargus took his place. The shake-up left the palace somewhat in disarray. Even Dario, who was relatively new to his post, had to take a leave of absence on the king’s orders. I could tell Dario’s heart and mind hadn’t yet recovered from this whole ordeal. He hadn’t been able to protect me despite witnessing my abuse firsthand, and he had yet to come to terms with that. Everyone who’d looked after me was gone, leaving only Lance, the one who’d rescued me.

“Doesn’t it bug you to just sit there and not do anything?” Lance asked me.

“What about a book? On second thought, maybe not. Let’s see... What else is there?”

Lance hesitated to give me another book after I’d been forced to memorize so many. Besides, I could always recite any one of the dozens of books I knew by heart. Why bother reading something new? But Lance had little else to offer me. After spending his life focused on his studies so he could become a good king, he had few outside interests to share with me.

“If you can’t decide, then I can’t just sit here and work.”

He closed the book he was reading, stood, and approached my chair. He loomed over me, but I wasn’t afraid of him. I didn’t feel much of anything, really. I just stared up at this distant brother of mine.

“Cedric,” he said, “you need to fix how you talk before anything else. It’s really important for royalty to sound polite, but you’re only four years old. I’m your brother, so you can speak more naturally around me.”

“What is it you mean by ‘natural,’ Elder Brother?”

Lance hesitated, perhaps perplexed that I would ask such a question. I knew the *definition* of “natural,” but I was at a loss for how it applied to me.

“I’m saying you can just be normal. Uh, let’s see... If you don’t get it, go ahead and just copy how I talk.”

Seeing my lingering confusion, he set his hand on my shoulder. I held silent and still, peering into his red eyes. Then I blinked three times and gave a rough nod. “All right, Bro. Gotcha.”

Lance sighed, a sign that my imitation of his casual demeanor must have sounded natural enough for him.

“It’d be best if you made some friends your own age,” Lance said. “But it’s still too early for you to be out in society.”

Although my handsome face and tranquil gaze made me look a few years older, I was still just four. My maturity level probably made me seem even

younger.

Noting that Lance seemed to have little advice in the way of socializing, I asked, “Do you have friends, Bro?”

I cocked my head, watching him, and Lance grimaced. It looked like the topic pained him. Perhaps he didn’t have many friends of his own. It wasn’t all that surprising, given that he was the crown prince; people couldn’t really be open around him. On top of that, high society was far too preoccupied gossiping about “God’s Child” to pay him much mind at the time of his debut.

“I guess I’d say there’s one person I want to be friends with,” Lance said.

Though my lips didn’t so much as twitch, I perked up in curiosity.

“He’s the crown prince of Chinensis, Yohan Linne Dwight. I’m sure you know who he is, right?”

I nodded. The two crown princes exchanged greetings during official ceremonies, though I hadn’t seen them act very warmly with each other. Yohan always had an icy quality to his expression—the complete opposite of Lance.

“He’s the same age as me and another crown prince,” Lance added.

“Someday, I want to have a real one-on-one conversation with him.”

“Chinensis...”

I rolled that word around on my tongue—a term Bertrand and the others had drilled into my head. I just couldn’t fathom why Lance would want to be friends with someone from *that* country, of all places.

Detecting my unspoken question, Lance reached up and stroked my hair. “We might be from different countries, but we’re the two wings that make up the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I guess that might still be a bit confusing for you. It’s fine if you don’t get it. I’ll be sure to teach you all about it eventually.”

“Okay.”

At my murmur of acceptance, Lance chuckled and mussed up my hair. I blushed, both because of Lance’s laughter and because no one had ever been

affectionate with me before.

“Listen up, Cedric. This is important.” Lance knelt to look me dead in the eyes. I nodded once, never breaking eye contact. “Someday, I’m sure you’ll finally understand just how big this world is. Right now, you can forget all that. Once one of us becomes king, I’ll be sure to teach you all about it.”

Lance took my tiny hands in his. He was warm, blood pumping with the vitality of his youth.

“When you decide you’re ready to move forward of your own free will, I promise I’ll support you. So don’t worry—I’ll always be there for you. If something bad or scary happens, make sure you come to me.”

I blinked my wide eyes as a shiver ran through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

“And don’t you forget that memorizing things isn’t good enough. You have to etch these words into your heart and think back on them.”

Lance squeezed my hands. We were so close, I could see my reflection in his eyes. I drew a shallow breath, but the shaking only got worse, like my body was expelling all the fear I’d held in for so long.

“We’re brothers,” Lance went on, speaking slowly and clearly. “You can come to me for anything, no matter the reason. I’ll be on your side forever. Things have been really hard for you, haven’t they? But you’re okay now.”

Something about this last bit finally broke me. Tears welled in my eyes. All the emotions I’d locked away welled up and overflowed. I was happy, but the way Lance spoke to me put all the cruelty I’d suffered into stark relief. I couldn’t hide from what had happened to me—or how desperately I’d longed for someone to save me.

I had never cried before; I’d never been allowed to. So I wailed like a baby, all those feelings letting loose at once. Lance wrapped his arms around me and held me tight.

That was the day our tale began: “God’s Child” Cedric Silva Lowell and my “ordinary” brother Lance.

One hundred thirty-six months ago...

“Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Lance Silva Lowell, the crown prince of Cercis. I’ve been looking forward to speaking with you. I think we’ll get along well, Prince Yohan.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Prince Lance.”

As the prince of Chinensis, I had never had a real conversation with Lance of Cercis until we were both ten years old. He had come to my castle alongside the Cercian king to attend a meeting. During all of his previous visits, I’d carefully avoided interacting with him too much. I didn’t want to talk to him if it could lead to a dispute between our kingdoms.

Lance had nothing to do while the kings met, however, so he’d asked to see me. He had been given tours of the castle and the nearby town before, so he’d seen it all. As his peer and a fellow crown prince, I was the one responsible for entertaining him.

“Chinensis is as beautiful as always,” he said. “You’ve got culture and architecture that we don’t. I never get sick of taking it all in.”

That’s rather brazen of him, I thought. What Lance really meant was that Chinensis was *too* different from his country. We were called the United Hanazuo Kingdom, but we comprised two separate countries: Cercis and Chinensis. We’d formed this alliance to survive, but we didn’t share our culture or religion. In fact, we had few points of relation aside from trade. The citizens mingled freely, but the royal families of each nation seldom interacted. Lance’s insistence on talking with me was not only strange but wholly unnecessary.

“Thank you, Prince Lance. But Cercis is also most beautiful.” I smiled politely, just as bored with this conversation as every other in my life.

Being prince of Chinensis was impressive, but at the end of the day I was merely a representative of a tiny kingdom. People praised me as the young, brilliant heir to the throne, but that was a position I would inherit regardless of my skill or ability, since I had no siblings. Everyone in Chinensis believed in me, yet I'd given them very little reason to do so.

As an isolated country, Chinensis only ever traded with Cercis—our ally and the other half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Cercis was in the same situation. This was an alliance based solely on superficial exchanges. Unlike the common folk, government officials and the royal families still did not quite trust each other.

Time after time, I found myself wishing I'd been born as an average citizen rather than having to play these games the royalty had to engage in. Nothing good came of being born into royalty. From my earliest years, my life was controlled by adults, and not a lick of the studying I did changed that. My life was a slow, steady march toward a distant throne. I studied hard like the adults wanted and tried to become the perfect crown prince they desired, knowing that someday I would morph into a complete bore just like them. I despised the country and the era we lived in. More than that, I detested the person I was forced to become.

In ten years' time, I would probably also hate Cercis and our united kingdom, but I would have to maintain a polite, shallow relationship. I would marry, have children, and foist the same tedious life I suffered onto them.

This country has no future.

If we kept ourselves closed off from the world, denying contact with other lands, we were bound to be erased from history. Yet we continued to delude ourselves into thinking our way was best, clinging tenaciously to that fiction even as it gradually reduced us to a relic of a bygone time.

The small countries of Chinensis and Cercis had quarreled frequently in the past. But the moment other powers targeted us, we formed an alliance to

ensure our mutual survival. It was a relationship of convenience and nothing more.

Almost a century had passed, and the royal family of Cercis still made no attempt to understand God. We treated them with equal contempt. Though we claimed free-flowing trade with each other, the law gave our king ultimate power, adding that his “authority shall not be scorned in the name of God.” That last bit was a snide reference to Chinensis, and it was why we could never be on good terms with the Cercian royal family.

I agreed with this, of course. After all, I only ever felt at peace when I was praying. It wasn’t like I had anyone else to rely on. Wet nurses had raised me; I rarely ever saw my parents. God was the only person I could reach out to—the only person who understood me. He was the only one in the whole world who loved me, permitted me more than just my studies, and guided me down the right path.

God was my salvation. Unlike the corrupt royal family and government, He protected the innocent Chinensian citizens. I prayed whenever I had time, offering God my gratitude and asking that He continue allowing the Chinensian people to live in peace. Strangely, the more I did this, the better my reputation became.

It was like being caught up in unending river rapids. Like it or not, I was going to live the life that everyone wanted of me, grow old, and die. That was the fate I was born with. That was my destiny.

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?! Cercis is really pretty!”

Back in the present, Prince Lance echoed my empty compliment as though I’d meant it. His eyes sparkled, and he leaned closer to me. A grin spread wide across his face. I recoiled from his open, emotive response.

“I’m really honored to hear you say that,” he said. “If the next king likes his country, then I know the future’s going to be bright.” He crossed his arms and nodded knowingly.

I didn't understand. "'His' country?" I ventured, feeling odd. "I was talking about Cercis..."

"Our country is the United Hanazuo Kingdom. That includes both Cercis *and* Chinensis, right?"

He said it like it was so obvious, so plain. Few royals were willing to acknowledge the United Hanazuo Kingdom aloud. They didn't want to surrender their nations in name as well. But Lance? He didn't even hesitate. My mouth fell open—and the next thing he said had me floored.

He wanted to open up the country someday.

"Times change," he said. "Someday, we'll definitely need to trade with other countries and exchange information. We can't just rely on each other. Who knows? Someone could be out there developing technology that will leave the whole world awestruck."

I agreed, but that did not mean I was on Prince Lance's side in this. I'd given up on that future, thinking that it was impossible. He, on the other hand, had already decided to pursue it.

"First, we have to turn the United Hanazuo Kingdom into something we can show off to the world," he went on. "The higher-ups are always grumbling at one another now, but once *we're* in charge, I want to change all that."

Lance paced as he spoke, meandering into the sunlight. A golden glow fell around him, like God was shining His light down on this boy in particular.

"If we, as the kings, make our intentions known, then no one should be able to criticize us. Our citizens commingle peacefully—and hey, we're all humans, right? Even if we don't always see eye to eye, there's no reason we can't share our way of life."

"Does that mean you want to 'share' the God we follow?" I asked. "Or do you intend to be rid of Him?"

It was the first time Lance, who'd gotten carried away in his dreams, fell

silent. Fear trickled into the back of my mind. Were those glowing aspirations of his nothing more than lies and stubbornness? Was it ego?

“That would mean putting you under our control,” he said unabashedly. “It’s a big world out there. People who want to believe in God can have their faith, whereas other people can devote themselves to whatever they wish. It’s the people who should choose, not the crown. We should make a point of accepting each other’s beliefs. That way, there won’t be any trouble.”

His radiance was far too bright. Part of me wanted to shake him and tell him all of that was just a pretty fantasy, but the strength of his convictions silenced me. How was it that two princes so close in age and from similarly isolated countries had turned out so different?

“I want you to teach me about yourself too,” he said.

His burning-red eyes never left me. The heat of that gaze thawed the frozen world I’d lived in for so long.

“I’ll learn everything I can about you, so learn about me too, okay?” he went on. “We’re going to live together as kings for many, many years. I’m going to need you.”

His open, honest gaze held mine. He reached out for me, and something inside me lurched. I’d spent my life cursing my birth and fate, and his proffered hand felt like a sign from God.

For Lance, this was all so easy. He and I were both boys, both born the same year, both living in the United Hanazuo Kingdom as crown princes. Yet we couldn’t be more different.

“And I want you to need me too,” he finished.

It felt like destiny. As if God Himself was guiding me, I reached out and took the prince’s hand.

One hundred thirty-one months ago...

“Yohan, you have to stop visiting Cercis so often,” my father said with a sigh after summoning me to his office.

“What do you mean, Father? Cercis is one wing of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Why can’t I go there?” I asked despite having a rough idea of the answer.

Father glared at me from his throne. “You don’t understand? The Cercians think you’re visiting Lance to spread our religion. You’re embarrassing our country, and it will strain our alliance.”

I knew it, I thought, but I clenched my teeth to keep it locked inside. I’d always known that Father and the government officials feared this. The people of both Chinensis and Cercis appreciated my visits to Lance, but the same couldn’t be said of the monarchy. My parents—who should have been my closest allies—and the government officials were our strongest opponents.

“He can come from Cercis to see us, but don’t damage the dignity of Chinensis by flitting there over and over,” Father said.

Of course. His precious dignity. That dignity was seeming more and more worthless as I spent time with Prince Lance. Our people approved of our budding friendship, yet here my father was trying to stop it for something as petty as dignity. Resentment simmered in my gut.

“Yohan, you’re one of the most brilliant princes in our nation’s history. Don’t be led astray now. We *are* Chinensis. You can never bow down to either prince of Cercis—especially the younger one. Don’t get too comfortable around him. He’s nothing but trouble for us.”

I was only ten years old, not yet brave enough to rebuke my father. Instead, I squeezed the cross hanging around my neck and sent a prayer up to God. I nodded, bowed to Father, and left.

The thud of the door closing behind me echoed in my chest.

“You have to come to Chinensis next time because we can’t look inferior to

you.” I could never say that to Lance. He wasn’t doing this to win our favor.

While I considered telling him that my official business as the prince was keeping me too busy to see him, I knew that wouldn’t work either. Our relationship would crumble if he ever found out I was lying. Unable to deceive Lance, I had no other choice but to tell the truth—even if it turned him against me.

“Just when I thought we’d finally become friends...” I murmured to myself as I made my way down a long hall.

Lance was my very first friend. He showed me the light when I was shrouded in darkness. He’d made my small and lonesome world so much bigger than I ever thought it could be.

“Our country is the United Hanazuo Kingdom. That includes both Cercis and Chinensis, right?”

I would never forget those words. He was the only thing to bring color to my tedious life. The past six months we’d spent together were unbelievably fun.

He had seen past the limits of our respective nations and called us true compatriots. All that would probably come crashing down once I confessed to him. Chinensis had closed the door on Cercis, and I was stuck on the other side.

Once, I genuinely believed that the two of us could create a united kingdom. Surely that dream was over now. I’d already given up...but as it turned out, he refused to do the same.

“I get it. In that case, I’ll just have to come to Chinensis from now on!”

“What?!”

Lance had come to my country for his usual visit, and I’d confessed the truth to him while we sat in a parlor. I’d ensured ahead of time that the room was empty just in case he felt like yelling at me. His frank response was like nothing I’d imagined.

“You’re not mad?” I blurted before I could stop myself. He seemed so

unaffected that I had to ask. Had he heard me? Did he understand what I was saying?

“If the king ordered it, then what else can we do?” he replied, arms crossed. “I’m sorry I got you in trouble, Prince Yohan.” He sighed and bowed his head to me, chastened, but his eyes were as fiery as ever. “My father’s also pretty stubborn, so he might tell me to stay away from Chinensis too. It probably hasn’t happened yet because people aren’t all that interested in me right now.”

Prince Lance closed his eyes and shook his head at himself, otherwise holding silent as he contemplated the problem before us.

How could he be so accepting of me? If he had come to me with the same problem, I probably would have pulled away from him, ready to end our relationship. I was relieved to have kept my friend, but questions flew through my mind.

“I’ve got it!” Lance slapped his leg and faced me with a grin. He jumped up off the sofa and circled around the table to stand next to me. “Prince Yohan, don’t you have that ‘blood oath’ thing in your country?”

The blood oath was a Chinensian religious ceremony in which two parties mixed their blood to forge an unbreakable vow. Royals performed it in public, pledging their loyalty both to the people of their country and God. It was often used for things like successions, religious vows, weddings, and legal oaths.

Before I could figure out what this had to do with us, Prince Lance bit into his own thumb. The sound of rending flesh made me gulp.

“What are you doing?!” I asked, alarmed.

He’d drawn blood. I went for a towel, but the prince stuck his bleeding thumb at me. He didn’t explain himself even as I leaned away.

“Let’s make a blood oath right here, my friend!” Lance’s voice echoed through the room, his confident smile warm and bright. “Someday, we might not be able to see each other again the way we do now. But that’s only for ten years or

so. Once we've taken our thrones, we'll destroy the walls that keep us apart. It'll be a fresh start...the true beginning for this country of ours."

No matter how tall and thick the walls that separated us, Prince Lance just kept on smiling, determined to scale them or tear them down. His radiance drew me toward him.

"Promise me, Prince Yohan," he said. "No, just *Yohan*! No matter what else happens, we'll become kings—and together, we'll bring prosperity to the United Hanazuo Kingdom!"

The fire in his red eyes burned bright. Blood trickled from his thumb down to his wrist. He grinned at me, seemingly unaffected.

"I know we can do it! As long as I've got you! You and me..." He trailed off. Despite the blazing passion in his eyes, I found no delusion or hesitation there—only an unshakable conviction. "We're the only two crown princes in this world who exist as one!"

My breath caught in my throat, and I shuddered. My whole life, I'd always seen my fate as something repulsive. I was born to a farce of a united kingdom, crown prince of a country split in two. But in this moment, my destiny suddenly seemed a blessing.

I urged my legs to turn me away from the prince so I could retrieve a knife from a hidden shelf. Although it was placed there to protect me from harm, I used the blade to nick my own thumb. Perhaps I was overexcited, as I didn't feel any pain at all. Fresh, red blood welled up on the pad.

"I swear," I said. "When it comes to this country's future and the good of the people..."

I approached and pressed my bloody digit to his. We pushed hard, holding our thumbs against each other until the bleeding stopped.

"Lance, I...I need you."

Prince Lance...no, *Lance's* blood was the same color as mine, even before we

mixed it together. Just another bit of proof that we were both only human.

“I’ll swear it too, Lance,” I said. “Let’s always look out for each other. If I fail at something, then you’ll cover for me, and if you fail at something, I’ll cover for you. We’ll always protect the things we love.”

We separated our bloody thumbs, taking each other’s hands and squeezing them. The warmth of his palm pressed against mine. We had no priest, no official vows, no ceremonial dagger. This was a child’s version of the blood oath.

Yet in that moment, to the two of us, it was an oath that ran thicker than blood.

One hundred and two months ago...

“Yohan! Let me introduce you to my little brother. This is Cedric, the second-born prince.”

I met Prince Cedric when I was twelve and he was eight. He looked even younger than that, peeking at me from behind Lance. We had greeted each other at our respective countries’ ceremonies, but this was our first time truly interacting.

“Cedric, this is the guy I told you about, Prince Yohan. He’s my best friend. Together, we’re gonna make the United Hanazuo Kingdom thrive.”

Cedric took a bit more interest in me after this explanation.

“Hello there, Prince Cedric,” I said. “My name is Yohan Linne Dwight. I’m good friends with your big brother.”

The young prince could have been five instead of eight. When I offered a handshake, he frowned before he finally accepted it.

“I’m Cedric Silva Lowell. It is an honor and a blessing to make your acquaintance. May you and my brother, Prince Lance, guide the United Hanazuo Kingdom to a future of eternal prosperity.”

Despite his anxious demeanor, he spoke eloquently. Still, his voice was curiously flat, like he was reading off a page. It called to mind the rumors I'd heard about this "God's Child." He possessed the power of perfect recall, like a god. It was an uncanny ability, but judging by the way Lance stroked his hair, the older prince seemed quite used to it.

"You don't have to be so formal. Yohan's my friend, remember?" Lance said with a smile.

Cedric's gaze fell to his feet. A scowl twisted his mouth. "Bro said I had to come, so I did. I never wanted to come to this dumb country."

Lance delivered a swift, loud smack to Cedric's head. The little prince yelped, clawing at the site of impact. Lance looked so much more like a father than a big brother in this moment, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Yohan! You should be mad at him!"

"No, I don't mind," I assured him. "Prince Cedric's reaction is correct, actually. *You're* the odd one out here."

Royals only interacted publicly and rarely mingled outside of events where they could be seen together. That was perfectly normal to all of us. Lance visited us more than any other member of Chinensian royalty in history.

Lance balked. "What do you mean, 'odd'?!"

I smiled in lieu of an explanation, letting him stew in his outrage.

Lance had invited Cedric to join us in Chinensis many times now, but he always refused. Today was the first time he'd agreed to visit, yet the younger prince already looked like he wanted to flee. He'd drifted away from Lance and clambered up a nearby tree.

"He's been like this a lot lately," Lance told me. "Once he learned that it's hard to get to him when he's in a tree, he started climbing them more and more. His teachers don't know what to do with him, since he always skips out on studying. I try to tell him it's dangerous, but he never listens!" He stared up

at Cedric, rubbing his temples in exasperation. When he scowled like that, his face aged well beyond its years.

He said Cedric had recently given up on his studies altogether, instead fleeing from his teachers. What began as simple laziness had transformed into actual escapes. Sometimes Lance had to catch him and drag him back. As he told it, it was happening all too frequently.

“Can I try talking to Prince Cedric?” I asked.

Lance frowned, eyes flitting back and forth between me and his brother. “Are you sure you want to do that alone?”

“I am,” I said with a smile. “Wait for us in my room. I’ll be sure to bring him back.”

Worry lingered in Lance’s crimson gaze, but eventually he agreed. “Don’t do anything dangerous!” he barked at Cedric in the tree. Then he took his guards and headed for the castle.

I watched Lance disappear before letting out a sigh. Only he could leave the second-born prince, his beloved little brother, with a Chinensian prince. Anyone else would—

“You’re not gonna brainwash me, Prince Yohan,” Cedric said from above. When I looked up, he was glaring at me from a high branch.

“I have no intention of brainwashing you, Prince Cedric. Our god’s teachings only apply to this country. Even though I want people to understand God, I would never force Him on another person. Do you want proof? I haven’t brainwashed Lance, have I?” I beamed at him.

Cedric gazed off in the direction Lance had gone before turning back to me. “Of course you wouldn’t do that to my bro or any ordinary person,” he said. “But I’m different. I don’t even feel alive in this country.”

I knew what he was trying to say. Cedric was unique; thanks to his innate ability, he would never forget anything he learned. Furthermore, Cercian royalty

and government officials didn't care for us Chinensians. They nervously awaited the day when we tried to forcibly convert the citizens of Cercis.

"We don't see God as someone who controls us," I went on. "He forgives, protects, and at times reaches out to us in salvation."

My words were a bit clumsy; I had only recently developed this way of thinking about God. Lance had changed a lot about how I looked at the world. Prince Cedric covered his ears and glared at me, suspicious. I wondered if he would still hear me through his palms.

When he saw that I'd stopped talking, he lowered his hands from his ears and grabbed the branch to balance himself. "Is that all?"

Hoping he might be ready to listen this time, I tried again. "I know that you're a very kind person, Prince Cedric." He squinted at me, scrutinizing. "You're doing all this for Lance, right?"

I offered no further explanation, but the way his eyes widened told me he understood—and that I'd surprised him. He sat there with his mouth hanging open.

"I get it," I went on. "I've heard stories about the two of you. But I have no intention of telling Lance your motivations for these 'misbehaviors.'" I stepped closer to Cedric's tree and leaned against it. When I looked up, I saw him staring down at me from his branch.

"You better not," he said, which meant my assumption was correct.

"I give you my word."

Cedric fell silent, lost in thought. While I didn't agree with his reasoning, I knew he'd been forced to walk a path others had laid out for him for some time. If I were in his shoes, I'd probably feel the same way.

"Bro's never hated me before," he said, his voice so soft it was nearly stolen by the wind.

Had I not been directly below him, I might not have heard him at all. I might

have assumed he was speaking only to himself, but something told me he meant those words for me.

"I know. That's just the sort of guy he is," I responded just as quietly.

Yes, I knew just as well as Cedric that Lance would never hate him. He simply wasn't like that. And that open nature was how we'd become such close friends as well.

"Bro's the crown prince," Cedric said. "I'm sure he'll be an amazing king someday, way better than Father...and way better than I would be too."

"Agreed."

Cedric could be blunt, but when he admitted his true feelings, I could not help but want him to open up to me even more.

"He's kind," he said. "He's accepting of everyone, even me...and he doesn't discriminate against Chinensians like you."

"That's exactly right."

Cedric's replies emerged tentatively, like he was expecting me to explode at him any moment. I could tell how on edge he must have felt in coming here.

"I've tortured him for so long."

Those heavy, painful words fell from his mouth all at once. When I raised my head, he was still staring straight down at me, but he bit his lip to keep from crying. For the first time, he truly looked like a little boy.

The government officials in Cercis had been trying to bypass the traditional inheritance of the throne to make Cedric, aka "God's Child," the king instead of Prince Lance. They even mocked Lance in private, calling him "ordinary." The rumors were pervasive enough to reach me here. Early on in our friendship, I'd asked Lance if he hated Cedric because of it.

"Of course I don't hate him. He's never done anything to hurt me."

He was so blunt, so earnest, not a whiff of deception or bitterness in his tone.

“If you’ve heard rumors about us, then you know my nickname, right?” Cedric said. “Tell me, Prince Yohan. Do you hate me? Do I disgust you? Do you think I’m repulsive?”

The little prince seemed on the verge of breaking down. I had to wonder if he’d agreed to come here just to ask me these questions. In this moment, I appreciated that he was indeed Lance’s brother. No one but these two dared cut right to the heart of the matter.

I reached a hand up to Cedric. I couldn’t quite touch him, but I smiled and offered it anyway.

“I don’t hate you,” I assured him. “I don’t think you’re disgusting or repulsive at all.” I squeezed the cross around my neck with my free hand and made a vow to him. “Lance told me he loves you and that you’re an irreplaceable member of his family. He even told me that you’re a kind person. That’s why I believe you.”

Fire came to life in Cedric’s eyes. Then the tears spilled free at last, streaking down his cheeks. He barely even blinked as he stared down at me, the large teardrops landing on my face. We were more alike than I’d previously assumed. That was why I, not Lance, had uncovered Cedric’s true motivations. I knew what was inside his heart.

I opened my hands to catch his tears. Keeping my eyes on this boy, with his golden hair sparkling in the dappled sunlight, I spoke firmly: “You’re Lance’s little brother, and there’s no one more suited for the throne than he is.”

My words only made him cry harder. The tears rained down on me as he curled up to bury his face in his knees and wail. He looked even younger than his meager eight years then, or maybe “innocent” was the right word. He’d been exposed to the motives and machinations of so many adults, compelled to absorb whatever information they foisted on him. Only Lance let this boy be a child again.

“Come down, Cedric. I swear on God’s name that I won’t force you to do anything.”

Cedric grabbed his shirt to blow his nose into it, wiped the tears from his face, and slowly climbed down the tree. He hung his head so that I wouldn't see him crying, but his shoulders kept on shaking. When he reached the ground, I knelt down and offered him my pinkie. He rubbed at his eyes again, eyes dancing between my face and finger.

"Even if Lance... Even if no one in this world sees it, just know that I do. I see that you're kind and valuable, and that you've chosen a path filled with thorns," I said.

His life already had more than its fair share of painful experiences. Maybe one day he'd come to resent his determination to keep marching forward. Maybe his ego was too big for him to see his own powerlessness. Either way, we were the same. We both chose Lance instead of the future that adults had tried to force on us.

"No matter what path you take, I'll be on your side, even if no one else is," I said. "I'll share whatever path you believe is right, and I'll believe in it too. The three of us will turn Hanazuo into a wonderful country."

Cedric was still rubbing his eyes. He nodded again and again, as though he couldn't speak. The little prince then raised his head, his face all red and puffy, and gently wrapped his pinkie around mine. We squeezed our pinkies together, sealing a promise between us.

It was two months and three days after my ninth birthday.

"Oh! Prince Lance, Prince Cedric. Do you have business with Chinensis?"

Lance and I had arrived in Chinensis to see Prince Yohan like usual, but Lord Agee—a Cercian official flanked by his men—stopped us in front of the castle.

"Greetings, Lord Agee," Lance said calmly. "Yes, we planned to meet with Prince Yohan today."

I hid behind him, peeking out to glare at the man.

“Is that so?” Lord Agee said. “We just happened to have a meeting here as well.”

He sounded far too happy about that. In fact, he sounded far too happy about the “coincidence” of bumping into us. I didn’t like this guy at all.

Adults had never stopped trying to win me to their side. A few of Lord Agee’s men tried to sneak surreptitious looks at me even as they chatted with my brother. I knew that the rumors about “God’s Child” were playing in their minds.

It was then that Prince Yohan arrived with his guards, wearing a gentle smile. “Hey there, Lance, Cedric. I’ve been waiting.”

Prince Yohan was the same age as Lance, and I’d heard he was one of the smartest Chinensian royal family members in history. He’d even figured out why I was avoiding my studies the very same day he met me. Not even Lance or the adults in the castle had sorted that out. And yet, I’d been cautious around him, sure that my nickname would offend someone from such a deeply religious country. Prince Yohan assured me that wasn’t the case.

“You’re Lance’s little brother, and there’s no one more suited for the throne than he is.”

Prince Yohan was the first person who saw me as Lance’s little brother and not merely as “God’s Child.” That made me almost too happy to bear.

“Sorry, Yohan,” Lance said. “It looks like your visitors got here at the same time.”

“It’s fine,” Prince Yohan replied. “I must have mixed up the schedule.” He had his guards lead Lord Agee inside, then invited us to his room. After Lance, Prince Yohan was my greatest savior. He knew what made Lance so great and understood what I was trying to accomplish on my own.

“Cedric,” he said, “I heard you ran away from one of your teachers again. Ever the little speedster, aren’t you?”

Lance groaned. “It’s no laughing matter, Yohan. He’s smarter than everyone, but he’s wasting that talent if he won’t learn anything.”

I secretly wished I could waste all my “talent” until it was gone. Lance chased me down when I ran from my studies, and when he found me, I had to go back or risk making him look the fool. I always went back, but it meant more mindless repetition under the adults’ watchful eyes.

“Why not make a distinction, at least?” Prince Yohan suggested. “There’s some information that will be of use to you, like history, laws, etiquette, culture, and—”

“Don’t care,” I cut in, earning me another scolding from Lance.

Although Prince Yohan said he would support my choices, he kept trying to convince me to not abandon my studies. Just one month and ten days ago, he told me, *“If you don’t want adults knowing what you’ve learned, why don’t I start teaching you in secret?”*

I refused, of course. I could live just fine without studying; I didn’t want to up my knowledge for no reason at all. Thanks to my ability, I learned things constantly without even trying, regardless of whether I wanted to or not. Besides, I already had things like Cercian history and law in my brain. The histories of other countries were in there too, since Bertrand had been making me read about them until I was four. If I memorized even more stuff, the rumors about “God’s Child” would spread all over again.

“Just forget it. Tell me about Chinensis,” I said.

Prince Yohan half smiled, half scowled at my usual demand. Lance sat next to me, resting his chin on his hands, and he smiled as well.

Ever since I got to know Prince Yohan, I started coming to Chinensis with Lance. I’d been told all kinds of terrible things about Chinensis back when the adults were brainwashing me. They called Chinensians religious nuts, crazy, stubborn, and small-minded. They said Chinensians were my enemies, that they’d look down on me with contempt because of my nickname. Because of

my abilities to absorb information, they ordered me to never look outside the carriage when I traveled to Chinensis for formal events.

Even after Bro rescued me, I was scared that just by stepping foot in Chinensis I would take on their values. After all, that was exactly what had happened when those adults treated me like a tool.

But once Bro introduced me to Prince Yohan, I braved longer and longer looks out the window during my carriage rides to Chinensis. The buildings were different from ours, but the people were the same. I spotted plenty of churches, which I assumed served Chinensis's religion, but none of the disgust or fear I anticipated rose up in me at the sight. They were actually kind of pretty. It was hard to believe I'd been scared of such a pleasant sight all this time. That made me feel like I couldn't trust anything the adults in Cercis ever told me.

The first time I asked Prince Yohan to teach me about Chinensis, both he and Lance were shocked. They must not have expected someone who always ran from his studies to ask for a lesson. The thing was, I trusted the two of them way more than any adult.

Lance granted his permission, and Prince Yohan led me to the sofa. He asked what I wanted to learn about, but I wasn't sure what to say. I'd already heard of his country's faith, customs, blood oath ceremony, and conflicts with Cercis. It was all so fascinating that I could devour it all over again. The greater the difference between Cercis and Chinensis, the more I craved the information.

I glanced around, trying to think of what to ask him, when my eyes landed on Prince Yohan's chest. "What's that pendant?"

"Ah, this?"

He lifted the cross hanging around his neck. I'd spotted the same shape on their churches and elsewhere around the country. Prince Yohan had once explained that it was a symbol of their faith, but when I asked if wearing the symbol was *part* of the faith, he only grinned at me.

“It’s not something you absolutely have to wear,” he said, somewhat bashfully. “It’s just... Yes, I think I’d call it a charm.”

He removed the pendant so I could see it up close: a simple white cross. Chinensis was rich in minerals, but this was a plain pendant with no added decoration.

“When you wear the symbol, it means God is with you,” he said. “He offers us divine protection. At least, that’s what I hope for when I wear it. It’s supported me throughout my life.”

A shadow fell over Prince Yohan’s face, revealing a deep loneliness I never would’ve expected from him.

“God has no shape,” he continued. “This is just a symbol, not the real God. Our faith forbids idolatry.”

I had no idea how they believed in something without form. Nevertheless, I was enamored with their devotion to one thing above all else. That part, at least, I could understand. In fact, I was jealous of Prince Yohan for having both God and Lance to believe in. We’d caught Prince Yohan praying during plenty of our visits. He never truly fulfilled the image of a “religious nut” that adults back in Cercis tried to sell me, though.

“We pray to God, sing to God, protect His teachings, and thank Him,” Prince Yohan said. “That’s what our faith consists of, just as I explained to you before. That’s probably why we want to be closer to Him and do whatever we can in His name.”

Prince Yohan let his cross fall back onto his chest. The sunlight filtering through the window outlined the simple white shape.

“It’s not something that can be forced,” he added. “But we’d all be very happy if you and Lance accepted our way of life.”

Prince Yohan ruffled my hair, his gaze sliding over to Lance. My brother nodded, and I mimicked the gesture, accepting Prince Yohan’s peaceful smile.

Prince Yohan, Lance, and I spent as much time together as we could that day, but eventually someone summoned Prince Yohan away on business. Lance left to use the lavatory, and for a while I was alone.

“They’re taking too long.”

I’d grown bored of counting each tick of the clock. Guards stood outside the room, but I wasn’t about to call them and make them hunt down my brother and the Chinensian prince. Besides, I didn’t like interacting with people aside from those two. I was more at home here in Prince Yohan’s room, even if I was all by myself.

I rose from the sofa and wandered to the window. Off in the distance, I could just make out the spot where Lance and I had disembarked from our carriage. Beyond that lay the town itself, a beautiful sprawl of homes and churches and shops. I never got sick of gazing out at Chinensis and all its lovely white buildings.

“We might be from different countries, but we’re the two wings that make up the United Hanazuo Kingdom.”

Bro had said those words to me four years, ten months, and twenty-eight days ago. I finally felt like I was starting to understand them. Our towns, faiths, and lifestyles were different, but we both belonged to wonderful countries. I didn’t understand why the adults couldn’t grasp something so obvious.

“They’re *still* taking too long.”

Annoyance tugged at me. I never used to get impatient, not even when adults forced me to sit and study for hours on end. If I was sitting next to Lance, I could do nothing all day and never feel bored. But lately, this new restlessness had been a persistent itch at the back of my mind.

I left Prince Yohan’s room, and the guards followed. I told them I was only going to the lavatory, but I took the longest route I could to search for Prince

Yohan and Bro. The guards tried to address me, but I ignored them.

We passed a staircase that led into the great hall, and I spotted some officials from our palace at the bottom—Lord Agee and his men among them. They huddled in the shadows, speaking quietly. Their creepy smiles stirred something in me, and I yearned to know what they were whispering and sneering about. If I could just see their mouths moving, I could read their lips and understand most of their conversation by comparing it to my memory of how they spoke. I watched in careful concentration.

“I can’t believe it... Why do Prince Lance and Prince Cedric have to keep visiting a place like this?”

“As God’s Child, Prince Cedric could harm his education by coming here. Whatever would we do if he began to spew these zealots’ gobbledygook?”

“The rumors say that even Prince Lance has been won over by Prince Yohan’s smooth talk. Perhaps having God’s Child as a younger brother has caused him to seek comfort in a foreign god.”

“No, Prince Lance isn’t such a gentle soul. I wish he’d be as guarded as Prince Cedric...”

“Just what is Prince Yohan up to? He keeps inviting our princes here over and over again. He looks so delicate, but he’s shameless. He may be well known for his brilliance, but the fact that he’s trying to get close to God’s Child...”

The longer I read their lips, the worse I felt. These kinds of people were the exact reason I’d put “God’s Child” to death.

It all started when I climbed a tree. Nine days before my eighth birthday, I saw a tree on my walk back to my room. It triggered a memory of a trip Lance and I once took into town, where we saw children playing. I imitated the children in my memory and the way they’d climbed trees, placing my hands and feet exactly as they had. Soon I could climb as easily as they did.

When Lance came home and discovered me doing something so dangerous,

he launched into a lecture. What happened next was even *more* shocking. He asked who taught me how to climb trees in the first place, and I reminded him we'd seen those children in town doing it. That was when Lance came up with a theory: *"Maybe it's not just memory and information. Maybe you can imitate techniques you see too."*

Hearing that, all the hair on my body stood on end. He tried to calm me down, saying it was just a theory and I shouldn't worry. His reassurances didn't loosen the knot that had formed in my gut.

"I'm gonna have to work even harder so that I measure up to you."

Those words were a dagger to my heart. The more I learned, the more pressure I put on my brother. I ruined the things he'd spent hours, days, weeks, months, *years* learning. He was working so hard, but all of it was going to waste because of me. That was when I decided to stop studying and learning things. As long as I didn't read or listen to my teachers, I could avoid obtaining more knowledge. I wouldn't have to worry about surpassing Lance and making things harder for him.

"What's the matter, Your Highness?!" a soldier called out to me.

I'd been standing frozen beside the staircase, staring at Lord Agee and his men. The group jumped as much as I did at the soldier's shout, finally noticing me above them.

"It's Prince Cedric!" said one.

"We're about to head home to Cercis," said another.

Brazenly, they ascended the staircase to get to me. I stepped away, but they just grinned and commented on the perfect timing.

"We don't have many opportunities to speak with you directly, since you're always with Prince Lance."

What's wrong with that? I thought, but I could guess the answer after eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Please keep this question in confidence, Prince Cedric—has Prince Yohan done anything strange to you?”

“Yes, I’m concerned about that too. Please be very careful around him. You see, Chinensis is...quite different from our country. Don’t you agree?”

“He may be Prince Lance’s dear friend, but there’s no need for you to force yourself to befriend him too.”

I hated them. All they ever did was project their ideology and ulterior motives on me. They tried to weigh me down with their negativity so I would see the world through the same twisted lens they did.

With nowhere to run, I stood there silently and let the adults jabber away. They feigned concern for me with the same mouths that had insulted Lance and Prince Yohan.

“We’re just worried about you, Your Highness, as God’s Child—”

“What the hell have you ever done for me?!” My voice came out deeper than I expected, every word sharp and cutting. Their not-so-innocent smiles faltered, melting into grimaces.

“Prince Yohan has never forced Bro and me to do anything! He’s a great prince who loves his people, just like my brother! So why the hell are you acting like I can trust you more than Prince Yohan? I don’t remember you doing anything more than saying hello to me.”

Lord Agee had greeted me at ceremonies and nowhere else. He’d also interacted with Bertrand fifty-one times after I turned two, all the while keeping quiet about my “unique” education.

Then there was Lord Butcher. He, too, had only greeted me at ceremonies and interacted with Bertrand fifty-one times after I turned two years old. He kept his mouth shut about my “unique” education.

Lord Nepenthes. We’d only ever greeted each other once, including at ceremonies. He had learned about my “unique” education when I was three

and said nothing about it.

Lord Hallisay. Lord Johnson. Lord Hambrough. Every last one of them had only ever greeted me at ceremonies. They'd all witnessed my "unique" education and never told a soul.

"Tell me right now why you think you get to act like we're so close," I snapped, anger contorting my expression. I lashed out at them, gripping my shirt till my knuckles went white. "How can you pretend this is normal while you frame my brother's close friend? Tell me why you think I should prioritize your wants over Bro and Prince Yohan!"

How dare they cozy up to me when they never cared about me! How dare they speak ill of someone I care about!

The men went pale, mouths flapping as they struggled to dredge up excuses. Until now, I'd never once talked back to an adult like this. I'd always stayed quiet and run away, but for the first time in my life, I was determined to stand my ground.

I'm the second-born prince. Bro chased away that seneschal when he was only eight, and I can do that too. Right here and now! I'm a member of the royal family, and that comes with power, even if I cast away my title as "God's Child" and abandon my talents. I'll still have power over men like this because I am royalty.

I'm a prince just like Bro. I'm a prince! I'm—

"Cedric?"

I spun around at the sound of that voice. Prince Yohan was right behind me, watching me with concern. He asked what was wrong. I glanced back at Lord Agee and his men, whose eyes had widened with panic. I yearned to tell Prince Yohan everything, to expose these cowards right here, but it would only make more trouble for Lance.

"Nothing," I lied. "They just wanted to say hi."

The men's relief was palpable, and it pissed me off. I didn't do this to help them. Before they could say another word, I grabbed Prince Yohan's hand.

"Bro never came back from the bathroom, so let's go search together...*Big Bro*," I said, loud enough for Lord Agee and his cronies to hear.

"'Big Bro'...?" Prince Yohan repeated, just as shocked as they were.

"I trust Prince Yohan as much as I trust my brother," I declared. "So I'm gonna call him 'Big Bro.' It's a special nickname I'm using just for him."

I was still gripping Prince Yohan's—or rather, just Yohan's—hand as I spoke these words directly at those men. They exchanged confused glances, eyes wandering like they weren't sure where to look.

"I'll never forgive anyone who talks bad about Bro *or* Big Bro," I declared. "Sure, 'God's Child' may not exist anymore..."

I pointed at each of them slowly, announcing their names from Lord Agee to Lord Hambrough. They flinched as I addressed them, shocked that I remembered their names.

"That doesn't mean I won't remember *you*, though."

In fact, I would never forget. Just like Lord Bertrand, their faces, words, and everything else about them were burned into my brain. If they caused any more trouble, they would not get another chance. Which they clearly understood, judging by their pale faces and the tremor that had come over the whole sorry lot.

That was all I needed from them. I tugged on Yohan's hand and began to run back toward his room. He stayed silent the whole time, but once we made it there safe and sound, he finally spoke.

"Thank you, Cedric."

"How much did you hear?"

"I was there before they spotted you."

He must have caught even more of their slander than I had. Perhaps he'd been a little closer to them than I was, so he'd heard them instead of having to read their lips. Yohan certainly seemed shaken by all the insults and insinuations. He said he'd wanted to run over to me when he saw me approach, but he decided to stay hidden so as not to make the situation worse. He also remarked on my swearing, but I ignored it. I could never admit to something as pathetic as wanting to look cooler and stronger in front of the adults.

"Why didn't you say anything to them sooner?" I asked him. "This is *your* country, Big Bro. You could've easily punished them or something."

"I'm used to hearing stuff like that," he said, smiling awkwardly.

Those jerks must have been speaking ill of him for years. Anger surged through me all over again. I offered to tell Lance, who could bring the matter back to Cercis and get them all in trouble, but Yohan shook his head.

"It's fine. I only have to deal with it for a few more years. Right now, the time I spend with you and Lance means a lot more to me than whatever those men might say. I don't want to upset the relationship between our countries." He squeezed my hand. "You know, I haven't gotten to hold your hand since Lance introduced us."

"A few more years? What do you mean?"

Yohan furrowed his brow. "Lance didn't tell you? We made a promise. Once we become kings, we're going to break down the invisible walls that separate our countries and make the United Hanazuo Kingdom an amazing place." He flashed a brilliant, earnest smile, adding, "That's why it's going to be okay."

This wasn't merely him reassuring me; it was his true conviction, something he was sure to bring to fruition.

Lance and Yohan had made a promise. I was a little upset that Lance never told me about it, but this promise filled me with hope that easily overwhelmed the disappointment. The two of them would one day stand shoulder to shoulder and lead the country together, freeing the people from their restraints

and tensions. But what would that mean for my life? What would I be to them when that happened?

“By the way, Cedric...are you going to keep calling me that? No one’s watching us anymore.”

I cocked my head. Prince Yohan was my “big bro” now. Why would I call him anything else, even in private?

When I told him as much, he pressed his fingers to his forehead. “You really are Lance’s brother,” he remarked with a sigh.

Eventually, Bro finally returned to the room as well.

The moment Lance saw us, he cried out in a panic, “Cedric! Where’d you go?!”

He explained that on his way back here, Chinensians had stopped to chat with him and mentioned seeing me outside of the room.

“Just when I thought I could finally leave you alone,” he said, exasperated. “What in the world happened while I was gone?”

Yohan and I exchanged glances.

“You know what, Bro?” I said, still holding Yohan’s hand. “I can’t wait to see the country you and Big Bro lead together.”

“Big Bro?!” Lance blurted.

I tugged Yohan’s hand. He smiled shyly, then offered his other hand to Lance. My brother shook his head, then grinned at himself and ruffled my hair.

“In that case, I’m gonna have to keep improving!” he said with a hearty laugh. “‘Big Bro,’ huh? That means Yohan and I are basically brothers!” He patted Yohan on the back. “That soft side you’ve got always surprises me....”

“I guess we really *are* brothers,” said Yohan, beaming down at me.

That day, I received a gift that was more than I could’ve asked for. The hope my brothers inspired in me felt like a dream. I was the luckiest little brother in

the world.

“Here, Cedric. This is for you.”

Twenty days had passed since I started calling Yohan “Big Bro.” He led us to his room just like he did during all of our visits. As soon as the guards closed the door behind us, he went to a drawer and brought out a small box.

“My birthday was two months and—I mean, it was a while ago,” I said.

I’d been trying not to recite pinpoint numbers out loud ever since I killed God’s Child. Yohan insisted that he hadn’t gotten the date wrong, even though it was long past my birthday. Lance looked just as confused as I did.

“You really shouldn’t spoil him, Yohan,” Lance said.

“I have one for you too, Lance.” With a chuckle, Yohan retrieved another small box and handed it to my wide-eyed brother.

I asked to open mine, and he gave me permission right away. I ripped off the wrapping paper and opened the box to find a cross pendant inside. It was identical to the one Yohan always wore. It was enshrined in my impeccable memory, but I still couldn’t believe it. I glanced over at Yohan’s cross to confirm and noticed Lance doing the same.

“Don’t worry. I’m not trying to convert you to our faith,” Yohan said. He waved both hands and smiled, but I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

“I know that. But why these?” Lance asked.

“Because Cedric started calling me ‘Big Bro.’”

Lance and I both furrowed our brows in confusion. I didn’t get how the two things were related at all. Yohan removed his pendant and held it up in the air.

“Your crosses are specially made, just like mine. There are only three of them in the whole wide world.”

My eyes nearly popped out. I examined the three crosses more closely. If

what Yohan said was true, it meant our pendants had been custom-made to match his.

“I wanted to give you proof,” Yohan went on. “Cedric, as long as you continue to be a kind person, we’ll always be brothers—no matter *who* you are.”

I went still. He was saying I didn’t have to be God’s Child, and that he’d be my brother regardless as to whether I took the nickname.

Yohan gently removed my pendant from the box, held it up, and smiled. Then he hung it around my neck while I stood there in a daze. I rarely ever wore jewelry or accessories outside of official ceremonies, but the cross now rested on my chest.

“I pray that our God will be with you and Lance when I cannot. The cross represents my hope that He will protect you.”

He stroked my hair even more gently than Lance usually did. A lump formed in my throat. I bit my lip, but it didn’t staunch the swell of emotion rising inside me, so I leapt into Yohan’s arms. He yelped in surprise, but held me tightly after a moment.

“Cedric...shouldn’t this be embarrassing to a nine-year-old prince? You’re still so young.”

I didn’t care, and I didn’t loosen my hold on him. I was way too happy to think about things like that. The luxurious riches I’d received at my official birthday party didn’t even come close to the gift he’d just given me. It was my first time receiving a “promise” in physical form. Even if I, clumsy as I was, lost everything, I would still have Lance and Yohan no matter what. Suddenly, the prospect didn’t seem so scary.

“I know that princes from Cercis can’t exactly wear such things in public,” Yohan said. “Instead, you can set them aside until the day that the United Hanazuo Kingdom is truly one—”

“No, I’m going to wear mine right now.”

Yohan and I both whirled to Lance at this bold declaration. I was about to ask if that meant I could wear mine too, but Yohan let out a shout.

“What are you saying, Lance?! I’m glad you feel that way, but you can’t! What if people start to spread terrible rumors about—”

“If I keep it under my clothes, then no one will see it, y’know? No one would presume to tear off a prince’s clothes.”

Lance put on his pendant despite Yohan’s attempt at stopping him. He tucked the cross into his shirt and told me to do the same if I planned on wearing it. I draped the cross around my neck and tucked it away with the utmost care.

“But won’t your maids see it when they change your clothes?” Yohan sounded so uncharacteristically flustered, I couldn’t help but gawk at him.

“I’ll just explain that it is a gift from my friend and doesn’t represent my own beliefs,” Lance replied.

“They’ll think I’m trying to convert you for certain this time! You know what? I take it all back. Return it!”

Yohan snatched at the pendant, but Lance easily sidestepped him. I backed away as well.

“I’ve already accepted your faith, from the United Hanazuo Kingdom’s perspective,” Lance said. “In fact, I want people to know my intentions in this regard. I won’t show it off, but I don’t care if some people spot it.”

Yohan slouched, his shoulders dragged down by defeat. “What if you get banned from Chinensis because of this?”

“That’s fine. It’s why we took our oath, right? Cedric might be lonely if we can’t visit anymore, though.”

“It’s totally fine!” I chimed in. “It’s proof of my promise with Big Bro! I can be patient if I have to!” I had to make sure Yohan knew I was in complete agreement.

“Oh, you learned how to be patient?” Lance asked me.

“Don’t get so cocky,” Yohan said.

They were joking, but I was completely serious about this.

The two of them let the matter drop that day, but afterward, they both continually warned me to keep the pendant secret. If anyone asked about it, I was to tell them I had Lance’s permission to wear it.

That cross pendant proved Yohan and I would never be apart. It was so precious to me that I didn’t care who might see it and ask questions.

“Hey, did you hear what Prince Lance and Prince Cedric are wearing?”

“Yeah! Some people out in town said they saw the princes with it on!”

It was proof that Lance, Yohan, and I were brothers.

“Did you hear about the crown prince of Cercis?!”

“I saw it myself. We went to visit my wife’s family in Cercis, and he just happened to be nearby. He came down for an observation.”

A symbol of faith to the people of Chinensis.

“When Prince Cedric tripped and Prince Lance helped him up, I saw those pendants underneath their shirts!”

“Prince Lance says it was a gift from a friend, and wearing it doesn’t mean he believes in the Chinensian faith.”

Two months and six days had passed since the rumors started. They’d already spread all the way to Chinensis.

“The princes of Cercis are wearing symbols of our faith!”

“I heard a rumor that they were a present from Prince Yohan.”

We defied the citizens’ expectations.

“Our country finally has a royal family that accepts Chinensis.”

“Our royal families and officials have bickered all this time, but maybe these princes will be different.”

“At long last, there’s royalty that accepts our Chinensian faith!”

“If they’re really presents from Prince Yohan, then the princes being friends must be true. This could mean an end to all the fighting.”

We received an overwhelming response.

“This must be the work of God’s Child, Prince Cedr—”

“No, I heard it was Prince Lance’s decision! You never hear rumors about ‘God’s Child’ anymore, right?”

“I did hear that Prince Lance really looks after his little brother. What a kind prince he is.”

Lance, Yohan, and I hadn’t anticipated any of it.

“I heard that Prince Lance is...”

“Prince Lance is trying to change this country with his little brother.”

“The Cercian crown prince is friends with Prince Yohan!”

“Prince Yohan and Prince Lance are trying to help others understand our faith.”

“Did you hear what Prince Lance did?”

“It was all the work of Prince Lance!”

“Guess what Prince Yohan did!”

“It’s all thanks to Prince Yohan!”

“They’ll be the next leaders to guide us as the United Hanazuo Kingdom!”

It was as though we truly *had* received God’s blessing.

Chapter 4:

The Companions and the War

“**C**ONFIRM THE SAFETY of the inner rooms! If you find a soldier, bring them outside the castle or to me!”

I, the firstborn prince of Freesia, raised my voice as the Cercian castle collapsed around me.

“Please retreat at once, Your Highness!” a knight called to me, but I ignored him. How could I possibly just run away and let people die?

Gilbert had announced the grave news just earlier: *“The ambush has resulted in the possible collapse of the southern castle tower. Please take shelter at once...”*

By the time I teleported there, the tower had already partially caved in on itself. The knights scattered, confused and terrified. Even I could barely move without using my teleportation.

“Check the first-floor entrance!” I ordered. “The door may be jammed, trapping people inside!”

The knights leapt into action, kicking open the broken door. A few men jumped through a hole in the floor to reach the first level.

If the castle was being guarded as planned, then only two people should remain inside. Gilbert assured me he hadn’t changed the evacuation plan for the castle guards in the southern tower. I had no choice but to believe him and rely on his knowledge of where everyone should be in this tangled mess.

“We’ve found someone in front of the entrance!”

Reports came from the lower floors and the opposite end of the hallway. I teleported to the first floor, arriving behind the trapped soldiers. With a touch to their backs, I evacuated them before they even realized I was there. I

thanked the knights and told them to go find the last missing person.

Broken chips rained down on us from the crumbling ceiling. I teleported to the upper floor to check the progress of the evacuation. I gritted my teeth when a knight told me the inner rooms were empty.

“Aaaaahhh!”

The knight and I spun toward the scream. He reacted faster than me, taking off in a dash and flinging open a door. I raced after him. We skidded into a library where a soldier lay pinned between toppled bookshelves. Next to him was a window with a branch just outside. He must have been trying to climb out that way when the shelves fell on him.

I told the knight not to move the bookshelves. Instead, I grabbed the soldier’s hand and teleported him away in a blink. Once he was gone, the shelves fell to the ground with a thud.

“That’s everyone! Now have the knights evacuate too!” I shouted.

Even as I made my command, I touched the knight beside me and teleported him away. I dealt with one man at a time, teleporting myself just a few steps away whenever the ground beneath me started to give way.

Finally, the knights comprising my guard patrol yelled that we were the last ones remaining. Before the relief could wash over me, the floor beneath us began to tilt—along with the rest of the building. I reached for the knights around me, immediately teleporting all of us back to our base in the Cercian palace before the tower could collapse.

When the familiar headquarters materialized around us, I heaved a shuddering sigh. “We made it...”

“Big Brother! You really *were* at the southern tower?!” Tiara rushed up to me, noticed I was out of breath, and offered me some water. I gulped it down as she and the knights fretted over me.

“It’s a good thing...there weren’t too many soldiers out there,” I muttered

through deep lungfuls of air.

The old, unused tower hadn't been heavily guarded. While that was good for our rescue mission, it was also why it had taken us so long to respond to the enemy attack in the south. Still, it all could have gone horribly wrong if I hadn't memorized our soldiers' positions during the strategy meeting the night before. I'd even made sure to walk from end to end of each country's castle. As soon as Gilbert gave us the word, I'd been able to teleport straight to the southern tower, a place I'd personally visited and had specific coordinates for.

Once I'd arrived, I tapped each soldier on the back to teleport them to safety, then ordered my retinue of knights to help evacuate anyone else who was trying to flee. Gilbert had quickly informed the central and northern towers of the attack, ensuring no other soldiers entered the doomed southern tower. Unfortunately, that meant I had to admit that Gilbert had been a major help.

"We successfully completed...the evacuation," I reported to him. "At the very least, there's no one left inside the castle."

Upon my initial return to headquarters, I'd teleported Val to Pride and come back again. I *had* planned to go back to Pride as soon as I had an update on the state of the war, but when I returned to the Cercian castle, I found the situation far more dire than I'd anticipated.

While I was busy teleporting back and forth, Gilbert had ordered the communication specialists to report our evacuation of the southern tower, preventing more soldiers from entering the tower. He'd also selected the fastest, strongest knights to head there, leaving him and the headquarters horribly vulnerable. I hadn't even known about this when I'd learned of the explosion at the southern tower—I'd teleported straight there before Gilbert or Tiara could stop me.

"We evacuated...all the soldiers and knights...to other towers," I went on. "The central and northern towers should have much more protection now. We...almost didn't make it..."

The floor and walls were already buckling when I got there. I really should have forced Val to come to headquarters first so I could have gotten him to deal with the emergency right away, but by the time I'd reached the tower, it was already too late for that.

"Prince Stale, that was far too reckless!" Gilbert admonished me. "You may be able to teleport, but if the unthinkable had happened and the tower had collapsed on—"

"My elder sister would've done the same. I know you would too, if you had my power." I cut Gilbert off. He was right—it was dangerous—but we both knew I couldn't have done anything else. I turned away from him, done with this conversation, and made to order a status report.

"Prince Stale!" Gilbert said, grabbing my shoulder.

I whirled toward him, startled. A vein snaked across his forehead, pounding with every furious heartbeat.

"You, Your Highness... You're vital to our country, just like Princess Pride and Princess Tiara! If you put yourself in danger, there are people—people right here in this room—whose hearts will shatter!"

Gilbert kept one hand on my shoulder and placed the other on his chest. This time, I was the speechless one. I could do little but gape at him, my eyes wide and jaw tight.

"Don't you ever forget that. If the worst *had* come to pass... Just as you imitate Princess Pride, your younger sister observes and imitates you! If you want to protect both your sisters, then please reconsider your actions!"

I didn't know how to respond in the face of this unusual frankness. I turned those words over and over in my mind, searching for a response.

"He's right, Big Brother!" Tiara had joined in to scold me. She approached and gripped my face in her hands. "You would be so worried if Big Sister did what you just did, wouldn't you?!"

Picturing Pride doing anything like what I'd just done at the southern tower, I shivered. "I'm sorry."

Tiara's eyes filled with tears. "I was terrified that whole time!"

Gilbert hunched over, his eyes skittering between me and Tiara. He was clearly holding something back, but I didn't get a chance to press him on it.

TwEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEet!

All the hairs on my body stood on end. My blood ran cold as death and disaster flashed through my mind.

"Elder Sister!" I gasped.

Before I could even offer an explanation to Gilbert or Tiara, I teleported away. My vision went dark for a blink. When it returned, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Stale..."

Pride lay before me, both of her legs wrapped in bandages.

"Damn it!" Val said with a click of his tongue. He never could hold back when he was irritated. He used his special power to set the ground under his feet in motion, sliding off along with Sefekh and Khemet toward the town at an absolutely blistering speed.

I was left there with Pride, stunned and horrified.

Once we left Pride behind, me and the kids rushed to the town outside the castle. We searched for the painfully familiar Freesian uniform. A lot of the knights were helping evacuate citizens, what with the entrance to the town destroyed and their escape cut off. I used my special power to repair the entrance, sculpt walls for buildings, and snatch citizens out of harm's way, dropping them off in safe farmlands instead. But damn, I had to do it a *lot*.

Enemy soldiers spotted me more than once, but I had the knights and Sefekh's special power to protect me. Even with the fealty contract preventing

me from tearing the enemy to shreds myself, I was still safe as I evacuated the citizens...even if it was frustrating as hell not to fight back.

As we raced around the town being do-gooders, I couldn't help but wonder how my life had ever come to this. It had all started with that business at Gilbert's house...

Knights raced to the prime minister's home and apprehended the criminals I'd captured there. After I left, I reported to the headquarters in Cercis by transmission just as Stale ordered. Me and the kids were on our way into town, hoping to enjoy our sweets and booze without those nosy knights pestering us... and that was when Stale teleported directly in our way. The moment that prince made his request, I glared and bared my sharp teeth at him. Sefekh grabbed my shirt to restrain me, while Khemet looked back and forth between me and Stale.

"Rescue people in both Cercis and Chinensis?! And you want me to take injured knights off the front lines in the north too?!"

I'd already spent the past five days watching over Gilbert's house and fighting off the intruders. Baby Stella's constant bawling meant I barely got a wink of sleep while I was there. All I wanted to do was rest. Sefekh and Khemet were pretty tired out too; seeing the two of them rubbing their sleepy eyes only made me more irritated. I stomped my feet.

"I'm not forcing you," Stale said. "It's just a request, and I'm the one asking."

"You didn't work me hard enough at the prime minister's house already, Mister Prince?" I snarled in reply.

I'd had to watch over the manor and protect the people who lived there. That "request" had come from Stale the night that the alliance was made official. He'd told me that Pride and Tiara themselves had named Gilbert's daughter, so if anything happened to Stella or her mother, Pride would be distraught. Between that and the rather generous compensation Stale offered, what could I

have done but accept the job?

“I’m no soldier or knight. I’m a *criminal*. Who the hell would want me dragging kids onto their battlefield?”

I grabbed Sefekh and Khemet’s heads and scowled. Stale knew as well as I did that Khemet would have to accompany me to the battlefield due to her special power of amplification. Without her, I couldn’t do much more than make dirt walls. The wrinkle in Stale’s brow when I explained this told me he understood just how little I wanted to bring the kiddos into a war zone.

“Don’t get all carried away, Mister Prince. You can give me orders since you’re royalty, but the mistress is my only real employer.”

I made sure Stale knew I was only taking on his jobs because of what he’d done for the kids. That answer didn’t seem to make him too happy, though.

“I don’t care what happens to that ally or colony or whatever they are. Besides, that’s where the idiot prince is from,” I added.

Stale pinched the bridge of his nose. Even he clearly understood he’d roped me into far too much hassle by sending me and the kids to Gilbert’s house. My resistance was more than fair. I was just a deliveryman these days; my job was to connect countries, not fight or protect them. Because of all this, Stale’s words came as a request rather than an actual order.

“This isn’t an order,” he said. “I made it a request in the first place so you’d have the right to refuse... But you’ve forced my hand. There’s no time to lose.” He heaved a sigh.

“Changing that request to an order after all, eh?” My fealty contract meant that I could never refuse an order from the royal family, regardless of my own will.

“Yes, this is an order. You can’t repeat what I’m about to tell you to anyone.” He turned his eyes on the little ones. “The same goes for you, Sefekh and Khemet.”

I raised an eyebrow and frowned, surprised by the sudden command.

“Val, did you know that my elder sister is on the battlefield right now, just like me?”

“Huh? What about it? The mistress has got her imperial knights. I dunno about the whole country, but I’m sure she’ll be fine with those guys beside her.”

I waved my hand to shoo away his comment like it was a fly buzzing around my head. For a second, I considered fleeing before Stale could *actually* issue an order, but that probably wouldn’t do me much good against someone who could teleport. As long as he didn’t order me otherwise, I figured I’d just disengage from the conversation.

“She made a vow that if we lose the war, she’ll be burned at the stake with their king.”

My eyes snapped back to Stale. “What?”

I struggled to comprehend his words. Stale’s face was completely blank, his coal-black eyes free of deception. Pride really had made a vow like that...and she really would go through with it.

“I’m not lying. If you don’t believe me, ask my elder sister and *then* decide if you want to accept my request or not.”

I clicked my tongue loudly again. A headache pulsed behind my eyes as my irritation grew. I hated that Stale knew he could sway me by throwing out this bit of information about Pride. *Ugh. How disgusting. I’m actually about to agree to this, aren’t I?*

I clenched my fist to hide the tremor in my fingers, then glared daggers at the guy. Despite the prince’s expressionless face, I sensed his composure underneath. I wanted to grab him by the shirt collar, but the fealty contract would never allow such a thing.

Just as my lips morphed into a toothy scowl, Khemet tugged on my shirt. “I want to go to her, Val!” he cried.

I responded with a confused grunt, but then Sefekh grabbed my arm. “We should go!” she said. “We’re worried about her too. Besides, we’ll get a reward, right?”

“She means a lot to us, so we want to help her if we can. I won’t even be scared ’cause you’ll be with us!”

The kids had me trapped, and I wound up exhaling in resignation. I scratched at my hair, still stubbornly searching for an excuse.

“Guess I’ve got no choice,” I said. “I’ll go to Hanazuo. But I’ll only help the citizens depending on what my mistress says. I’m definitely never gonna save any damn knights.”

Stale nodded, apparently expecting this reaction from me. “Very well. But let me ask you one thing: if you feel like you owe me, then don’t you also owe a member of the royal order, if you think about it?”

I scowled with disgust, clicking my tongue for the umpteenth time. The prince was just conjuring up debts for me to repay at this point. *What the hell does he mean by that, me owing a member of the royal order?*

“If you’re talkin’ about the kids, then the knights just did what the royal family ordered,” I growled. I had to stuff down the urge to shout at Stale to just get this over with and teleport us to the battlefield already. “I don’t owe them a damn thing. And if you mean the thing from six years ago, I already repaid that with my mistress.”

“Arthur’s a knight too,” Stale said. “Elder Sister told me that he got that bruise on his neck protecting you.”

“I won’t deny it,” I replied. “What about it, though? That’s a piss-poor reason to drag a couple of kids into the line of fire. Is that what my life’s worth, though? A bruise?”

I’d betrayed others many times throughout my life. I didn’t believe in repaying every single favor that was done for me. However, the “debt” on my shoulders

after everyone wiped out the slave traders always ate at me. That was why I agreed to Stale's request and why I defended Gilbert's family—not out of virtue, but out of the desire to get rid of that nagging thought in the back of my head. The idea that Stale—and even Pride and Leon—saw me as generous or kind made me sick to my stomach.

Stale looked like he was about to argue some more, but instead he gestured for Sefekh and Khemet to cover their ears. Sefekh cocked her head before covering Khemet's ears for him. Knowing what Stale was probably about to say, I covered Sefekh's ears myself.

Stale then crossed his arms, satisfied, and looked me dead in the eyes. "I know that you're a criminal and not a person of virtue. But if you still feel you need to repay me, of all people, then the urge to repay Arthur must be eating you up even more."

Stale's eyes flicked to Sefekh and Khemet. Seeing no reaction from them, he continued, uttering the words I least wanted to hear. I grimaced.

That was how I knew I wasn't getting out of this.

"Val, I want you to help people, just like Stale instructed."

Just thinking about it pissed me off all over again. I picked up anyone from Hanazuo I came across, but couldn't stop clicking my tongue in irritation the whole time. Why the hell did I have to go to all this trouble?

"Captain Callum! Come on, we have to save him! Now, Captain Alan! Save Captain Callum! Save Captain Ca—"

Stale had teleported me to my mistress, who was already wailing. That damn woman always seemed to be cryin' to someone about something. I didn't give a damn about some knight, but seeing her cry made my stomach churn. Why'd she have to cry, and why'd someone have to go and make her cry in the first place? Before I could even think about it, I unleashed my power in the direction

she was looking. It was a piece of cake. Stop the source of the annoyance. Get my mistress to stop crying. Feel better.

The next problem was her legs. Heat billowed around my head when I saw how hurt she was. It was just like the time I almost lost Sefekh and Khemet. My stomach turned over, bile rising in my throat. My hackles were up, my blinders on.

“Please. Please just save as many people as you can.”

I doubted the princess had ever been injured before, yet the first thing she did was beg me to save the people of Hanazuo. It had to be a joke. Did she have any idea what I’d been through? She was tellin’ me to leave her and go be with other people. Did she want to just lie there stuck? That creepy prince of hers could have teleported her away, but she didn’t even bother asking him.

She needed to just go home already and stop being such a hassle. Though she may have been a terror of a princess, that girl did not belong on a battlefield. She was wounded, in pain, bandaged, weakened, crying. None of that suited her. She belonged back in her peaceful country, smiling like always.

“I told you!” I snarled, grinding my teeth together so hard, it made my head hurt. Sefekh and Khemet, clinging to my sides, looked up at me. I ignored their worried gazes. I was just talking to myself.

She came into clearer view once I sped up. I pretty much never used my power at maximum speed, but even when I went that fast, I could still see well enough. It helped when I was making deliveries. I never would’ve been able to do it without Khemet.

“Just hurry up and end it already!”

I wanted the damn war over, *now*. My mistress’s oath didn’t matter to me. They just needed to get the war over with and force her into bed. She could rest up and recover back at home. Then maybe I wouldn’t feel so sick and pissed off anymore.

When we neared our destination, I slowed down. Sefekh and Khemet, noisy little brats that they were, cried out when they spotted it. Their little voices only made me angrier. Who was going to take the blame if they got hurt like my mistress had?

As soon as the knights saw us charging in, they brandished their weapons. They looked slow and heavy, the bastards. I wished I could've used my power to swallow 'em whole.

"Ugh, Freesian knights!"

Though I couldn't explain myself without my mistress or the creepy prince around, I tried asking where the imperial knights were once we got close. Two familiar faces emerged from the crowd.

"Val! Why are you here?!" said the one with chestnut-colored hair—Eric, that was his name.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" added Arthur, the brat.

They glared at me. *Aw, shucks. What a warm welcome.*

"Prince Stale and our mistress ordered us to help!" Khemet piped up.

The knights blinked in surprise, and their eyes lit up with recognition. I knew they whispered about me, the "deliveryman." I'd probably met them while turning over thieves and slave traders I picked up in my travels. I did not like the look in their eyes one little bit. *Gross. I don't need any friggin' knights judging my worth.*

"We picked up a heap of people from this country on the way here," I said, jabbing a thumb over my shoulder. "Gimme whatever knights you can spare—and make sure some have healing powers!"

The knights grabbed their weapons, distrustful. Good. I liked them better scared and angry than *appraising*. Except Arthur. It'd be a cold day in hell before I liked that brat. He and the other imperial knight debated what to do, but I didn't bother listening. I was too busy wondering when and how I might

make a run for it.

“Commander!”

“Commander Roderick!”

Their combined shout was so loud, I itched to clamp my hands over my ears. The crowd parted to let one knight through. He could’ve looked at me with scorn, but instead he just wrinkled his brow and addressed me normally.

“I’ve just received word from Princess Pride and Prince Stale,” he said. “Arthur, Eric, you know this man, right? Show him where to go.”

You know me too, bastard. I stuffed those words deep into my gut, turning away from the imperial knights and their commander. Then I reversed my special power to deposit the people I’d picked up with it. The kids and I took a loop, led by the imperial knight and the imperial brat, and found that some of the wounded would need to be carried out.

I scanned the area, glaring at every knight who dared to meet my eyes. “So? Why aren’t you chargin’ in there? A buncha knights could rip those soldiers limb from limb. What’s the holdup?” They certainly had plenty of weapons, and their formations were as neat and tidy as ever.

“We suffered a few explosions from massive bombs,” the brunette, Eric, told me. “Right now, our knights and the enemy soldiers at the front lines are separated by a ravine made by a bomb. Look at how the ground’s collapsed. We tried to go into the pit earlier, but they just fired at us from above. We were at a total disadvantage.”

He pointed sadly at the scene. A big hole pockmarked the ground, just as he said. He explained that the plan was to go around the hole and march on.

“Good plan. Reminds me of my job six years ago,” I said with a snort, hoping to piss them off.

The two imperial knights scowled, murder in their eyes, but they didn’t budge otherwise. Instead, Sefekh gave me a swift kick in the shin. The kids were no fun

at all. I'd finally been feelin' a little less annoyed, and Sefekh had to go and ruin it.

"They're just about finished treating the victims, but some people have been gravely injured. Please send them back with care," the knight brat, Arthur, said.

He and Eric led us to a temporary camp filled with people sitting or lying in beds, attended to by knights with healing powers. The sight instantly dredged up the memory of my mistress's injury, and I clicked my tongue in irritation.

"Carry 'em to the place where we brought our group," I said. "We'll take them out to the fields in one big trip."

"You're not going to carry them yourself?" Arthur asked me.

"You think I can hold back and be gentle if I'm carryin' a knight or three?" I shot back. They only had to go a few meters. They could do it themselves.

He didn't argue, and slowly, Eric began organizing the knights to transport the injured. Arthur remained still, staring at me until I snapped and asked what was so damn fascinating.

"Thanks."

"Say wha...?"

I thought I must have heard him wrong, but then he added, "Now all the knights can fight at ease."

Nope. I was seriously going to throw up. With a grunt, I whirled away from the stupid brat. Khemet and Sefekh were clinging to my clothes, so I dragged them along with me as I held back a retch.

"Hey, Val!" Arthur called out. "Where are you—"

"You knights are ready to fight now, yeah? Actually, I figure you're ready to advance."

"That's right. What's your concern?"

I ignored his question and pushed on. "I wish I could kill all the enemy soldiers

myself, but I've got my orders from the mistress."

That damn contract wouldn't let me harm anyone, save for very special circumstances. I glared in the direction of the enemies and clicked my tongue. I just couldn't stop doing that today with how agitated I was. Even if I got Pride's permission, I couldn't wipe out that many enemies without Khemet's power, and there was no way I was going to ask the kid to help me with a thing like that. It was one thing for *me* to kill people; I'd never let Khemet do it. Sefekh wouldn't allow that. Yeah. Probably.

"What're you talking about?!" the brat shouted.

I just kept marching out of the camp until I reached the edge of the ravine. It was pretty deep; I was actually impressed no one had died in the explosion. Then again, no one died in the cliff attack I was part of six years ago either.

"Hmm. If the brother and sister are monsters, then those knights must be monsters too."

I snorted. Sefekh and Khemet tried to peer into the hole as well, but all that lay down there was a pile of enemy bodies, so I grabbed 'em by the napes of their necks before they could catch a glimpse of the carnage. When I told them there was nothing to see, Khemet accepted it with a nod, but Sefekh scowled at me. She was being so annoying. All I was doing was stopping her from getting hurt. Kids didn't need to see stuff like that.

"Hey, knight brat," I said to Arthur. "Go tell the knights to prepare for battle right this minute."

"That's not your choice to make!" He pouted and glared, but I just turned and held my arms out for Sefekh and Khemet.

"My job is to help the citizens, injured soldiers, and knights," I said. "I'll evacuate them if I have to. But those are my *only* orders. So right now, I've just got one thing left to do."

The kids clutched my shirt and arms, anticipating what was to come. The

knight brat stopped barkin' at me too. When I heard him whisper, "No way..." I swiveled to get a look at his face.

Heh. He looks just as dumb as I expected.

"I've just gotta entertain myself."

Ka-boooooooooooooooooooooom!

Just as I predicted, the ground rumbled and shook all the way to the knights' base camp. They screamed at the sudden commotion, and I got to savor the sight of them running around like headless chickens. Even the knight brat stumbled when the ground lurched beneath him.

While the knights fumbled around, I thought back to my conversation with the creepy prince.

"If you knew about this, you'd probably feel much worse about your debt to Arthur."

Why'd he have to go and say something like that? It just made me even more pissed off. First there was my mistress's injury, and then I had to deal with all this other bullshit. I just needed to make it up to this weird brat as fast as possible.

"I'll pay you back for everything and more," I muttered.

I wielded my power, making the ground quake beneath me. The crater from the bomb blast swelled toward the surface, swallowing up the dead bodies inside. The walls of the hole closed in, dirt flowing into the gap like water from a subterranean spring. As I pulled the earth back together, the knights' cries turned to cheers.

"Look at that!"

"The hole's gone!"

Idiots.

Even the enemies on the other side were whining about the ravine between

us and them going away. Well, it wasn't like they stood any chance, goin' up against a buncha Freesian knights. What the hell were they so happy about?

Once the hole was filled in, I leveled off the terrain. The ground was still a little bumpy, but it wouldn't collapse. The knights whooped and hollered way too damn loud, and when I spun around, the brat was still staring with his mouth hanging open. I glared at his bug-eyed face and stomped past him, shoving his shoulder on the way. He stumbled, then cried out a delayed "Hey!" which I ignored.

"There's nothin' left for us to do here," I said. "We'll take our stuff and hit the road. You guys better wrap this up quick."

All we needed to do was carry the knights, citizens, and those with special powers for healing to a safe location. Once we had a spot, it would just take a couple round trips and we'd be done with this at last. Arthur said nothing in reply, and even when I strode away from him, he didn't move a muscle.

"Did ya hear me?" I snapped, baring my teeth at him. "Go tell your old man already. Those annoying injured folks and the big hole are all gone. The rest is a job for you knights."

The knight brat's eyes looked about to pop out of his skull. I strolled away from the annoying kid, that creepy prince's voice already in my head again.

"The man you tried to kill for sport six years ago, the commander, is Arthur's father."

I never wanted to know that. What a stupid connection we shared.

Some of the knights called out to me, but I ignored 'em all. When one tried to grab my arm and stop me, I used my power to bind his hand with sand.

"Take a good look at them. Arthur looks just like his dad."

I didn't bother memorizing that knight's face back then. Now I knew that he was not only the commander but the guy still sittin' right over there. The brat really was a perfect copy of the guy. If only they weren't so identical—then I

could've at least doubted the prince's story.

"Two years ago, Arthur had plenty of opportunities to get revenge on you. He could have invented a reason to let you die. He easily could have stopped Sefekh and Khemet from being rescued too, but he never did."

That bombshell had made my jaw lock up tight. Irritation and anger surged from my gut all the way to my fingertips. What did I care if they were father and son? Sefekh, Khemet, and I were all abandoned by our parents. The concept didn't mean a damn thing to me. I didn't understand it one bit. But as for the concept of "family," well...

"If it were me, I wouldn't have just let him die. I'd have ripped him apart, limb by limb."

My gaze drifted toward Khemet, who was holding my hand, and then Sefekh, who was holding his. They both raised their heads when they caught me muttering to myself. I told 'em it was nothing. Khemet smiled and squeezed my hand tighter.

It wasn't atonement. I was just repaying a debt I owed so I wouldn't feel so damn sick to my stomach. That was all this meant to me.

"Charge in! Overwhelm them with numbers! Crush them!"

"Destroy the town! That's where the king of Cercis is! Capture him as soon as you find him!"

The same soldiers who'd destroyed the border wall in the southernmost point of Chinensis now poured relentlessly into the country. Slaves bolstered the enemy's numbers. They thundered across the countryside with weapons and horses, their war cries reverberating through the air.

A hole in the defensive wall allowed three men at once to pass into Chinensis. That was as much as their bombs could manage, but the fact that they'd managed to penetrate the wall at all was important. It meant they could attack

Chinensis from the rear. The enemy marched through the opening one after another, setting foot into Chinensis to attack the town closest to the castle.

I was the death that awaited them.

“Ah... This is wonderful,” I said to myself.

As captain of the Eighth Squadron, I got to put my skills to use on all this fresh meat. A soldier attempted to step through the hole. He lost his foot before he even realized what was happening. I was a gust of wind blowing past them, cutting them down one by one as their blood sprayed into the air. The injured soldier shrieked and collapsed.

I, Harrison Dirk, glanced down at him and kicked him back outside the country's border. “You're in the way. How are the other enemies supposed to come in if you lie there howling?”

I finished off the writhing man with my firearm.

“What, you only have ten or twenty men to send? Are none of you prepared to fight? Do you have no loyalty?”

Provoked by my sneering, the enemies on the other side of the wall picked up their weapons again and charged. Some even aimed their guns to provide cover for the others. Seeing their bold attack, something swelled in my chest.

This was all so, so wonderful.

“Captain Harrison, I'm asking for your help because I have faith in your skills.”

“Ha... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

The enemies faltered at my wild laughter. This was just too beautiful a sight for me to control myself. Ah... I'd been waiting so long for this moment, for this constant outpouring of enemies, for this mission that would only conclude when I grew bored of the slaughter. I'd used my special power to sweep through the enemy soldiers. It left me slightly out of breath, but even that sensation was a pleasant one. It spurred me onward.

“I'm here because *she* ordered me!”

Before my thrill could wane, I cut through every last one of the soldiers pouring in. I sliced their necks, crushed their eyes, stabbed their throats, and watched them crumple to the ground one by one. A bloody mist filled the air in my wake, staining my face and clothing. I didn't care. Their filthy blood was like a blessed rainfall to me.

“Well done! There's no time for games! Go on, line up for me. I won't let a single one of you escape! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”



I couldn't stop laughing. They cringed away from my cackling and screaming, afraid to cross the border wall. How dull, how dull! I went to them instead, slashing the useless puppets' eyes with my sword. I didn't even need my special power for this.

They screamed and stumbled backward, and I finished them off with another slash, kicking them back over the border before they hit the ground. I had no use for such weak fodder. I would mow down every last one of them without leaving a single enemy standing. After I pierced their eyes, cut off their ears, and severed their limbs, I paused to respect the few soldiers brave enough to fight back. They died all the same, then more clambered through the wall, their blood joining the communal splatter.

Oh, Your Highness.

How could she have been injured with two brilliant knights at her side? The princess claimed they weren't at fault, but if it were me, I would have abandoned everything to protect her. She would have been my priority over myself, the soldiers, my compatriots, everything. I'd cast them all aside to protect her.

Even that probably wouldn't have been enough. Imperial knights weren't chosen on sheer fighting skill alone. If they were, I might have been beaten by Alan Berners, but certainly not Eric Gilchrist or Callum Bordeaux.

They were all brilliant knights in their own ways.

I didn't mind that I wasn't chosen to be an imperial knight. After all, I swore my loyalty to the vice commander above all else. That meant my priorities also included Commander Roderick and the royal order. But more than that, I just wasn't good at protecting people. I knew that all too well by the time I joined the main forces. The person more suited than anyone to be her imperial knight was...

"Heh... Ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

The more I thought about it, the more thrilling it became.

I could never forget that she'd been hurt. Even if I turned everyone from Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana into dust, it still wouldn't be good enough. Nevertheless, it was all for her. I swung my sword and cut down enemies for her. I never, ever, *ever* stopped. I couldn't protect like those imperial knights. I could only kill. So I would be sure not to fail in the one and only duty that belonged to me.

Blood dyed my uniform red as I sliced through more enemies. It wasn't unlike the uniform Pride herself wore. What a wonderful thought that was. A twisted smile spread across my face, my excitement carrying me through another round of hacking, cutting, and slashing through enemies. A nearly endless supply of enemies waited on the other side of that border.

"What are you doing?" I taunted them. "This is the only path forward. Come and face me already."

I waited on my side of the wall, but the enemy squirmed. Had they actually frozen in fear? I approached the hole to drag them through myself when a cluster of small explosives came sailing my way.

Bangs, flashes, and blasts ripped through the air, roaring like thunder. The explosions widened the hole and destroyed the ground at my feet. From the other side of the wall, the soldiers sneered at me, shrouded by the smoke. But I...

...was behind them.

Before the cackling men could realize their mistake, I slit their throats with one slash, sending blood spraying out like grisly waterfalls. The soldiers stumbled backward in shock, gaping at my sudden appearance.

"This is all your fault," I muttered.

She had ordered me to secure the southern border of Chinensis. Technically, however, I'd just left the country, disobeying my order. And it was all due to

those bombs they'd lobbed at me. I never would've had to leave Chinensis without those. Why couldn't they just agree to rush at my sword and crumple at my feet already?

"Oh well," I said. "The most important part is that I don't let any more enemies invade Chinensis."

I raised my head. Before me lay a beautiful sight: a huge wave of enemies and even a camp set up at the rear. The longer I looked, the more my lips lifted in a wicked smile. Yes, this would do just fine.

I was supposed to obey the duty bestowed on me by the vice commander, commander, and crown princess. And I was happy to do whatever they asked of me. But oh, what a pleasant surprise.

"If I wipe you all out, there will be no one left to come through this wall," I reasoned.

Blood blossomed, bodies fell, and viscera spattered the earth. All I had to do was reach out to plunge my blade through another enemy—a terribly lovely feeling. I would not let a single soul slip by me.

Of the four people in the world I was willing to exhaust myself for, *she* was one of them.

Everything was to be as Princess Pride Royal Ivy desired.

"Chaaaarge! Trample Cercis under your feet!"

Enemies had already invaded Cercis from the southern border and were pouring in through the wall. Their strength had dwindled after hitting their own forces with bombs and getting caught in the southern tower collapse. Still, I knew being able to attack Cercis at all was a major victory for them.

They took up their weapons and raced toward the castle and the nearby town. We couldn't protect either site very well, having sent the bulk of our manpower to Chinensis. Cercis sure seemed ripe for the taking.

“If that’s what you think, then you’re in big trouble,” I murmured to myself, pushing my dark-framed glasses up my nose.

A new army suddenly materialized before the enemy soldiers. Their white uniforms fluttered as they charged the invading forces, cutting them down in the blink of an eye. The enemy reeled with shock. They had no time to react before our soldiers cut them down without mercy. I saw a few grip their weapons and make a dash for the knights, trying to regain momentum, but they had no chance against our knights. Soon enough, their numbers began to dwindle, their advantage draining away before my eyes.

I watched this all calmly, like a player observing the game state on a chessboard.

“Gilbert was right,” I mused. “All they did was increase their numbers. It’s a silly plan, giving their untrained slaves weapons and armor and expecting them to be anything other than decoys.”

I raised my right hand to give my next order as Pride’s steward and adoptive brother.

“Be careful of your backs!” I shouted. “Enemies who already marched north may return! Don’t forget to watch the skies at all times! If more unidentifiable explosions occur, retreat at once! There’s no need to protect me.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the knights responded. They seemed unaccustomed to my tone.

“Bring Princess Pride her victory!” I shouted.

“Yes, sir!”

The knights charged in with a roar, reinvigorated in their purpose. Each took out several foes on his own as the group made steady progress up the battlefield. Enemy soldiers pointed their guns and swords at me, eager to take down the leader, but knights mowed them down with gunfire the second they were open. Though we had relatively few knights on our side, they struck so

swiftly and ferociously that the enemy withered under their assault. Quick and precise, they harried our adversaries without ever once letting their guard down.

When the enemy attempted to push forward, the soldier leading the charge was shot, crushing their spirits and bringing their advance to a halt. They could not even retreat; the moment they made to do so, the knights swept through them, cutting them down. They didn't come from just one direction—the knights, comprising only a small fraction of the enemy's numbers, managed to surround and trap them.

Our formations may as well have been walls. The enemy could only retreat south, the way they'd come, but all the while the Freesian knights picked off the men at the front of the pack.

"Don't panic, just cut them down," I said. "Our true enemies aren't these sacrificial soldiers who know little of battle plans and leadership!"

I had this battle so well in hand that I used myself as bait, then let my knights crush the enemy. I regarded our foes coldly, barking orders at my men from atop my horse.

"Anyone can hold a weapon and march! But knowledge, competency, and leadership are what separates a knight from a mere soldier!"

I held no animosity toward the enslaved fighters forced to stand on the battlefield against their will. In fact, I found it rather cruel. The enemy was using humans as pawns even though they had neither the resolve nor the skills to survive this battle. It filled me with rage. But far stronger than my sympathy was a yearning—a craving to kill anyone who had had a hand in hurting Pride. That included me.

Pride had been treated by knights with healing powers already, but instead of getting to bed where she could rest, she was still out on the battlefield. It pushed me into a state far darker and stronger than anger.

I'll destroy everything that poses a threat to Pride.

Anyone who got in the way of Pride's desires was going to be put down. I would make sure of that.

"Stale, I have something to ask of you."

"Prince Stale! I can see the southern wall!"

I looked up when a knight called out to me. He had used his special power to run straight up a building's wall and now pointed far past the enemies back on the ground. He must've laid eyes on the border wall.

I left the knights around me in charge of planning our next steps. I also gave them temporary leadership privileges, then turned and teleported to the knight running up the wall.

"There it is."

When I teleported to him, the knight on the wall grabbed my arm before gravity could send me hurtling back down, lifting me up so I didn't fall. I thanked him, got my footing, and looked in the direction he'd pointed. It was distant, but I could just make out the border wall and the spot where it had been destroyed. It lay just within range.

"Would you be willing to come with me as my personal guard?" I asked him.

The knight holding onto me agreed with a nod. I made note of his face. I was pretty sure he'd only recently been promoted to the main forces. He had only just graduated from being a rookie, but now he was a full-fledged knight, like Arthur. I wouldn't have any problems with him at my side.

I squeezed his hand and teleported the two of us to the broken border wall. We landed on top of the thick stone and found enemies swarming beneath us. A huge group was still waiting to come through the wall. I saw no need to fight anyone who hadn't managed to make it into Cercis. We would take out the soldiers who crossed the border and stop the rest from ever setting foot inside.

"Let's go past the border first," I said.

I ordered the knight to stay with me, just to be safe. Then the two of us

dropped down to the side of the wall outside Cercis. With so many soldiers beneath us, I ended up teleporting on top of their heads and trampling them beneath me. They shrieked with surprise and fell face-first to the ground.

“What the hell?! Where’d they come from?!”

The soldier who’d cried out was too slow. He barely finished his yelp before I slit his throat. As blood spurted onto me, I swung my sword back and stabbed him, then pressed on. My knight protected my back while I handled the enemies coming at me head-on, parrying their every blow. I didn’t really want to kill them; I simply wanted to get as close to my goal as possible. And these soldiers were so very weak. None of them compared to Arthur in the slightest.

Well, I supposed that made sense. These were untrained troops sent here for show. Comparing them to Arthur was probably rude. I pushed the thought aside as I continued dodging, blocking, and swatting away attacks while I advanced through the throng.

My knight remained at my back as I moved. All of a sudden, I heard a metal clink, and the knight cried, “Incoming!” Someone must’ve gotten impatient. Instantly, I teleported the two of us into the air.

Gunshots rang out, followed by enemy screams. That much was to be expected, seeing as how the enemy gunman had fired into his fellow soldiers. We fell back down to the ground, landing on the enemy troops.

I evaded, parried, and deflected every attack that came my way. If someone was about to corner me, I teleported behind him or over his head. It was one of my first times using a sword outside duels and mock battles, and it turned out to be way easier than I’d imagined.

“This should be enough,” I said.

Once we reached the very back of the enemy lines, I called out to my knight, and the two of us teleported back to the top of the border wall. He asked me if I was hurt, but I hadn’t suffered so much as a scratch. I was more worried about him, but he was as hale and whole as me. Truly, no amount of mock soldiers

could ever rival a knight. I wasn't really all that powerful—it was the enemies who were lacking. I couldn't get cocky.

This time, we looked out at the Cercian side of the wall, teleported down, and trampled more enemies. There was no need to advance this time. We planted our feet and cut them down where we stood, then zipped away again.

Our destination was the Anemonian ship currently anchored in Cercis's port.

"Pardon our intrusion," I said when we arrived.

The Anemonian knights who'd been left to guard the ship flinched when we appeared, but they quickly relaxed when they recognized my face.

"Sorry to disturb you. Thank you for everything you've done so far. I am Stale Royal Ivy, the firstborn prince of Freesia." My eyes shifted to the ship's armory. "I believe you still have a large stockpile of supplies for us. Mind letting me have some?"

They agreed to my request, allowing me access to the weapons and gunpowder from Anemone. We still had some in our camp, but it was best for me to use these more distant supplies since I could reach them more easily. Plus, I was about to use up a *lot*.

"All right," I said. "I think I'll have to choose items that are a bit smaller. I don't want to bring any more harm to our army or the border wall..."

I was speaking casually to the knight at my back, but as soon as I looked at his face, I was hit with *déjà vu*. He seemed surprised when we made eye contact, blinking over and over again. Wait, why was he suddenly so nervous? He couldn't be an enemy spy, so what was the problem?

"Prince Stale, is something wrong?"

His question snapped me out of my peculiar state. He was right. This was no time to get distracted. I needed to hurry and... *Ah*.

An old memory flashed in my mind; I had a hunch this was the very same knight who'd suggested dropping bombs on the enemy and gotten an earful for

it when I was young. My lips parted in realization. The knight asked what was wrong, but I was already smiling. I told him I was all right and began selecting the bombs I needed.

“Please don’t worry,” I assured him. “I’ll be sure to send the bombs in properly this time.”

The knight had been lifting the box of bombs off a top shelf for me, but as soon as I said that, he dropped the box with a crash. I whirled around. The box was fine, thankfully, but the man’s face had gone pale. I laughed, inappropriate as that was in a situation like this.

I pointed out more boxes to take down from the shelves. He was clearly anxious now, and his eyes darted all over as he worked. Soon, we had everything we needed. I was still stifling my laughter as I tried to think of the perfect place to send the boxes. I settled on the western tower for now. That way, they wouldn’t ignite immediately. Lighting anything in an armory was suicide.

That done, I bid farewell to the Anemonian knights and teleported to the western tower with my guard. I confirmed the contents of the boxes and asked him for a lighter. Then I took something out of the first box.

Copelandii, Alata, Rafflesiana...just you wait. It’s your turn to experience the terror of these bombs.

“Chaaaaarge! Start the invasion of Cercis!” I howled at my useless troops.

We’d done our best to invade Cercis across the border wall, but what should have been an easy invasion suddenly ground to a halt. Attacks flew at us from both sides—one from those damn Freesian knights and one from a mysterious ambush on the outer side of the wall.

My soldiers were pushed away from the castle town and back outside the country. The Freesian knights had forced our formation to flip, leaving the army

no more than a panicked mass of men without leadership. I shouted commands, but little by little, we lost ground and retreated. Still, I was merciless in commanding my soldiers. I ordered anyone turning tail to get back to Cercis at once.

That was when something fell from the sky. Then another. And another.

Plop. Plop, plop, plop.

Lumps the size of our hands rained down outside the border wall. A whiff of gunpowder had me instantly on alert, but my shocked soldiers could do little but scramble out of the blast zone. A second look revealed the bombs weren't lit. They were mere balls of gunpowder. Though we had no idea where they'd come from, it was easy enough throwing them back into Cercis. I ordered my men to do so, but it was too late.

A single lit bomb appeared out of nowhere.

This time, screams pierced the air. My soldiers fled in every direction. Ear-splitting bangs followed. That single bomb had lit the surrounding explosives, resulting in a chain reaction.

From my position farther back on the battlefield, I could tell we hadn't suffered too many injuries. A direct hit would have been nearly lethal, but these individual explosives weren't nearly as deadly as long as we kept our distance. Still, we weren't sure exactly what had just happened. The moment we thought the danger might have passed, massive projectiles much larger than the last pelted our heads from above.

More shrieks tore through the air, although these explosives weren't lit. Even so, we all knew what would happen if another spark came flying our way. The soldiers at the front were the most vulnerable, yet I kept on ordering them to push forward. It left my troops squeezed between their own brethren and the Freesian knights cutting them down at the front lines. They had nowhere to run.

As expected, the lit explosives came next. Small bombs popped up out of thin air, one after another, grim specters come to deliver our deaths. On their own,

the bombs wouldn't do much. But there was a mountain of explosives right on the ground, waiting for that spark to ignite a whole inferno.

The fuses hissed as they burned down before finally erupting. Secondary blasts followed, and within a few seconds, the area around the border wall was filled with smoke that billowed beyond Cercis itself.

The curtain of smoke obscured my vision. This wasn't a real explosion, yet it had already scattered my soldiers and left them choking on smoke. They couldn't see, let alone engage in a proper retreat, though they hurried backward anyway. In the confusion, I couldn't order them to do otherwise. With the battlefield in this chaotic state, I'd be killed the second the enemy realized where I was.

It wasn't just Cercis I had to worry about either. Most of my own soldiers were slaves dragged here to increase our numbers. They had zero loyalty to me. They *despised* me. They could switch sides any second and turn this into a massacre.

I didn't issue a single command as the smoke cleared. The whole time, soldiers continued to march through the border wall, only to be cut down or forced back out when they met with the knights on the other side.

I had to stay calm until I could see the battlefield properly again and try to fix this. It was only a smoke grenade. There was nothing to fear—all I had to do was wait, and then we could stabilize the situation.

Problem was, my vision never cleared.

I strained my ears for some sign of how my army was doing. That was when I noticed a strange noise.

Plop, plop, plop, plop, plop, plop.

Objects were hitting the ground at regular intervals, but I had no way of telling what they were. It could have been smoke grenades, bombs, or something else entirely. I couldn't discern their size or whether they were lit. All

I knew for sure was that my vision wasn't getting any clearer, and my troops were steadily retreating. Perhaps they were using this shrouding smoke as an excuse to flee. Or...was this the moment the slaves would take their revenge on me?

Ka-boom!

Occasional explosions cracked through the fog. Wails and shrieks from my side of the battle lines always followed. The regular soldiers shouted at the slaves to keep pushing, but it was bedlam on the battlefield, and the slaves were barely following orders anymore—after all, they were livestock led to the slaughter, not comrades or officers.

Would the next item raining down be a bomb? Where would it fall? When would we regain our vision? How long would this infuriating smoke last?

I could sense the slaves' fear and agitation growing. In that moment, I was all too conscious of how we treated them, how we used and disposed of them. And now they had weapons in their hands and no one to tell them who was on their side on this incomprehensible battlefield. No one could punish or stop them right now—no matter who they turned their weapons on. The people they hated most weren't in Cercis—they were in their own camps.

The longer the smoke lingered, the more my heart raced. I could almost smell the panic rising among the slaves, and I knew that they'd turn on us. We might have still had a few loyal soldiers among those pushed back through the gap in the border wall, but even those soldiers weren't faring well, with knights from Freesia cutting them down one by one. They had no idea of the chaos awaiting them on this side of the wall.

The slaves had been granted the perfect stew of factors—temporary freedom and an ideal opportunity for revenge. All of a sudden, my trained troops found themselves embroiled in a whole new fight—one in which the distinction between friend and foe was as murky as the smoke obscuring the world around them. The damn Freesians hadn't even set off an explosion or rushed at us, yet

they'd dealt us maximum damage, setting us on a path to self-destruction.

In the brief moments I had left, I knew this could only be the work of one man: Stale Royal Ivy, the next seneschal of Freesia.

"As long as we still have this many smoke bombs, you should be able to send them all back through the wall. Let's return to the south once I've finished launching them," I told my knights.

This job was getting boring. I was teleporting the smoke bombs we borrowed from Anemone's ship to the outer side of the border wall, one by one. I included a few small explosives among them, here and there. That was the entirety of my repetitive task.

Once I'd shrouded the battlefield from the eyes of enemy commanders in the rear guard, it ground the enemy invasion to a halt. The slaves had no reason to fight without anyone forcing them. And the moment a commander shouted to issue such an order, the slaves would follow the sound and attack them.

"This is why it's a waste to use slaves and soldiers who don't want to fight," I muttered.

Unlike the United Hanazuo Kingdom and Freesia, the enemy bolstered their numbers with slaves. They had to if they wanted to do any damage to us at all. Yet my plan only worked *because* they were using the enslaved troops to increase their numbers.

"I'm sorry to make my country's proud knights help me with such a dull job."

I'd explained the strategy to the knights before we left. It was mere coincidence that they ended up being the same knights who joined me as my guards. I apologized for the tedium of lighting a bunch of explosives and smoke bombs for me, but they assured me it was no problem at all. We moved at a steady pace, lighting and teleporting. All the while, I watched the battle from the tower's window. Amid the chaos, I spotted a blimp outside the Chinensian

castle. It was limping toward the town beneath it, so the knights must have already shot it down.

I glanced at the knight who handed me the next lit smoke grenade. Noticing my eyes on him, he looked down at his own hands to avoid my gaze. It made me want to tease him a little.

“I could have used large-scale explosives, but I didn’t want to harm our knights or the border wall,” I said.

I would use massive bombs for Pride’s sake if I had to. I’d long since prepared myself to go to such lengths for her and the Freesian people. I knew that Pride, Arthur, and probably even Tiara were out there fighting right now; their hands would be just as bloodstained as mine. But if it meant protecting Pride, our country, and its people, that was a price worth paying.

The knight politely dipped his head at my offhand remark.

“What do you think?” I asked him, hinting at our encounter long ago. “Did I manage to live up to your expectations this time?”

He froze before he could light the bomb in his hands, eyes flying wide. I couldn’t allow our workflow to stop, so I urged him to light the next one. That brought him back to his senses. When I requested a smoke bomb next, he lit it with shaky fingers. As soon as he passed it to me, he squeaked out a response.

“I sincerely apologize for my insensitivity back then!”

He bowed deeply, but I just shook my head. To be honest, I’d forgotten about him after all this time. I was a bit surprised that he still remembered that incident and felt bad about it. Six years ago, this man—just a new recruit at the time—said to Commander Roderick: “*Why don’t we get Prince Stale to drop bombs on the enemy’s position?*”

I patted him on the shoulder. “I know it’s a bit late, but congratulations on joining the main forces,” I said. He raised his head, and I breathed a sigh of relief when his eyes lit up and his expression eased.

We continued without hesitation. I could just as easily drop giant bombs outside the country and wipe out all of our enemies at once, but I could harm our own forces or the citizens by doing something like that. No, better not to give in to my emotions and act in retribution for Pride's injury. The image of her wounded was still burned into my brain. If the people who hurt her were in front of me now, I would kill them with my bare hands—even if they numbered in the hundreds.

But I knew the danger of my special power better than anyone. If I was going to cause another person harm with this power, I wanted it to be for Pride, the country, the people—not for revenge. The thought of taking lives so impulsively and recklessly sickened me. I was the last person who should ever let myself reach that point.

All the same, if Pride was safe right now—if I weren't hungry for vengeance—and she *still* asked me to wipe the enemies out with my power, I would do it. I would do things infinitely more violent and cruel. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

"All right. That should just about do it for the gates of Cercis," I said to myself, swinging my arms to release the tension in my shoulders.

With the loaded bazooka still on my shoulder, I surveyed the empty enemy camp beneath me. Turning toward the Cercian gate, I enjoyed an even more beautiful sight. The ocean of foes who'd stood between me and this camp was gone, some so thoroughly decimated no one would ever put the pieces together again. I, Leon, had wrought this destruction—and I was the only one left standing amid the wreckage.

"I hope all the knights are safe."

I headed back toward the gate where I'd left them, squinting to try to make out human figures standing in the distance past all the corpses. I smiled with relief, my heart warming when I realized my beloved Anemonian people had

survived. I jogged over to them. When I got closer, the knights noticed me and called out. I waved to the ones running up to meet me.

“We’re so glad you’re all right.”

“Are you truly unharmed?”

I told them I was fine, then asked for a status update. I nodded along as they made their reports, then turned to the communication specialist we’d borrowed from Freesia.

“Please connect me to the headquarters in the Cercian castle.”

“Thank you for waiting, Prince Leon. We’re so grateful for your support.”

I bowed to the prince in the transmission. Leon returned the gesture.

“It’s been a while since we spoke, Prime Minister Gilbert,” Leon said. “To summarize our results, we’ve completed our defense of the Cercian gates and we’re freed up to provide aid to other camps. However...” He paused, smiling. “Judging by the information we’ve received, it sounds like the areas most in need of aid are your headquarters in the Cercian castle and the lightly guarded Chinensian castle.”

I couldn’t suppress a tick of surprise at Leon’s cheerful description of our situation. Still, I appreciated his calm assessment.

“The knights and soldiers are fighting with all they have, and the enemy has yet to breach the castle,” I told him. “That said, the knights have blocked off some doors, and the enemy is trying to break through them. The other camps have reduced the number of enemies attempting to enter the castle, but right now, we can only prevent long-range attacks. Our priority is to keep the castle under our control.”

Leon nodded. This *was* a defensive war, in the end. You could pare down manpower at certain sites and send knights to the castle, but the most important objective was protecting our headquarters.

“As I thought. There’s something I’d like to share with you, Prime Minister. It regards Anemone’s firepower...”

With a charming smile, Leon explained his army’s situation—including how many weapons he had available, how much firepower they’d stored on their ship, and how many knights he could deploy.

My eyes grew wider and wider the longer this went on. It was enough of a shock that Leon had defended the gates with such small numbers, but clearly I’d vastly underestimated Anemone’s might. While Leon was the only person who could operate many of their weapons, their strongest ones had the power to decimate wide swathes at once.

What a frightening country they’d grown into in only a few short years, most of it occurring over the last twelve months. I’d heard praise of Leon, future king of Anemone, but I was beginning to suspect those rumors didn’t do the man justice.

“With that in mind, how should Anemone proceed?”

Pleasant as the prince was, I hesitated, schooling my expression into stillness. “And why is the crown prince of Anemone asking me, a foreign prime minister, for orders?”

Sure, I likely had a better grasp on the state of the war than anyone else. Even so, the crown prince of Anemone didn’t need to take instruction from a Freesian official. While I’d offered *advice* to each camp, I certainly didn’t expect the prince to come to me for orders.

“Pride, Stale, and Tiara have all told me that you’re the very best when it comes to putting people to use.”

He was still wearing that winning smile of his, but I couldn’t hide my befuddlement. For Stale’s name in particular to be on that list...it was just too surprising.

I was still floundering for a response when Leon issued a soft gasp. *“Pardon*

me. I'll be right back."

He was no longer looking at me through the transmission, but rather at something off in the distance. With no further explanation, he disappeared.

"Heeeey!" I shouted into the distance. "Hm, I guess he can't hear me."

After cutting the transmission with Gilbert short, I called out to a far-off mass moving at incredible speed. But my cry only drove it farther away. My knights gaped in shock at the behemoth even our fastest warhorses would never catch.

"He leaves me no choice," I said with a chuckle.

I aimed my bazooka at the ground and fired.

Ka-boooooooooom! With a thunderous roar, the path in front of the racing object crumbled. The mass skidded to a stop, and I waved both my hands in its direction. Finally, the object—which had been trying to go around us—darted straight at me with unbelievable speed.

"You bastard!"

The ground rumbled and shook as the massive object ripped it apart. A figure at the peak growled with rage. As he grew closer, my knights and I could finally make out his furious features.

"What the hell was that, Leon?! You almost blew us to pieces! Were you tryin' to kill me, or do you wanna die?!" Val snarled, baring his teeth at me.

He sat atop a big lump of earth. Khemet and Sefekh peered down at me, the girl looking just as enraged as Val. "You're lucky we already dropped people off outside of town!" she snapped. "What if we'd still had the refugees with us?! I'd never forgive you if Val or Khemet got hurt!"

"I'm sorry, I just didn't know how else to stop you. But I made sure to miss!" I said, offering my most gracious smile. This seemed only to enrage them further. I could see how badly Sefekh wanted to send a blast of water right at my face.

“Why are you here, Leon?” Khemet asked, still clinging to Val. The three of them probably didn’t know Anemone had joined the war as reinforcements.

“I’m here to help Freesia too,” I said. “This is perfect timing. Our ship is pretty far away.”

“We’re in the middle of executing orders from the mistress right now,” Val said. “We’re haulin’ the idiots who didn’t evacuate in time out to farmlands, so we can’t bother with you.”

“Why don’t you listen to what I have to say first? I think you might like what you hear.”

He wrinkled his brow. I beamed back at him.

“I’m speaking to Prime Minister Gilbert right now. Come and join me.”

Val clicked his tongue but released his special power. The upturned ground beneath him sank down and returned to a mere lump of dirt. He kicked at it in irritation.

“I’ll give you one minute,” Val growled.

“The very best? At putting people to use?” I muttered. I had to steady myself with deep breaths after Leon abruptly left the broadcast. *Princess Pride, Princess Tiara, Prince Stale... All three of them said that about me?*

This was Tiara’s first time on the battlefield, yet she was putting her life on the line for Pride’s sake. Stale had shown concern not only for me but for my family as well, saving them once again. Then there was Pride, who remained on the battlefield despite being unable to stand due to her injury.

Having known them since they were children, it was hard for me to hold back my shock at how quickly they’d matured. And here they were the ones praising *me* behind closed doors?

“How unfair.”

Knowing this, I had no choice but to live up to their expectations. If those three were saying such things about me, I had to embody the person they believed me to be.

I closed my eyes. The state of the camps, the multiple battles, the weapons on hand...and our larger objectives. I ran over all of it in my mind, seeking the most advantageous strategy for our forces. Just as I believed I'd found something...

"Thank you for waiting, Prime Minister."

Leon's voice prompted me to open my eyes, but I reeled when I saw the man standing beside him in the broadcast.

"What do you think? How would you make use of Anemone if we had this merry band along with us?"

With a cheery expression, Leon pulled the man closer. The new arrival cocked an eyebrow and glared at Leon, not holding back an ounce of his irritation.

"Stop speakin' for me! I told ya, I'm already busy with the mistress's orders!" The man clicked his tongue. He shoved Leon's arm away and turned his glare on me. *"I haven't even gotten my payment yet, Prime Minister."*

Val. How in the world had he gotten here so quickly from Freesia? There could only be one explanation.

"Very well," I sighed. "Once the war is over, you can take what you please."

"Payment? Are you paid in money or goods?" Leon asked him.

"Not money," Val said curtly. *"Anyway, get a move on already. Why am I even here, huh?"*

"I see," I mused. "With him, you should be able to travel anywhere we require at top speed..."

This increased Leon's range tremendously. If Pride's orders allowed it, Val could take Leon and the Anemonian knights and split them between Cercis and Chinensis. But that could interfere with the Freesian knights already at the front lines in the north. In the end, I settled on sending them to Anemone's ship so

they could gather supplies. Thereafter, they could head to the two main towns in Cercis and Chinensis to provide support.

I paused, for there was also the matter of a certain weapon Leon had mentioned earlier. “I have one question for you, Prince Leon.”

“What is it?”

I narrowed my eyes at the prince. Behind him, Val seemed to be trying to slip away. Khemet and Sefekh watched the broadcast, their lips parted in wonder.

Keeping the castle out of enemy hands was my first priority, followed by ending the war as swiftly as possible. Both goals required taking out as many invaders as possible.

“The weapon you mentioned earlier,” I said, biting back a smirk. “How accurately can it hit its target?”

“As long as you can provide the coordinates, I won’t miss,” Leon said, grinning ear to ear.

“Prime Minister Gilbert sure does make big moves,” I mused.

Clank, clank, clank. A clang of metal rang out from the Anemonian ship anchored in the Cercian harbor. My knights worked swiftly, just as I’d instructed. I watched over them as they made the final adjustments, then passed the weapons on to Val, whose glare threatened to bore a hole right through me. Khemet and Sefekh lingered at his sides, watching the knights with fascination. Their childlike innocence and cries of “Wow!” and “So cool!” were honestly adorable.

As Gilbert ordered, Val had carried all of us to the ship with his special power. I could see his annoyance at having to work alongside me, but he couldn’t really turn it down, having finished Pride’s mission so quickly. When I heard about those orders, I felt it would be much more efficient for Val to work with me instead of running around aimlessly. Most likely, Gilbert’s plan took that into

account as well.

“I didn’t expect this to be the target. I had no idea...”

“Quit blabbin’ and work. I’m sick of waitin’ on you,” Val cut in.

I simply smiled, accustomed to his rough ways thanks to us becoming drinking buddies. Val crossed his arms, clicked his tongue, and stomped to and fro. I could tell how much he hated being forced to stand around, especially on Gilbert’s orders.

“All right. Let’s force the enemies back.”

I recalled the prime minister’s words. I’d assured him we could hit any target as long as he provided precise coordinates, but I’d never expected Gilbert to choose what he had.

Pride and her siblings had always told me that their prime minister was brilliant and talented. Stale even said that there was no one better at putting people to use, and he expressed how jealous he was of those abilities. At long last, I was witnessing it with my own eyes.

With the final preparations complete, my knights announced that we were ready to move. I sighed with relief. All I had to do was light the weapons. A communication specialist called out that the Cercian castle had finished preparing as well. With my men awaiting the signal, I confirmed the gunpowder supply, direction, angle, and breeze one last time. Then I announced our target.

“Aim for the Cercian castle gates.”

“Fire!”

Bangs and reverberations rocked the ship and the passengers on board. We covered our ears to prevent damage as booms shuddered around us. The massive cannons on the Anemonian ship had just roared to life.

A sound erupted at the front of the Cercian castle as though the ground had split open, swallowing the enemy soldiers gathered there to invade. Captain

Callum had blocked the castle gates in advance, so there were no soldiers from Hanazuo or Freesian knights nearby. Gilbert had ordered every last one of them—including the injured—to spread around the castle, as though he meant to abandon the gates themselves. Our forces darted off in every direction now, fighting any enemies they came across.

Apparently, the enemy really believed I, Pride Royal Ivy, would simply give up defending the main entrance. They gathered at the gates, never once considering we'd cleared out this area on purpose.

When the cannonballs struck, the front of the complex absorbed all the damage, leaving the castle itself unscathed. They landed within a few dozen meters of their target, a stunning display of accuracy. Nothing touched the castle aside from debris blown around by the wind. We did, however, lose the fence surrounding the castle and the outer wall the enemy had already broken through. But when that wall collapsed into rubble, it took enemy soldiers with it.

No one had predicted that Hanazuo would not only strike its own headquarters but take out a part of the castle. The enemy soldiers seemed to believe that Cercis had bombed its own castle to take both sides out at once.

"Thank you for allowing us to use cannons, Lord Fergus, Prime Minister Dario...and King Yohan. I appreciate your permission in King Lance's absence," Gilbert said.

He smiled at the men around us. The cannons had succeeded in taking out most of the soldiers attempting to storm the castle, with no casualties among Hanazuo's soldiers or my knights. Fortunately, Lord Fergus, Prime Minister Dario, and King Yohan had granted our prime minister permission to fire the cannons, destroy the outer fence, and take out the castle wall. Still, it was clear they had many questions.

"Why did we give him permission for such a risky counterattack?"

I knew what they were thinking: *What if the cannon operators misfired? What*

if their aim was off slightly? What if Anemone betrayed them? What if any soldiers or knights were left behind at the front of the castle? A single one of those missteps could have resulted in immense damage to our side. We might even have had to surrender the castle itself.

Somehow, my incredible prime minister had managed to convince them. It wasn't just the foreign seneschal and prime minister who believed in Gilbert; even Yohan, the king, accepted his explanation eventually. Just like the seneschal and prime minister, Yohan's eyes were as big as saucers. I sat beside him and couldn't help but smile at this sight.

That's our brilliant schemer, all right, I thought to myself.

He'd convinced them all to go along with his plan. It reminded me, terrifyingly enough, of the Gilbert I knew from the otome game in my past life. And yet, listening to everything from Yohan's end of the transmission, I found myself as easily swayed as all the rest. Or to put it more accurately, Gilbert had skillfully guided us all into believing in his plan.

That was no easy feat. Before suggesting such a reckless strategy, Gilbert had laid out Anemone and Cercis's statuses. Clearly he wanted us to have a full understanding before we reached a conclusion.

"We could use this method... This is what we should do..."

If Stale had heard this hypnotic display, he likewise would have thought back to nine years ago. Back then, Gilbert had easily "persuaded" the palace officials into believing terrible things about me. This time around, Gilbert had calculated his odds of success and considered defensive measures, but a plan such as this never should have received any approval while the Cercian king and prince were both absent.

Yet Gilbert secured the permission he required. The result was a bit of damage to the castle and the elimination of nearly all invading enemy soldiers. Even if Lance or Cedric later questioned this use of the cannons, Gilbert would persuade them too. Best of all, none of our own forces suffered so much as a

scratch.

Now that I think about it, the end of Gilbert's route involved making the other love interests destroy the castle tower with Pride inside it.

My smile faltered when I remembered how reckless he was even within the game.

"I believe we've wiped out a large portion of enemy troops with this attack," Gilbert said. "The knights and soldiers who fled to the east and south should be able to handle anyone who remains. We must thank Prince Leon for his help. I will speak with you all later."

With that, our brilliant prime minister ended the transmission.

After closing the transmission with Pride and the others, I started a new one to Leon. Thanks to this plan of mine, our small force of Freesian knights had wiped out plenty of enemy troops, leaving them wounded, disorganized, and nearly destroyed.

"Thank you very much, Prince Leon," I said. "The cannons were a great success. Your skills have proven most impressive."

"No, it was nothing," Leon said with a humble smile. "All the praise should go to you, Prime Minister Gilbert, for providing coordinates within our range of fire. I hardly contributed at all."

We launched into our plans for the remainder of the battle.

"By the way," he said, derailing our discussion, "where is Pride at the moment? I'd like to speak with her through a transmission if possible."

My lips twitched, shoulders going stiff. Leon had a single communication specialist with him. I was the only one broadcasting to him on his ship, so he and his men had no idea about Pride's injury.

Something illogical but powerful begged me not to tell him that she'd been hurt. I couldn't casually reveal Pride's condition to the prince while still hiding it

from Arthur and the other knights. That would only serve to rattle our troops—a change that could lead to casualties.

Yet I could hardly lie to Leon, who was both a crown prince and a great ally in this war. I kept a smile plastered on my face, choosing my next words with the utmost care. However, I never got a chance to say them.

“Damn it, Leon! How long are ya gonna chitchat for?! Hurry up, or I’m leavin’ your ass here!”

A familiar voice shouted from behind Leon. Leon whirled, startled, and assured Val he was on his way.

“Forgive me, but I have to get going.”

“Of course. Best of luck to you.”

I heaved a relieved sigh, silently thanking Val for his unexpected help.

With a charming smile, Leon bid me farewell and ended the transmission.

“Leave it to me,” I murmured, though those words were only meant for Pride.

“Ah... Aaah... Someone... Anyone!”

I wandered aimlessly, lost and alone. Like my fellow townsfolk, I’d left the town the night before, fleeing to an evacuation area. The only information we’d gotten was that Chinensis, our neighbor, should have been the sole target of the enemy invasion—but because we sent out Cercian troops as backup, the enemy could retaliate against *us* as well. That was why we had to flee to an evacuation zone and get as far from the castle as possible.

The scale of this war was beyond anything we could’ve imagined. Skirmishes rose up wherever we looked, and endless soldiers stormed into our country. When the enemies spotted us fleeing, they set their sights on us. Those knights from Freesia had come to our rescue, sure, but many of us didn’t trust them either. They were just more outsiders in our country.

Those who didn't flee the Freesian knights froze in terror, so we had to drag a few of our own away. People scattered all over, leaving many unable to find the disguised or locked-up evacuation areas. And we certainly couldn't get all the way from town to the farmlands on foot. With the war cries and bombs echoing in every direction, we didn't know where to run.

"Somebody, help! Please!"

I couldn't tell what was going on anymore. I stumbled around, full of regret for not leaving town as ordered. I was about to give up when a voice called out.

"Are you all right?!"

I spun to find knights behind me. But these weren't the same knights who'd rescued us before—the two men who raced up to me were carrying weapons unlike anything I'd ever seen. I tried to run, but my body was too weak, and I sank to the ground. The knights patted my back and told me I was safe now. Then they dug small metal objects from their breast pockets, pulled out the pins, and tossed the items up to the heavens. They exploded, producing a light as bright and brilliant as the sun.

"Ah, there's another one. That makes seven. I think we should get going," I called ahead. I had three knights with me, a standard guard detail for the crown prince of Anemone. They spread out a map and marked the next location of the flash grenade.

"Hey, Leon, looks like the real haul's in Cercis," Val said to me, sounding bored. "Only the damn Chinensian soldiers got themselves hurt. All the regular folks were fine."

Val had used his special power to dredge up more earth so that he and I could ride it, along with a few others. He glanced back at the hunched soldiers we carried with us.

"Chinensis already knew they were going to be invaded," I replied. "I'm sure

the king must have ordered all civilians in the castle town to evacuate.”

I glanced back at the soldiers as well. I deeply respected these men who’d gone on fighting for their homeland until they couldn’t. Hurt as they were, they nodded to confirm my hypothesis.

“Oh, the only thing up north is the front line of the battle,” I told Val. “You should turn to the west and follow the build—”

“Shut up! I know what I’m doin’!”

He violently sent our earthen mound skidding into a sharp turn. Even the soldiers, covered with a protective dirt dome, toppled over. We had to brace ourselves to keep from being thrown off completely.

Val sent us flying toward Cercis even faster. As we traveled, we flashed past Freesian knights locked in fierce battles, but Val whizzed by them all without a care.

“Damn it... I shoulda left you on that boat if I knew you’d be so annoying!” Val snapped. He must have meant my ship from Anemone, aboard which we’d gathered weapons.

“I’ll be quiet if I have to,” I said. “But then you won’t know the locations of the flash grenades. You haven’t been memorizing them, have you?”

He didn’t respond, just snarled and sent us on even faster.

Sefekh scowled at Val, but she shot water at me, like she could snuff out the source of his irritation. I leaned to the side, dodging the jet, then offered the girl a smile; it only seemed to make her angrier. All the while, Khemet watched us nervously.

I was helping out with Gilbert’s plan, attempting to lead my Anemonian knights across Cercis and Chinensis as part of a rescue effort. We’d started by using Val’s special power to drop off pairs of knights throughout the main town in Cercis. Those knights would search for anyone in need of aid, or for citizens who hadn’t evacuated. Once the townsfolk were confirmed to be safe, the

knights would throw flash grenades into the sky to reveal their locations. Until we received enough of those signals, Val's job was to rescue the people who needed help in Chinensis. Meanwhile, the knights with us marked down the locations of the flash grenades on a map. When we returned to Cercis, those knights would direct Val to all the stranded townsfolk. With the citizens safely in hand, we could drop them off in farmlands and return to Chinensis.

All this was only possible thanks to Anemone's weapons and cooperation, as well as Val's unique mode of transportation. Even he had to acknowledge that this process was pretty efficient...surely.

"There's the eighth. Val, can you go a little fast—"

"Hell yeah I can, *Your Highness*. Just don't fall off, kid!"

Seething, Val picked up speed. He secured Sefekh's and Khemet's feet so they wouldn't fall, but the knights and I had only the dome to protect us as Val made a mad dash for the wounded soldiers. We were facing the nation of Cercis now, so I could scan the area for flash grenades as we went along.

"What amazing speed," I remarked calmly to my knights. "That reminds me... Did something happen to Pride?"

Val's right shoulder jerked. "Huh? How the hell would I know?" he said, trying to sound bored.

"You didn't want Prime Minister Gilbert to answer my question, did you?"

I saw right through him. Val clicked his tongue and steered the dirt even more chaotically instead of responding. That was my cue to press him further.

"Is that why you, a deliveryman, were put in charge of rescuing people?"

He obviously didn't want to answer. Though I wasn't privy to the details of his contractual relationship with Pride, she probably hadn't forbidden him from lying. I figured he was trying to hold back as much as he could.

"I can think of some possibilities," I went on. "She could be injured, or maybe she deserted the battlefield, went missing, died... But I can't see her ever

deserting like that, and if she were missing, you and Prince Stale would definitely be sent out as a search party. That means she's either injured or dead —"

"Shut your damn mouth already!" Val snarled at me with such ferocity that I snapped my mouth shut, but his anger more or less confirmed my theory.

Everyone fell silent. Once we crossed the border into Cercis, the knights told Val the locations of the flash grenades. He moved as instructed, reluctantly slowing down to avoid the many structures in the Cercian town.

"Can you just answer me one thing, Val?" I asked in a near whisper.

The sounds of war partially drowned out the question, so both Val and Khemet glanced back at me. Val glared, likely expecting my usual teasing—but he would find no mirth in the icy stare of my jade-green eyes. Khemet stiffened; even Val startled a little.

With my expression utterly sincere, I kept my eyes fixed on Val. "Pride's alive...right?"

I hoped he heard my yearning in that question. I could not bear to have him dodge it yet again. He scowled a little, returned his gaze to the road in front of him, and spun Khemet's head to stop him from staring at me. He clicked his tongue, then finally answered.

"Would I be here if she wasn't? I'd be long gone."

Despite his words, his tone was even and serious.

I relaxed at last. "Yeah?" I answered softly, my usual charming smile back on my face. "Good. That's all I needed to hear. Thank you."

With that, I sprang to my feet. We'd slowed down, but were still traveling plenty fast. The knights urged me to sit, but I dismissed them with a wave and took a few stumbling steps. Val turned when he sensed my approach. I simply smiled and waved at him. Then, before he could ask what I was doing, I set my hand on his shoulder.

“I really want to see Pride as soon as possible. You do too, right?” I whispered in Val’s ear.

“Says the guy who’s always visiting Freesia just to see her,” Val grumbled, scowling.

“I actually already saw Pride today. I just want to see her again.”



Val sighed at me. I could feel him using his power to secure my feet so I didn't have to cling to his shoulder for balance. I reached down for the gun at my hip.

"Every second I'm apart from Pride is far too long."

Bang!

Val whirled on me for firing the gun so close to his ear, but he seemed even more surprised that I knew how to fire one at all. My bullet had struck an enemy soldier trying to sneak up on us from behind.

"I think my attack is a little faster," I said to Sefekh with a childish smile.

She responded by smacking me. "Are you gonna leave your country and marry our mistress, then?"

"Of course not. Living away from Anemone would be hell."

Val scratched his head, apparently embarrassed by my words. He stuck his tongue out. "Blegh. What an annoying way of sayin' it."

"I mean every word. You wouldn't want to leave Freesia either, would you?"

He shrugged off my question. "I don't got a patriotic bone in my body. Stop talkin' like you understand me."

I cocked my head, a bit surprised by that response. "Hmm."

Bang! I shot another soldier.

"Then what about leaving Pride?"

Val fell silent, and I suspected he was suppressing the urge to shove me right off the dirt. I took his silence as answer enough.

"Let's finish this job quickly," I said. "The more people we save, the more the knights and soldiers can fight without worry."

I gunned down every last enemy that approached us, as though they were target practice. Sefekh blasted water at groups of soldiers and their horses; somehow it felt like a competition had ignited between us. I let out a whoop of

praise, but Sefekh merely harrumphed and squeezed Khemet's hand.

"*We're* the ones who get to be next to Val!" she shouted. She held her hand up toward me, and this time I was far too close to dodge her spray of water.

The mound of earth raced toward town, outpacing even the swiftest warhorse. All the while, Sefekh and I shot at anything we could reach.

We reached a woman cowering in the streets. We reached townsfolk who couldn't get to safety because of broken shelter doors. We reached soldiers too injured to move. We reached knights who'd gotten wounded protecting children. We reached shelters the enemy had nearly breached. At a blinding speed, we rescued every last person who needed us.

Only when the bells tolled to signal the end of the war did we know our job was done.

"I see. Princess Pride is absent. How unfortunate," the man said, his fox-like eyes narrowing as he sneered.

This man, Adam Borneo Nepenthes, was crown prince of the Rajah Empire. His dark-purple hair fell past his ears, slicked back on the right side. He'd come to Freesia to form a peace treaty that ensured Rajah's total withdrawal from the United Hanazuo Kingdom. He had no business left but to return home, yet he'd suddenly requested to meet the crown princess—my daughter.

"Yes, she's currently participating in the defensive war in Hanazuo. It's possible that the war may be over even as we speak," I told him. As queen, I had stayed behind while my girls went to war in my stead.

"I'm sure Hanazuo will be victorious if Freesia is involved," he said. "I would have liked to meet Her Highness, though." He slouched dramatically and ran his fingers through his hair. "In that case, may I at least meet with Princess Tiara as a gesture of goodwill for our peace treaty?"

"I'm sorry to say that both Pride *and* Tiara are away." I spoke curtly, like I was

slamming a door in his face. His request did not surprise me, but I narrowed my golden eyes—currently accented by makeup—and flicked back my blonde hair in irritation.

“Is that right?” the prince replied teasingly.

“Of course. I wouldn’t lie or keep secrets from the crown prince with whom we’ve joined hands in peace. Tiara strongly wished to travel there, whereas Pride is attending as my proxy with full authority to act in my place. You may search the castle, but you won’t find them.”

“How unfortunate.” He smirked, not sounding disappointed in the least. “Incidentally, have you given thought to the letters my country has been sending you? I’m perfectly serious about my request. If we can’t enter into an alliance, isn’t a marriage between Princess Tiara and myself an absolute necessity for both parties?”

His creepy grin never faltered, twitching as he addressed me, Vest, and Albert in turn.

“Indeed, the three of us are working to select a fiancé for Tiara,” I said. “We acknowledge that you’ve volunteered yourself, Prince Adam.”

Rajah had been sending me letters for some time requesting peace, an alliance, and an engagement between Adam and Tiara. They always made it clear that if our countries could not join forces, then we should secure that peace through marriage instead. For Adam, who was turning twenty-one this year, Tiara was probably the ideal bride.

“I cannot give you an answer yet,” I told him. “Pride and Tiara have many people seeking their hands in marriage.”

“Oh, really? I’ll have to wait, then—although I don’t believe you’ll find anyone more suitable than me. Princess Tiara would make an incredible queen for the Rajah Empire.”

His slender eyes widened slightly, his smile curling at the corners and making

him look utterly reptilian. It made me glad I'd agreed to let Tiara visit Hanazuo. If she were still in the castle, we would have had to comply with Adam's request. We could not lie about her presence, as that would break the fragile trust between Freesia and Rajah. For now, we had a duty to show some level of respect to Rajah.

That being the case, I wasn't ready to force my daughters to meet with anyone from the empire right now. Or rather, I *couldn't* let them meet. Rajah clearly sought a close relationship with Freesia, hence their offers of peace and marriage. I suspected they hoped to revive their industries as well.

The more Rajah expanded, the closer they came to becoming the largest country in the world. But they had never been on good terms with us. Even now, with Adam sitting directly across from me, I did not trust the man.

Judging by their letters, I'd assumed Rajah was after Tiara, yet the first person Adam had asked to meet was Pride rather than his prospective fiancée. This came despite the two heirs being unable to marry—well, as long as the two countries didn't merge into one, anyway.

Is Adam after Tiara or Pride?

I suppressed a sigh of relief at Tiara's current absence. It was the one saving grace in all this. Meeting at a public event would be one thing, but being introduced directly to a princess with few others around carried much deeper implications. Pride and Tiara could meet Adam at a formal ceremony where they were surrounded by guests, and that would be good enough. Besides, Adam was just one potential fiancé out of many.

"If we must, we can call off the treaty," Vest whispered in my ear.

I knew he didn't think much of Adam either. His usually gentle gaze took on an edge as he studied the prince. I tried to keep my face neutral and shook my head at Vest's harsh suggestion. All we had agreed to was "peace." Regardless of what Adam said or how powerful the Rajah Empire was, Freesia was the only country with the right to choose Pride and Tiara's fiancés. And the peace treaty

meant Rajah couldn't get what they wanted through threats.

"Rumors of Princess Pride's and Princess Tiara's beauty and wisdom have reached our nation, you see," Adam said, his eyes bright and keen.

I smiled elegantly, not letting my guard down. "It's an honor to hear you say that."

"Princess Pride, in particular, is still said to be without a fiancé," Adam went on. "I find that such a waste. It must be the one and only flaw of the famous Princess Pride, heir to the Freesian crown. Your Royal Majesty and Your Royal Highness must be worried that, even at seventeen, she still has no partner with whom to lead her country... Oh, is something the matter?"

When he squinted and smiled, he resembled nothing so much as a snake. I held my expression steady, though my eyes must have flashed with anger for the briefest moment. If Adam noticed, he seemed merely amused. His sneering self-satisfaction would *not* cause me to lose my composure.

"*Your Imperial Highness*," I said, pointedly emphasizing his title, "I was under the impression that you came here to create peace with my country. We've already signed the treaty, so if there's something you'd like to say, now is your chance."

The servants behind him stiffened. Their hands clenched, clearly itching for the weapons we'd confiscated when they arrived.

"I apologize if I offended you, Your Royal Majesty. I said too much."

I only just managed not to ball my hands into fists at Adam's insincere smile. My own smile taut, I replied, "That's all right." Then I signaled for my guards to prepare for Adam's departure. "When can we meet next? We'll work around your schedule, so do tell us which days you'll be unavailable."

"The sooner the better," he replied. "I'd like to reconvene before Princess Tiara turns sixteen, if possible. Most dates are acceptable, but as for days that aren't..."

Adam gestured to his chief of staff behind him, who opened a notebook and read off the next year's worth of Adam's busy schedule. At my side, Vest recorded every date and closed his notebook at the exact same time as the chief of staff.

"Thank you very much," I said. "We'll be sure to remember those dates. We appreciate you taking the time to come here today."

I stood. Albert, Vest, Clark, and my knights joined me, shaking hands with the emissaries from Rajah and wrapping up the meeting.

"Of course," Adam said as our hands clasped. "As someone who respects good manners, I have faith that you'll avoid the dates we listed."

His fake smile did nothing to alleviate my concerns. He moved down the line and shook the hands of Albert and Vest too. Vest kept his face stern, but during their handshake, he offered the prince a faint smile. We Freesians also shook hands with Adam's servants and guards. Given that I was queen, none of them could refuse the gesture from me, but their eyes were ice-cold the entire time.

"I look forward to seeing you again," I told them. "We'll be sure to send you an invitation next time."

Knights ushered the group away. I waited until the doors shut firmly behind them before letting out the sigh I'd been holding in throughout the entire meeting.

"Should we be relieved that nothing happened, Vest?" I asked.

"Our country came out of it unscathed. We also know for certain that we'll have to be wary of Rajah from here on out. We accomplished our peace treaty and avoided the princesses having to meet with Prince Adam. We've also acquired a year's worth of days to be avoided. I think that's fairly successful." He paused before adding, "Oh, and you were wonderful as always." After that, he retrieved the notebook he'd tucked away in his breast pocket.

"We should plan a ball on one of *those* days right away," I said.

“Right away,” Vest echoed with a bow. Clark and the other knights offered deep bows of their own. As they left the room, a bold smile played on my lips.

“Yeugh! Disgusting filth!”

As soon as our carriage departed Freesia, I let out a screech. Crown prince though I was, those damn Freesians had pushed me to my limit back there. I stretched my feet out to rest them on the seat across from me. The general and chief of staff assigned to travel with me knew to expect this, and they’d left the seat open for just this purpose.

“Did you see that old Freesian hag?! She was so friggin’ boring the whole time! It was like she was wearing a mask!” I shouted, mussing up my purple hair. When I raked my fingers through it, it stood up in all directions—the way I liked it. I’d only smoothed it down for this stupid meeting, but now I could let it stick up all over. I rested my elbow against the windowsill and sighed.

“They were so annoying,” I grumbled. “Those stupid knights took our weapons and even our pens. They’re all monsters, yet they’re scared of us?!”

I wiped invisible scum off the pen and dagger the Freesians had returned to me, cleaning them on my general’s clothes.

“And Princess Pride and Princess Tiara weren’t there? What an absolute joke! After coming all this way, all I got to look at was that ugly hag!” I raged, stomping my feet as hard as I could. “What the hell were they talking about, sending me an invitation?! Is that monster queen’s brain rotten?! She pisses me off!”

I kept on screaming, flinging my anger around the carriage, heedless of my volume or the eardrums of those riding with me.

“She thinks she’s gonna invite me when she doesn’t even know my plans?! That damn hag! Ask me my schedule first!”

With one last scream, as loud as I could manage, I finally slumped back in my

seat. I clicked my tongue, annoyed at getting no reaction from the people around me. Once I got home, I'd have to torture these "products" to feel better again.

A smile finally returned to my face. I watched Freesia roll by outside the window. Moments later, I murmured a calm, "Oh well," as if nothing had happened. And my smile grew wider.

"I'm one step closer to stocking my shelves with more products."



Chapter 5:

The End of the War and the Companions

“T*HIS IS AN URGENT REPORT. Enemy forces on the front lines have been suppressed. Our army has emerged victorious.”*

The knights’ cheers rang through the transmission. Thanks to our victory in the north, the war had finally come to an end. Commander Roderick, the man who’d led all our forces, calmly delivered the news to those in the Chinensian castle, the Cercian castle, and Freesia via transmission.

“Well done,” I told him. “You’ve proven yourself once again, Commander. I’ll inform each camp of our victory at once.”

Once I’d finished applauding our brave commander, I issued orders to the guards and knights. We couldn’t deliver the news so easily to units whose whereabouts were unknown. Stale was likely in southern Cercis, whereas Leon and Val were working to provide aid to both countries. Harrison was still in southern Chinensis. Tiara, Prince Cedric, and King Lance had gone to the nearest village. Knights and soldiers were surely still fighting at their respective camps in both countries. They were waiting for a signal that would inform them of our triumph.

“Once we’ve brought in the soldiers we have detained, we’ll head to Chinensis to provide aid to their camps, Prime Minister Gilbert.”

“Good. Please do,” I replied.

I turned my gaze to the other transmission. In it, Pride’s eyes were lit up like stars. She’d gasped at Commander Roderick’s announcement of our victory and thanked him for his efforts. Gazing upon her, I felt everything click into place at last.

I closed my eyes for a moment to block out the hectic sounds coming from

her end. Then, in place of the princess, I ordered Roderick to report our victory to the Chinensian camps and send knights as reinforcements. Understanding the situation, he nodded and vanished from the transmission. I watched him depart before turning toward the window. The war had broken out early that morning, yet the sun was already starting to set.

So it all went as planned in the end?

Even the timeline for the war's end fell within my predictions. Although the effort had ended up being much more complicated than I'd originally anticipated, I'd never doubted our army could settle this within a day. Both the Freesian royal order and the United Hanazuo Kingdom had suffered little harm despite the many clashes along the way.

"Now all that's left is for the others to return safely."

I watched the Cercian seneschal, prime minister, guards, and knights celebrate. I'd seen with my own eyes that Pride was safe, but there were still many others out there somewhere on the battlefield.

"Sir Arthur must be safe, since there were no deaths on the front lines. That just leaves Stale and..."

I fell silent. Too much remained unresolved. I would not be surprised if more complications arose; the talks between Freesia and Rajah were probably just finishing up. I yearned to get back there, to see my wife and daughter as soon as I could, even though I'd just spoken to them.

"I'll be home soon."

I sent those words up to the clouds drifting serenely through the sky, hoping they'd reach my beloved family somehow.

In that moment, I felt in my bones that the war had truly ended.

"What in the world happened here?"

The Chinensian soldiers stood speechless before me—Harrison, captain of the

Eighth Squadron—and the ruin I'd caused. They'd been racing across the country on their horses, assisting whoever needed it and informing the camps of our victory. But their elation seemed to crumble when they came upon me amid a sea of destruction.

One soldier muttered that the mangled bodies around me could hardly be called "corpses." They'd lost any resemblance to humans, reduced to puddles of blood and armor. The dirt and grass were dyed red, and a sickly scent hovered in the air.

I stood beyond all of it, barely visible among the heaps of casualties.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha..."

The soldiers shuddered at my laughter. They'd come here to meet with the Freesian knights protecting the south, but now they looked ready to turn tail and run. Still, they could not deny that my methods had been...*effective* in aiding this war.

A few soldiers looked like they might muster up the courage to approach me, but the carnage left them hesitating. Instead, they called out from where they stood.

"Excuse me! You there, Freesian knight!" a soldier yelled, not knowing my name.

"Oh. Soldiers from this country, eh?"

The soldier blinked, and a breeze blew past him. Suddenly, my knife perched against his throat. The other soldiers recoiled, unable to tear their eyes from the blade...and the sight of me drenched in their enemies' blood.

"What a bore," I said. "I thought there were still more to kill."

I hung my head and kicked a corpse, letting my knife dance over my knuckles as I searched for more foes. I offered no apology for what lay around me, and the soldiers seemed to know not to demand one. They swallowed and shifted, asking what I meant. I reluctantly put my knife back in my pocket and looked at

the hole in the border wall that the enemies had charged through. Not a single one remained standing—or alive.

“I just finished killing everyone,” I said simply. “If you need to fill the hole, use the bodies I left on the other side. Those ones still have some shape to them.”

The high of the war hadn’t quite left me yet, so I came off a bit harsh. The soldiers said nothing, so I turned toward them.

“Well?” I asked. Some squeaked in fear; others gathered themselves enough to announce that our side had prevailed in this war. The news came as a surprise. A small smirk spread across my lips.

“S-so, erm, Princess Pride asked that any capable men help out the other camps and spread word of our victory, so—”

“Got it.”

I didn’t let the soldier finish. I wasn’t pleased by these orders, having just finished slaughtering enemy soldiers, so I meandered away—then stopped to ask where exactly I should be going. The soldiers offered me a horse so I could join them, which I accepted. Despite my special power, I couldn’t maintain my unnatural speed over long distances.

I went still, contemplating all I’d heard. The soldiers brought me a horse and offered directions to the castle. “I wonder if the vice commander will praise me for a job well done...”

I sighed, clinging to that tiny thread of hope.

“There’s no need to panic! Switch places with the rear guard if you sense trouble! Don’t get dragged outside the wall!”

Once the explosions and smoke grenades in the south of Cercis had ceased, I teleported there with my knights. The front lines were holding strong, having already pushed the enemy back outside the Cercian border.

I shouted orders from atop my horse, but the battle was essentially over. All

we had to do now was keep the enemy from coming back through the broken border wall in a few spots. The front-liners had defended this place all on their own.

Clang... Clang... Clang...

A bell rang in the distance, and everyone swiveled toward the sound. There was no mistaking the signal—this was the sound agreed upon for victory, not defeat. The war was over.

“Finally!”

“Commander...!”

“Raise your voices!” I shouted to the men. “Make yourselves heard! Our men are victorious!”

The knights roared triumphantly, their mighty voices shaking the very earth. On the other side of the wall, the enemy surely heard and knew they were done for.

“I doubt you can even call this an invasion anymore.”

My quiet words faded away unheard, drowned out by the jubilant cheers around me.

Once the smoke beyond the border wall dispersed, we knew Rajah had no more hope to cling to in this war. Those of us who’d survived gaped in fear as we saw just how much we’d lost. Our vanguard and most of our commanders had gone down—struck not by our foes but our *own forces*. Then there were the troops whose remains were little more than puddles. That hadn’t been done by any gunshot, but some kind of Freesian monster with a knife.

When I could finally see my surroundings again, I sighed with relief. I had to rally the troops under my command, regain our position, and make one last push against Freesia.

“Now! Everyone, charge inside!” I shouted, but my throat had dried up.

“Yes, Commander!” my men responded.

We were still just as cornered as we were before.

Most of my direct subordinates, who’d been leading troops, lay dead. I couldn’t even tell who’d stabbed whom. Only slaves remained, and they turned their hate-filled glares on me. Gone was their fear and obedience; bloodlust burned in their eyes. The message was clear: *“Now is our chance to kill him.”*

The soldiers took notice and pointed their weapons at the slaves. They knew as well as I did that sheer numbers could overwhelm us if the slaves stopped directing their attack at Hanazuo and turned on us. Now that the slaves had realized we’d lost, they weren’t going to keep marching to their deaths. As they gathered, even the rear guard seemed on the verge of revolt. They didn’t need smoke to take us out; if they turned on us as one, there would be no survivors. They would be free.

They pressed forward, one step at a time, like an army of little ants charging an armored beetle. The other commanders and I had nowhere left to flee.

Our enemies in the distance whooped and hollered with delight, celebrating our impending demise. One black-haired, bespectacled man among them cried, “We’re almost there! Soon we can all return to Princess Pride!”

Subjugation and loyalty.

The border wall cleanly separated these concepts as the war drew to two very different conclusions.

Yohan Linne Dwight, that was my name. Though I had a close relationship with God, I had suffered a cold history as crown prince, robbed of color and light. I had a good friend in the king of gold—a man who burned hotter than fire and shone brighter than the sun.

But without *her*, I would have given up. I’d intended to from the start.

“Freesia promises to protect you!” she’d declared. *“We’ll fight alongside King*

Yohan, who desires a bright future for his kingdom!"

Even as I spoke of making a stand for the sake of my people, putting my life and the Freesian princess's life on the line, I had no hope for victory. I kept telling myself not to be greedy as things progressed. *May there be as few victims as possible. May I live up to what Lance and Cedric think of me.*

I clung to a slew of selfish and contradictory desires, *wishing*. I wished Cercis would not be targeted. I wished Lance would recover from madness. I wished Cedric would return home safely. That way, we could all band together as the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

I wanted to protect Chinensis. I wanted my people to remain free. I wanted my loved ones unharmed, damage reduced, and innocent parties unscathed. Even as I took shelter in the castle, my many desires had my heart in a vise. Surely I was the greediest of anyone.

"Our knights have emerged victorious."

I didn't believe my ears at first. The announcement came so suddenly that I assumed it had to be another one of my ridiculous delusions. Despite my fading senses, I grabbed my cross and squeezed it hard. I ordered troops to head in as reinforcements and ring the bells of victory, but my brain wasn't keeping up. I struggled to process the reality right before me; I'd been so calmly and grimly prepared for defeat that victory was almost harder to fathom.

"We...won?"

Had we really defended Chinensis? It was hard to accept such an outcome. My mind repeatedly shoved away the notion and told me to get a hold of myself. I just couldn't believe it.

I turned to look at the woman beside me, as if the sight of her might tether me to reality. Pride Royal Ivy was princess of the country Cedric had gone to for reinforcements. Despite being heir to the Freesian throne, she showed no hesitation in going to the front lines herself, even wounding both legs just to save a Cercian soldier. She stared back at me calmly, not even boasting about

what her knights had achieved.

“As an ally of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, Freesia vows to protect you once tomorrow comes and this war begins. Should we fail, then His Majesty and I will burn to ashes together.”

Why had she offered to sacrifice herself like that? She’d performed the blood oath before me and my people, knowing exactly what it meant. Her fate was sealed, her death assured if we lost this war, yet her expression betrayed no hint of fear. I was here in the castle now thanks to her bravery—her oath.

The princess was busy celebrating the news of the victory as if it was no surprise to her. I knew that the knights, with their overwhelming firepower, as well as the Anemonian weapons and reinforcements came from her. Seeing her there proved to me that my country had won the war. And she was the one who’d saved us.

My kingdom would survive. Our culture, our name, and our people would remain unsullied. We could keep living as Chinensis—as the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Years ago, I couldn’t have cared less about my homeland. I believed we would fade away eventually, leaving no trace of ourselves behind in this world.

But now... But now, but now, but now, but now...!

“Ah!”

I reached toward the window. I hadn’t allowed myself to look all throughout the conflict, fearing I would see nothing but empty, razed land. I pictured it over and over again to prepare myself. Yet there the town stood, perfectly unchanged. It had not been destroyed—it was still *right there*. The setting sun cast a soft glow over the very same place I’d gazed upon all these years.

Two people came to mind, and I hoarsely called their names.

“...ance...ric...”

Lance, Cedric. They were my friends, my family. I loved them more than

anyone else. Those brothers had been the ones to guide and need me, even though I was so cold. They came to save me so many times. While we were from different countries within the United Hanazuo Kingdom and shared no blood, they got me back up on my feet whenever I needed them.

Their faces were vivid in my mind, and I was desperate to see them. I knew I wouldn't actually be able to spot them from the castle, but I *needed* to. All the things I'd stuffed down, the things I could not admit I'd hoped and wished for, bubbled up inside of me, and tears streamed down my face.

I'd really thought triumph was impossible. I blamed myself over and over again, wishing I could go back in time and undo it all. Everyone else was fighting so hard to save us, and there I was, the only one who could do nothing at all. I knew I was useless, but I still wanted to join my soldiers on the battlefield. I utterly despised myself for how powerless I was.

I need to see them. I need to see them!

Lance always said the world was a big place. I knew that much. But Lance was the only person in that big, wide world who would stay with me, make sure I wasn't alone, and show me a future brimming with light.

Big Bro. That was what Cedric called me. I knew he hadn't put much real thought into it, but it meant the world to me. Someone I felt close to had granted me a nickname of my own, and one of kinship at that. I'd built a relationship with him, and he'd given me so much more in return.

Praise meant nothing to me. Being called one of the most brilliant knights in history meant nothing to me. I was bored, lonely. I had nothing to be proud of. Cedric was the only one who knew these things. So when he called me "Big Bro," it was the only title I actually took pride in.

My country, people, culture, faith, happiness, freedom, friend, little brother... Every last one of them was so precious to me. *But I can't possibly have all of that*, I'd thought. *I can barely protect just one.* That had pierced me like a knife through the heart.

Yet here and now, hope returned to me.

I thanked God, folding my hands to pray to him. He hadn't abandoned us after all. My entire life up to this point consisted of praying to God, thanking Him, hoping, clinging, and praying some more. I never once received a response, but the act of prayer cleansed my heart, relieved my burdens, and saved me countless times.

This time, I filled my prayer with an abundance of gratitude. I prayed for the safety of every last citizen of Hanazuo and Freesia. I prayed for the eternal prosperity of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

Forgive me for my greed, Lord. I don't want to let go of anything ever again. Even after preparing for defeat, in the end, I still don't want to lose anything. I offer my life to you just as I always have, so please forgive me. Let me keep being the king alongside my lifelong friend of this "United Hanazuo Kingdom" you've given me.

Right then, the bell rang.

Clang... Clang... Clang...

It felt like God had answered me.

I shuddered, and tears squeezed between my closed lids. The strong yet gentle tolling of the victory bell filled me with warmth. I'd never heard a more beautiful sound in my life.

I continued my prayer in response to the bell, thanking God for ending this war. I thanked him for guiding Freesia and their princess to my kingdom. I thanked him for allowing me to live long enough to see the war come to an end. Then I chanted every name I remembered from Hanazuo and Freesia, even adding Lance's and Cedric's names to the list.

Please allow them to return safely. Guide them back home. If this one last wish could be granted, please let me see—

"Yohan!"

My lashes fluttered open like I was waking to a sunrise. Yet the sun had nearly set, casting long shadows on the town outside. Only the repeated tolling of the bell convinced me this was not a dream.

I spun toward that rich, powerful voice. The two of them stood there like a mirage in the desert. I couldn't look away, still unsure if this was all a dream.

Cedric stared at me, looking like he might cry. "Big Bro!"

"Lance... Cedric..."

My friends. My family. When I called their names in a quiet, broken voice, they rushed toward me. I couldn't speak, still reeling in shock, but Lance wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. Cedric grabbed my shoulder, asking if I was hurt. The warmth of their touch told me this was no mirage or dream—it was real.

They're smiling. The people I love are here with me and they're smiling.

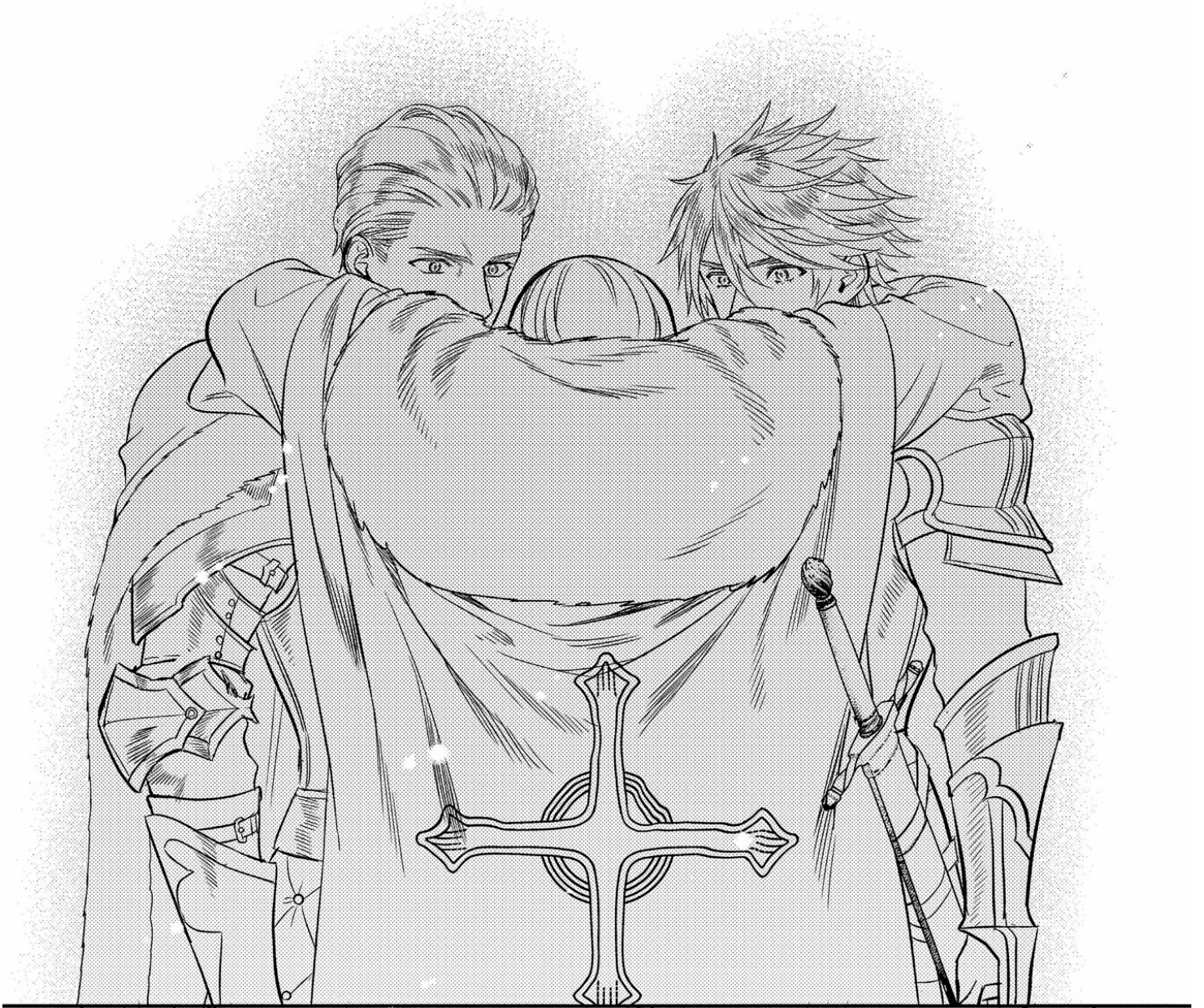
I wrapped my arms around Lance and Cedric, both of whom were taller than me. I latched on to their shoulders and yanked them into the tightest hug I could muster. They yelped, startled, but returned the embrace.

"Thank God... You're both safe!"

Relief flooded my body when they hugged me back. I floundered for words, but emotion clogged my throat.

"We're the ones who should be saying that."

"How could I die before my big brothers?!"



I laughed even as more tears fell. What they'd just said was so typical, so familiar, so *them*. As I stood there crying, their tears joined mine, striking my head and shoulders. I let go, allowing myself to sob as loudly as I liked.

How glad I was to be born in this land.

How glad I was to be born as this era's—this *moment's*—king.

These were the reasons why, in such a vast, strange world, I got to meet God and the two men in my arms.

Chapter 6:

The Blasphemous Princess and the Unseen Moments

“HHEY, MISTRESS! Are you sure it doesn’t hurt anymore?!”

“How much longer until your leg is better?!”

One night had passed since the end of the war. The minute I awoke, Sefekh and Khemet rushed to my bedside to get a closer look at my face.

Stale had brought Arthur to my room the night before, but Tiara, Captain Alan, Captain Callum, Val, and the children ended up staying in my room until morning. Stale had left to act as my proxy with Prime Minister Gilbert and the kings, while Arthur returned to the other knights...although both of them glared at Val before they left. Val had glared right back at them and silently pointed at the sleeping Khemet and Sefekh. It appeared he had no intention of moving or sleeping until they woke up, so when morning came, Val had sprawled out in a corner of my room. He was still out cold.

“Nope, it doesn’t hurt,” I said. “It’s fine as long as I don’t move it. The knights have been treating me with their special powers, so I think it’ll be fully healed within a few days.”

That was only if I stuck to my bed rest, though. The two children sighed with relief and cried out, “Thank goodness!”

“By the way, Big Sister, how long does the order not to speak of this last?” Tiara asked me.

I gulped. I was still keeping my injury a secret, with the exception of a few select people. At first, I didn’t want news of my injury to bring down morale on the battlefield, but I probably needed to notify everyone now that the war was over. Honestly, what I *really* wanted to do was stay in bed, say I was exhausted, and keep the injury hidden until I’d healed. I didn’t want to upset anyone. But

most of all, if Mother found out about my legs, she might bring both Captain Callum's and Captain Alan's careers to an abrupt end. I stopped myself from turning around to glance at them.

"Good question," I muttered. I knew all too well that I was only covering up my own failure; I needed to discuss this with everyone. As I racked my brain for a solution...

Knock-knock!

My eyes flicked to the door. Sefekh and Khemet whipped around and darted back to the sleeping Val. Before Tiara could react, the person on the other side called out to me.

"Forgive me for interrupting your rest, Princess Pride. It's Gilbert. I have King Yohan and King Lance with me, as they've requested to meet with you."

What?! Prime Minister Gilbert's calm voice erased every thought from my head. Wh-wh-what do I do?! They can't see me like this! My hair's all messy, and even if they can't see how I'm dressed under the blanket, I can't greet two kings like this!

"W-wait just a moment, please!" I replied.

Though my voice nearly cracked, Prime Minister Gilbert replied with perfect composure. Tiara combed through my hair with her fingers, and I returned the favor for her. It was then that something else dawned on me.

"Val! Val! People are coming! It's two kings!" Sefekh said.

"What should we do, Val?!" Khemet asked.

Sefekh was mercilessly slapping the snoozing Val while Khemet shook his shoulders. Val let out a growl, reluctantly sat up, and rubbed his eyes. "Wha...?"

"I said people are coming! Should we really be here?!" Sefekh replied.

"Huh? How the hell do I know? We've got the prince's permission, so what does it matter who shows up?"

“But it’s two kings!” Khemet protested. “How can we be allowed to meet—
whoa!”

Val shot to his feet, blinking his wide eyes and looking a little green. He tucked Khemet under his arm, took Sefekh’s hand, and flew out the nearest window without another word. Sefekh shrieked, but I knew they would be all right. No one knew how to flee a scene like Val.

Tiara’s mouth hung open. I knew Val didn’t like royalty, but even more than that, he probably didn’t want some stipulation added to his fealty contract—like, say, if I asked him to kneel in front of royals.

Captain Callum glanced out the window before quietly shutting it. He shook his head, a sign they hadn’t fallen to their deaths. Now that Tiara and I had finished our hasty grooming attempts and the room was clear, we finally welcomed the kings waiting on the other side of the door. My guards opened it for them.

“Apologies for the sudden intrusion,” King Lance said, stepping into the room. “How are you feeling, Princess Pride? I’m sorry for taking so long to come see you.”

Right behind him were King Yohan and Prime Minister Gilbert—the latter of whom appeared to find this a bit awkward. Both kings were pale, and I got the impression they hadn’t slept. Two *kings* had been up all night long, yet here I was, well rested and comfortable. King Lance’s face was especially pallid. *Maybe Arthur should take another look at him.*

“I’m much better now, thank you,” I said. “And no need—I’m sorry that I can’t be of any help to you during this critical time.”

“No, there’s no issue,” King Lance replied, a bit flustered.

Tiara moved to the opposite side of my bed so the kings could approach me. Prime Minister Gilbert ordered guards to bring them chairs, and they sat at my bedside.

“Even after the war, Prince Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert here have been a tremendous help to us. It’s thanks to them that we’re able to come here and see you,” King Yohan said with a smile.

Our prime minister dipped his head in kind. I would expect nothing less from Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert, covering for me so well while I was away.

At first, we exchanged polite remarks and thanks for each other’s efforts in the war. Prime Minister Gilbert joined to offer us reports on the current situation, and our conversation continued smoothly. Captured enemy soldiers would be kept in the prisons of Cercis and Chinensis, but once things had settled down, they would be returned to their homeland. The two kings agreed on this, not wanting to create any further grudges. Despite the damage to buildings, they must’ve been relieved that very few of their citizens had been harmed.

The Freesian knights and Anemonians had suffered zero casualties. A dozen or so of our knights were seriously injured, but the knights from Anemone never endured more than minor wounds. The wounded from the United Hanazuo Kingdom numbered very few compared to their country’s population, and there were almost no deaths either. My heart ached at the thought that there had been any at all, but the kings reassured me that this was still a tremendous victory.

“It’s a miracle that there were so few victims,” King Lance said.

King Yohan nodded. “Our soldiers and citizens are very grateful.”

Prime Minister Gilbert added that the enemy probably suffered more than a hundred times the damage we did.

“We cannot thank Freesia enough for its help,” King Lance said.

“It will take some time to repair our buildings, but our people are eager to work now that the danger has passed. I know we’ll be able to recover,” King Yohan added.

The two kings bowed.

“It’s nothing,” I replied, my voice a bit squeaky as they paid me this undue deference. I needed to change the subject quickly. “Where is Prince Cedric?”

“He’s commanding the soldiers while we’re away,” King Lance informed me. “Right now, he’s probably using a Freesian communication specialist to receive reports from Chinensis.”

He’s commanding them?! Not to be rude, but can he really handle that?

King Lance seemed to notice my hesitation. “He’s only taking the reports. We’ll be the ones to issue commands as soon as we return.”

So he was something like a messenger, in reality. That role seemed perfectly suited for Cedric.

“He volunteered himself when he heard me ask Prince Stale if I could come visit you. However, there’s something else I’d like to discuss...”

King Lance faltered, clearly struggling with whatever he wanted to bring up. I sat up straighter and faced him as he lifted his fiery eyes to meet mine.

“I happened to hear about an action you undertook, of which I was never informed...”

Eeeeeek! My smile twitched. Is this about my legs?! Or is it...?

“They said you performed a blood oath with Yohan in order to rouse the people of Chinensis.”

“Ghk...!”

My blood ran cold, but to my surprise, Prime Minister Gilbert was the one who’d coughed. He must have expected, like me, that they’d mostly ask me about my injury during this visit. I swiveled to look at the prime minister, who rarely ever let his guard down. He covered his mouth and muttered an “excuse me,” only to follow it up with a frightening glare. His eyes bore into me like daggers, sending a chill racing down my spine. He couldn’t speak freely in front of the kings, but I could almost hear his questions piling up behind his tightly

closed lips.

“I don’t know any of the details,” King Lance said. “Whenever I ask, Cedric and Yohan tell me that they can’t discuss it. May I hear it from you directly?” King Lance’s steady gaze had me fixed in place.

I pressed my lips together.

“I apologize, Your Highness. One of my soldiers mentioned it in a transmission,” King Yohan said with a guilty look.

Shoot! I never ordered the Chinensian people not to speak of this. Ugh, guess it was only a matter of time before I got found out.

As I struggled with where to start, Captain Callum stepped up to explain it for me, which I accepted. He laid out the details of my injury for the kings. Color drained from King Lance’s face the longer the captain spoke. By the latter part of the tale, he was white as a sheet. Prime Minister Gilbert’s eyes were practically bulging out of his head, his mouth agape. *Oh, how Stale would enjoy that sight if he were here.*

King Lance’s gaze darted back and forth between King Yohan and me as he put the pieces together. “So that’s why *you* bowed too, Yohan!”

Both King Yohan and Cedric had bowed to me before the war began, just as the knights had.

Hands massaging his temples, King Lance nodded before shooting a glare at King Yohan. “You...! How could you do something so reckless?!”

The other king shrugged at his friend, a faint smile on his face. “I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d worry. See?”

“But why did you drag Princess Pride into it too?!” King Lance leaned forward and raised his voice, but it seemed more like urgency than anger. “Even if we’d been defeated, there was no need for either of you to burn!”

Prime Minister Gilbert was clearly biting his tongue in front of our guests, but judging by the look he was giving me, he agreed with King Lance. He kept his

expression composed, but his pupils dilated, sending another shiver through my body.

“I’m sorry for acting selfishly,” I said. “But it was the only way I could rouse everyone in that moment. Besides, I believed in our knights.”

I offered my excuse even amid the overwhelming pressure from King Lance. I glanced at him, then at Prime Minister Gilbert, who seemed to know what I was about to say.

“I knew they would save everyone. They did a wonderful job.”

When I smiled, King Lance sighed in exasperation. Then he turned to King Yohan again. “I’m sure you were fully prepared to die, weren’t you?” he asked angrily.

King Yohan’s smile went crooked, and King Lance sighed again.

“Cedric went and dragged someone else into this, and now I’m the only one who hasn’t repaid the person who saved the United Hanazuo Kingdom. That won’t do.”

King Lance murmured this last bit to himself before rising from his chair. King Yohan, nodding agreement, stood as well. They held my gaze for a moment... then got down on their knees.

My hand flew to my mouth. King Lance bowed his head, his next words emerging in a rich and regal voice. “Princess Pride, you risked your life for our country, and Yohan and I remain eternally in your debt.”

“You also saved the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I promise that we will spend as many hundreds of years as it takes to repay Freesia for your generosity.”

King Lance’s face remained stiff and King Yohan’s relaxed smile thinned as they made their pronouncements one after the other.

“There’s no need for that! Please, rise!” I begged, but all they did was slowly tilt their heads back up.

“Even with Freesia on our side, we couldn’t have hoped for a victory like this

without *you*, Your Highness. Yohan, Cedric, and I all owe you an extraordinary debt.”

“Why are you including yourself in that, Lance?” King Yohan asked.

He must have been thinking about how I brought Arthur to him when he was ill. That had mostly been the work of Stale and Arthur, though. Besides, I felt responsible for pressuring King Yohan, which was why I took the oath with him. As for Cedric...if he owed me anything, it was for the three days of headaches he gave me when we’d only just met.

“Please don’t concern yourselves with that,” I insisted, waving both hands. “All we did was act in the interests of our ally.”

I’d spent the second half of the day on the sofa with King Yohan, so if anything, I felt like I actually deserved some criticism. Yet the honorable kings asserted I’d gone above and beyond for them. I appreciated that, but it was downright embarrassing having them praise me so. I implored them not to exaggerate, then told them I hoped that our countries could maintain a healthy alliance and open commerce.

“Of course.”

“With God as my witness, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

I knew Mother would be delighted by this outcome, which was its own kind of relief.

“Just tell us if there’s anything we can do. Although I doubt we can repay our debt so easily,” King Lance said solemnly.

I thanked him, but as long as the United Hanazuo Kingdom kept our alliance and traded with us, Mother or Uncle Vest would be the ones to conduct business with them. I couldn’t think of anything that I—

Wait a second. If they’d be so kind as to oblige me...

“Um, I actually do have a request.”

They tensed when I hesitated to elaborate. I yanked the blanket covering me

up to my chest. The blanket jerked, revealing my legs, one of which was bandaged and set in place. King Yohan, who knew of my injury, scowled in sympathy. King Lance's handsome features went wide with shock.

"Oh no!"

He managed nothing else, but it seemed he understood now why I hadn't left my room to meet with the others. Prime Minister Gilbert could explain it in more detail later. Right then, I wanted to make my case to the kings.

"As you can see, I was careless and injured myself. What I'd like to ask of you is..."

My next visitor after the kings was Commander Roderick. He ordered the two captains to take a break, bringing a detail of knights to stand guard in their place. I explained my situation, and he nodded deeply.

"I see. So you'd like to stay in the United Hanazuo Kingdom until your leg is healed?" he said with a worried glance at the limb in question. "I agree, it would be safer for you to leave the country in full health."

"Indeed. I've already received permission from Mother and Hanazuo. But I'm sorry to make the knights extend their stay too."

"No, your well-being is our highest priority, Your Highness. Clark is finishing up his business in Freesia, so it's not a concern. Although..." The commander trailed off, side-eyeing the other knights.

What's that about?

He wrinkled his brow, then let out a sigh. Eyes the same color as Arthur's settled on me, swirling with concern.

"You see, a good number of the knights and soldiers haven't seen you since the war ended. Some unpleasant rumors have begun circulating because of it."

I tilted my head. Indeed, I'd been confined to bed ever since the end of the war. Prime Minister Gilbert and Stale worked hard in my place, telling everyone

I was “resting.” But now I was worried that everyone saw me as a slacker princess.

Nervously, I asked Commander Roderick what he meant. A beat passed before he was ready to speak.

“They fear that you were a casualty of war.”

My mouth fell open. It was such an indirect way of putting it. The commander bowed his head and apologized.

They thought I’d *died*. It made sense; I’d been out in public a lot before the war began, only to suddenly disappear. I understood why they got the wrong impression, but really all I wanted was to keep my leg injury a secret so as not to harm morale. I supposed they weren’t all that far off from the truth.

The knights who’d worked to heal me had probably spread word that I was alive, but that had been days ago, and now I was just resting in bed, hidden away. Knights no longer stayed with me. I couldn’t force the Seventh Squadron to remain by my side when there were other injured fighters to treat. The knights whom Commander Roderick had brought already knew about my injury. If people thought that the crown princess’s death was being covered up, that was my own fault.

“I-I see...”

I forced myself to smile, unable to muster a real response. Commander Roderick explained that the rumor was especially widespread among the soldiers of Hanazuo, and that unease was starting to spread. If anyone needed to apologize, it was me—and Commander Roderick echoed my sentiment that we needed to deal with this situation. Everyone had fought so hard in this war; I couldn’t bear to leave them frightened and uncertain.

“How are my legs looking at the moment?” I asked the two knights who’d been examining me. My injury would heal eventually if I kept still. The knights had used their special powers to treat me again, so by tomorrow I’d be doing even better.

“You should be able to move the right leg already,” one said. “But the left needs more time.”

That was a relief. I knew my left leg was probably broken, but my right leg had healed faster because it was just a sprain. The Seventh Squadron’s special powers were so impressive. The two healer-knights smiled at me, seemingly as relieved as I was. These were the same men who’d immediately treated me during the war. I’d never actually thanked them for helping me back then, but seeing their faces, I knew I’d met them a few times at the knights’ headquarters.

When I asked, they introduced themselves as Jael and Mart.

“Thank you very much, Jael and Mart. You really saved me on the battlefield.”

A flush washed into their faces as I beamed at them. They probably weren’t expecting to hear their crown princess utter their names. Commander Roderick cleared his throat, and they quickly regained their composure.

“How do you feel, Princess Pride?” the commander asked.

I told him I should be all right now that my right leg was doing better. Then I added, “I’d like to address the men today. I need to be the one to explain my injury to them.”

“Then I’ll make sure they’re ready.”

Commander Roderick looked pleased with my suggestion. A public appearance would dispel the rumor that I was dead.

Before the commander could leave to inform the knights of my address, I spoke up to stop him: “Um, Commander...”

“What is it?” he asked, turning back to me.

Working up the courage to continue, I hung my head. “I’m sorry...about what happened six years ago.”

It was my second time showing such deference to the commander. I stared down at my lap, waiting, but I got no response. When I ventured a glance at

him, I found a wide-eyed Commander Roderick squeezing his lips together into a tense line, caught off guard by my apology.

I needed to explain myself properly. “When someone tries to save you...but they almost get themselves killed...it’s really, *really* scary.”

Just thinking about that moment brought all the fear right back to the surface. I squeezed my blanket with trembling fingers. Captain Alan and Captain Callum had dived to catch me as I fell. I truly thought Captain Callum had died from his efforts, and it left me terrified and heartbroken. It was the same as the cliff collapse six years ago, when I showed up and risked my life, causing Commander Roderick the same sort of fear and despair I’d felt about Captain Callum.

The commander left me in silence for a long time, then took a quiet breath. His expression softened... Then, ever so slightly, he smiled at me.

“You’ve grown up.”

It was my turn to be startled. The commander knelt down at my bedside to meet my eyes.

“I said a lot of unnecessary things about what you did for me back then, Your Highness. But now, there’s one more thing I think I can add.”

He paused, and I gripped my blanket tightly. His steady gaze made emotion swell in my chest, and I had to bite the insides of my cheeks to keep myself under control.

“Since that day, you’ve been even more irreplaceable to us knights. When it comes to things like your blood oath and your injuries...please don’t forget that they sometimes break our hearts.”

His gentle delivery of this sentiment *got* me. I’d lived in fear of being scolded by the strict commander, but somehow his compassion and quiet smile were what really made me want to break down and cry. I held my breath to stop the tears from spilling over, but with each blink they streamed down my cheeks

anyway.

“Please take good care of yourself,” he said.



My throat tightened, my eyes grew hot, and my limbs and chest felt heavy. I cast my eyes back down to my lap, my lips still quivering.

How many more times would I cause others such pain? How many times had I already hurt them? How many times had I ignored this sort of kindness—ignored the people who cared so deeply for me?

And I treated myself worst of all. Me, the person they loved and cherished.

“I...I will!”

I balled my fists tight, trying to summon some sort of strength, but that was all I managed to say.

I want to take care of myself too. For as long as everyone still cares about me, at least.

ORL:

The King of Gold, the King of White, and the Foolish Prince

“WHY?! Why did you betray me? Why did you betray Hanazuo?!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! What are you prattling on about? You’re the one who invited my army into your country!”

I, Cedric Silva Lowell, cried and wailed, but the tears of a second-born prince seemed to have no effect on the foreign queen’s heart. Screams of rage and anguish mingled with death cries like cracks of thunder in my ears. Explosions shuddered through my chest. The citizens cried out for salvation as destruction rained down around them.

Watching the Freesian knights—our “reinforcements”—dominate the Cercian soldiers was worse than any nightmare. Although our soldiers tried to resist, the knights cut them down without hesitation.

“Oh, but shouldn’t you be in a hurry to see your king? I sent a lot more knights to Chinensis, after all.” The queen smiled, urging me to hurry up and leave. Her disgusting smirk burned itself into my memory.

The kingdom of Freesia had betrayed the United Hanazuo Kingdom. The wretched proof was all around me. This awful queen had deployed the Cercian army to Chinensis for a sneak attack on the invaders, but they were still waiting for the signal to act. That meant every soldier remaining in Cercis was fodder for the Freesian knights, who slaughtered them mercilessly. No one could even sneak away simply to inform Lance, who was stationed at the location of the planned ambush, of this treachery. I was the only one who might get away to warn him.

“Come now. Get a move on! If you run as fast as you can, you might still be able to tell him how Freesia betrayed you,” the queen said with a sneer.

Her bewitching gaze settled on me. She'd easily overpowered every soldier in the country, yet she made no attempt to capture me. *Only* me. It was like she preferred to watch me suffer.

Still, I had no choice. I rushed for my horse, swinging up into the saddle to dash past the decimation. I had to clench my jaw and ignore the Cercian cries for help all around me. I couldn't stop. Not right now. I had to protect Lance, who knew nothing of Freesia's betrayal; Yohan, who swore to fight alongside us; and the United Hanazuo Kingdom itself. Despite the fact that I'd never so much as touched a sword before, I was the only one who could do this. I had to move *fast*.

"Aah... Ngh! Aaaaahhh!"

"King Lance, please snap out of it!"

"Someone call a doctor! His Majesty has gone mad!"

At first, none of it sank in.

Even though I'd reached the camp where Lance was to make my report, I could not utter a word. My mouth was agape as chaos swirled around me. Lance was on the ground, clutching his head and screaming. I'd never seen him in such a horrific state. It was as if his armor was too heavy for him and he couldn't manage to stand. Soldiers tried to drag him back to his feet, but he fell right back down.

I stood frozen, my whole body rejecting the sight before me.

"Oh, Prince Cedric! It's terrible! King Lance has..."

"Prince Cedric, Freesia has invaded Chinensis!"

"Your orders, sir! At this rate, our army won't be able to move!"

The soldiers shouted for help when they spotted me. I could not so much as close my mouth, let alone respond to their cries. I'd neglected my princely studies my whole life; I couldn't possibly command an army like my brother did.

All I could do was absorb the reality that *I'd* done this. I had backed Chinensis, Yohan, and Lance into a corner.

This must be what Hell is like.

The armies of Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana greedily engulfed our lower ranks. The Freesian knights were overrunning us as well. We were completely overwhelmed—and there was no hope of escape.

Our country had been closed for nearly a hundred years. I'd never seen anything like the Freesian royal order. They were like a swarm of demons swooping in to consume us. I'd even seen a knight capable of taking out dozens of soldiers in a single attack. Some knights shot fire, others flew through the air, and still others ignored bullets as they slaughtered the Chinensian troops. Were these knights even human?

"Not only is the town going to be attacked at this rate, but they're likely to reach the fields and farms where citizens have evacuated!"

"Prince Cedric! Please, give us orders!"

"Aiiieeeee!"

My brother's screams, the agonized cries of Chinensians, the thunderous bombs raining down on us, and the pleas of our soldiers bombarded my senses. I shuddered, my body numb and heavy. Perhaps I would be the next to succumb to madness amid this cacophony. My vision flickered out and flashed white in a wild cycle, my head aching and mouth dry.

Desperate for a plan, I racked my brain. Once, they'd called me "God's Child." I should have been able to find a solution. None of this would have happened if I hadn't led the Freesian reinforcements straight into the country.

Yohan said he believed in Freesia. Lance convinced me that, with Freesian reinforcements, we could emerge from this war victorious.

The citizens of Chinensis were hesitant, but the queen had spoken to them.

"Would you rather have Freesia wipe out your castle?"

“If you don’t want to fight in Chinensis, then we’ll go ahead and invade Cercis ourselves.”

“You never should have dragged me out here in vain.”

In the end, the Chinensian people made up their minds to support Cercis. Thus, neither Lance nor Yohan had criticized the queen for these threats. They said she’d only gone that far to help protect Hanazuo. Freesia was the only country to come to our aid, despite our lack of a formal relationship.

Once we understood what Rajah intended to do to our country, there was no one we could turn to for help. Muscari, the only country Hanazuo traded with, was too small to fight in a war. They would never send soldiers to a country they had no alliance with.

Believing we needed the aid of a larger country, I had dug through the past fifteen years of alliance proposals we’d received. I read through every last one, comparing them to what I knew of the world and its geography, and found a single country that was big enough to help us, did not depend on slavery, and could be a match for the Rajah Empire: the kingdom of Freesia.

Freesia had stopped proposing an alliance nine years ago, but it was the only scrap of hope I could find. I spent eight days searching for reinforcements, and after Chinensis suggested disbanding our alliance, I fled the country to seek Freesia’s aid. I never once thought it would lead my country straight to tragedy.

“Aaah! What a lovely sight. I can watch Chinensis come to an end from right here.”

A bloodcurdling voice jolted me from my petrified state. When I turned, I found the queen and her knights behind me. How was that possible? I’d escaped from her on horseback, traveling as swiftly as possible. Her presence was enough to send a chill down my spine.

More knights appeared behind her, materializing out of thin air. The Freesian seneschal appeared last. That young man, who emerged from nowhere just like the rest, pressed his glasses up his nose. Behind them, his eyes were murky.

The queen issued a single order, and her Freesian knights swept in to overpower Lance's soldiers.

"Hmm... I wonder how much longer this kingdom will hold out?" she said in gleeful singsong. "I just received word that my knights made it to the Chinensian castle and captured the king!"

I gaped at her anew. The war only broke out an hour ago, yet I didn't doubt the queen's boast.

She spread her arms wide, sneering at the men around her. "Oh? What's with him? Is that your king? Ah ha ha! What's he yelling about? What an idiot, losing his mind just because some country next door collapsed. Rulers of small countries really aren't up to the task, are they? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

The queen cackled at Lance as though his suffering were a show for her amusement. Anger swelled within me, leaving my body burning hot. I reached for the sword at my hip, my desire to kill this cruel woman overwhelming all other thoughts. The monster simply went on smiling at me, however.

"Too slow."

Shiing! Metal slid against metal, and my sword slipped through thin air. While I was still in shock over how fast she'd managed to knock my blade away, the queen struck me with the blunt end of her own sword.

I grunted as I toppled to the ground, the air knocked from my lungs. I clutched desperately at my throat, fighting off the urge to vomit. The soldiers cried out, but I could form no response through the coughing.

"Stale."

That single syllable from her was all it took for the seneschal to spring into action. He teleported straight to my side and coldly stepped on me as I writhed on the ground. I clenched my jaw, but the weight of his foot only lasted an instant.

Suddenly, the world blinked away, and I was in midair. Gravity took hold and

pummeled me back into the ground below. My armor creaked, which was more than my voice could manage. I was breathless from the impact of the fall. I stared blankly up at the sky as the queen's cackles rang all around me.

"Ahh... How amusing. I could watch that over and over again..."

Taking her words as a signal, Stale stepped on my cracked armor once more. I knew he could and would do this to me as many times as his queen wished, regardless of whether I cried, broke bones, spit blood, lost consciousness, or died altogether. This would happen to me again and again until the queen was satisfied. This man had been too hardened by a life of doing her bidding and killing to care what happened to me.

"Mm... That's enough. I told you not to hurt him, remember? Not yet, anyway."

I'd tensed in anticipation of another fall, yet her words came as no relief. The queen stared down at me with that same smile she always wore—like her lips had been pulled up with strings.

Lance was still screaming. I reached out for him, but my throat felt like it might collapse. I couldn't call for him, couldn't say anything. I couldn't even reach him, in truth, as he lay too far away.

"Your screams are so boring... Can't you make better sounds than that?"

I heard metal glide across leather, and my blood ran cold. The queen paced toward Lance with her sword in hand, her intentions clear.

"N-no! Don't touch my brother!" I croaked.

I thrashed and flailed as much as possible, barely managing to graze the queen's foot as she passed. I couldn't grab her, not while I was still struggling for breath, but the queen stopped anyway.

"Heh heh... Ah ha ha! Ahh, it's just like before. You got on all fours and begged me to save your country." She bent down to peer closely at me, and I shuddered from her crazed grin. I wanted to retch, but I couldn't tear my eyes

away. At least her attention was on me now.

Her mention of how I'd begged twelve days ago made the incident replay in my mind. I'd arrived in Freesia and pleaded for them to send troops at once, before it was too late. I'd gotten down in front of the queen and bowed so low that my head hit the floor. I should have just given up when she grinned at me. Even back then, it sent a chill racing down my spine. But it was far too late for regrets now.

"You know something, Prince Cedric..."

The queen's voice softened as she mocked me. The shock of my landing had worn off a bit, and I managed to lift my head to meet her eyes. I infused my glare with every bit of malice I could muster, but it only seemed to encourage her.

"I think I want to take Cercis now too."

Her grin pulled taut, and her purple eyes widened. She was truly a horror. I locked up again, incapable of responding.

"I'm going to start by killing your king. That way, I can have all the gold I want and sell the people off as slaves. All of Chinensis's treasures will be mine too. The people in Chinensis can do what they want, as long as they give me all their jewels. That's the plan Rajah and I came up with in secret."

My breath caught; my mind reeled. I ran her words through my head over and over again, not even blinking as they set in. Though I couldn't say or do much, I summoned the strength to express my one and only wish: "Stop..."

"Oh? Did you say something? Ha ha! You think you can resist me? You're an imbecile who brought me an invasion on a silver platter. You're weak. You're stupid. You can't do more than wriggle on the ground like a worm."

The queen scoffed at me with contempt. Her sword flashed as she pointed it at Lance, mouthing the words, *"I'll kill him."*

My blood froze, and I swallowed hard. She seemed to savor my ghostly pallor

for a moment before she stood and strolled closer to Lance. The nearby soldiers threw themselves in her path, but the woman sliced cleanly through their armor. Still they leapt at her, trying to protect the king, but the queen simply cut them down and shrieked with laughter.

I yelled each man's name as he fell to her blade. My impeccable memory meant that their names, faces, and every word we'd ever exchanged were fresh in my mind. All those memories were completely useless right now.

"St-stop! Don't do it! Don't hurt my soldiers or my brother anymore!"

My screams tore my throat raw. I forced myself back to my feet as my voice rasped into something I barely recognized.

The queen went still, her sword hovering over the next soldier. Neither the knights nor the seneschal tried to stop me as I took step after painful step toward her. I begged my limbs to cooperate—whatever it took to get to my brother. The queen turned slowly, like she'd been waiting for me all this time.

"Yes, Great Prince?" She grinned, her wide, purple eyes burning brightly. I shoved down my fear to face the queen head-on.

"Don't touch them... Don't touch my brother, my soldiers, or my country!"

I hated myself for having no weapon but my words. Not that a blade would've made a difference in my current state. I squeezed my fists and took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

The queen tapped at her lips, pretending to consider my plea. "Is that really how you beg a superior for a favor?"

I ground my teeth together so hard, they threatened to crack. The queen waited for a response, her lips curling like a feral beast's. I forced myself back down to the ground, falling to one knee and bowing my head, but she jeered, "Is that really all you can do?"

No, she wanted me to *supplicate*. Scowling, I abandoned all shame and pressed my face into the dirt. "Please, I beg you! I'll give you as much gold as

you want! So please, have mercy! Spare our king and our citizens! I'll do anything you ask of me! Please!"

I prostrated myself before the queen just as I had when I asked her to send reinforcements. Dirt smeared into my hair and clothes. The queen cackled, clutching her stomach and pointing at me in my pathetic state.

It was the ultimate humiliation. Here I was, bowing to the woman who'd betrayed my country and slaughtered my people. My chest ached, pulse pounding a hard and slow beat. A clammy sweat drenched my whole body. But I dared not lift my head.

The soldiers who defended Cercis called my name, telling me not to do this. I couldn't bear to witness their painful expressions as they watched their prince debase himself for this monster.

"Look at your pretty face, all covered in dirt. I love it."

I jerked my head up at her cheerful response. The queen wore a repulsive grin that stopped my heart and sent a shiver through my body.

My shock seemed only to please her even more. She cupped my cheeks like she was delicately handling a work of art. "I should have you stuffed and mounted. You'd look so beautiful."

Her soft tone and enchanting eyes did little to lessen the blow of those words. I shakily turned my head away, gulping around the lump in my throat.

My fists clenched as I dredged up my next words. "I don't care what you do with me! I'll do whatever you want. As long as you listen to my plea, you can stuff me, make me your dog, or use me as your toy. I'll do it all!"

Bro saved me all those years ago. He saved me when I was nothing more than a plaything to all those adults!

No one meant as much to me as Lance did. He'd given me common sense, direction, love—*everything* I had in my life now. I would do whatever it took to save him. My own life was a small price to pay for the countries and citizens

that my two brothers loved so much.

An excited flush colored the queen's face. She stroked my hair before bringing her hand back down to my cheek. Her eyes were sharp and cruel, her sadistic nature shining through. "What a lovely face," she murmured. I was used to hearing that sort of compliment, but when she said it, I broke out in goosebumps.

Once the queen had finished drinking in my desperation, she snapped her fingers. Stale teleported to her side and held out a piece of paper.

"Here's your reward, Cedric. You get to sign this."

I took the pen and scroll held out for me. As I read the details of the contract, I realized in horror that this had been part of the queen's plan all along. The rights to all of our gold would transfer to Freesia. In exchange, Freesia would guarantee the safety of the royal family and protect the country from Rajah and its colonies.

"I actually wanted to kill the king before I made you sign this, but it's not like he's going to get in my way now. You can sign this since you're his successor, right?"

She sighed with disappointment. I supposed Lance going mad had ruined her fun in some perverse way. Apparently, the crown prince of Rajah, with whom she'd formed the secret pact, had told her he would let the Cercian king's convoy go free while they tried to carry out their sneak attack. That made me think she had been looking forward to dealing with us herself. But now that the king had lost his mind, she was deprived of her fun.

Lance had stopped screaming by this point, but he lay motionless on the ground. I could just see his legs if I looked past the queen. I gripped the contract carefully, trying not to tear it, and read it again and again.

"Why does it say 'Cercis' and not 'Hanazuo'?! This means that Big Bro...that Chinensis will—"

“You have to sign it. You can’t protect them otherwise, can you?”

She displayed her sword, pointing the tip at Lance before slowly moving it toward the soldiers, the corners of her lips tugging upward as her eyes flashed.

“If you don’t sign it right here and now, you’ll lose your king and your people. I decided I’d let you protect them. Shouldn’t you be thanking me?”

Thanking you for what?! I screamed in my mind. If Freesia had never betrayed us, we really could have used their monstrous power to save Chinensis. But I could never say that out loud, no matter how much I wanted to. If she took away that contract, we’d lose everything. I bit down on my own lip so hard, I tasted blood. I shuddered, glaring at the queen, who was enjoying herself tremendously.

She snapped her fingers at her seneschal. “Bring me citizens.”

The next second, five people had teleported in front of us. With my perfect memory, I knew these crying, quivering people were all Cercians—there could be no doubt. The knights had taken them captive during the war, but they clearly had no idea why they were here.

“If you don’t sign this, I’ll turn Cercis into a slave nation along with Chinensis. Actually, no... I’ll enslave you all!”

The queen stepped away from me, her sword now pointing at the Cercians. Knowing exactly what she was planning, I sprang forward to stop her, but I’d hardly flinched before her knights had me restrained.

“I hear it’s not very fun to be a slave.”

She sneered, pacing in her elegant high heels. Then she plunged her sword through one of the captives. Their scream pierced my mind, banishing all other thoughts.

“You have no freedom. It’s far worse than being someone’s toy or even livestock. Regardless of whether your country is at war, your life becomes a living hell.”

One after another, she slashed through the captives. She moved with ruthless efficiency, cutting down person after person with a single swing apiece. I could only watch as the Cercians met their fates—men, women, and children alike. *One hundred seventy-two seconds.* That was how long it took her to kill all five. I burned that number into my brain to be remembered for the rest of my life.

“They’re all so forgettable when they die like this. Slaves are exactly the same. It’s what’s going to happen to all of them unless you sign the contract.”

Still smiling and making her jabs, she snapped her fingers again. Stale brought her another five Cercians in a flash, his face emotionless as he teleported them on top of the still-warm corpses. As soon as the Cercians realized what they were standing on, they screamed.

“If you don’t sign it, they’ll die right here. Either way, this country will be mine. The only difference is whether they die as slaves or as free citizens.”

She swung her sword, stabbing the citizens like they were heaps of dirt rather than living, breathing flesh. Her flagrant disregard for their lives was horrifying, incomprehensible.

“No more! I’ll do it! I’ll sign it right now! Just don’t hurt anyone else!” I cried.

Unable to bear any more, I shouted for the queen in desperation. “Is that right?” she teased. I averted my eyes before scribbling my name down on the paper. Once the contract read “Cedric Silva Lowell,” I held it up to show her. I believed that I’d just saved my country’s people. But then...

“Ah ha ha! Well done indeed.”

Slash! She brought her hand down and sent blood flying.

It wasn’t mine. She and the knights had slaughtered the remaining four captives, along with the soldiers who’d tried to save Lance. They hadn’t even had time to scream.

“Why?” My voice was hoarse, strangled by the shock tightening my throat. I couldn’t even manage to cry. My mouth hung open. The queen snatched the

contract out of my hands, her eyes sparkling.

“The contract says that Rajah and its colonies will preserve the country’s safety, right? It doesn’t say that Freesia won’t cause you any harm or that it’ll preserve the life of every last citizen. Ah ha ha ha ha!”

I was speechless. Before I could accuse her of deceiving me, my eyes trailed past the puddle of blood.

“Bro...”

Lance was on the other side of the corpse pile. Fearing that the knights would turn their blades on him next, I crawled forward, trembling. The queen let out another loud laugh at my pathetic state.

I was “God’s Child.” I remembered the names of those soldiers. I remembered the names and faces of every Chinensian I’d ever met. And now I would likewise remember how they looked the moment they perished, expressions frozen in death.

I pulled aside the bodies one by one to find Lance hidden behind them. They’d been so desperate to protect him, and the height of the heap proved it. Once I’d moved the last body, I finally found him, prone on the ground. My heart stuttered at the sight of my brother drenched crimson with the blood of his soldiers.

“Don’t worry. I let him live, since the contract included a guarantee of the royal family’s safety. Aren’t you pleased?” the queen said.

My mind was empty; I couldn’t even react. Instead I dragged Lance out of the pile of bodies, sitting him up so he could breathe better. He was wide-eyed and convulsing, a sight I would surely never forget.

I had no idea what to do about any of the horrors before me. What was happening? How had I managed to invite a more dreadful monster than Rajah into my home?

“It’s all my fault...”

I'd been chanting those words in my mind for some time, but they finally whispered past my lips. I'd thought the phrase 203 times so far. All the while, the queen went on laughing, draining color from the world around me until it went dark. She held up the contract as my soul left my body. Blood spattered her face from how she'd stomped on soldiers' corpses, and there was a terrifying glint in her captivating eyes.

"You beautiful, foolish prince," she said. "There's still lots more fun to be had."

Her carefree smile filled my vision. Her eyes, mouth, teeth, nose, and skin—all of it made me want to retch. She was no human—she was a monster.

It's still not enough?

It wasn't supposed to go this way. All I'd wanted to do was help my brothers. They'd always been there to save me, and I wanted to save them in return. But in the end, the only thing someone as stupid as me could do was make a mess for everyone.

Do I need to pay even more for the sin of being so foolish?

I cradled the limp, convulsing king in my lap. The scent of our beloved country burning around us stung my nose. The cries of the dying and the cackling of the queen rang in my ears. I saw nothing but red.

"I couldn't protect them..."

That was all I could utter as I bent over my brother, my tears falling to his cheeks and streaming through the blood on his face.

"Your Majesty! What's the meaning of this?! You said... Freesia said you would come here as reinforcements!" I said.

"Really? Did we say that, King Yohan?"

The very knights who were supposed to rescue me now had me surrounded. I shouted at the queen from where I knelt, but she simply twirled her hair around

her fingers and played innocent.

“I only followed the contract Prince Cedric signed,” she said.

“Cedric, you say?!”

Her smirk twisted as I cried out in disbelief. She snapped her fingers and Stale, the Freesian seneschal standing a few steps behind her, came forward with a piece of paper. It claimed that Freesia had been granted all rights to gold ownership from Cercis. In exchange, Cercis and the royal family would receive protection from Rajah and its colonies.

“Cedric Silva Lowell.” I could not deny that his signature was right there at the bottom of the contract. I was still struggling to take in the truth laid plainly before me as the queen approached.

“Prince Cedric came crying to me,” she explained. “He thought Rajah might come after Cercis, too, so he told me he’d agree to anything as long as I saved them.”

She had to be lying. Cedric would never say something like that. After all, he’d gone out there to bring back reinforcements not just for Cercis but for Chinensis too. He’d left the very day I told him I was dissolving the alliance.

“You ended your alliance, right?” the queen went on. “That must be why he told me he didn’t care what happened to Chinensis and begged me to save Cercis.”

I could scarcely breathe. The queen laughed as I trembled on my knees. I’d dissolved the alliance to keep Cercis out of harm’s way, so why would Cedric do something like this?

“That’s why I told him he’d have to betray Chinensis if he wanted to offer everything to me,” the queen said. “I said you had to fight and couldn’t surrender. Then I told him I’d protect his country, and his country alone, if he gave me all their gold.”

No, it’s not possible. It can’t be! She’s the one who pushed us to war. This

wicked queen had to be toying with my emotions. I couldn't believe that Cercis had been taken hostage. Except...Cedric had indeed been the one who brought the queen here in the first place.

I tried to shake off the doubts, clenching my jaw. The queen just kept on smirking in my periphery, but I hardly noticed. *No. No, I can't doubt Cedric's motives and blindly trust this queen instead. She must have deceived that kindhearted boy and forced him to sign. But...how could she possibly trick him into signing something like this?*

The poison she'd poured into my heart was setting in. The contract never mentioned Chinensis or Hanazuo. All it did was guarantee the safety of Lance and Cedric, as Cercis's royal family.

"Bro! Big Bro! I brought reinforcements! Freesia's gonna help us! Now you don't have to surrender!"

When I reflected on that moment and Cedric's hopeful smile, his reassurance took on new meaning. Everything had seemed so bright and optimistic in the moment, but now I looked back on a muted scene.

"It can't be..."

I went limp and fell to my knees within the circle of knights. These disgraceful thoughts wouldn't leave me. The queen loosed a shrill laugh as her knights dragged me back to my feet.

"As promised, Cedric betrayed Chinensis and proved to me that he was sincere. That's why I let him sign this contract," she said.

The sickening notion knotted my stomach. I scrambled for an explanation, but I couldn't deny her words. I found only one sliver of hope in all of this.

"What about Lance?!" I asked. "He's the king of Cercis, and he would never allow Cedric to sign such a thing! Your contract means nothing!"

"And what do you think that king can do in his current state?"

The queen snapped her fingers for the third time. Stale instantly appeared in

the room—this time with Cedric, who cradled a bloody Lance in his arms. My jaw dropped. Though I still struggled to comprehend the power of teleportation, I was far too fixated on my two friends to think about it.

“Lance! Cedric!”

I had to know they were all right. I reached for them, but the queen had handcuffed me. She ordered the knights to release Cedric, and he rushed over to me, his golden hair obscuring his lowered face the whole way.

“What happened to Lance?! Cedric, is he...?!”

It brought me no relief to see them in such a state. Lance’s eyes were dry and wide, his face contorted into an expression I’d never seen before. He was clearly unwell. His sweaty body shook violently, but he didn’t manage a single word. All he could muster were incoherent cries in this state of apparent insanity.

“Bro didn’t know about any of this,” Cedric said. “When Freesia betrayed us, he went mad...”

Cedric still couldn’t look me in the eyes, staring at his brother instead. The prince was limp from despair and his own powerlessness. I grabbed his slumped shoulders and shook him.

“You didn’t betray us, right, Cedric?! Answer me! How could you sell Chinensis to Freesia?!”

Cedric whipped his head up at that. Tears sprang to his fiery eyes. He screwed up his already tearstained face and raised his voice. “I didn’t! I didn’t betray you! I just...”

“Oh? Go on, Prince Cedric. Is he wrong?” the queen interjected.

He shivered at the sound of her voice. His eyes went wide, a single tear spilling over.

The queen grinned cruelly at his obvious terror. “You promised, remember? You said you would never lie when I asked you something.”

As her laughter grew, so did the intensity of Cedric's quavering. He shuddered like he was reliving some awful memory.

With Cedric now under her control, the queen raised her voice. "Answer me now. You read the contract and signed it knowing exactly what it said, didn't you?"

Cedric's face scrunched tighter in pain as the queen held up the contract. "I did."

I couldn't believe it. Was it true after all? Had Cedric really agreed to those conditions?

"You begged me, remember?" the queen pressed. "You said you'd give me all your gold. You said you'd do anything I wanted if I spared your king and citizens."

"Yes, I did..." Cedric acknowledged.

This all felt like some sort of sick game. It had to be a trap, yet Cedric had walked right into it. She was trying to pit us against each other, and Cedric was doing nothing to stop her. His hands shook as he held his brother.

"You knew I would abandon Chinensis, didn't you? Yet you signed the contract anyway. Am I mistaken?"

"That's right!" Cedric shouted, his face bright red. "But you still killed all those soldiers and townsfolk right in front of me!"

I staggered, surprised he wasn't spitting flames at the queen. I knew him well enough to believe this was the truth, but looking at the raging prince and sneering queen froze me in place.

Cedric sold out Chinensis.

He sold out Chinensis for Lance and for Cercis. It was the only conclusion I could reach with the facts before me. The prince had abandoned Chinensis and signed the contract to save his own people. Once the queen had successfully duped him, the Freesians slaughtered the Cercian knights and townsfolk. Lance

couldn't have known any of this if he'd already fallen to madness. Once he learned of Freesia and his brother's betrayals, he would utterly break.

It all came together. My only small bit of relief was that Lance, my best friend, hadn't been the one to betray me. I understood why Cedric had made the choices he'd made. He had to sacrifice something to protect his homeland. But still...

"Why?!"

Fury surged through me. *It's unforgivable. Unforgivable! Unforgivable!* My chest was boiling, and before I realized what I was doing, I snatched the collar of Cedric's shirt and punched him in the face.

Cedric's body hit the ground with a thud. I'd never hit someone before, but my heart was aching much more than my fist. Somehow, even though all the rest of us were busy fighting, Cedric didn't have a scratch on him. Partnering with Freesia must have allowed him to get away unscathed, unlike everyone else.

I ripped Lance out of Cedric's arms and set him on the ground. Cedric was still pale from my punch. He looked dazed and confused, but before he could ask, I grabbed the front of his shirt and slammed him onto his back on the floor.

"Why did you betray us, Cedric?!" I screamed. "Why did you betray Lance and me?! You're the only ones I believed in!"

My roar startled him, and he just stared back at me. I blamed him far more for this betrayal than Freesia—though if that simpleminded prince didn't get why, I would pay it no heed.

"I trusted you!" I shouted. "All these years, I thought we were brothers!"

When I lifted Cedric up by the collar, the cross pendant he wore under his shirt slipped out. It was a dagger to the heart. I'd given him that as a symbol of our sworn brotherhood...and Cedric still betrayed me in the end.

"You're wrong!" he whimpered. "I didn't betray you... I just... I just...!"

He looked dazed, barely even blinking as tears rolled down his cheeks. It was like he couldn't grasp what was going on, the gravity of what he'd done. But I was too immersed in my rage and hurt to care about *his* feelings here.

He was right about one thing: This wasn't a "betrayal," as Cedric insisted. All he did was abandon Chinensis after we ended our alliance. The second-born prince of Cercis did whatever he had to do to protect his own country, regardless of what it meant to ours, considering we weren't even allies.

Cedric cried and reached his shaky hands toward me. He clearly didn't understand. He seemed to be chewing over his words before trying to lay out his truth for me. Then he gently squeezed my hand, which was gripping his shirt.

"Please believe me, Big Bro! I wanted to protect Hanazuo! I never wanted to betray it! I brought Freesia here because I thought they'd help, but they turned on us all! She took Cercis and my brother as hostages and forced me to sign that —"

"Didn't I warn you not to lie, Cedric?" the queen cut in. "It was my one condition if you wanted me to stop killing Cercians."

He must have been lying, if what the queen suggested was true.

"I'm not lying!" Cedric protested, but he faltered there. Perhaps his fear of the queen prevented him from pushing any more than that, but it left me still feeling like he'd deceived me.

"I'll ask you again, Cedric, so be honest," the queen said slowly, and he went stiff. "You signed this contract knowing you would be abandoning Chinensis if it meant saving your country and people. You understood that and signed out of your own free will, didn't you?"

Cedric gritted his teeth. With an anguished look, his hands shook around mine. The look on his face was enough to spark a faint hope in my mind—maybe he really *was* threatened into signing that contract.

Hoping the queen couldn't hear me, I whispered, "Cedric, this is your last chance. Tell me the truth. If you really think of me as your brother, then I deserve to know. Answer her question honestly."

Silence reigned. Cedric, still shaking, couldn't tear his eyes away from mine. A soft sigh of a breath escaped his lips.

"I'm sorry, Big Bro..."

Tears spilled down his cheeks. His voice was weak and hoarse, but the queen heard every word.

"The queen's not lying... She's right... All I could think about was saving Cercis..."

He seemed to have no choice but to confirm the Freesian queen's depiction of the facts, regardless of the circumstances that led to them. He bawled like a child, but I didn't believe he was lying. I'd seen him cry like this for years now. I had to accept this horrible reality.

"I trusted you," I said. "I thought we were family. I thought we were brothers. I thought you were a good person. I never expected Lance's brother could turn on his own."

You even supported our dream.

I released my grip on Cedric's collar—not out of mercy but out of total defeat. I cupped Lance's face, my glasses slipping off and hitting the floor as I bent over him.

"How disgusting," I said.

My feelings of betrayal had twisted and morphed from anger and despair into pure, white-hot hatred.

Cedric stared at me in disbelief. "Big Bro," he uttered quietly.

That name he'd always called me made me nauseous now.

"You repulse me," I said. "You make me *sick*. I hate you. I hate you so much!"

I'll curse you and detest you for the rest of my life!"

There was no ridding my heart of this hatred.

Tears rolled down my face. I spoke more viciously than ever before, and it seemed to rattle Cedric to his core. He floundered, uncomprehending, as though I were speaking in tongues.

"Cedric Silva Lowell, the second-born prince of Cercis who betrayed Chinensis. God's Child, cursed and corrupted by God Himself. You'll never forget this moment, this betrayal, or your sins so long as you live. May you suffer eternally under the weight of your crimes."

The hatred burning inside me left a scar on my heart. I spoke almost without thinking, the words coming out on their own as my chest ached from this betrayal, from this destruction of our entire history together.

"I can't believe you're related to someone as pure as Lance."

Those words would hurt Cedric the most. Plus, as God's Child, he would never forget this—none of it. The present moment would become a lifelong wound left to fester and rot inside him.

"I'll never forgive you," I went on. "Not ever. You're the complete opposite of Lance. God's Child? You're no child of God. No, they should call you Unwanted Child. Just look at how you've destroyed Lance's happiness. It's all your fault, all your fault, all your fault! No one will ever trust or accept you again. Just like today, whenever you meet someone new..."

I paused, staring at the unblinking, barely breathing Cedric as his crimson eyes filled with true despair. His face went pale, and tears tracked down his cheeks. He resembled nothing so much as a weeping corpse.

"...you'll just betray them and lose everything again."

Cedric had spent years unable to believe in other people, and I callously hurled his heart into doubt and mistrust all over again. His gaze went dull. Despite Lance's efforts to lift the burden of shame from Cedric's shoulders, I

placed it right back atop him, even as his tears flowed from his lifeless eyes.

“Why?” Cedric asked quietly.

Shameless. What a shameless question to ask. My anger flared and I grabbed for Cedric’s neck. But just before I could squeeze my fingers tightly around it...

“I’ll swear it too, Lance. Let’s always look out for each other. If I fail at something, then you’ll cover for me, and if you fail at something, I’ll cover for you. We’ll always protect the things we love.”

Those words from deep in my past flashed through my mind. It was a promise I’d exchanged with Lance. Despite everything, Lance would probably still protect Cedric, his beloved younger brother. That much hadn’t changed, even though that beloved brother had sullied his hands to protect Lance and their homeland.

No. This may be Lance’s dear brother, but to me, he’s just a disgusting traitor. This isn’t something “we” love. I—

“I trust Prince Yohan as much as I trust my brother. So I’m gonna call him Big Bro. It’s a special nickname I’m using just for him.”

I hated this repulsive, unforgivable traitor. I yearned to kill him. But I couldn’t shake my memories of bonding with Lance, of Cedric earnestly calling me “Big Bro.” Even though the prince didn’t resist, I couldn’t bring myself to tighten my grip and strangle him. As if God himself had put a stop to this, my body refused to obey my command.

I struggled a bit longer before finally releasing Cedric’s neck. I stared down at the prince. With Cedric reduced to little more than dead weight, I leaned down to share one last curse.

“I pray that everyone in this world curses and rebukes you for all time.”

Cedric flinched. He moaned quietly and began to cry anew. Perhaps his sins had finally sunk in, but I put him out of my sight, turning toward Lance where he lay. His eyes were still open, so I gently closed his eyelids before praying that my

friend might soon come to.

I found my glasses and put them back on, this time facing the queen as the Cercian king. “Now, what contract shall I sign? Has a representative from Copelandii arrived yet?”

My homeland could not win. More of our soldiers died every moment. I had to sign whatever contract she required and put an end to this war as soon as possible.

The queen still had her rapt gaze pinned on Cedric, who was sprawled out on the floor. “Let’s see... They’ll probably be here in half a day or so.”

I gasped. Even with the outcome decided, she wasn’t going to end the war. My people would go on being slaughtered for hours.

As I stuttered, Stale broke his silence and spoke as the seneschal for the first time. “Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana have no interest in stopping until they’ve invaded all of Chinensis, from the castle town to the farmlands. They’ll keep going until you learn your lesson for resisting the Rajah Empire.”

They weren’t going to let me surrender. I stared out the window in a daze. Chinensis already lay in ruin, reduced to a sea of smoke and fire. Screams echoed in the distance.

“That can’t be!” I said. “Please, allow us to surrender! We’ve already lost! I can’t let more people be hurt! Rajah can’t want to lose out on potential slaves, can they?!”

It made me sick to talk about my people as slaves, but right now, all that mattered was ending the war as quickly as possible. Even if we became a country that legalized slavery, shipped out our citizens as slaves, lost our name, and became Rajah’s colony, it was worth it so long as I could stop the slaughter of the Chinensian people.

“I can’t speak to any of that,” the queen said. “We’re from Freesia, not Rajah. Besides, you tend to get more people either way if you sit around and wait,

right? Or, if I need to describe the situation in a way that's easier for you to get through your head..."

Her boredom shifted to something more sinister. A smile coiled on her face. I was rooted to the spot as her gaze shifted from Cedric to me, struggling not to recoil from her repulsive grin.

She raised her arms to the ceiling, as though channeling words straight from the heavens. "Don't you think God is telling you to die already?"

I went perfectly still, all words stolen from my lips. My throat went dry and my mouth hung open. I couldn't even keep hold of my hatred of Cedric or my worry for Lance.

Blasphemy.

It was blasphemy against my faith, my God, my people's lives, everything we had. She'd scoffed at God's will, suggesting he was responsible for Chinensis's collapse, Cedric's betrayal, and the fact that both Freesia and Copelandii had targeted us.

"It seems like this outcome is proof of that," the queen added casually.

I sprang into action before logic could stop me. I lunged for her, but knights instantly restrained me. I let out a bloodcurdling scream of rage, but my struggles were useless; I couldn't get free. I could only howl like some wild beast. I didn't feel like myself. Hatred had so utterly overwhelmed me that it superseded rational thought.

The queen seemed to enjoy the sight. Her lips curled into an even more menacing smile. "Ah ha ha! You look terrible. Chinensis, a nation supposedly favored by God, has *this* for a king?"

Jubilant, she cupped my cheek while the knights held me back. I desperately tried to shake her off, but Stale grabbed my head and forced me to remain still. It was easier for her to toy with me this way. The queen dug her nails into my skin like she was sharpening a set of talons.

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said. “I’ll let you live. I want to see you fall even deeper into despair.”

She scraped her sharp nails down my cheek, leaving hot tracks in their wake. Then she released me and ordered her knights to throw me in jail. I thrashed in vain as they dragged me out of the room, my wails echoing down the halls long after the heavy door to the throne room slammed shut.

I was left in the throne room with the Freesian knights, seneschal, and queen. Once Yohan’s voice had faded away, the room fell silent except for the distant screams from town.

“Why? Why, Big Bro...?” I whispered.

I was still on the floor, staring up at nothing and muttering to myself. The queen noticed, and her high heels clacked closer until she grinned down at me.

“Too bad,” she said. “I wanted to watch him strangle you. Ah ha ha!” When I didn’t react and merely kept my gaze fixed on the ceiling, the queen crouched down beside me. “You were a good boy, telling the truth like you promised. Right? You never told a single lie. Hee hee!”

The giggle slipped out of her. She stroked my bangs, brushing the blond strands back to get a better look at my face.

“You begged me to protect Hanazuo,” she said flatly. “You didn’t plead innocent, mention Freesia’s betrayal, or say that you were threatened, did you? You poor, poor thing.”

I stayed still as a corpse. My brother, on the other hand, twitched and groaned—at least he was alive.

She was right; I hadn’t lied. Until the very end, I’d told the truth. After all, the queen had taken Cercians hostage and ordered me to answer her questions honestly. I thought it would be easy enough to avoid lying—especially to Yohan, my big bro. But my desperate pleas had all been drowned out by the queen, not

a single one reaching him. Now he believed her instead of me, the man he once thought of as his little brother.

“Gilbert’s so smart,” the queen remarked. “Aha! He really planned it all out perfectly. I guess old fools can be useful sometimes.”

Her obvious pleasure suggested she’d plotted this from the start: a way to ruin my relationship with Yohan. I knew the Freesian prime minister was cunning, an expert at influencing others’ decisions and judgments. He was the one to craft this sinister plan, and the queen had used his assessments to orchestrate this ghastly spectacle.

“You should learn from him,” the queen told the seneschal at her side. He silently bowed his head, and she flicked her hand to order his departure. Then she reached out toward me. “Hey, prince. Are you dead? You’re being boring.”

I did not move, a doll just for her as she brushed aside my blond hair, traced my jaw, and stroked my face like a sculptor molding my every feature.

“Sad, isn’t it?” she went on. “You worked so hard to stop your country from going down with Hanazuo, but no one wants to give you any praise. You’ve been so truthful, but no one believes you...and they never will.”

Only my tears proved I still lived. I didn’t so much as flinch, no matter what terrible things the queen whispered to me. But every single word was stored away in my brain. Because of my innate ability, I would remember them all with perfect, torturous clarity.

Seemingly bored of stroking my cheek, she scratched me without warning. Her long, sharp nail cut my delicate skin, but I did not even wince.

She sighed in resignation. Then a horrible smile twisted her face. “Hey, would you like me to get revenge for you?”

I finally blinked, glaring at the queen. That renewed her excitement.

“I think I’ll burn King Yohan at the stake, but you can be the one to light the fire,” she said. “Oh, that’s right! Shall we include the Chinensian citizens along

with him? King Yohan didn't trust you, so he deserves to suffer. Don't you think that sounds—"

"Nooooo!"

Rage flared within me, reigniting my body. The queen grinned with glee, thrilled to have finally struck a nerve, and I clenched my jaw.

"Don't hurt Big Bro and Chinensis anymore! I've done everything you asked, haven't I?!"

"Sure, but I only promised not to hurt *Cercis*. Don't you remember? It had nothing to do with Chinensis. This place is just going to end up as a colony of Rajah and—"

"Then it doesn't belong to you! You've already tortured him enough!" I shouted, desperate to protect Yohan, who'd lost his kingdom in the first place because of me.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder, clearly enjoying this. I sat up quick, though she was unruffled.

"How come? Why do you still want to protect him?" she asked me, cocking her head like a fascinated child. A dangerous glint lit her large eyes.

Her naked curiosity shook me too much for me to bother brushing my own messy locks out of the way. "Because I care about him. Do I need a reason? I would do anything for Bro or Big Bro—"

"Even though he called you 'Unwanted Child'?"

The queen was the one to cut in this time. I saw myself reflected in her eager purple eyes. It was a simple question, yet it left me immobilized—a statue all over again. More tears flowed from my eyes, as if someone had turned the faucet of my despair back on. With that simple question, she'd brought back every awful curse Yohan had flung at me. It all returned just as vividly as the moment it first occurred, a visceral hell of my own making. I would never escape those words, now or in the future.

“Aha! Did you break?” the queen said, thoroughly entertained by my fresh bout of crying. She poked my cheek, amused, then shoved my unresponsive body back to the floor.

“Ah... How funny. You’re so funny, Cedric.”

She stroked my golden hair, moving my bangs to peer into my eyes. Then she turned her gaze on Lance, who quaked beside us.

“You know something? I was going to torture your brother to the brink of death, make it so he could never live on his own again, and *then* have him sign the contract.”

Her gleeful reveal of an unthinkable nightmare made my whole body jolt. For a brief moment, I was glad my brother had gone mad. It was better than the alternative.

“You would have suffered a whole lot more that way, right? King Yohan would have hated you so much more too. I mean...”

She trailed off to lean close to my ear, her face blushing bright with elation.

“I knew what I was going to say and everything. ‘Cedric tore King Lance limb from limb for the sake of himself and his people.’”

I sprang into motion, grabbing her dress and yanking myself up to glare at her. Our foreheads nearly touched as I let loose.

“Who would believe a joke like that?!”

I would *die* before I ever hurt Lance. I clenched my teeth together hard enough to crack them, my eyes boring into hers, but she only smiled, unaffected.

“‘Unwanted Child.’ ‘I’ll never forgive you.’ ‘I’ll curse you.’ ‘How disgusting.’”

Those were the words Yohan had just said to me earlier, now repeated by the queen. I steeled myself, resisting the pain the memory elicited, but tears tracked down my cheeks just the same.

I reached for her neck, and her knights moved in. The queen stopped them, basking in my obvious hatred.

“You ask who would believe it? Ah ha ha ha ha ha... Who in this world would believe *you*?!”

Her rebuttal left me weak. She brushed my hands aside, then wrapped *her* fingers around my throat.

“You can kill me if you want, Cedric. But as soon as I die, Chinensis and Cercis will both become Rajah’s colonies. The truth is that Rajah wanted to destroy both halves of the United Hanazuo Kingdom all along.”

I gulped, eyes bulging. My mouth hung open as I stared dumbfounded at the queen. Her expression grew more terrifying by the second.

“Really, you should be thanking me,” she said. “I’m the one who took you into my care. All I demanded for my help was the right to rule Cercis and Chinensis’s minerals. Cercis would be a sea of fire right about now if it weren’t for me.”

She looked out the window, where destruction rained down at her command. I was too shocked to speak and simply shook my head. She smirked.

“It’s the truth!” she said with a chuckle.

Pain twisted my pale face. My lips quivered, my whole body rejecting her words. Even after all this, I’d underestimated just how deep this pit of misery went.

“Why?! Why must you attack our country so—”

“Why? It’s simple.”

The queen grinned at my confusion. She swept her hair aside and leaned in so close she might have kissed me.

“I wanted to see that pretty face of yours in complete and utter agony.”

I froze, my jaw jerking from how hard I clenched my teeth. “That’s the reason?” I asked. Every moment that I shook before her, she smiled more

lovingly at me, ecstasy plain on her face.

“Ahh... I want to see your beautiful face contort even more. You should be happy! At least you managed to save your country thanks to those looks. Heh heh heh... Ha ha!”

Her crazed smile plunged me deeper into despair, yet some tiny spark of hope nestled in my chest as well. She seemed to savor the turbulence of my shifting emotions; perhaps I could use that.

“You know... I could still do the things I mentioned earlier,” she said.

Her purple eyes watched my every move. I swallowed, blinking rapidly, my breath coming in ragged sips as I tried to hold strong. The queen absorbed every second of it, tracing her delicate finger down my sweat-dotted throat.

“I could take your brother, King Lance, and cut him up bad enough that he could never live on his own again. I could burn King Yohan and his people at the stake. It would be so easy, wouldn’t it?”

My blood turned to ice. I ground my teeth together.

“No,” I managed to say around my shuddering breaths. I shook my head, my control faltering. The queen, on the other hand, looked happier than ever.

“Didn’t I tell you to listen to everything I told you? Fine. I’ll *make* you listen.”

Her grin grew, an ugly gash opening on her face. She breathed poison into my ears.

“You repulse me,” she said. “You make me *sick*. I hate you. I hate you so much! I’ll curse you and detest you for the rest of my life!’ How does it feel to be hated by someone you trusted?”



She reminded me of those words in a delighted singsong. Sweat soaked my entire body, my teeth chattering.

“‘God’s Child, cursed and corrupted by God Himself.’ Was that it? Now be honest with me. Did that hurt? Were you sad? Do you hate him?! Tell me.”

Her attack went straight to my heart, and I shuddered fiercely. I set my jaw to keep my teeth steady. I would always recall how it felt to hear those words coming from a man I loved like a brother. It would plague me forever.

“I won’t know unless you tell me,” she went on. “If you refuse, I’ll bring the two of them here and—”

“No! Don’t...hurt them... I don’t want them to die! No more!”

My cries echoed through the room. I clutched my head, unable to take this abuse any longer. Her interest rekindled, the queen released me, stepping back to get a better look.

“It hurts! It’s killing me!” I said, clutching at my armored chest like I was having a heart attack. I started at a scream but descended to a whisper as I went on, letting my emotions gush forth. “My chest is burning up! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts! I’m...so sad!” By the time I finished, tears spilled from my eyes.

I would say whatever the queen wanted to save my brothers and my country. But once I got going, I found I couldn’t stop. I named every emotion stabbing at me, listing them out in a torturous exercise. All the while, I yanked at my hair, my face screwed up into a horrific expression of pain and anguish.

“Why? *Why*, Big Bro?!” I said. “Why do you hate me? Why didn’t you believe me?!”

My screams echoed off the walls. I let my tears flow without restraint. When the queen demanded to hear more, I sobbed, hung my head, and wailed, grabbing at my own throat.

“I just wanted to protect them! I wanted to save Bro, Big Bro, and the people!

He...he promised me! So why did he say that?! He said...he said he didn't feel that way!"

"I don't hate you. I don't think you're disgusting or repulsive at all."

It had all come undone. Ages ago, Yohan had sealed a promise between us with those kind words—but what happened here today erased all that. Once, he'd been my salvation; now, he'd broken my heart into pieces.

I cried and cried, squeezing my throat harder, coughing up blood from how I screamed and wailed. I wanted Yohan to trust me, but it was my own foolishness that had put us in a situation like this, a situation we could never recover from. No matter how much Yohan hated me, no matter how much he wanted to kill me, all I wanted was for him to believe in me. *I wanted to save them. I wanted to protect everyone.*

"Tell me," the queen said. "What did King Yohan say to you at the very end?"

The queen seemed spellbound by my howling. The more I cried and shook, the more keenly she watched me, like I was a piece of art she particularly adored.

"I pray that everyone in this world..."

My face went still and blank as I slipped back into a daze. My eyes clouded over, my anguished expression smoothing. The queen pouted at me, likely sensing her fun was coming to an end. I knew she preferred my pain to the moments when I simply stared into the distance with no discernible emotion.

"...curses and rebukes you for all time."

I recited those words like I was reading from a page. My hoarse voice lacked any inflection. Once I'd finished, I fell totally still, my eyes without light. Yet tears dripped down my cheeks, and the queen stroked my hair.

"Aww... It's all right, Cedric. I won't say that to you."

Her words almost sounded like compassion or mercy, but her amused tone told a different story. Her warped smile and sharp gaze returned.

“I mean, your reaction’s just so boring. I want to see your face twist up even more beautifully.”

“I trusted you. I trusted you. I trusted you. I trusted you.” I repeated it over and over and over as she brushed my moving lips with a ruthless grin.

“Don’t worry. Just keep suffering by my hand, Cedric Silva Lowell.”

I didn’t respond. I just tonelessly went on saying those same three words before whispering one final plea.

“Big Bro...”

I couldn’t even see the queen anymore. She’d disappeared from my field of vision. I saw and heard nothing but the brother in my memories, the brother who loved me, the brother who now hated and cursed me. In the end, I couldn’t even bring myself to pray that this was all just a nightmare.

Chapter 7:

Return to the Present

S*TEP, STEP...* The younger Freesian princess quickened her pace when she spotted me giving orders to the knights.

She called out to me in a clear voice, and I glanced over my shoulder. When our eyes met, I bowed and smiled. She'd mostly been staying with her sister since the war ended, but now she'd slipped away from the crown princess and her guards to come see me alone.

"What is it, Princess Tiara? Did something happen in Princess Pride's room?" I asked softly, placing a hand over my chest.

I knew Prince Cedric would be visiting Princess Pride right about now. Princess Tiara glanced down and up again, raising her head high to fix her gaze on mine. The knights next to me paid us no mind, busy setting up a broadcast point for the communication specialists.

"Yes. I came here to ask something very important, Prime Minister Gilbert," she said.

I blanched at the grave expression on her face, but I had a pretty solid idea as to what this was about. For the sake of privacy, I ordered the knights to exit the room.

"Care to explain?"

My throat bobbed as I swallowed, but I listened earnestly to what she had to say.

"By the way, Gilbert, how are Maria and Stella doing?" Stale asked me.

It was three days after the war ended and we had just finished up organizing

documents together in the Chinensian castle. I was on my way out to make my report when he abruptly questioned me about my wife and child. It caught me off guard, to be honest, and I stopped in my tracks.

Before I replied, I glanced out the castle window. Life was returning to normal in the town. The peace and normalcy were proof of Yohan's supreme abilities as a ruler. In just three days, he'd restored his country to this point. The citizens of Cercis were equally devoted to the revitalization of their country, and soldiers stationed throughout town were helping with the efforts.

I turned back toward the prince to see that he'd likewise averted his gaze and was watching the town with sudden interest. "They're doing very well," I said. "I spoke to them a bit last night. I believe they're out doing some major shopping with our employees right about now, since it's been so long. They should be with the guards and knights dispatched from the castle too, of course."

"What do you mean, 'major shopping'?" Stale asked, brow furrowed.

"Yesterday, a load of alcohol and sweets were taken from my home," I said, shrugging with a resigned smile.

Stale instantly understood. "Don't tell me they made it back to Freesia in a single day..."

Val and the children had rejected Stale's offer to teleport them back home, instead returning to Freesia via Val's special power. Stale had only learned of this well after they'd left, however.

I dipped my head. "Thank you very much for all your help."

My gentle tone prompted him to look my way. He crossed his arms and scowled. "I didn't do it just for you, so don't bow your head to me. If you want to thank me, do it with your actions. Next time, be sure to ask me and Elder Sister for help."

He pushed his glasses up with a glare, but I heard the kindness behind his rebuke. My smile grew a bit wider.

“Yes, I promise.” I tilted my head to one side. “You know, I’m really starting to see the resemblance...”

“To whom?” Stale asked, puzzled. “Are you still saying we resemble each other? Or do you mean Uncle Vest and me? I’ve been hearing that more these days. I really respect him, so I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I chuckled at his sarcastic response. I’d watched him grow to resemble the seneschal more and more ever since he’d taken on the job of steward. But now...

“No, I mean you resemble Princess Pride and Sir Arthur.”

This time, Stale stared at me with wide eyes.

I couldn’t help laughing at his startled look. “Oh, do you mean you never noticed it yourself?”

Stale flushed redder than I’d ever seen. He covered his mouth with the back of one hand and waved his other hand toward the door, gesturing for me to leave. “Don’t flatter me. Go report to the king already.”

“It’s not flattery,” I said simply. I set my hand on the door, ready to leave as he’d instructed.

“Gilbert.”

Stale was now using his entire arm to cover the pink in his cheeks. His free hand, as well as those jet-black eyes of his, pointed right at me. He jabbed his finger at me as though declaring war.

“I’m going to make you into the ultimate prime minister,” he said. “So be ready.”

My eyebrows quirked upward at that, and my fingers slipped off the door handle. In lieu of an immediate reply, I bowed to him from the waist. Just as Stale opened his mouth to remind me not to bow, I found the right words.

“I look forward to working with you, future seneschal Stale Royal Ivy.”

It had nothing to do with favors, guilt, gratitude, or even pride. As the prime minister, I allowed Stale's show of genuine allegiance and trust to enter my heart—where I was sure it would stay.

"At this rate, you should be fully healed by tomorrow."

Jael and Mart, the two knights examining my elder sister's injury, reached that conclusion the day after Pride's conversation with Cedric. The knights had spent the past three days healing her leg, hoping to get her fully recovered as soon as possible. Pride grinned, evidently relieved that the process was nearing its end. The two knights smiled back at her.

Tiara hopped up in the air and clapped her hands. "Thank goodness!" she said to Pride. Then she turned to me and Arthur.

I pressed the black frames of my glasses up my nose and let out a deep sigh. I'd been visiting Pride every single day to check on the progress of her recovery. Things had proceeded just about as swiftly as I could expect and hope for, yet the news that she would be completely healed by tomorrow released a knot of tension from my shoulders. "That's great news," I said with a smile of my own.

Arthur, who was there on guard duty, pressed his lips together. I knew he was just as thrilled as the rest of us, but he couldn't speak to me as freely at present. If the other knights weren't here, he'd be jumping and shouting like Tiara. Even Captain Callum, standing right beside him, could no doubt see it in his eyes. Arthur took the safe route, beaming without a word.

The captain was probably just as thrilled to hear about Pride's recovery. It was his duty to stay vigilant until she was well again and we could all return to Freesia, but it had to be a relief that she'd at least get to walk around without pain soon. Captain Callum smiled at Pride but said nothing; he clearly believed he should remain silent and watchful—despite the obvious joy emanating from him and all the other knights.

"Let's hold the victory banquet tomorrow!" Tiara said, still doing her little

dance. If Pride was healed by tomorrow, we would leave this country the day after.

“I’ll inform Gilbert, King Lance, and King Yohan of our plans,” I replied.

“Thanks, you two,” Pride said. “But do you think it will work out? I’m sure the kings are very busy right now, to say nothing of Prime Minister Gilbert and you, Stale. Are you sure you’re getting enough sleep?”

No matter how we tried to hide it from her, Pride knew we’d spent the past three days working around the clock. I’d been acting as her proxy and coming to her room each day to report to her. Each time, she scanned my face for dark circles under my eyes or any other sign that I wasn’t quite holding up.

She reached out and cupped my cheek, stroking the skin beneath my eye with her thumb, but she seemed relieved—and blind to how my skin heated under her touch.

“I-I’m all right,” I said, struggling with her abrupt attack on my composure. “I’ve left Gilbert in charge of my work while I’m here, so all I still need to do is coordinate with the knights and report to Mother.”

In truth, I had very little work to do today, despite being busy up until yesterday. I was actually glad to have another task. I’d wanted to help the United Hanazuo Kingdom however possible, but the kings said they would feel guilty giving me any more work.

“It’s okay, Big Sister!” Tiara chimed in with a dazzling grin. “King Lance, King Yohan, and all the knights and soldiers are really excited to celebrate with you!”



On the day of our victory, I appeared before the citizens in place of the two kings and Pride, which was why she still hadn't managed to address the troops. They knew this was because of her injury, but I could tell she yearned to see them all the same. Similarly, Pride hadn't faced the people of Chinensis since her blood oath. She was terrified that she'd made a horrible impression on them after causing such a fuss and disturbance and then suddenly disappearing after the war. Reprising her role as the queen's proxy and crown princess would make her unbelievably happy.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it too," she said.

Pride thanked Tiara, stroked her hair, and carefully sank back down against the pillows. Just seeing the glow in Pride's face, I knew her heart was full of anticipation for tomorrow's victory banquet.

Moments Long Awaited

IT WAS DAWN when I poured water over my head with a loud splash at the newly opened bath in the Chinensian palace. With the sun still crawling up over the horizon, the chill of the water sent goosebumps rippling over my skin. Becoming a knight like my father, the commander, had prepared my body for far worse than a bit of cold water.

I'd awoken in a hurry, running here before my duties as "Arthur Beresford, Vice Captain of the Eighth Squadron" could begin. This pool used to be the castle's water supply and laundry spot. Now, with so many knights residing at the castle, the king had kindly opened it up as a means of bathing. He also set up a simple wall around the bath so that, immediately after the battle, the muddy knights could wash off without worrying about being seen. The bath was outside, but this way, we could clean our bodies without reservation. We continued to patrol the castle in shifts throughout the day, but I was the only one visiting the bath this early.

The shock of the cold water hit me again, and I gasped. I repeated the process a few more times before reaching for my towel, only to find...

"Huh?"

Nothing. My towel was gone. I brushed my wet, silver bangs away from my face and squinted, searching for my towel. It should have been right there where I left it, but instead it was somehow flying in the air on the other side of the fence surrounding the pool. Someone behind the fence had stolen my towel and was tossing it up and down for fun.

"Um, excuse me, but that's my towel. Please give it back," I said.

I really didn't want to get out of the water and stomp around soaking wet. At least I still had a fresh change of clothes next to me, but I couldn't exactly put them on until I was dry. Just as I was considering reaching over the wall and

grabbing the towel out of the air, the thief threw it back to me. The moment the man's laughter followed, I knew exactly who'd done this.

"My bad, my bad! I just happened to spot you walking toward the bath."

"Morning, Captain Alan," I said. "You're awake as early as ever. Are you here to wash up?"

I couldn't be too mad at my superior's prank. I rubbed my wet head with the towel and asked Alan through the wall if he was planning to bathe before our shift as Pride's imperial knights. I hadn't expected him to be up as early as I was, considering there was no crack-of-dawn training to attend.

"Uh-huh," Alan responded casually. "Can I come in?"

The bath was enclosed to prevent maids and other palace employees from seeing inside, but it wasn't exactly a private room. It was only big enough for a few people to use at a time. Wondering if he'd been waiting his turn, I quickly told him to hop in. When he emerged from behind the wall, he was naked from the waist up.

"I just happened to wake up early," he said. "I didn't want to waste the morning, and since we didn't have training, I helped patch up the castle walls."

"Um, I'm pretty sure the commander said His Majesty wasn't making knights help with repairs..."

Apparently, Alan chose to join them anyway. He explained that he knew no one would notice an extra worker slipping in to help when it was so early in the day. He'd changed out of his uniform and blended in as one of the workers for over two hours, ending up covered in sweat, building materials, and paint.

"Don't be so stuffy!" he said with a laugh, hanging his clothes up on the wall and immediately drenching himself with a bucket of water. The chilly splash struck me. I continued drying my hair but opted not to bother with my body for the time being. I wasn't surprised that Alan, a knight known throughout the order for being obsessed with training and stamina, needed something to do on

a morning when we didn't have our usual exercises. Even so, it was extraordinary that he'd go to such lengths to get around orders from the king and commander just to squeeze in a bit of activity.

"Why're you here, Arthur? I thought you always bathed at night."

"Well, I thought about how Princess Pride is gonna be fully healed today and just felt sort of spent... But it's an important day, so I wanted to wash up a little."

Knights in the order didn't typically bathe every single day. However, we imperial knights had been careful to maintain our hygiene while Pride was injured, as we spent so much of our shifts in her room. If all went well, today would be the day that Pride was officially healed, so I could have slacked off on my own cleanliness if I really wanted to. But then I remembered that there was an important event later on, so I came to sneak in a bath.

Alan nodded his agreement and scrubbed his arms with the soap he'd brought with him, going hard at the flecks of stone and whatnot on his skin.

"Are you gonna dry your hair?" he asked, pointing at my head.

I'd doused myself one last time with water and wrapped my towel around my waist. Unlike Alan's short hair, my long, silver locks would take a while to dry. The captain only needed to rub his towel on his head for a moment, whereas I'd been wiping my hair down for a while now without much change. That was why I usually bathed at night.

"Why not ask Kevin to dry it for you? His wind could get the job done quick," Alan said.

"No way, I could never ask him for something like that... Besides, I'd just be bothering him if I woke him so early to use his special power."

I dried off my body, shaking my head at Alan's suggestion. The gesture sent drops of water flying from the ends of my long hair toward Alan. Muttering that it would be faster with help, Alan quickly changed into his clothes.

“Fine, then I’ll give you a hand,” he said.

“Whoa! Hey!”

He didn’t give me a chance to resist. Alan swept behind me, covered my head with his towel, and started rubbing my hair vigorously, the friction drawing away the moisture. The damage to my hair was no matter, but the shame of having a senior knight do this for me was just awful.

“No, I can do it myself!” I cried, grabbing Alan’s hand only to be batted away.

“Don’t get in the way,” Alan said with a smile. He swiftly changed topics before I could complain more. “I sure am looking forward to tonight’s victory banquet. I want you to enjoy yourself, you hear that? You played a big part in this war.”

“Nah, it was nothing... Actually, since I’ll be guarding Princess Pride, I don’t think I’ll be able to—”

Alan began to rub my hair down again, interrupting me mid-sentence. He did it so fast, my own hair whipped around and hit me in the face. “It’ll be fine!” he told me, and I could hear the grin in his voice.

He and I had the morning shift guarding Pride, and then I’d tag in Captain Callum in the afternoon. Callum and I would probably be the ones on duty during the victory banquet, which was slated to last late into the night. But Alan insisted I deserved to enjoy the party as much as anyone else because of what I’d done on the front lines.

“Okay! All done! Well, even if it looks bad, you can just tie it up and no one’ll know!”

Alan pulled the towel back and snapped it against my back. My head was spinning from that crazy rubdown, but when I pinched my hair, it was perfectly dry. “Thanks,” I responded, still dizzy. I went back to drying off the rest of my body as the sun finally rose.

“You gotta dry your hair properly. It’s still cold in Hanazuo, and you don’t

want to get sick.”

“It would take far more than wet hair for me to fall ill...”

In fact, I had no memory of ever catching a cold—all thanks to my special power to cure diseases. Alan, who didn’t know of my power, argued his point as the two of us packed up. He wrapped a towel around his waist, draping the other wrung-out towel over his shoulder. Aside from that, he had nothing but his bar of soap.

“I’ll be careful,” I insisted.

I squinted at the trickle of sunlight spilling over the horizon. My heart raced at the prospect of this new day beginning at last. After everything I’d heard from the others, I couldn’t wait for tonight’s event. I wouldn’t be able to let my guard down while I was on duty, so I couldn’t drink alcohol or let loose—but that didn’t matter. There was only one thing I really wanted out of this evening.

Today’s the day I’ll get to see her walking on her own two feet again.

Pride had fully recovered from her injuries. No other reward could come close to that, a sentiment Alan agreed with completely.

“There’s still some time before breakfast,” I said. “What say we get a little sparring in? Just as long as we don’t get dirty.”

“Really?! You don’t mind?!” Alan said.

We’d both woken up early, anxious to start the day. After leaving the bath together, we darted back inside to work up a sweat all over again.

“Hey, hey! Can we go to the festival?”

“The hell’d you say?” I grunted.

I was sprawled out on a bed in a Freesian inn. I cast a quick glance at Sefekh. Before I could shoot down that inane idea, Khemet joined in from the next bed over.

“The Hanazuo festival that the townspeople told us about! Can we make it in time if we leave now?! I’ve been wanting to go too!”

“See, Val?!” Sefekh said.

Four days had passed since the defensive war in Hanazuo came to an end. Me and the brats made it back to Freesia faster than everyone else thanks to my special power. Now we were taking a well-earned break. I needed some rest to recover from the round-the-clock surveillance the prince “requested” of me. Pride, my direct employer, was nowhere nearby either.

With no real home of our own, we’d decided to stay at a random inn near the castle. The bedsheets were pulled back and the blankets lay strewn all over the floor, which was nearly covered with our ransacked piles of sweets and booze. The chaos made it look like we’d been here an entire month.

“It’s probably over already,” I muttered. “What do ya need a festival for? We’ve got more booze and sweets than we could ever get through. What a stupid idea.”

Damn the Cercians who mentioned the festival before we left. We didn’t know exactly when it would take place. It was possible it hadn’t even happened yet, but I figured it was way more likely that it was long over. It would be a real nuisance to travel all the way back to Hanazuo for something like that.

Average Cercian citizens—not knights or guards—were the ones who’d told Sefekh and Khemet about the celebration. I wished they would’ve spared me the grief. They caught me as I was heading toward the border gate, bag slung over my shoulder, and insisted we stay longer to attend the festival.

Leon and I had provided aid throughout the country during the war, and once it was over, Stale ordered me to patch up the walls all around Hanazuo. That was why the citizens recognized me on sight. They wanted the people who had helped them out to enjoy the festivities with the rest of them, but it felt to me like they were sticking their noses where they didn’t belong.

“We got these from the manor, though! There might have been all kinds of

rare desserts at the Hanazuo festival!” Sefekh complained.

“Oh, but, Sefekh—all the desserts we got were real rare too! The box these ones came in looks so expensive...”

Khemet picked up one of the boxes on the ground and held it up. The brats had gotten regular old sweets from the market *and* fancy desserts from the royal capital. We’d plucked them all out of Gilbert’s house. For free!

“If alcohol and treats from my home will suffice, then please take as much as you desire.”

Thanks to our work looking out for his family, Gilbert had given us permission to ransack his house. We went right for his manor as soon as we returned to Freesia and proceeded to secure the entirety of the house’s liquor and dessert stash. Marianne was all too happy to hand it over when I told her we had the prime minister’s permission. It was a small price to pay, considering we’d guarded them for days on end.

The kid, Stella, wasn’t quite so cooperative. She burst into tears at the sight of my face, then screamed when I snatched her stupid sweets, her wails echoing through the house as I rifled around for my rewards. Sefekh and Khemet suggested leaving some of the sweets behind, but Marianne refused, saying she wanted to express her gratitude properly and that she could always buy more.

Even after fighting soldiers both in my days as a criminal and during the war, one thing was for sure—no foe could rival Stella’s wrath. She screamed shrilly enough to bust my eardrums. Not even the communication specialist could withstand the racket she made; he couldn’t even concentrate long enough to connect to Gilbert. That Stella was like a secret weapon, disrupting all the adults around her with the noise she made. Before Sefekh proposed they take out the aggressor—meaning me, I figured—and be done with it, it was a worse hell than any battlefield I’d ever been on. The pain only stopped when her mother scooped her up to comfort her.

“I don’t ever wanna set foot in that damn house again,” I grumbled.

“What?! I do! Stella likes me now!”

“Me too! I want to see her too! Stella was sooo cute!”

Khemet and Sefekh stopped digging into another expensive box of baked goods to whine at me again. Despite being scared of my face, Stella had quickly taken to these two, who were closer to her in age.

I groaned. “Gimme a break.”

“Why not?!”

“Let’s go back!”

The pair rushed over to me.

“Go ask the prime minister if that’s what you want to do, not me!” I snapped. Really I just wanted *them* to stop screaming too.

Going to the prime minister’s manor as guards was one thing; going as guests was a lot less likely. Besides, my fealty contract meant I couldn’t enter anyone’s house without permission or a damn good reason. But if the brats got the prime minister’s permission, I’d be more than happy to drink Gilbert’s fancy booze on the roof or in the garden—anywhere Stella’s sonic weapon of a voice couldn’t reach me. *Ugh. It’d be better if Gilbert just told us to stay away and I didn’t have to run the risk of encountering that kid ever again.*

Sefekh and Khemet quieted down now that they had my tepid approval and pawed through the fancy box for more sweets. Inside, they found a pound cake topped with liqueur-soaked fruit. I sniffed it, but it wasn’t anything like the pricey stuff I was drinking. Sefekh and Khemet didn’t seem to care as they stuffed their faces.

“It’s good!” Khemet said, and they held out some cake for me. I took a huge bite.

“I hope our mistress got to enjoy the festival with everyone,” Sefekh said.

“But she’s hurt, right? Can she go outside?!” Khemet asked.

The kids were still worried about Pride. She was getting treated by the knights with special powers, but we'd seen her all bandaged up and confined to her bed. Even I couldn't really imagine her recovering after just four days.

I let them debate it, sitting back and listening. It was definitely hard to believe that even Pride could recover so quickly. Knowing the princess, though, she'd probably try to force herself onto her feet at the festival so people wouldn't worry about her. Stale and Gilbert wouldn't let her do anything too dangerous, but she should be letting that leg heal completely before attending events.

Sefekh noticed my silence and tugged on my shirt with a wrinkle in her brow. "See! I knew we should have stayed for the festival! Then we would have seen how she's doing!"

"Leave me alone," I said. "They made me fix up the damn walls right after the war ended. That prince would've worked me to the bone if we stuck around any longer."

Originally, I just had to protect Gilbert's family. Only afterward did they force me to provide aid on the battlefield and help out with repairs. I was *not* about to go back and let them give me even more work. That was the whole reason I'd left Hanazuo in such a hurry in the first place.

"If you finish the remaining aid and other work, I'll let you see Elder Sister in the Chinensian castle."

Stale made that promise when he asked me to go work on the border walls. I swallowed hard. *Curse that brat for exploiting me.* I clicked my tongue. Even with my rewards, they owed me way more this time around—and the princeling knew it. It wasn't as if I particularly cared what happened to Freesia or Hanazuo, so why not just flee to avoid more orders? Although...

"Hey, why don't we go on vacation somewhere outside of Freesia? We don't have any work without the mistress around, so we can kinda go anywhere we want," Sefekh said.

I grunted. My fealty contract prevented me from leaving the country for

anything but delivery work. I'd left Hanazuo without getting permission to stay in a foreign country, so I didn't have the luxury of finding a nice place to kick back and relax.

"I'll be waiting for you in Freesia."

Those words had come from my own damn mouth. I'd said that to Pride before leaving the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I clicked my tongue again at the memory. In the moment, I felt like I couldn't go on without saying those words, even though they were so unlike me.

Pride wouldn't get back faster just 'cause I was waiting for her, yet all I could do if I wanted to see her again soon was sit around in Freesia. So yeah, sure, I had ditched Hanazuo to avoid getting forced into more labor, but I also wavered at the idea of being away from Pride.

"Such a pain in the ass," I griped, tipping the bottle to my lips. I gulped it down, then swiped at my mouth with my thumb to wipe off the dribble.

I was chugging top-shelf stuff, pilfered right from the prime minister's own collection. But somehow it tasted no more interesting than water. Growing agitated, I tossed that bottle aside and grabbed a new one.

The last time I saw Pride, she was stuck in bed with an injured leg. I didn't exactly know why she wasn't back in the country yet. But if that festival Sefekh was talking about had anything to do with it, I hoped it was an experience that would finally bring a smile to her tired face—ideally, with her leg fully healed too. If I couldn't be around her, I needed to know she was happy.

I uncorked the next bottle, muttering to myself the whole time. Sefekh and Khemet had nothing to say about it. Stretching my legs out in bed beside them, I resolved to take it easy for a while.

"What? A bath?!"

The sun was high in the sky when my maids suggested I wash up. It came as

such a shock that all I could do was echo the tail end of what they'd said. I turned toward my two other visitors: Stale, who was blinking over and over again, and Tiara, whose eyes shimmered with delight.

Earlier that morning, the kings learned that the knights' treatment had fully healed my leg. I had to be careful, but I could stand on my own two feet again. That meant I could easily participate in tonight's event. But the second I could move around again, I was extremely busy.

First, Stale came as my steward to schedule any meetings I might attend. Then Tiara stopped by to pick out dresses with me. While Stale could have teleported to Freesia to bring them to us, the two kings had prepared formalwear especially for us, so we took them up on their generosity. Hanazuo produced beautiful dresses that I knew I might never have the opportunity to wear again. Picking just one among the lovely garments was incredibly difficult, and I spent far too much time waffling over my decision before we even got to the fitting.

After that was my dance lesson. Everyone participating in tonight's event had to attend a lesson involving traditional dance steps from Hanazuo. Tiara and I had to memorize the dance very quickly. I was told the kings would lead us, so I didn't need to force myself to learn if it was too much for me so soon after my recovery. Still, I *was* the crown princess of Freesia—I wanted to show respect for our allied country by getting it right.

With Stale watching over me, I dove into the lesson and found myself relieved that none of the steps were particularly difficult. I managed to memorize the entire dance, thanks in part to the training I'd already received as royalty. I stayed on tiptoe, worried about hurting my legs, and ended up getting quite a workout. The dance didn't bother my legs whatsoever.

After all of that, I struggled to adequately respond to our hosts' generous offer to bathe as well. My maids explained that King Lance had specially prepared the bath for me when he heard I'd recovered. Unlike Freesia, where taking baths wasn't part of the culture, the people of both Chinensis and Cercis

did so often. Supposedly, this castle even contained a giant bath reserved for the royal family. Freesia had private bathrooms, but *these* baths were separated between men and women and large enough to hold many people. I had yet to experience anything like it, however—as did Tiara—so we perked up at the offer.

My maids had wiped me down while I was confined to bed, but a bath was a different experience entirely. Coming from a bath-loving culture in my past life, I was particularly delighted to do more than douse myself with warm water like usual. I also learned that King Lance had offered the great baths to Tiara and Stale immediately after the war ended, but the two of them hadn't wanted to experience it before I could. They were both so kindhearted to keep me in their thoughts like that.

The great baths boasted supreme quality, with visitors rarely being allowed to enter them—even *royal* visitors. It was the ultimate show of hospitality for King Lance to open them up and invite us in personally. The maids told me that baths helped relieve fatigue and that I should relax and wash the sweat from my body now that I had healed. Tiara and I agreed, while Stale consented to use the men's bath. The maids curtsied in response.

Right then, something appeared to dawn on Stale. "Excuse me. I have a request of King Lance regarding the men's bath..."

When he described his request and offered to take it to the king himself, I had to say I was quite surprised.

"How lovely... Of course Cercis would have something like this!"

Once our maids had undressed and washed us, Tiara and I relished the sight of the great bath. It was much larger than any of the bathrooms in *our* castle. While we each had our own personal bathrooms back home, they were rather simple. The great bath was, as the name implied, a space large enough to fit ten rooms in one. Some luxury hotels in my past life had bathing areas this size, but

that was all I could really compare it to.

The chamber had three large tubs resembling pools, each filled with water of a different color. The Cercian maids explained that the light-red and green waters provided medicinal effects. Golden tiles in the floor and walls glimmered in the light, a display of Cercis's famous deposits.

"Which one should we use, Big Sister?!" Tiara asked, eyes sparkling as she held a towel to her chest.

Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her wavy hair sat tied atop her head in a bun. This would be our first time bathing together, which added to the excitement bubbling within me. Without the memories of a past life like mine, Tiara was even more thrilled than I was to see this sort of bath for the first time. She couldn't decide which of the three tubs she wanted to get in first.

"Let's try the normal one," I suggested.

She squeaked her agreement and held my arm. I thought she was about to take off skipping despite the slippery floor, but she remained standing and beamed at me more brightly than the sun.

"I'll be sure to keep you steady! Just grab me if you feel like you're about to fall! Your leg only just healed, after all!"

I couldn't help but laugh. I'd just finished a dance lesson with her, yet she was still looking after me like a mother hen. Her compassion touched my heart.

"Of course. Thanks, Tiara."

We walked arm-in-arm to the edge of the tub, supporting each other on the slick ground. Steam shrouded the middle tub, but I could still see clear through to the bottom. *Whew, at least this thing isn't so deep I could drown in it.* Tiara and I stared back at our reflections on the water's surface.

I dipped my toes into the water, confirmed its pleasant temperature, and slowly eased my body into the bath. The water had just been heated and was still pretty hot, but that was perfect for me. I plunged in up to my shoulders,

despite the threat of overheating; it just felt too good to resist. Tiara seemed to feel the same. Beside me, she let out a sigh and sank down to her neck. Her rosy cheeks grew even more flushed as the heat seeped in.

“It feels so wonderful... Does your leg hurt at all, Big Sister?”

“It’s fine. In fact, I feel my fatigue melting away. I just need to be sure I don’t get too hot and faint. Are you doing okay?”

This was only the first of the three tubs, but already I felt like I could soak until I passed out. I told Tiara to sit like me, correcting my posture so that the water came up to the top of my chest. I had my past-life memories to thank for teaching me the optimal position for bath enjoyment.

“I wish Leon could have stayed and taken such a lovely bath...” *Although I doubt Val could’ve joined him, since he’s not royalty.*

I decided not to voice that last thought. Just like Val, who’d returned to Freesia as soon as possible, Leon had set sail for his homeland the night the war ended. He was probably still on his ship at this very moment. I felt a little guilty that Tiara and I got to savor such a refreshing bath and he was still traveling.

My body warmed as we lounged in the bath, the steam enveloping the entire room in soft clouds. The longer I soaked, the more I wished Freesia had an enormous bath like this too.

I briefly contemplated going for a swim but ultimately decided against it. It would be disrespectful to splash around in such a nice place, even if it was just the two of us. Instead, I placed my hands on the surface of the water and interlocked my fingers.

“What are you doing?” Tiara asked with a tilt of her head. Her eyes were a little glazed over, the water temperature possibly leaving her a bit dizzy. This only made my little sister even cuter, and I couldn’t help teasing her.

“Take that!” I said, squeezing my hands together. A stream of water shot out and struck her cheek.

Tiara let out a half shriek, half laugh, then marveled at how I'd manipulated the water. "How did you do that?!" she cried. "The water shot out of your hands!"

"You interlace your fingers, let the water enter the space between them, and then..." I shot a second water jet with another "Take that!"

She giggled and grinned, snapping out of her heat-induced haze. "I'd like to try too!"

Tiara managed to shoot the bathwater into a perfect stream on her very first try. Though she didn't use as much water as I had, she managed to shoot it just as far. She clapped her hands excitedly over her success.

Next, I showed her how to place her palms together. Tiara stared closely at the new arrangement, trying her best to learn how it worked. I warned her that she would get hit with the water by doing this. She craned her whole body away to avoid a second blow. That was when I slammed my palms against each other. This time, the water shot straight up in the air like a geyser.

"It's like what whales do!" Tiara shouted.

I was glad she liked my second trick just as much.

Then her face lit up in realization, and she pointed at the tub of red water. "You could make a pink fountain if you did that over there!"

"Then why don't we switch tubs?"

I didn't hesitate to oblige her. We were both getting pretty warm, and Tiara wasn't as used to it as I was, so it was probably a good idea to enjoy the other tubs sooner rather than later.

I stuck my foot into the red water less carefully this time, since I was already warmed up. A floral aroma wafted up from the tub and tickled my nose. Perhaps the medicinal effects of this water came from flower extracts. Whatever the case, it was a super luxurious thing to bathe in. I inhaled the scented steam deeply, and Tiara did likewise.

This tub was a bit cooler than the first one, and it even came with a slope where we could sit and stretch out our legs. Maybe this one was better suited to long baths, actually. I leaned back against the edge of the tub, stared up at the ceiling, and extended my legs, feeling like they were two centimeters longer now. Tiara was also... *Hmm?*

“Tiara? What are you...?”

I’d assumed she was right next to me, leaning against the tub, but when I looked down, she was in front of me and staring at me head-on. My legs were close to hitting her knees. I thought maybe she meant to splash me as vengeance for earlier, but instead, Tiara reached into the water and gently took my left foot.

“I saw the maids massage you when they were washing your body. I thought it might be even more relaxing in the bath!”

She kneaded my foot with her slender fingers, placing gentle pressure on my sole and arch. Then she took my foot in both hands and squeezed it lightly, exactly the way my maids had done it. *She may be my sister, but I can’t believe a princess is massaging my foot!*

Between the massage and the effects of the water, I was feeling incredibly relaxed, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask this of my sister. I tried to tell her we should play with the jets again, but then...

“Aha... Ha ha ha ha! Tiara! Tiaraaa! Ha ha ha! It tickles!”

“Too gentle, huh?”

She really was such an airhead. When I’d hesitated to accept the massage, she must have believed she was hurting me and needed to be gentler, but that had only turned her soft touch into a tickle attack. Whether because of the hot water or Tiara’s cute little fingers, the bottom of my foot was extremely ticklish at the moment. I squirmed, trying not to accidentally kick her, but my writhing twisted my foot out of Tiara’s hands. My laughter only served to amuse her, so she just grabbed at my foot again—and this time she was out for blood.

“Okay! I’ll do the other one too!”

“Wait! Tiara—ha ha ha ha! Stop... Ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Tiara chanted “coochy-coo” the whole time, making even my ears feel ticklish. I was powerless to do anything but laugh at full volume, as improper as that was for a princess. The more I laughed, the more heat flooded my head. And I couldn’t even stop cackling long enough to change the subject to the pink fountain or try to distract her some other way. She only relented once I hollered for mercy, returning to the first lovely massage she’d given me.

It took me almost three whole minutes to catch my breath, however, and Tiara grinned deviously at me the whole time. I worried I might pass out before I ever got to try the third bath. If the water in this one had been any warmer, I would have been out for good.

As Tiara continued to massage me, I folded my palms together once more and squirted a jet of water right at her. The red fountain, not so much pink, succeeded in exacting my revenge. Tiara shrieked and released my foot before trying to make a fountain of her own. I probably should have done this sooner instead of trying to force my way out of her tickle attack. My little sister was cute, but boy, was she mischievous.

“It’s a little early, but let’s go to the green bath now,” I said.

“That sounds good! We can enjoy one last bath before we leave!”

Tiara, who seemed a bit more energetic than she had at the start, joined me in standing up out of the tub. By the time I got my feet on the tile, my legs felt even lighter than before. Tiara’s massage had an instant positive effect. Still, I would have to take revenge on Tiara’s feet in the next bath... *No, I should be nice and return the favor.* That was the thought that crossed my mind as we linked arms and headed to the last one.

Neither of us considered that the final tub would be full of extra-hot water.

“What a sublime bath...”

Those words arrived with a splash as my companion sank into the clear bathwater. I instantly put my back to him and submerged myself to my shoulders, using my whole body to express my distaste for his decision to sit *right* next to me in the spacious bath. Even after scrubbing myself clean and getting into the water in this massive room, I hadn’t spoken a single word.

“Why, Prince Stale, I never could have imagined that a prime minister would someday bathe with royalty,” Gilbert said, his amusement at my expense plain in his voice.

My left side was suddenly cramping. He scooped up some water and poured it over his shoulder. I pursed my lips, trying to relax but failing in the face of this interruption.

I wasn’t the only person who’d been invited to the men’s-only baths. Gilbert, whom I’d invited myself, was also there to relieve his fatigue. I only had to remove my dark glasses to get into the tub, but Gilbert had to tie up his long, light-blue hair in a bun. He had refused the maids’ offer to scrub his body, opting to take care of the preparations himself.

When I first asked Gilbert to join me in the bath, he’d refused, likely not thinking himself worthy of such a luxury. I’d had to change the request into an order to get him to come here. I knew it was probably strange, bathing beside the prince consort’s son when he’d never even done so with the prince consort himself. Even Freesian royalty rarely bathed together, unless they were married. I certainly hadn’t been raised bathing with siblings or parents, so I understood that Gilbert would find it strange for me to invite a commoner to join me.

“We’re not bathing *together*,” I clarified. “I told you, it’s just more convenient this way.”

The bath hadn’t been prepared for Gilbert’s sake; it had been drawn for the firstborn prince, with Gilbert having permission to attend. A bath like this would

only be drawn for members of royalty, like me, and not for anyone below that rank—even a prime minister. But between my request and Gilbert’s contribution to the war, King Lance had agreed to let the prime minister in as well.

“Of course,” Gilbert replied. He kept up his smile and poured water over each of his shoulders to warm himself. I faced away from him the whole time. I wanted to put some distance between us, but the temperature right here was just too perfect. The green bath was too hot, and the red bath was too cool. The clear bath in the middle, without any special alterations, was the exact right temperature. However, now that we were in the same tub, I couldn’t really chase Gilbert out. Neither did I feel like making small talk. It wasn’t as if I really *wanted* Gilbert here with me.

“If you’re unable to relax alongside a *lowborn citizen* in your bath, would you prefer I find another one, Your Highness?”

“You’re still being nasty in a place like this?” I muttered. “I’m sorry to say that I used to be a commoner too. I just didn’t invite you here to chat.”

“Yes... I understand that.” Gilbert chuckled a bit too knowingly. His light-blue eyes softened, and I got the horrible suspicion that he’d guessed my true intentions.

The journey to Hanazuo leading up to the war had been a long one. Then the fighting broke out, leaving Gilbert no time for rest. He’d helped tie up loose ends as things wound down as well. I knew he was exhausted, even if he never admitted it. The people of the United Hanazuo Kingdom had watched Gilbert’s tireless work with astonishment, but at the end of the day, he was still human. He could get by with only a little sleep, and he was used to working without it. But the weariness would catch up to him just like anyone else. That was why I’d decided to drag him into this bath with me when I heard how good it was at relieving fatigue. Though it annoyed me, he had worked harder than anyone in settling postwar matters and acting as Pride’s proxy. He deserved this, regardless of my personal feelings about the man.

“Thank you.”

Gilbert’s soft, simple words echoed through the room alongside the plinking droplets. They said more than he could have in a whole speech, but I pressed my lips together and submerged myself up to my nose. I blew bubbles for a few seconds, then came back up to my shoulders for fear of boiling my head. I cupped water in my hands and gave my face a splash before finally facing Gilbert for the first time since he’d entered the bath.

His eyebrows lifted, betraying his surprise at my shift in direction, but he smiled politely. I was still pouting, my usual glasses gone and my hair disheveled. Water dripped from my bangs and caught on my long lashes. I only wore my glasses for show and could see just fine without them, but the steam and water drops obscured my vision. I narrowed my eyes, focusing intently on Gilbert.

He maintained his smile beneath my intense stare for five whole minutes before he finally looked away. Only two meters separated us. It probably seemed like my vision really was that bad if I was squinting for so long.

“Is something the matter?” Gilbert asked at last.

I went on staring but crossed my arms. *Nothing’s wrong, per se.*

“You spend all day working on papers, so how did you get all those muscles?” I asked. I tried to keep the jealousy out of my voice, but it seemed like Gilbert caught me. He hesitated to respond, blinking with surprise.

I scanned Gilbert’s body. We were close enough that I could see him easily, even through the water and steam. The loose clothing he usually wore hadn’t prepared me for how toned he was underneath. It wasn’t at all what you’d expect from someone with a desk job. His biceps and forearms bulged, even at rest, and his abs were clearly defined. His legs rippled with muscle, practically equine in their elegance and strength. I had known this man since childhood, but I’d somehow underestimated him all that time. His body type didn’t suit a prime minister, assistant to the prince consort.

Gilbert recovered—and promptly doubled over with laughter. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand to stifle the giggling, water sloshing all over from his sudden outburst.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been using your special power to make yourself look younger,” I said.

“Aha! Heh heh... Of course not!”

The man went on chuckling, but I wasn’t joking. I had witnessed Gilbert’s strength over the past three years, but I never knew him to train or work out. Of course I would be jealous that he had so much muscle without any effort. I trained in fencing and hand-to-hand combat, even sparring with Arthur to get the body I had.

“Pardon me.” Gilbert regained his composure, though his lips still twitched. He was clearly fighting the urge to tease me. Maybe he thought I’d been scrutinizing his face rather than studying his form. “I sincerely apologize for appearing in such a state before you, Your Highness.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

I scowled as he placed his hand on his chest and bowed so low that his head nearly dipped underwater. It was normal for two men to bathe together, and I didn’t feel any shyness about our bodies. I was simply confused about how the prime minister was maintaining a physique like that.

Gilbert let out one more exhaled laugh before slowly raising his head. “As the prime minister, it’s crucial for me to have the skills and strength to protect His Royal Highness. I also keep up a fitness regimen at home so as not to lose my strength.”

“Prime ministers aren’t guards or knights. What need is there to be so fit?”

And where do you even find the time? I kept that to myself, knowing all too well that the man before me could make whatever time he needed, no matter how busy he might be.

The role of prime minister did require some proficiency in self-defense and fighting; Gilbert was right about that. There was a need to protect both himself and the prince consort. However, it was clear that Gilbert surpassed almost every other prime minister in history when it came to toughness.

“Well, at first, I wanted whatever I could get my hands on,” he said. “It didn’t matter if it was intelligence, fighting prowess, or power.”

He spoke quietly, each word rolling off his lips like the water dripping around us. I got the impression he’d never spoken of this to anyone but perhaps the prince consort—the man he’d said he had to protect. I supposed he was ready to stop hiding it from me too.

Initially, he told me, the only thing he wanted was a job that would carry him to his beloved. The ability to make her happy was all he needed in life. He just so happened to end up in the role of prime minister, which required knowledge more than anything else, but he would have been happy with any high-ranking role in the castle. Gilbert had to excel in every possible area, as any sign of inadequacy or failure would get him passed over by the Freesian officials.

“Once you’ve obtained a weapon that surpasses everyone else’s, it’s hard to let go of it, no matter how many years pass,” he said. “I suppose it’s the sort of thing people without any real worth cling to.”

My gaze drifted downward. “Still being humble even now? Or maybe I should call it ‘snide.’”

I couldn’t fathom Gilbert feeling unworthy. People hailed him as an excellent prime minister precisely because he possessed so many of those “weapons” others lacked. But as I looked at the water, I saw in our reflections the insecurities of our pasts as commoners. The water had been the perfect temperature before, but for just a second, it was a bit too cold.

“Not at all,” Gilbert said quietly. His gentle eyes were fixed on me, as though he’d guessed what was in my mind. “There’s nothing more important than having weapons. They’re just like limbs. Even if one of them is unusable, you

can usually get by with the other three.”

Gilbert doused his shoulder in water again, then rubbed it down his arm all the way to his wrist. He had all four limbs right now, but even if he lost everything someday, I knew he’d go on serving the royal family and Freesian people for hundreds or thousands of years—until his day of judgment came.

“You have more superior weapons than I do, Prince Stale. I believe that, one day, all of these skills in your possession will have a part to play.”

“Stop playing humble. And don’t try to flatter me.” I couldn’t help feeling like I was still so far from besting him.

“It’s not flattery.”

Gilbert didn’t hesitate in his rebuttal. His words no longer emerged warm and airy, but instead snapped with the finality of a door slamming shut. I was caught off guard by it, yet Gilbert held my gaze even as his tone and slender eyes softened.

“You’re like a different person than you used to be,” he went on. “There’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll continue to grow, Prince Stale.”

“Hmph.”

He smiled gently at me, like I was his own grandson. I looked away and pressed my lips in a thin line, my huff of an exhale echoing through the silent room.

I had to admit, I was happy for someone to acknowledge my growth...but did it really have to be Gilbert? I couldn’t even bring myself to reply with sarcasm or snark like I usually would.

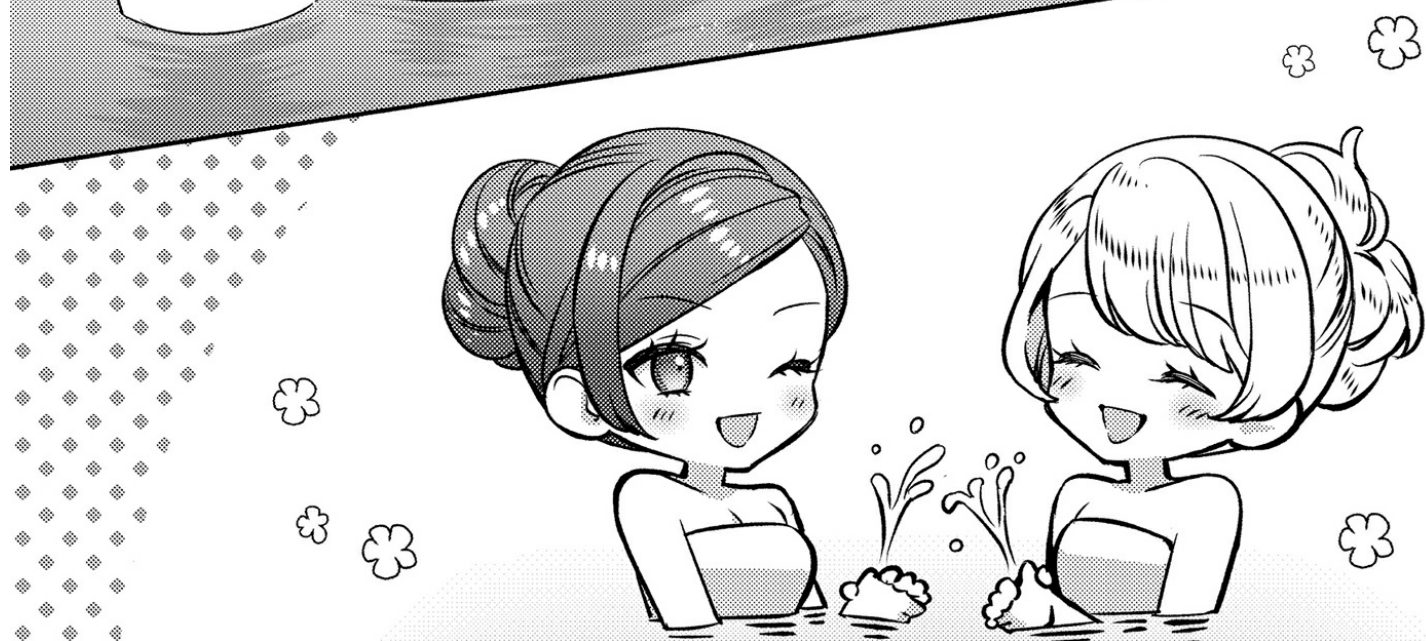
I scooped up bathwater and brought it to my face. The bath must have been getting to me; my cheeks were burning hot. It was definitely that and not the doubt that Gilbert’s words had planted in my heart, the fear of actually trusting and believing him.

“Still...it’s a real shame,” Gilbert said.

“What is?”

I furrowed my brow as Gilbert’s tone readopted its usual mirth, but I still refused to look at him. Of course he’d end all this praise with some sarcastic quip. I could never best him in this sort of verbal sparring. Surely he was about to point out some sort of mistake I’d made during the war or something.

“That nice body of yours you’ve been sculpting,” Gilbert said. “It’s a shame you’ll never get the opportunity to show it off to Princess Pride and Princess Tiara.”



I snapped my eyes up and found Gilbert grinning ear to ear. Enraged, I brought down my whole arm to drench him in water with a great big splash.

“Elder Sister, it’s me. Are you finished preparing?” Stale called as he knocked on my door.

“Just about,” I replied. “You can come in.” My imperial knights, who’d been waiting for me to finish, opened the door.

Stale and Tiara entered the room. I lit up as I saw they’d changed into their new attire from the United Hanazuo Kingdom, and they seemed to feel the same about mine.

Stale went still, his glasses fogging up, until Tiara grabbed his arm and said, “You look lovely, Big Sister!” She pointedly yanked at him as I tried to figure out the reason behind his blazing cheeks and cloudy spectacles.

“Are you still feeling dizzy, Stale?” I asked. “You were really red when you got out of your bath. Please don’t overwork yourself.”

“I’m sorry. I’m fine,” he said, adjusting his black frames with a gulp as he steadied himself. “That outfit... It suits you. It’s almost as if it was made for you, Pride.”

Stale didn’t appear to appreciate the mention of his bath. On his way out, he had tried to hide his red face from me and Tiara, but failed miserably. *Just what happened in there? I know Gilbert joined him... Did they get into yet another argument?*

He cleared his throat, derailing my train of thought, and lifted his gaze to meet mine. I had no doubt he’d complimented Tiara just as politely on her dress, but it was nice to hear he liked mine too.

“Thanks, you two. I’m really glad to hear you say that.” I puffed up, giggling. I felt like a native princess, all dressed up in Hanazuo garb.

Captains Alan and Callum stood behind my siblings, vigorously nodding along

to their praise. The flush in their cheeks must have been because of how charming Tiara looked in her dress. She was wearing light pink from head to toe, the star of the show compared to me. Still, I was proud of my dress all the same. I brushed back my wavy red hair, grinning at my visitors.

“All right. Let’s head out!” I cried, unable to contain my excitement.

Tiara and Stale smiled and agreed. They had to be as relieved and proud as I was that we were on our way to a victory banquet after everything we’d been through. Tiara linked arms with me, Stale took my hand, and Alan and Callum followed behind as we left the room. I took confident steps with my head held high as the Freesian princess.

It was time for the United Hanazuo Kingdom’s victory banquet to begin.

A Delightful Reward

“I WANTED TO EAT something refreshing! What were you thinking?!”

Sefekh shot a jet of water at me with her special power. It struck me head-on, soaking my face and the meat I was eating.

“I worked so hard for you! Where’s *my* compensation?!”

The argument started when the three of us returned from our shopping trip and I set our food on the ground instead of the table. Then I made a comment about how weird it was for Sefekh to eat nothing but sweet stuff, her meal consisting of baked goods and fruit. I didn’t see what the big deal was, but clearly Sefekh had been harboring a grudge ever since I decided we weren’t going to that festival in Hanazuo.

“What compensation will shut you up?” I snarled, mussing up my hair. “Talk about a pain in the ass.”

Sefekh rarely demanded anything, so she must have really meant it this time. Besides, if I didn’t comply, I’d just end up drenched again.

As she struggled to come up with an answer, Khemet suddenly grinned and raised his hand. “Hey, Val! Can I roll over to you?!”

“Huh? Do whatever the hell you want.” I cocked a brow at his request for permission to move over to my bed, but it didn’t really matter. We always just sprawled out on the beds however we felt like.

“Yay!” With his dessert in one hand, Khemet jumped over to my bed. But instead of sitting next to me, he used one of my crossed legs as a pillow. He giggled, apparently quite pleased with himself.

That got Sefekh saying, “Me too! I want to go over there too!”

“Don’t you runts know we’ve got plenty of pillows already?” I grumbled.

Before I could demand they use something else, Sefekh jumped onto the bed, still holding her half-eaten fruit. She rolled next to Khemet and slammed her head into my other leg in the same position.

“Ow!” I shouted.

I couldn’t pull away now that I’d become their living pillow. At least I could still reach the booze. I clicked my tongue and glared at the brats. They took turns feeding each other their fruit and sweets, Sefekh’s grudge magically disappearing during all this.

“Val, this chocolate tastes like booze!” Khemet said.

“Here, have an apple, Val. You need to eat some fruit,” Sefekh said.

The children held up their chocolate and fruit for me. Scowling, I opened wide and took a bite of each. There really was no beating these brats when they decided they wanted something.

Afterword

HELLO, THIS IS TENICHI. Thank you very much for purchasing the sixth volume of *The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior*, aka Last Boss Queen 6.

This installment focuses on the behind-the-scenes stories that weren't told during the previous volume's defensive war. It also depicts the events after the war ends. Between the revisions, the corrections, and especially the reorganizing I did to this book, I believe that even the web novel readers will enjoy the new perspectives from the three United Hanazuo Kingdom characters.

I consulted my editor about how to condense the story of the defensive war to fit in a single volume, and we arrived at the idea of splitting it into two parts. But the story ended up coming together in a way that makes each book satisfying to read, even on its own.

Suzunosuke-sensei, thank you as always for another batch of illustrations that make you feel like you're really there! I was so moved when I saw how each picture perfectly captured the images I saw in my head as I began writing this book. I was especially surprised when I laid eyes on the illustration of Harrison fighting, since it was exactly what I had in mind.

There's one more thing I'd like to express my gratitude for... Believe it or not, Last Boss Queen is being made into an anime! I really still can't believe it. Thank you again to everyone who's supported me to this point. I'm grateful to Suzunosuke-sensei for bringing color to this story's world with their wonderful illustrations, and also to Bunko Matsuura-sensei for drawing the manga that introduced so many new readers to my story.

Bunko Matsuura-sensei, our time together was a brief miracle, but I want to thank you so much for everything. You and Suzunosuke-sensei really came

together to make this anime adaptation.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Bunko Matsuura-sensei for the manga version, people who sent me fan letters, everyone at Ichijinsha, the ones who helped with publishing and novelization, people 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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