

NOVEL

2

Written by
Tenichi

Illustrated by
Suzunosuke



THE MOST
HERETICAL
LAST BOSS QUEEN

FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Emma Schumacker
ADAPTATION: Michelle McGuinness
COVER DESIGN: H. Qi
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Anne
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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Chapter 1:

Reunion with the Heartless Princess

FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS, I lived a boring, ordinary life, just like any other girl. The only highlight? An otome game called *Our Ray of Light*, or ORL. This immensely popular series was my secret joy. At least, it was while I was alive.

“Ugh! I can’t believe Big Brother would just leave us behind.”

Tiara Royal Ivy, the younger princess of the kingdom, stood at my side with her cheeks puffed out in protest. Despite her indignation, she looked angelic with her wavy blonde hair and golden eyes.

Tiara, now eleven, glared at an empty spot on the floor. Only seconds ago, our brother had stood there—before he vanished in a blink.

“Stale probably couldn’t help it,” I told her. “That was an incredible battle, after all, and I’m sure he can barely contain his excitement. Let’s cut him some slack, okay?”

I took Tiara’s hand and urged her to carry on. Our guards closed in as we hurriedly walked toward the gates of the royal order’s training grounds.

“I’m excited, aren’t you?” I smiled at Tiara.

“Yes, Big Sister.” She beamed, her anger melting away.

In this world, people knew me as Pride Royal Ivy, firstborn princess and Tiara’s older sister. At thirteen, I was growing into my bright-red wavy hair, though my sharp purple eyes still threw people off. But they had to tolerate me, for here in the kingdom of Freesia, I was in line to inherit the throne. That wasn’t merely due to my lineage, however. Ours was the only nation where humans were born with special powers, and I had earned my position as crown princess five years ago, when my power of precognition manifested at last.

“How about it? Finally satisfied, Stale?”

An enthusiastic cry rose beyond the gates. Tiara and I looked at each other and smiled. It had to be Stale's habitual companion, Arthur.

"Arthur! Stale!"

I called out to them as soon as I passed through the gates. The pair froze in the middle of sparring when they heard my voice. Lowering their swords, they slowly turned to face me. My heart warmed as I took them in. Arthur and Stale meant more to me and Tiara than anyone else in the world.

"Princess Pride, Tiara," Arthur said, straightening up as he faced us.

At only fifteen, Arthur Beresford had already joined the order of knights last year as a new recruit. Stale and Arthur trained together every day, strengthening their friendship alongside their swordplay. Once cringing and shy, hiding behind a curtain of hair, Arthur now stood proudly before us, his long silver hair pulled back into a ponytail and his bright blue eyes meeting mine.

Right beside him, as ever, stood Stale Royal Ivy, my younger brother-in-law. Though he'd been born a commoner and was only twelve years old, he already carried himself with the composure of the firstborn prince of Freesia. His dark hair and eyes and expressionless face could make him look rather serious, but I knew he was kind beneath that cold exterior. Since our family had adopted him, he technically wasn't related to me and Tiara, yet he was as dear to us as a flesh-and-blood brother. Our family chose to adopt him due to his special power of teleportation. Once I ascended the throne, this intelligent and capable prince would serve as my right-hand man. I could ask for no better companion for the job.

The bond between these two boys had obviously strengthened over the years. Though Arthur sometimes tried to speak rigidly and formally to Stale, Stale always rejected it, getting more casual as Arthur got more formal. Of course, Stale adhered to proper procedure for official matters, but with Arthur he spoke casually, like he was addressing a friend and equal.

"Arthur, congratulations on being promoted to a knight," I said.

"Congratulations, Arthur!" Tiara added.

In fact, he'd graduated on this very day, flying through the order's entrance

exam to join the knights as a member of the main forces at the top of his class.

His journey began two years earlier. The boy spent day after day training with Stale as well as his father, the commander of the order. One year later, when Arthur turned fourteen, he was accepted into the order as a new recruit on his first attempt.

All aspiring knights were put to the test in battles against one another, and only the first round of victors proceeded to the second trial. There they clashed with a member of the order who examined their fighting style regardless of who'd won the bout. Arthur made it that far without a single loss, and he'd even managed to land a hit on the knight he went up against in the second trial.

Today's entrance exam was a tournament among one hundred rookies to see who would make it into the main forces. Only one person could emerge victorious and guarantee their promotion to the rank of "knight." The order filled the remaining slots by grading the rookies on their fighting styles, then selecting as many new knights as needed.

Arthur was the one who walked away with the ultimate victory under his belt.

"Thank you very much for coming all this way for my sake," he said.

He bowed, but that didn't entirely hide the embarrassed flush in his cheeks. Tiara's congratulations must have flustered him. She was naturally adorable and charming; everyone adored my younger sister, even Stale, though you couldn't really tell from his habitually blank expression.

"Of course we'd show up. It's such a big day for you, Arthur," I replied.

"Arthur, you were wonderful out there," Tiara said.

"Ah... Thanks, Tiara."

When Tiara leapt up to him and clutched his hand, Arthur smiled gently and stroked her hair, making him look just like another big brother to her.

I smiled to see them all so happy and relaxed together. When Arthur first started training with Stale, the farm boy had spoken so stiffly to the prince. That faded over time as Stale and Arthur became friends as well as training partners.

The more time Stale spent sparring with Arthur, the more Tiara and I got to

know him as well. Arthur used to address us with an awkward, bumbling level of formality, but now, he spoke to both Stale and Tiara as total equals, as long as they weren't around others. When it came to me, though...

"By the way, have you spoken to the commander and vice commander yet?" I asked Arthur. "They're probably thrilled for you."

"No, not yet. I'm sure they were both watchin' for themselves, so they probably already know. Plus, I don't want to make a big deal about it, Your Highness."

Same as always. No matter how many times I asked him to address me casually when it was just us, it appeared I was the only person he couldn't let his guard down around. He'd gotten better, but we had a long way to go before he finally stopped addressing me as "Your Highness" even in private. Stale and Tiara both spoke to me formally too, and though they excused it by saying I was the heir to the throne, it left me feeling distant from all of them.

"There you are, Arthur!"

Our conversation was interrupted as two figures paced toward us—Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark of the order of the knights. As they approached, they offered the proper greetings.

"What do ya want, Commander?" Arthur grumbled.

"You know what I want," the commander said. "Didn't they tell you to come see me once you'd finished the procedures for joining the main squadron?"

"Aw, shut it! The accolade's tomorrow anyway, so why should I have to go report to my own dad just to drop in and say hi? Talk about embarrassing!"

"We were going to explain the accolade process to you, Arthur," the vice commander said. "By the way, congratulations on your promotion."

As a friend of the commander, the vice commander had known Arthur for most of his life. And with his only family being a younger sister, Sir Clark likely saw Arthur like a son or younger brother. His praise came from the heart.

"Commander Roderick, how about you start with some praise for your son instead of jumping straight to reprimanding?" he said. "No one wants to

congratulate him more than you, isn't that right?"

The commander remained still as Sir Clark patted him on the shoulder. "There's no need for praise," he said bluntly.

Arthur huffed, his fresh scowl deepening.

Then, Commander Roderick's expression softened to one of radiant pride. "I always knew you'd make it into the main forces." He set his hand on Arthur's shoulder.

"Well, yeah, obviously," Arthur said, but a shy smile tugged at his mouth.

Stale patted Arthur's free shoulder. "The year we spent training paid off, huh?"

"What the hell?! Don't try to take the credit for this, Stale!"

"Which one of us had to make up for all the training you missed out on with the commander?"

"You said you wanted to do all that, ya little jerk!"

Arthur had stopped training with the commander once he was accepted into the order as a new recruit. Apparently, he felt uncomfortable with the idea of being the only soldier to receive special training from his father to help him get into the main forces. But in exchange, he'd spent much more time training with Stale over the past year.

"Princess Pride, you have my sincerest apologies," Commander Roderick said. "My son has been a horrible influence on Prince Stale."

"N-not at all," I said. "As I've mentioned before, Stale appears to be enjoying himself quite a bit, and it's had no effect on his work, so please don't let it upset you."

Despite my reassurances, the commander shook his head. We'd had this discussion many times before, and I'd never managed to convince him.

"Just so you know, this guy's been a schemer ever since we first met," Arthur muttered, trying to turn the tables on Stale.

"Keep it to yourself, idiot," Stale shot back. They jabbed accusing fingers at

each other.

“You suck, you know that?” Arthur said.

Commander Roderick slumped as he observed the exchange. Vice Commander Clark hid a chuckle behind his hand. The commander tried to get the boys back on track by telling Arthur that tomorrow would be an important day for him as a knight, and the boy grunted in acknowledgment. These kinds of lively yet tender moments had become a staple of my life as Pride Royal Ivy, but they were no less precious because of it.

It all began five years ago, on the day I regained my past-life memories and learned of my sins and my fate. I might have been the crown princess here, as well as Tiara and Stale’s older sister, but I’d lived a very different life before this—a dull, ordinary life in which this entire world was nothing but an otome game to me.

Regaining all the memories of that previous life revealed my fate here—the fate of the evil last boss queen, Pride Royal Ivy. My darling little sister, Tiara, was the heroine of ORL, with Stale and Arthur among the romanceable characters. There were five love interests in total. That much I remembered for sure, though many of the details of the game were lost to me now. I’d gotten pretty obsessed with the third game in particular, so I couldn’t remember the earlier games as well. I knew the overall plot and that Tiara was the heroine. Most importantly of all...I knew I was the wicked final boss.

The Pride of the game world wounded the hearts of everyone around her, including the love interests. In the end, she was punished, and Tiara healed the damage her sister caused.

In some sense, having these memories was a burden. I knew how horrible I would become. On the other hand, those memories had prevented me from committing egregious crimes against Stale and Arthur. The Pride in the game forced Stale to murder his own mother. She’d also let Arthur’s father and several knights die in an ambush. So far, I’d managed to thwart those evil plans because I knew the plot of the game, but I didn’t know how long that luck would last. I truly didn’t want to hurt Stale, Arthur, or Tiara. I didn’t wish for them to suffer as they did in the game. From the bottom of my heart, all I

wanted was for them to be happy, and I would do everything in my power to see it through.

“I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Arthur,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied, smiling shyly. “Until tomorrow.”

“Let’s get going, Arthur,” Commander Roderick said.

The commander and vice commander bowed to us, then headed back the way they’d come. Arthur offered a hasty farewell before hurrying after them. As I watched Arthur stride away, proudly carrying the same white uniform his father wore, my resolve to protect him—to protect *all* the people of this kingdom—grew even stronger.

Knights formed a line down the vast throne room. The new inductees shuffled their feet as they waited before me in a space so cavernous, their nervous murmurs echoed. They awaited a once-in-a-lifetime honor.

“Live with humility.”

Three new knights knelt, surrounded by their seniors.

“Live truthfully.”

They lowered themselves before the firstborn princess of the kingdom of Freesia—me. Mother had put me in charge of this solemn ceremony one year ago.

“Defend the pillars of chivalry.”

Candles accented in gold hung throughout the room. The men stood or knelt on a bright red carpet as sunlight streamed through the tall windows, glittering where it hit their shining armor and white uniforms.

“Serve without betrayal.”

I took a quiet breath. Every eye focused on me. I steeled myself for my duty.

“Serve without deception.”

“Arthur Beresford.”

“Show ceaseless kindness for those in need.”

Arthur was among the men kneeling before me now. When I called his name, he rose slowly to his feet.

“Show ceaseless bravery no matter the strength of your enemy.”

Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark stood to the right, anxiety lining their faces.

“Strive for dignity.”

Stale stood behind me, along with Prime Minister Gilbert and my father, the prince consort. Tiara had wanted to join as well, but she was too young.

“Act with gravity.”

Arthur took a careful step forward. He trod on the crimson carpet, passing his father and the vice commander.

“Become the shield that guards the people.”

Arthur took a knee in front of me. The light from the windows cast a solemn glow over him.

“Become the sword that slays the crown’s foes.”

He unsheathed his sword and presented it to me with both hands. I received it and set it on Arthur’s shoulder.

“Never forget your title as knight.”

Arthur bowed his head, and I began to recite the knight’s oath. The commander pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to hold back tears as his son joined the order. *Like father, like son. You should be proud.*

Just two short years ago, Arthur set foot in this room for the very first time, though under severely different circumstances. At the time, he wept, shaking as he asked me whether he would ever become a knight like his father. He’d been so small, so scared, so timid.

But Arthur had changed dramatically since that day. He wore a beautiful suit of armor, and his hair lay sleek and smooth. Anyone who looked at him now would see the perfect knight and nothing less.

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

I wondered if he still remembered that promise. I didn’t mind if he forgot as long as he achieved his goal of becoming a knight. Regardless of whether he remembered his exact words that day, he’d protect the people of this kingdom—of that, I was sure.

“I dub thee Knight, Arthur Beresford.”

With that declaration, I pointed the sword at Arthur, and he lifted his head. Through a faint shimmer of tears, he met my eyes with determination. Then, slowly and carefully, he bent to press his lips to the blade. With that, he achieved the final step. He was officially a knight.

Applause erupted all around us.

“It took me two years, but I made it back here,” Arthur whispered, a gentle smile on his face. Only I heard him over the roar of the crowd; only I got to witness his fleeting, unbridled joy.

He remembered. That smile banished all doubt, transporting me right back to that moment two years ago. Yet I felt a gap, a chasm. He’d spent every moment of those two years training with Stale. Only in this moment did I realize how much I’d missed him during that time.

Answering tears welled up in my eyes. I smiled back at him, this sad, cringing boy who’d become a strong, proud knight right before my eyes.

“Welcome home, Arthur,” I said.

He’d come back to me, right back to the very same place where we’d made that promise.

Chapter 2:

The Coldhearted Queen and the Quitter

ONE MONTH AFTER Arthur's ascension to knighthood, Stale and I prepared for the assembly.

This meeting only occurred once a year, and the discussions helped make and amend the laws that governed our kingdom. Last year was the first time Stale and I got permission to participate. I could even submit proposals of my own, though I lacked any final say. Mother hoped I could study the process in this way.

"Are you all right, Pride?" Stale said.

He'd watched me all throughout the assembly and even after it ended, when a familiar man had slunk up to me, snaking through some small talk to push his personal agenda. Father had eventually intervened, but Stale's gaze still flickered between Father—who was dragging away the man in question—and me.

"Yes, I'm fine," I assured him. "Sorry for worrying you."

Stale pressed at the black frame of his glasses (glasses identical to the ones he wore in the game, in fact), but they could not conceal the dark look in his eyes. I knew from the game how vicious he could be when he set his mind to plotting and scheming.

Interestingly enough, the glasses he now fussed with had been a gift from Arthur just a few days after he was knighted. When I asked why he thought Stale needed lensless glasses, he responded that he simply thought they'd suit him. He certainly wasn't wrong about that; Tiara and I both made sure to tell Stale that the glasses looked good on him. But I still didn't understand why Arthur would go out of his way to buy them as a present. Even if they *were* lensless, glasses did not come cheap in this world.

Stale seemed to enjoy the gift. He wore them all day, every day outside of his training sessions. Whenever the servants suggested Stale could put in a specialty order to a craftsman for better glasses, he turned them down.

According to Stale, he had no desire to wear glasses that weren't a gift from Arthur. It was just another sign of how different things were here than in the game. They'd never become such close friends in ORL, and while I loved nothing more than seeing them both happy, it left me worried about the inevitable future still creeping up on me.

When I apologized, he shook his head. "If you are well, then there's nothing to worry about." Despite this, he glared after the man Father was taking with him—Prime Minister Gilbert.

A slender man with long, light-blue hair tied and draped over his shoulder and matching blue eyes, Prime Minister Gilbert served as my father's assistant. He didn't seem to hold me in very high esteem, and Stale regarded him positively murderously in return. Around two years ago, the man had curiously started speaking to me with more favor than before, but I'd been on the receiving end of some very biting words from him for the last five.

Today, our disagreement stemmed from the Special Power Registration Bill. Prime Minister Gilbert had been pushing for the law for years, but the assembly had once again deferred it.

"Your Highness has now garnered quite a lot of trust from Her Majesty," the prime minister had said. "I believe you could successfully leverage that trust to get my bill passed, if you wished."

Over the years, his clever words had won him more support for his bill. But holdouts like myself, Stale, Uncle Vest, Father, and Mother left the bill's prospects bleak. The law would force anyone with a special power to register themselves with the government, an idea that left me far too uncomfortable to support. Who knew what the government could do with that kind of information? But Prime Minister Gilbert never gave up trying to sway me.

Even at the accolade celebration one month ago, with the entire royal family and a number of bureaucrats in attendance, Prime Minister Gilbert flitted around the room, chatting with each and every knight. Father scowled at him

through the entire ceremony, narrowing the intimidating purple eyes I'd inherited from him. When Prime Minister Gilbert tried his silver tongue on Arthur, Stale turned downright terrifying.

"By the way, Sir Arthur, do you possess a special power yourself?" Prime Minister Gilbert asked.

"Yes, I do," Arthur told him. "Sadly, all I can use it for is growing crops. I wasn't blessed with the kind of power that'll help me serve as a knight, like my father."

It was remarkably moving to hear Arthur bring this all up so casually. Two years ago, this supposed lack on his part served as his greatest source of shame. I itched to add to the conversation, knowing what I did of Arthur's backstory in-game, but I held my tongue.

"I see. What about among the villagers? Have you met anyone with an unusual power or heard rumors about such people?"

"Well...my mom runs a small restaurant, so I've heard both true stories and rumors from the customers. Someone said there's a person outside of town who can conjure up rain, and I've heard the baker's daughter has superhuman strength. People even say that when something disappears, it's the work of someone turning invisible with their special power, and they tell tales of a man who uses his free control of chains to kidnap villagers night after night."

I couldn't hear every word over the other voices in the room, but I was a bit surprised to learn that Arthur was privy to all kinds of rumors.

"What else?" Arthur mused. "Besides my dad, I've met people with all kinds of powers. There was one who can make water evaporate, one who has perfect aim with firearms, one who can grow her own hair at will... Then there's the common stuff, like making fire and ice, controlling plants, long-distance communication, and treating injuries. I've heard totally baseless rumors too, like that some people can make rainbows, turn into birds, cure diseases, or even turn their hands into guns."

Prime Minister Gilbert nodded along as Arthur rattled off a list of alleged powers. He didn't stop at Arthur, though. He struck up conversations with several other knights, all seemingly innocent, yet something about it was

unsettling.

Back in the present, Stale told me, “Please don’t let your guard down around Gilbert. I don’t want you seeing him anymore unless I’m with you.”

Even though we were completely alone in the hall, I couldn’t believe Stale could do something as rude as refer to the prime minister without his title. In the game, Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert were actually pretty close. They even teamed up together to support the kingdom.

Wait. What was that just now?! They teamed up to support the kingdom?!

I gasped. An intense sense of déjà vu overtook me whenever I got near Prime Minister Gilbert, but now it felt even stronger. Until this moment, I’d completely forgotten his role in the game, but his connection to Stale in ORL suddenly barreled into me. *So he was a character in the game too?!*

I dug for more, any other memories that might help me make sense of this revelation, but I met nothing but static.

Gah! I really need to remember this part!

I snapped out of my daze as Stale was shaking my shoulders. I abruptly reached out and grabbed his hand, giving it a tight squeeze, and he flinched.

“Stale, can you teleport us to Prime Minister Gilbert’s location right now?”

“What?” Stale’s eyes widened.

Two years ago, Stale could only teleport things lighter than his own body weight. But now he could teleport anything equal to his own weight plus another adult. He could even teleport to a specific person’s location even if he didn’t know exactly where they were. He did need to have a strong connection with the target—meeting them multiple times, speaking with them, and getting a sense of their character beforehand. For example, he could teleport to Pride when she whistled or snapped or to Tiara the moment she let out a cry of distress, no matter where we were. Hopefully, the Stale here in front of me could do the same with Prime Minister Gilbert.

“I believe I can, but where did this come from?”

“There’s something I need to confirm,” I said. “Please, Stale. Please do this for

me. And try not to let him see us if possible.”

Stale barely hesitated before nodding. “Our maids, guards, and even Tiara are waiting for us out in the hall.”

Without another word, he set a hand on my shoulder, and we vanished in a blink.

“I’ve had enough of you, Gilbert!”

When the world reappeared, Father’s shouts filled our ears. We were standing at the door to his room. He must have ordered his guards away because it was just me and Stale in the hall.

“I could get us in there, but I think they’d see us,” Stale whispered.

Guilty as I felt about eavesdropping, I had to agree. Instead, we hunkered down to listen. I definitely didn’t expect to hear them in the middle of an argument, but I felt like it might help fill in the gaps in my memory.

“I simply don’t understand what I’ve done wrong, Your Royal Highness.”

“Why must you stubbornly drag Pride into all this?! You’ve never stopped ever since she and Stale signed their subordination contract.”

Prime Minister Gilbert kept his voice calm even as Father grew increasingly intense.

“I would agree that my previous treatment of Princess Pride was uncalled for. I apologize for my actions. I was merely a little on edge at the time,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “However, our conversation this time bloomed entirely naturally. It was nothing untoward.”

Have to disagree with you on that. You practically cornered me, Prime Minister.

“My dream has languished for two long years,” he went on. “When I learned your beloved daughter would inherit the throne, when she received her precognition...we quickly located Prince Stale thanks to his extraordinary power.” I could easily picture his oily smile as he spoke. His smooth tone wound through me like a viper, cunning and deadly.

“Aside from Stale’s age and gender, the other requirement was that his

special power had to be exceptional or unusual. I explained to you back then that this was nothing like searching for an extremely limited power such as your own.”

Extremely limited power. Stale and I exchanged a look.

So that was what his Special Power Registration Bill was all about—finding more people like Stale with extraordinary special powers. If the government had all that information, they could track down anyone with a special power whenever they wanted.

Prime Minister Gilbert’s voice rose in pitch, growing frantic. “Of course, I’m sure none of you are cutting corners when it comes to searching for people with special powers, particularly someone with the power I’m seeking. I appreciate that diligence ever so much, sire. Why, you’ve used the people’s tax money on that search, and all for someone who isn’t even a member of the royal family! It is yet another example of how kind you royals are! You even let that boy, Prince Stale, write letters to his mother!”

His tone dropped then, sounding almost conspiratorial. “Did you realize back then that I’d already been proposing my bill for two years? Then, as now, it never gained any traction. You were just as unwilling as the others to bend, yet a few days of constant begging from your daughter Princess Pride and you folded to her whims.” His hatred and rage were palpable even through the heavy door. I wanted to cover my ears and shrink away, but Stale was watching me, a question in his eyes.

“A few days of constant begging?” he whispered, blinking.

Oh no. Is he angry?

“Quiet down! You know that must be kept in absolute secrecy,” Father snapped.

But Prime Minister Gilbert cracked right back. “Of course I know that! That’s why I’ve never said a word! Yet despite my loyalty all these years, you’ve never actually kept your promise to find that power. You said the two of us were your dear friends, citizens you’d sworn to protect. How foolish of me to believe you. I just wanted to repay my gratitude by serving as the prime minister, but what’s come of it? Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Prime Minister Gilbert's voice faltered, growing quiet. Father didn't say a word. In the silence that followed, the only sound that reached us from the other side of the door was the prime minister's ragged breaths. Eventually, Father spoke again.

"Gilbert, I understand your pain. Rosa and I are doing everything we can—"

"How could you ever understand?!"

I covered my ears out of reflex. His voice echoed down the hall. Even with all the guards sent away, someone surely heard that roar.

"What the hell could you possibly know, Albert?! You think you understand my pain—or *hers*?!"

Something thudded within the room. It could have been a falling object or perhaps something hitting the wall. Grunts accompanied the scuffle, making it clear that Prime Minister Gilbert and my father were fighting in there.

Who is he talking about?!

"Arthur Beresford, the boy I met at the accolade!" Prime Minister Gilbert shouted. "He'd heard rumors of that power! It really does exist, Albert. Someone really *does* have that power! If the whole kingdom comes together in search of it, we'll—"

"Calm yourself, Gilbert!" Father said. "Those rumors have existed for more than a hundred years! You should know that better than anyone."

"Then what should I do?! Tell me, Albert! How can I save her?! How do I find that power?!" All his cunning and charisma were gone now, replaced with a desperate wail—it was almost as if his own life were on the line.

"We've told you over and over. We're adding more men to the search party every single year, and whenever Rosa and I travel to another country, we always ask about ways we can help her that don't require a special power. We just haven't found an answer yet. But one day, if we keep looking, I'm sure—"

"It's been seven years! Seven years, Albert!"

Another thud, maybe a body hitting a wall. The next time Prime Minister Gilbert spoke, he nearly growled.

“What about her?! What about Marianne? She doesn’t have much time left...” The prime minister’s voice trailed off into silence. There was a softer thunk, as though he’d sunk to his knees on the floor.

“You still can’t find it? Why not? Every time we find more special powers, we seem to get closer, so how have you still not found it?” A sob distorted his final words.

“Gilbert...”

“Just...just one! If you just found one person...!”

Finally, Prime Minister Gilbert gave one last desperate, pained scream.

“Just one person with the power to cure diseases...”

That was the moment the dormant memories inside me finally came rushing to the surface.

“Found you!”

Someone was smiling, but their curved lips were taut and unsettling.

“Y-Your Majesty?! Wh-why are you here?!”

Prime Minister Gilbert stood frozen in shock. His face drained of color; his hands trembled at his sides.

“Day after day, you’ve been bombarding me with this ridiculous proposal,” Pride said. This was the Pride of the game, the same Pride who terrorized the people of Freesia until the love interests finally put an end to her. “You stirred up trouble at the assembly today too. If this bill of yours really became law, wouldn’t other people with special powers get all the attention, and my power wouldn’t be so special anymore?”

Pride brushed her wavy red hair back. She smirked down at Prime Minister Gilbert, who knelt at someone’s bedside.

“Gilbert,” she went on, “there are no secrets allowed in my castle. This isn’t a storage room for commoners. Oh, right, you’re the prime minister now. So sorry.”

This is me. This horrible girl...is me.

“Your Majesty, please hear me out,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “This girl... Marianne is here for a reason. The previous queen and prince consort allowed her to stay here.”

“I know. I had Stale look into it already.”

The prime minister paled further.

This Pride is still young. Even younger than I am right now.

“This person suffers from a very unusual illness,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “I assure you, there’s no risk of—”

“No risk of contagion, right? That’s why Mother and Father let you keep her around?” Her childlike voice clashed with the malice lurking beneath every word.

“Exactly!” Prime Minister Gilbert’s gaze shot up, full of hope. *I’ve never seen him like this.*

“Hmm, no, I don’t care for this at all. I don’t want my precious castle to be sullied by this lump of germs.” Pride sneered at the woman in the bed. I couldn’t make out the woman’s face amid the bright light in the room, but I could tell she was horribly, horribly pale, nearly as white as her crisp sheets. Was she even still alive?

“Germs?!” cried Prime Minister Gilbert.

The girl pressed on, devoid of mercy. “No one knows what made her sick, and they don’t know how to cure it either, isn’t that right? Then why shouldn’t we just get rid of her?”

“No!”

The prime minister threw himself at Pride and clung to her. She brushed him aside like a bug, turning instead to the boy at her side.

“Stale, dispose of these germs.”

“No, please wait!”

Prime Minister Gilbert grabbed her arm. Even under the heat of Pride’s glare,

he pushed on in his desperation. “There’s still a means to save her,” he insisted. His gaze was piercing as he stared back at the girl, unblinking.

“The answer is the Special Power Registration Bill I’ve been proposing! If you would just help push it through and turn it into law, I could find someone who could cure her. Please, I just need a little more time.”

“Pfft!” Pride snorted. “Aha ha ha ha ha! Now *that’s* funny! A special power that cures diseases? That’s obviously just a rumor.”

She couldn’t stop laughing. Her laugh was childlike and lacking in grace as she mocked the man before her.

“That’s not true!” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “The people of our kingdom possess all kinds of special powers. Many can heal the wounded, so somebody out there must have the power I’m seeking. Somebody out there can save her!”

Despite the mockery, Prime Minister Gilbert pushed on. But Pride—I—just kept laughing in the face of his pleas.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha! Ah, how funny. Very well. I’ll enact that law for you, and I’ll let you keep your germs.” It was hard to believe that laughter was coming from a young girl. The unnerving aura she gave off made her look monstrous.

“Really?!” the prime minister said, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “Do you mean it?!”

“However,” Pride cut in, “you’ll have to continue to serve as the prime minister and take on my late father’s share of the work as well. If you can do all of that without a word of complaint, then in five years, I’ll have your proposal enacted into law at the assembly.”

But that’s impossible! The offices of prime minister and prince consort both entailed a wide range of duties. Either one of those jobs would be burdensome to many; no one could hope to take on both.

And yet, the prime minister leapt to the challenge. “Of course. I, Gilbert Butler, shall pour my entire heart and soul into fulfilling both duties.”

He clasped his hands together and bowed as though in prayer, thanking Pride over and over.

That won't be enough to save her. Plus, enacting that law will cause suffering for so many people, including you. Please, Prime Minister Gilbert, don't do this. You'll be the one who regrets it the most in the end.

Prime Minister Gilbert, Prime Minister Gilbert, Prime Minister Gilbert, Prime... Mini...

Pri...

"Pride, are you well?"

Stale's eyebrows knitted together as he peered at me. I shook my head, trying to play off my momentary confusion. Worried, he remarked that I looked pale today, but I tried to casually brush it off.

"I'm fine, Stale. I just didn't sleep very well last night."

"What did you dream about, Big Sister? If you had a nightmare, you should tell us." This time, it was Tiara gazing at me fretfully.

"Thank you. I believe I did, but unfortunately, I don't remember much," I said. "Maybe it was because I had trouble falling asleep."

The conversation between Father and Prime Minister Gilbert had replayed in my mind as I tried to fall asleep. I'd tossed and turned for some time before drifting off, but the next thing I could remember was waking up. By the time I awoke, my face was wet with tears and I had no idea why.

"Was it about Gilbert?" Stale whispered, perceptive as always. I nodded my head just a little.

After eavesdropping on that conversation yesterday, Stale and I teleported away and met back up with Tiara. We swore to each other that we'd never tell what we'd heard. Still, Prime Minister Gilbert's desperate cries clung to my thoughts.

Plus, there was that horrible memory... I'd experienced a similar sensation with Arthur. The moment I remembered one critical detail about him, more hit me like a wave. Now I had to contend with all this new information about the prime minister. This would be a lot harder than it was with Arthur. Gilbert

Butler wasn't merely the prime minister—he was also a love interest in ORL.

He wasn't just any romanceable character either. You could only unlock his route by finishing every other route in the game. Whereas Stale excelled in scheming, Prime Minister Gilbert was a master tactician. When it came to deception, information gathering, and enacting plans, no one could match him. In the game, he gathered all the love interests and Tiara to take on Pride, the only person he couldn't manipulate.

For a romanceable character, Gilbert's route was somewhat unique. It wasn't a shock that I'd forgotten he was romanceable. Besides being hidden, his route also contained almost no actual romance. Every other love interest shared at least a kiss with Tiara, but Gilbert never did more than kiss the back of her hand. There was no love confession, no grand gestures. He didn't seem to pursue Tiara at all. In fact, the sheltered Tiara herself had to pull him along, imploring him to show her the place he found most beautiful in the whole world.

Additionally, his route was short. With so little content, it felt more like a side story than a full-fledged route, probably because it was a secret route. Not to mention, well, Gilbert appeared *far* older than any other love interest. Incidentally, he looked completely different than he did in the game, even more so than Arthur.

In the game, we got occasional glimpses of Prime Minister Gilbert's thirteen-year-old self. He appeared as the mysterious boy, "Gil," and he gradually revealed his true identity and the darkness lurking in his heart due to his tragic past. Though his route contained mere crumbs of romance, his past alone was incredibly detailed.

Prime Minister Gilbert was born into a life of poverty. In Freesia, however, one could climb the social ladder if they had a special power. Gilbert's was "age control," and between that and his extreme work ethic and talents, he overcame the circumstances of his birth to make it all the way to the rank of prime minister.

All of it was just to be with her.

His fiancée.

She was always a sickly girl. She fell ill a few years after Gilbert was made prime minister. Her symptoms grew from difficulty breathing and constant body chills all the way to loss of mobility in her arms and legs. This rare disease existed only in Freesia. The queen and prince consort agreed to help hide the woman deep within the castle while Gilbert searched frantically for a cure.

Two years later, when the queen and prince consort died in the game, Pride took over as the new queen and learned of the sheltered fiancée. That was when she forged a deal with Gilbert, the same deal that forced him to take on the additional duties of prince consort. Alongside Stale, Gilbert ended up largely responsible for governing the kingdom while Pride enjoyed a life of luxury. Five years later, Pride kept her promise to enact Gilbert's bill into law, but the very next day, his fiancée died.

That was only the beginning of his suffering.

Pride used Gilbert's law to abuse her citizens' special powers. She enacted an even more severe law, one that resulted in mass bloodshed throughout the kingdom.

Bereft of his love, Prime Minister Gilbert languished in a state of shock. His special power bounced him between only two stages of life—an old man and the thirteen-year-old boy who'd first met his fiancée.

Unlocking the secret route gave the player one new choice at the beginning—to have Tiara flee from the solitary tower where Pride had imprisoned her. Tiara would escape through a window using a makeshift rope of curtains and bedsheets, then encounter the enigmatic "Gil." With his help, she'd make it to the town beyond the castle and learn about Gil in the meantime. This all unlocked one new ending cutscene in which Tiara smiled at Gil as he transformed into his true age once again.

Some fans theorized that Gil loved Tiara because she reminded him of his fiancée, the only other person to call him "Gil." Tiara overlooked his social status and showed him compassion unrestrained by social conventions.

At the end of the route, Gil said: "After everything that happened, I never even found anyone with a special power that could cure diseases."

Tiara clutched at the hem of his shirt, eyes shining with tears. Though striking,

the scene made me think more of siblings or a parent and child than lovers. I could also imagine it as a subtle, mature romance if I really tried.

Having all of this information suddenly at my disposal, I knew I had to buy as much time as I could to save Prime Minister Gilbert's fiancée. If things went the way they did in the game, she would die five years after Mother and Father perished on the day the law passed.

That was this year.

I gulped. I'd only gone to the lawmaking assembly twice, including this year. Still, I understood that even if a law passed the assembly, there was lag time. The government had to inform the citizens, and there would be preparations to carry out. Then the law could be ratified at last. The whole process took somewhere between a week and a month.

With the assembly going on just yesterday, I had one month at the most to save Prime Minister Gilbert's fiancée. But I could have as little as a week. Judging by what I'd heard, his fiancée didn't have much time left to begin with.

"What's going on?" Tiara asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I keep hearing something loud coming from the castle."

She was right. When I focused, I picked up the loud footsteps of maids, butlers, and servants mixed with voices calling out for someone. It was strange to hear the castle, much less the royal residence where we spent our days, so active.

"Pride! Stale! Tiara!"

Father rushed toward us, out of breath and flanked by guards. He was usually alone when he met us, so his entourage was alarming.

"Father. What's going on?" I said.

"Gilbert," he panted, raising his head to look at us. "Have you seen Prime Minister Gilbert?"

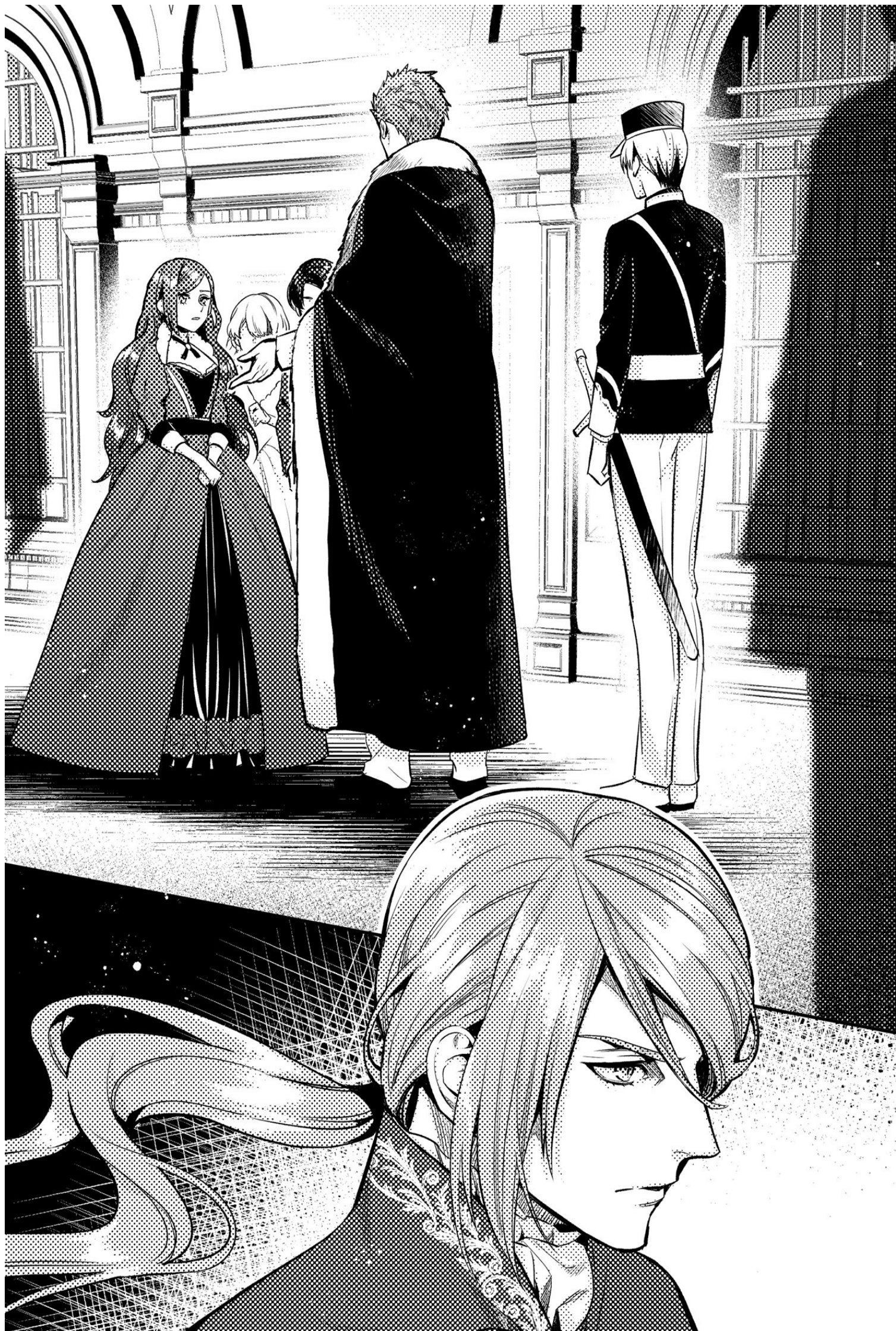
Prime Minister Gilbert?! Oh no. What's happened since yesterday?

I hadn't seen him, of course, nor had Stale or Tiara. Father sighed and shook his head.

“I see,” he said. “Listen, I want the three of you to go back to your rooms right away.”

He ordered his guards to escort us as we exchanged confused glances.

“Father, what’s the matter?” Stale piped up. “What’s happened with Prime Minister Gilbert?” The boy’s eyes narrowed a bit when he addressed the prime minister by his title.



“He’s been missing since this morning,” Father replied. “He’s not anywhere inside the castle. Everyone’s looking for him right now.”

I see. I silently nodded back at Father.

“Of course,” he went on, “it’s always possible he left on his own without permission. Anyway, until we know what’s happened, or until he returns, you are not to leave your bedrooms.”

I understood Father’s caution. A missing prime minister could mean a trespasser or even a kidnapping. Still, I called out, “Father! Please let Stale and Tiara stay in my room with me!”

“I’m worried about her,” Stale said.

“I’d feel better with my big brother and sister,” Tiara added.

Their instant commiseration helped sway Father, and I whispered my thanks as the guards ushered us on. Naturally, the security was much tighter than usual, as three members of the royal family were all gathered in one place.

We reached my bedroom. Ten guards stood outside my window, while our usual guards were posted outside the door. Thankfully, they let us be alone inside my room at least, even though my maids, Mary and Lotte, and my personal guard, Jack, stayed with us.

My heavy curtains were all pulled shut, and the room felt unbearably stuffy. Stale, Tiara, and I sat down on the carpet to write out messages atop thick books in place of tabletops. It was our best shot at communicating unobstructed.

“Big Brother, did I do the right thing by not telling Father you were able to teleport to Prime Minister Gilbert?” Tiara wrote.

Stale, his face expressionless, scribbled a response. *“Yes, thank you for keeping your promise, Tiara. Thank you too, Pride.”* We both nodded and smiled.

The three of us, along with Arthur, had made a promise. Arthur had also vowed that day to keep Stale’s secret. “I want to keep a card up my sleeve in case I ever need it,” Stale had told us.

“What should I do now, Pride?” Stale wrote. In other words, he wanted to know if he should use his special power to find Gilbert.

I thought for a bit, then wrote back, *“Let’s see how things go.”*

If someone had abducted Prime Minister Gilbert, the guards should take care of that instead of a bunch of kids. Maybe they’d even call in the knights. But the prime minister might have left of his own volition, and with good reason. If we intervened, we could make things worse for him. Stale and Tiara both nodded when they read my message.

“I really hope Prime Minister Gilbert is okay,” Tiara wrote.

Tiara’s handwriting lacked its usual strength. Even her face was clouded with sadness. But Stale didn’t hesitate in scribbling out a response.

“Me too. But I’m also worried he could be up to no good.”

That was Stale for you—never going easy on the man. Still, he could be right. Prime Minister Gilbert had acted beyond strange and suspicious yesterday.

Tiara, not knowing what Stale and I had done, cocked her head and murmured in confusion. Stale looked at me before revealing anything to our sister. We hadn’t told her at first, but she was a princess, after all. She deserved an explanation. I nodded at Stale, and he began writing it all out. Tiara trailed his words with her eyes.

I was touched that the two of them deferred to me for this kind of decision. They often followed my lead without question, leaving decisions up to me—just like they had when I’d suggested we all stick together in one room. I knew they’d put just as much care into listening to our citizens if one of them took the throne someday.

By contrast, the Pride of the game world never listened to anyone around her. She commanded everything—taxes, executions, wars, alliances, disputes, punishments, laws. If she’d just been willing to listen to the people around her, people like Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert...

Wait!

A dreadful, *dreadful* chill shivered through me. My hands started to tremble

before I even knew why.

She decided everything by herself...

All of my previous assumptions were collapsing. A cold sweat prickled on my neck.

Prime Minister Gilbert's fiancée died the day after the Special Power Registration Law went into effect. He also formed his promise with Pride on the day of the assembly five years earlier. Then that meant...

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!

I whipped my head up, slapped my hands over my mouth, and froze in place. Stale and Tiara leaned in toward me, trying to get me to tell them what was wrong, but I couldn't respond even if I wanted to.

That's right! The evil, selfish last boss queen would never listen to anyone else's opinion or care how she hurt her people. If she wanted someone killed, they'd be killed on the spot. If she wanted to dissolve an alliance, it would be gone that very day. If she wanted war, preparations would start the same afternoon. That's the kind of queen she—no, I—was. A queen like that wouldn't bother waiting a whole month or even a week. If she made up her mind to pass that law, it would get enacted the same day. Even if that terrible law that haunted the prime minister was agreed to outside the conference, it would go into effect on the spot! But that means...

Prime Minister Gilbert's fiancée was going to die today.

"So this is the local town..."

Standing atop a building with the wind rustling my long, crimson coat, I could see the entire settlement beyond the castle grounds. I'd seen the town from my carriage before, but that view didn't compare to getting this close.

"Pride, this should be a safe spot to observe from. Here, get down a little," Stale said, tugging on my hand.

Seeing as my outfit was so loud, Stale was right to caution me to stay hidden. I'd covered my face with a cloth, but the color of my clothing still stood out

compared to Stale's black uniform. I crouched down beside him, ensuring that cloth covered most of my face.

After my revelation, I'd apologized to my concerned siblings and excused my actions as a premonition—Prime Minister Gilbert was trying to save his fiancée, Marianne, but she was going to die today.

Stale quickly teleported to confirm the prime minister's location, then Lotte and Mary helped me change into clothes better suited to movement. Stale changed as well, teleporting out to his training room only to return in his black uniform and wielding two fencing practice blades.

We had to get Lotte, Mary, and the guard, Jack, to let us sneak out of the room. But it was hard explaining how we could reach Prime Minister Gilbert without revealing the secret trick to Stale's power. In the end, we simply said we couldn't explain right now. Jack dug in his heels at first, but Tiara agreed to stay behind, and I promised to stick with Stale.

Eventually, with all three of us begging, Jack relented. That was no small concession. If something happened to us or we ended up in trouble, Jack would be the one in the biggest trouble. He knew that even better than me, but I swore to myself I'd find a way to reward him, to reward all three of them, once we resolved this issue with Prime Minister Gilbert.

"Whatever you say, Your Highness, we'll always believe you," Lotte and Mary said.

I could never repay their kindness. Not only were they taking a risk for me, but Mary and Lotte had even given me a handmade battle uniform to wear, one they'd sewn a week or so after the accolade per Tiara's request. It consisted of shorts over leggings and a long red coat that covered me from neck to toe. It reminded me of Arthur's knight uniform. Stale's was a different color, but both outfits resembled knight's uniforms from the main forces. Even Arthur was quite surprised when he saw them for the first time.

When Stale and I readied to leave the bedroom, I lingered for a moment. I implored Lotte, Mary, Jack, and Tiara to try to explain if someone came looking for us. They would say I'd forced them to do this by threatening them. While all four looked uncomfortable with this notion, they did eventually comply, and

Stale and I swore we'd return soon.

Then we'd vanished, only to reappear on this roof.

"Pride, do you see that?" Stale pointed, and I looked down to find none other than Prime Minister Gilbert, surrounded by a group of outlaws.

"Gilbert was alone when I first teleported here," Stale whispered.

That meant the men must have gathered in only the few minutes between Stale's discovery and our return to this roof.

"So, we can have anything we want if we find the special power you're after?" one of the outlaws asked.

While Prime Minister Gilbert dressed like us, with a long robe and a face covering, many of the men around him wore only pants. It left their muscular chests exposed. At a glance, they appeared to be hard men, the sort who lived tough lives and got in their fair share of fights along the way.

"That's right," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "If I can deliver it, it's yours."

The men got right to the point, demanding proof of payment, and Prime Minister Gilbert showed them a small bag of jangling coins. Smiles and chuckles rippled through the group as the men beheld a sum that could likely change their lives out here in the streets.

"I'll vouch for this guy," one of the outlaws said. "He always pays up since he's a big shot up in the castle."

A man with tattoos curling down both arms barked out a laugh, plucking a cigar from his mouth to say, "But this time, it's a real chunk o' change." He looked like the kind of guy who would've worked in a flashy underground casino in my past life.

"This money goes to the first person to bring me someone with the special power I seek," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "If you require any reward other than money, I will arrange that as well."

He then stowed the bag of coins back inside his robes.

"I'll leave the details up to you," he continued. "I don't care about your means. Even if you obtain the information in some unsavory ways, it's no

concern to me. If you can deliver, you'll get your money."

I see. So this was his plan. I had to hand it to him—the outlaws might have the knowledge and connections to get the job done. Plus, they weren't restricted by the law. The prime minister had stated quite clearly that he didn't care how they got the information, even if they had to resort to something like human trafficking. I clenched my fists and watched the men press Prime Minister Gilbert for more information on the power he sought.

"I seek a special power that will cure diseases," he said. "Whoever brings me the owner of such a power will have whatever reward he requests."

The outlaws burst into laughter, clutching their sides before the prime minister even finished his offer.

"Bwa ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"What's so funny?!" Prime Minister Gilbert demanded, but no one quieted down.

"The power to cure diseases?! What fairy tale did you lift that from?!"

"This guy sure acts big for someone tryin' to chase down ghosts!"

"You sure you don't mean someone who can heal wounds, Mr. Big Shot? Or is this request coming from the famous Little Miss Bossy Princess up in the castle?"

The prime minister's hands shook with rage. Honestly, I didn't entirely disagree with the men mocking him. Many of those with special powers could heal wounds, but curing diseases was different. We had no records of such a power even existing, confining it mostly to the realm of rumor and fiction. It was like asking for a wizard instead of a palm reading.

"You won't even attempt it?!" Prime Minister Gilbert said.

The tattooed man raised his eyebrows. "Are you tellin' me the power you've been after all this time is the power to cure diseases? Come on, you can't be serious about this."

Some of the outlaws had left altogether; others were still chuckling to themselves.

“If you won’t help me look, then we’re finished here,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “I’ll take my business elsewhere!” He turned on his heel and started striding away.

“Wait a minute,” one man cut in. “You made us come all the way out here, so leave that bag here before you go.” He grinned, toothy and sharp as a knife. The tattooed man just shook his head and walked off.

“Certainly not. This is reward money, and you haven’t earned it.” Prime Minister Gilbert set his feet and clenched his jaw in the face of the muscular ruffian, refusing to back down. But the man raised a fist and someone shouted “Get ‘im!” and Prime Minister Gilbert...

...didn’t even flinch.

He dodged the punch almost casually, then grabbed the man’s wrist and flung him through the air. The man struck a wall with a heavy thud. The rest of the outlaws froze in shock after witnessing the prime minister flick aside a man three times his size.

I’d never witnessed the prime minister fighting, but I couldn’t say I was shocked. A man in his position certainly had to study self-defense. And he was such a hard worker that he definitely hadn’t slacked off in that regard.

Now, with barely a glance toward the man groaning on the ground, Prime Minister Gilbert turned and headed for the mouth of the alley.

“Why, you...!”

Another man rushed at him, brandishing a knife. He leapt at the prime minister, who slapped the knife out of the man’s hand with a quick strike. He followed up with a knee straight to the solar plexus, and the man doubled over in pain, sinking to the floor.

“I’m in a hurry,” Prime Minister Gilbert said coldly. “I don’t have time to fight you one by one. If you’re serious, then come at me together, or don’t come at all!”

The men held back a moment, sharing confused glances. Then they roared, charging together. Prime Minister Gilbert knocked out man after man, clearly taking out his anger and frustration on the hapless outlaws. He kneed another

in the gut, then chopped a man's neck to send him reeling.

Amazing. I bet these men are stronger than the ambushers I defeated at the cliffs two years ago.

"You bastard!"

Only three men remained. One was stirring on the ground, grabbing at Prime Minister Gilbert's legs. He hugged his ankles, forcing Prime Minister Gilbert to strike downward. But as he did, the two remaining men rushed him, knives in hand.

"Stale!" I cried.

As soon as I grabbed Stale's hand and squeezed, he teleported us directly above the men. We plummeted down on top of them, throwing them to the ground with us. I grabbed one man's arms, while Stale held his blade at the other's throat, preventing him from moving.

"What are *you* doing here?!" Prime Minister Gilbert gasped.

"We came here to find you," Stale said coolly. "I could ask what you were up to, but that won't be necessary." Stale struck one attacker as he spoke, knocking him out. Then he choked the man I'd immobilized until he fell unconscious too.

"Why are you dressed like that?!" Prime Minister Gilbert said. "How did you know where I was?"

"My elder sister had a vision, and I searched every alley with my teleportation until I found you." Stale brushed the dust from his clothes and lied to Prime Minister Gilbert as easily as taking a breath. He then pushed his glasses up and shot a piercing glare at the prime minister. "She told me she had something to say to you, so I brought her here with me."

Even with cloth covering his mouth, Prime Minister Gilbert went pale. "Wait just a moment," he said. "I apologize for fleeing the castle and involving myself with this group of scoundrels! I'll accept punishment for my actions, if necessary. But please, I beg of you, grant me time. I need more time!" He shrank back as he talked, perhaps trying to get out of Stale's range.

“Prime Minister, please calm down and listen to me,” I said. “I had a premonition. Your fiancée, Marianne, is going to pass away today.”

Prime Minister Gilbert halted, all the blood draining from his face. Then he rushed toward me, forgetting his fear.

“Even if your Special Power Registration Law went into effect or you convinced outlaws to help you, you still wouldn’t find the special power you need in time,” I told him.

Perhaps it was cruel to lay out the truth so bluntly, but I needed him to understand. In the game, his law never turned up a single person who could cure diseases.

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“It’s my precognition. I’ve seen it.”

Prime Minister Gilbert tried to grab my shoulders, but Stale thrust his sword between us, keeping him back. “Don’t touch my sister, you brute.” Stale’s voice was just as sharp as his blade. He positioned himself between us with his sword at Prime Minister Gilbert’s neck.

“Marianne...” Prime Minister Gilbert murmured, withering to the ground.

“Prime Minister, please calm down and listen to m—”

“Prince Stale!” he interjected. “Please teleport me back to the castle! Hurry! If you don’t, I won’t be able to see her!”

Even as Stale threatened him with his sword, Prime Minister Gilbert ignored my entreaties and begged for help.

Stale glared down, unmoved. “You tried to change the kingdom’s laws for personal gain, abandoned your post as Father’s assistant without permission, left the castle to commune with criminals, ordered them to search by any means...”

Stale sneered, not an iota of mercy in his cold face. “You even offered them gifts on top of the money. What if, in exchange for the power to cure diseases, they’d asked for top-secret information? What if they were after Mother, Father, me, Tiara...or even Elder Sister? Would you have even hesitated to give

them what they wanted, Gilbert?” Stale narrowed his eyes, the tip of his sword pressing harder against the hollow of Prime Minister Gilbert’s throat. I called out for him, but Stale ignored me as well.

“There’s so much more I want to say to you,” he went on. “But let me ask you one thing. You said you wanted to return to the castle. Will you confess to your crimes and return as a criminal? I’d be happy to teleport you to the dungeon. Or are you going to deny your crimes and get off with a scolding from Father? If so, you’ll have to walk back to the castle. If your fiancée is the cause of all your evil, then I could—”

“Stale!” I raised my voice, refusing to be ignored this time.

Stale’s shoulders lurched, as if he’d just realized what he was saying. He pressed his fingers to the frame of his glasses, then finally faced me. Anger tightened his lips and jaw, but something shimmered in his eyes. Seeing his expression, I nearly backed away from him.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Gilbert waited, frozen and clenching his fists. He murmured “Marianne” over and over in a hoarse, trembling voice.

“Why, Pride? Why are you showing this man mercy?” Stale said.

Leather groaned as he tightened his grip on his sword. The slightest twitch could end the prime minister here and now. I moved cautiously, touching Stale’s hand to encourage him to lower his blade.

What should I do? Those eyes, that look... I remember them from the game. He looks just like he did when Pride ordered him to kill his mother.

“Why?!” Stale said. “He was willing to sacrifice you and anyone else! He didn’t even care if he destroyed the kingdom or snuffed out people’s lives in the process.”

“I’m sorry, Stale,” I said. “But Prime Minister Gilbert is—”

“I’ll tell you what this man is,” Stale shouted over me. “He’s a liar and a snake! This whole time, he’s been one of the grown-ups trying to manipulate you and push you out of the way! This whole time, he...” Stale trailed off and clenched his teeth, clearly holding back tears.

I couldn't bear to see him like that. I reached out, gently pulling him into a hug and stroking his hair when he leaned against me.

"I'm sorry, Stale," I said. "But I love all the people of my kingdom, including him."

When he heard that, Stale dropped his sword with a loud *clang* and squeezed me tightly.

"That man... He's been hurting you. For years, he's been damaging you and your reputation over and over and over again. You just didn't know it. It's all his fault."

I held Stale through his confession, spoken in a voice choked with tears. Suddenly, it all made sense. He hated Prime Minister Gilbert for my sake.

"Thank you, Stale. All this time, you've been protecting me in ways I never even knew, haven't you?"

Stale didn't respond, but his arms went slack around me. When he finally pulled away, the poison of anger had drained from his body. He removed his fogged-up glasses to scrub at his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

Thank goodness. He's back to normal.

I turned back to Prime Minister Gilbert and found him collapsed on the ground. When I crouched beside him, I could hear him still whispering the name "Marianne."

"Prime Minister, we're going to use Stale's power to send you—"

"Your Highness." He jerked up and grabbed my arm.

Stale instantly stepped in close, but I shook my head to hold him back.

"I'm prepared to accept punishment," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "But as for Marianne..."

I knew where this was going already: *"Please don't let her name be sullied as well."* He latched on to me, his composure fully broken as tears clung to the corners of his eyes, which were wild with desperation. Normally composed and

cool, he was now gripped by a sort of madness—a frantic, flailing urgency. I wasn't sure I could reach him, but I had to try. Grief had stripped him of his usual capacity for reason.

"Listen to me, Gilbert Butler," I said.

I cupped his face and made him look me in the eyes. He seemed prepared for a death sentence, but he met my gaze steadfastly.

"I won't be punishing you or your fiancée."

"What...?" He blinked, mouth hanging open.

"However, there will be conditions. I want you to take us to your fiancée, and you must follow my every order while you do."

He nodded as I spoke, never taking those almond-shaped eyes off of me.

"Stale, teleport the prime minister to the castle, then take the two of us back to my bedroom. Prime Minister, as soon as you've informed the castle officials that you're safe, come to my room."

He steeled himself, continuing to nod his assent. Stale furrowed his brow, but he reached out to the prime minister and teleported him back to the castle. Once he returned, he wiped his palm on his jacket before taking my hand.

"I apologize for my actions earlier," he said, looking down at the ground.

I set a hand upon his cheek, drawing his gaze back up. "I appreciate that you were concerned for my sake."

He swallowed, eyes darting to the side as a shy smile stole across his lips. I understood his anger, even if I didn't know all the details. He had every right to hate Prime Minister Gilbert, but with my memories of ORL, I couldn't help but sympathize with the prime minister's misfortune. The man had already suffered more than Stale could ever know.

I squeezed Stale's hand, and he returned the gesture. The very next instant, the view before my eyes switched from the alleyway to my bedroom.

"Your Highness!"

"Big Sister! Big Brother!"

Lotte, Mary, Jack, and Tiara cried out the second we reappeared.

“I’m sorry to have frightened you all, but we’re safe and sound.”

I gave Tiara a hug and smiled at the others. All four returned the gesture with obvious relief.

“How is Prime Minister Gilbert?” Tiara asked.

Before I could answer, a commotion sounded just outside the door.

“Prime Minister?! Where have you been?!”

“Wait a moment, Prime Minister! We’ve been searching for you!”

Footsteps stomped toward my room. I ran for the door just as Jack threw it open. Prime Minister Gilbert stood panting for breath just outside my room, flanked by wide-eyed guards.

“Princess Pride!” Prime Minister Gilbert cried out.

“The prime minister has made it back safely,” I announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Then, just as Father instructed, the rest of us can now leave this room!”

The moment those words left my lips, Stale and I bolted. I grabbed the prime minister’s hand and dragged him away with us.

“Stale, teleport me somewhere,” I said. “While I’m gone, have Prime Minister Gilbert take you to Marianne. Come back for me as soon as you make it there.”

“Understood. But, Pride, where are you going?”

I notified Stale of my destination, but I didn’t have time to explain. In the game, Gil said his fiancée died “with the last rays of sunlight.” Through the windows, the sunset burned along the horizon, lighting the sky in flares of red. We didn’t have much time.

“But why *there* of all places?!” Stale shouted.

The prime minister had no time for our debate. “This way, Prince Stale!” He ran off in the opposite direction.

Stale clicked his tongue and linked his hand with mine.

“I’m sorry, Stale. I’m always asking so much of you...” I knew how little Stale wanted to work with the prime minister, but I had no choice.

He just smiled in return. “Nonsense. I haven’t even begun to serve you. Ask me for anything, Pride. It would be an honor to do whatever you need.”

I swallowed, processing his generous offer. *Anything I need.* I couldn’t possibly take him up on that; I’d already asked for so much. But he just stood there smiling, his expression as gentle as moonlight.

Then he teleported me away.

“Commander! Vice Commander!”

I started shouting for the men the moment I appeared on the training grounds.

“Princess Pride?!” They whipped around, regarding me with wide eyes. I couldn’t blame them; I’d appeared out of nowhere.

“I’m sorry to bother you during your training,” I told them.

“Y-Your Highness, what are you wearing?” the commander blurted. No knight had a uniform quite like mine. But I couldn’t dally in order to explain the red coat and leggings.

“I’ll tell you later. Commander, Vice Commander...”

I scanned all the practicing knights, but they were too far away to tell apart. I needed the commander and vice commander to tell me who was here today. And, more importantly, I needed their permission for what would come next.

“Where’s Arthur?” I asked. “There’s an emergency, and I need his help right away. Please find him as quickly as—”

“ARTHUR BERESFORD!”

Before I could finish, Commander Roderick’s shout boomed through the training grounds. He could have summoned a dragon off a mountaintop with a voice like that.

Both Vice Commander Clark and I covered our ears. The knights, who were practicing hand-to-hand combat, abruptly halted. One of them called out,

“Here!”

Arthur emerged from the pack, jogging toward us with his long silver ponytail swaying behind him. The commander kept his arms crossed as he and the vice commander stepped away, giving me space to address Arthur alone.

“Princess Pride?!” Arthur said. “Why are you...”

I grabbed his hand before he could protest, dragging him farther away from the training grounds. “I’ll be borrowing Arthur for a bit!” I yelled over my shoulder.

“P-Princess Pride, your hand!”

I ignored Arthur’s flustered stuttering, pulling him into a hidden passage behind a weapons storage shed. A flush lit Arthur’s face, perhaps because I’d yanked him along so quickly.

“Um...Your Highness...what is it that you need from me?”

His eyes kept flickering downward, and when I followed his gaze I saw that I still held his hand. I dropped it with a jerk.

“Arthur, I need your help. I have to save somebody. But to do that, I...I’ll have to change your life forever. I don’t know if it will be for better or worse, though.”

I felt horribly selfish even suggesting this plan, risking Arthur’s future without knowing the outcome. But still...

“Please, Arthur Beresford, I need your help.”

Arthur’s blue eyes widened as I made my plea. “What are you talking about?”

I couldn’t blame him for his hesitance. Arthur had only just achieved his dream of becoming a knight. Now I was literally and figuratively dragging him away from that, expecting him to drop everything to help me.

“You already changed my life a long time ago,” he said. Then he dropped to one knee before me, gazing up into my eyes. “I’m your knight, my princess. You can order me however you wish. I’d offer you everything, including my life.”

He accepted my request without even knowing what it is. I wanted to drop

down into his arms and cry.

“Arthur, you—”

“Pride!” I spun as Stale called out for me. I knew him instantly—even though he looked completely different.

“S-Stale?!”

My voice came out as a squeak. Stale had grown. A lot. This wasn’t the boy I’d seen just moments earlier but the seventeen-year-old Stale I knew from the game ORL. The black uniform he’d worn earlier now looked a bit too tight, and his voice was deeper than before. It felt like I was watching a glitch in the program.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “There’s no time.”

Stale, now even taller than Arthur, urged us on. When I glanced past his shoulders I saw why—the red of sunset was rapidly deepening to purple.

I have to explain everything to Arthur before we run out of time! Even as I thought it, Arthur squeezed my hand. Then he reached out for Stale as well.

“Stale, what’re you waitin’ for? Let’s go!”

I hadn’t even explained where we were going or why, yet Arthur pushed us to hurry. The moment Stale took his hand, we blinked away...and into the room where Marianne slept.

“Marianne... No, no... Please...”

A beautiful woman lay in a crisp white bed. Prime Minister Gilbert clung to her hand, hunching over the bed as he sobbed. Near the bed, three maids stood looking at the floor, averting their eyes from the grieving prime minister.

It was like she was already dead. Her eyes were open but stared up at the ceiling unseeing. They were the same peach color as her hair, a soft hue like the first light of morning. But her limbs lay limp, and her chest rose in shallow, fitful gasps. Her skin lacked color or heat, ghostly pale now. Her lips moved, but if she attempted to speak, it was not audible.

“Your Highness, what’s going on?” Arthur asked.

“That’s Gilbert and his fiancée,” Stale explained from behind me.

Arthur gazed between me and the woman on the bed, bewildered. I longed to explain, but we had so little time remaining.

“Arthur, I want you to touch that woman, Marianne,” I said.

Still holding his hand, I led him toward the bed.

Arthur blinked rapidly. “Huh?”

“Your special power isn’t limited to plants,” I said quickly. “In fact, you possess something much greater.”

Prime Minister Gilbert, still clutching his fiancée’s hand, noticed our approach at last. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but a glimmer of hope lit his eyes as we stepped close.

“You have the power to cure disease!”

Arthur didn’t hesitate. The moment I spoke, he dropped my hand and rushed to Marianne’s side. He placed one hand on top of hers and then grabbed her frail arm with his other hand.

Beyond the windows, the sun had set.

“Ah... Ah...”

Suddenly, Marianne lurched upward. She took a slow, gasping breath, as if she’d finally, *finally* emerged from underwater. With deep gulps, she dragged in lungfuls of air that expanded her thin chest. After years of lying paralyzed, she found Prime Minister Gilbert beside her and clasped his hand.

“It can’t be!” a maid cried out.

“It’s not possible!” said another.

“It’s a miracle!”

Little by little, Marianne moved her body. The stiff motions gradually smoothed as color returned to her pallid face. Her shoulders relaxed as her breathing evened out.

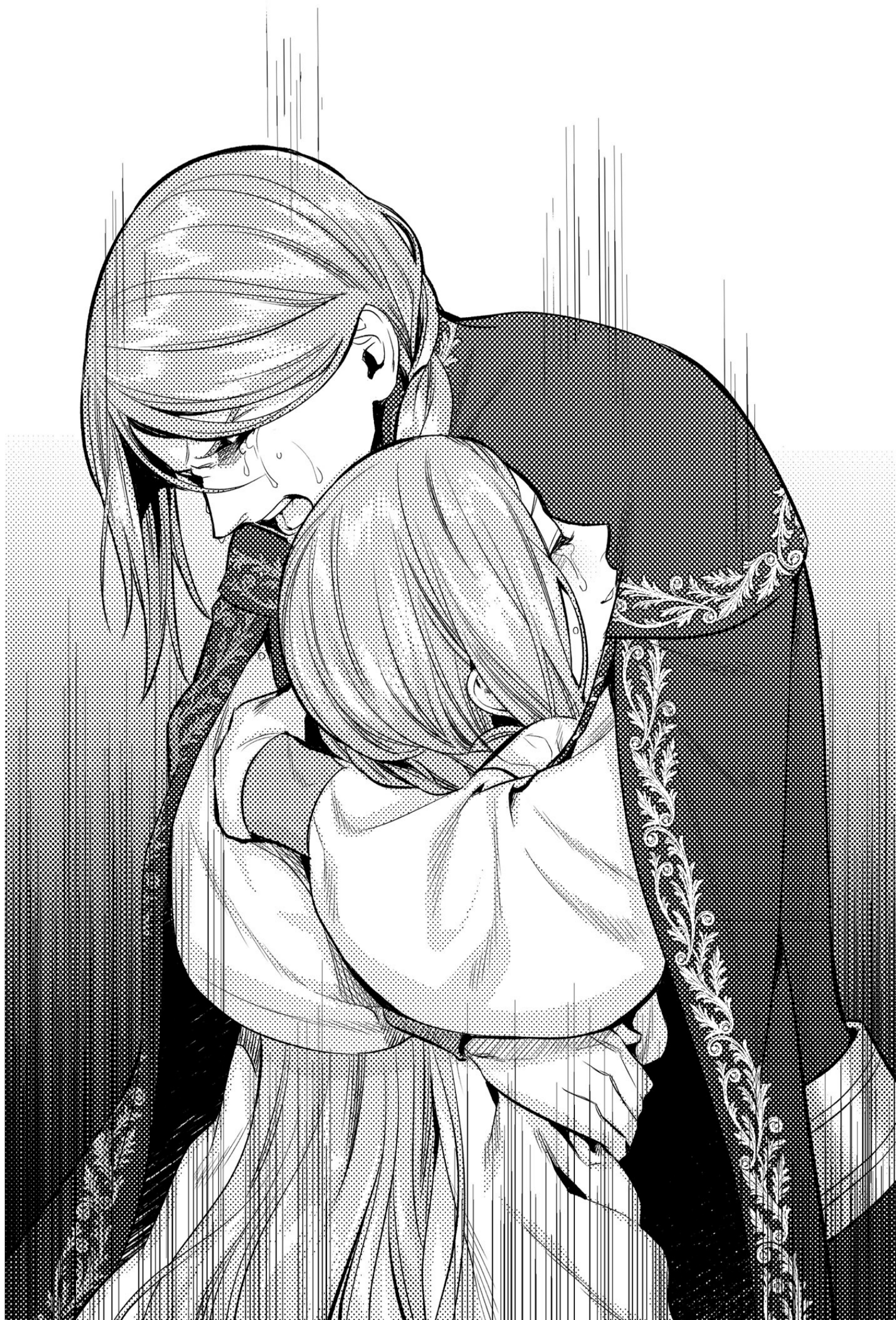
“Maria...”

The prime minister cradled her hand against his chest. His voice trembled, but no longer from fear and despondency.

“Gil.” With lips barely regaining any color, Marianne smiled over at Prime Minister Gilbert. “I’m...so...happy,” she said, voice thin from disuse.

Prime Minister Gilbert surged up to wrap her in his arms, squeezing her against his chest. He buried his face in her shoulder, racked with sobs as he held his beloved. Years of pent-up pain and anxiety and anguish rushed out in a cathartic flow of tears.

His body sagged, overcome with emotion, but he never let go of Marianne. Years of suffering released all at once, and he murmured her name, apologized, and thanked God over and over as he held Marianne. She soon joined him, clinging to him just as tightly as the tears tracked down her cheeks.



Arthur stood frozen, still holding Marianne's hand. He seemed too shocked by the outpouring to dislodge himself. Not to mention...he was seeing the true strength of his special power for the first time.

Arthur Beresford—the boy with the power to cure any disease.

During the game, when Arthur learned the horrifying truth of the cliff collapse incident from Pride, he escaped into the pouring rain. Tiara, the heroine, approached him there and caught a cold the next day as a result. She ended up confined to her bed with a terrible fever. When Arthur visited her, he set a hand gently against her forehead and her fever subsided immediately, revealing the truth of his power.

Arthur's special power was incredibly rare and just as valuable—probably even more valuable than the precognition that ran in the royal family. His divine hands could cure the diseases of humans, plants, and animals with a single touch.

Technically, he wasn't supposed to learn this for five more years, after he'd had more time to grow as a person. I'd accelerated the timeline by bringing him here today, but I couldn't say I regretted it.

Eventually, Marianne looked up from where she wept atop the prime minister. She turned to Arthur, who was still clutching her hand, while Prime Minister Gilbert gently supported her slender back. Marianne glanced at the place where Arthur held her hand, then up at his face, then back down again.

"You did this?" she asked.

Arthur just averted his eyes and nodded. Marianne struggled to sit up a little more with Prime Minister Gilbert supporting her. She set her free hand atop Arthur's.

"Thank you!" A fresh wave of tears spilled down her cheeks as she gazed up at her savior. "I get to see Gil again. Thank you for saving Gil—and me."

Marianne thanked Arthur over and over. Even Prime Minister Gilbert bowed his head in gratitude. Arthur merely gaped at the weeping couple. A single tear fell from his eye.

“Pride.” Stale, still in his older form, called my name quietly from beside me.

“Stale, I can’t thank you enough,” I said, taking his large hand.

“What are you talking about?” He laughed, squeezing my hand. “I simply do whatever you wish. You’re the one who made this happen.”

This older version of Stale was as beautiful as a work of art from up close. His smile set my heart fluttering in my chest. He slowly bent his long legs to kneel before me.

“Was I able to grant your wish?”

The rest of him looked older, but the eyes that gazed into mine were exactly the same as the twelve-year-old Stale I knew.

“Of course you did.”

I leapt into his arms. It was as if I were the younger sibling now. I fit perfectly against his chest as I hugged him tight.

“This body isn’t so bad, huh?”

Stale’s face felt a bit warm up close. I was probably squeezing him too hard. I put some space between us to peer up at him, and he chuckled.

“So, Stale, what exactly happened to you?” I said, stepping back.

Stale adjusted his glasses, which I’d knocked askew with my hug. “Gilbert did it,” he grumbled. He went on to explain that the twelve-year-old Stale simply couldn’t keep up when Prime Minister Gilbert charged toward Marianne’s room. In frustration, the prime minister used his special power to age Stale up so he could run faster.

“How amazing. I didn’t know he could alter the ages of other people as well,” I said. In the game, Tiara left the castle early on to live in secret in the local village—and in his route, Prime Minister Gilbert aged her up to thirteen to help hide her.

“Well, just their ages. He can’t control other people’s life spans, he said. Just his own.”

“You’ll go back to normal, right?”

“Yes, once Gilbert changes me back,” he said.

So in theory, Prime Minister Gilbert could keep Stale at any age he liked. What an incredible power. *Maybe that’s why...* Pain prickled in my chest. Did the extraordinary rarity of his own power convince Prime Minister Gilbert that he could find others? Is that what drove his belief that he could save Marianne?

Prime Minister Gilbert could be terrifyingly single-minded. He had a powerful motivation, a singular determination that could not be knocked off course. He’d climbed the ranks of government at a young age to make Marianne happy. But when she fell ill, he turned all that ambition toward her cure—even if it came at the cost of everyone else in the kingdom.

The Prime Minister Gilbert from the game probably never became so reckless, considering the five-year deal he made with Pride. In ORL, he must have lived every day believing Pride would soon save Marianne, only to meet the ultimate despair when that didn’t happen.

Perhaps that too was all part of Pride’s plan. If she knew from precognition that Marianne would die in five years, she probably set the time frame specifically for that moment of crushing defeat for Prime Minister Gilbert. She was more than capable of that kind of cruelty. In fact, plotting out a scheme like that probably amused her, as though this were all just a game.

After all, Pride did the same sorts of things to Stale and Arthur. She—I—loved to watch people suffer. The mere fact that I could follow her train of thought was all the proof I needed that we were one and the same.

When she worked her wickedness on Prime Minister Gilbert, she changed him as a person. Having to watch the woman he loved suffer while he remained powerless for years corrupted his heart irreparably.

That didn’t mean I approved of his crimes, of course. But at least now I understood how he could spend seven years frantically searching for a solution by any means necessary.

Still, in the game, his actions caused massive bloodshed. And all it got him in the end was a life of mourning, regret, and suffering. Once Pride enacted his law, the citizens came forward with their powers—and Pride used them. Those with special powers either died or became the queen’s slaves. She would not

stand for anyone's abilities outshining her own.

Thus, Prime Minister Gilbert's noble goals resulted in countless deaths. In his grief, he hid, taking the form of either a thirteen-year-old boy or an old man so he could go unrecognized. Even his fiancée's final words served only to burden him. He withered under the pain of having caused so much suffering without even saving Marianne in the process.

Despite all this, he did what he could to make amends, repenting through his work as the prime minister, trying to help the people of the kingdom however he could. He gave away all his possessions to the poorest. He hid those with special powers so the queen could not get to them. Through his work, he became beloved by the people; they even helped him hide Tiara when she fled the castle.

Still, he lived like a hermit. If Tiara tried to touch him, he'd recoil, saying, "You mustn't touch such bloodstained hands." He worked tirelessly but tortured himself all the while.

"Even when I pass on, I'm sure I won't get to join her in heaven," Prime Minister Gilbert said in the game.

I could never come to hate the man. So much tragedy befell him in ORL. Unless you managed to get his romantic route with Tiara, he lived most of his life in the form of an old man and requested execution in the end. The other characters forgave him, but he continued his tireless effort at repentance. Here in this world, where we were all getting a second chance, I simply wanted him to be happy.

Arthur, the only person in the whole kingdom—no, the whole *world*—who could cure diseases, never fell victim to Pride's law. He only learned the truth of his abilities when Tiara entered his story route. Unfortunately, that realization came too late for Marianne.

"Your Highness!"

I snapped out of my thoughts as Prime Minister Gilbert stumbled toward me. Stale instantly stepped between us, but I tugged on his sleeve to make him stand down.

“I can’t...I can’t thank you enough.” Prime Minister Gilbert sank to the floor to bow before me and Stale. “If it weren’t for you, I would be... Marianne would be...” His voice wavered, revealing just how close he’d come to heartbreak only moments ago.

“Lift your head, Prime Minister,” I said. “I’m not the one who saved Marianne.”

All I did was show Arthur the true nature of his power. I never could have saved her on my own. But Prime Minister Gilbert didn’t lift his head from the floor before my feet. Instead, he babbled a string of thanks and apologies, emotions tumbling out one after the other. His shoulders shook even more than his voice.

“Prime Minister Gilbert, I haven’t...” *I haven’t done anything.* I bent to set a hand on his shoulder and he jerked up, his expression twisting into anger.

“I’ve wronged you,” he said. “I’ve wronged you over and over in unforgivable ways.” This wasn’t just about today; that much was clear from the anguish on his face. He was trying to repent for five years’ worth of sins all at once.

I knew he’d spread unkind rumors about me, sullyng my reputation throughout the castle. But it wasn’t just me. Those rumors tarnished the entire royal family—and all so he could gain supporters for his bill. By the time I reached eight years old, the rumors were vicious, and he kept on spreading them up to this very day.

Prime Minister Gilbert didn’t just try to sway the castle, though. He held connections with the underworld as well. His job placed him in many courtrooms, which put him in contact with plenty of criminals. He purchased information from them and their ilk, gathering any kernel of knowledge he could about special powers. Meanwhile, he blissfully ignored the human trafficking many of his partners practiced, feigning ignorance so he could continue his search. After all, if someone with the right special power ended up on the black market, he could buy them like a commodity and achieve his end that way.

When Stale and I discovered him in that alley, he was preparing to give those outlaws any information they wanted about the castle’s weaknesses or the

royal family so long as they brought him the special power he sought.

Honestly, the more the prime minister continued to confess, the less I wanted to hear it. I didn't care if people thought poorly of me. Plus, if Prime Minister Gilbert was behind all the rumors about me, it meant they were just that—rumors. Not facts about the character “Pride,” as I feared. Not features that I couldn't change.

Still, with all of this out in the open now, the full horror of what he'd done finally hit me. Prime minister or not, the punishment for such crimes was death.

“I'm prepared to accept any punishment you bestow upon me,” Prime Minister Gilbert said when he finished his apologies.

I searched for Stale beside me and found him bowing his head, eyes closed. Next, I sought out Marianne. Arthur was helping her sit up in bed, but all the while, she fixed her eyes on Prime Minister Gilbert, bracing even more than him for my judgment.

“Does this mean you'll leave your fate in my hands?” I asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Very well, then. I had no intention of punishing either of you.”

Prime Minister Gilbert went absolutely still at my words, caught between terror and disbelief.

“However,” I continued, “once you confessed the full scope of your actions, I could no longer let you go free.”

“Of course!” he replied instantly, seeming ready to die if that was what I asked of him.

“Gilbert Butler.” I tightened my grip on his shoulder. For an instant, he reminded me of Arthur from two years ago, his gorgeous face distorted and pleading. “Are you prepared to keep everything that happened today from Mother and Father?”

Prime Minister Gilbert's eyes flew wide open. “What are you saying?”

“It won't be easy. The knowledge of your crimes will weigh on you, but you will not be tried for them.” I straightened to gaze around the room. “This order

is for Marianne and her maids as well. You're to forget about everything you heard and saw here today."

The maids and Marianne merely blinked at me.

"I can't believe it," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "Does this mean...you'll forgive what I've done? Even when I've resorted to—"

"It's not forgiveness," I cut in.

It wasn't that I couldn't or wouldn't sentence him to death. Mother had put me in charge of a few simple trials after I punished Val for his attacks. As a result, I'd already handled a few death sentences.

No, this was a different sort of punishment. It was similar to the way game-Pride forced Stale into silence after he killed his mother, even if my intentions were very different. That crime ate at Stale for all his life. Now Prime Minister Gilbert faced a similar fate.

"Prime Minister Gilbert, if you are truly remorseful, and if you wish to leave your judgment in my hands, then swear it to me right now. Swear to me, to everyone here, to the woman you love so dearly that you'd sacrifice everything for her. Swear you'll work tirelessly as the prime minister of this kingdom to bring about a better life for all the people of Freesia. Swear for all eternity, for as long as the crown demands it of you."

With Prime Minister Gilbert's special power, he would live a long, long time, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years. Even when Mother, Father, and I passed away, he'd have to go on living as the prime minister and keeping this vow.

It was just like the ending of the game. Gil's route concluded with him making a pledge to Tiara. Believing his crimes would condemn him to hell, he promised to protect the kingdom Tiara loved until the day his judgment finally arrived. Here, I could offer him that same path to atonement, and he'd get to spend his life with Marianne in the meantime. Of course, he'd probably prefer to live with her as a normal citizen, but his crimes were too egregious. He had to face the consequences of his actions.

"You'll withdraw from all illegal transactions. Use your information on human

trafficking to arrest and prosecute the offenders. Dedicate your life to serving this kingdom you attempted to betray.”

I cupped his face. His eyes were clearing now, filling with a tenuous light.

“I understand!” he said. “I swear, right here and now, that I’ll continue to protect the people of this kingdom until the day my heart stops beating!”

His tears stopped and he looked me square in the eyes. In that moment, I knew he could live up to his vow. This was the man who fulfilled his vow in the game even after losing his fiancée and causing the deaths of so many. He dedicated his life to serving the people. He declared his resolve in front of his beloved. There was no chance he would fail.

Besides, he’d already overcome so much. Marianne fell ill when I was six. I’d known the prime minister all that time, but only now, with him so close, did I notice the dark circles under his eyes, the hollows of his cheeks, the thinness eating away at his whole body. He’d withered away in silence for so long, and I hadn’t even known it.

If only I’d realized sooner. When I saw how frail he truly was, I wished I’d told Arthur about the true nature of his power earlier. How much suffering could have been avoided if we’d saved Marianne sooner? Perhaps Prime Minister Gilbert never would have strayed into darkness. Perhaps he’d be living a happy, normal life with Marianne.

My heart sank. “I’m sorry that I let it get this far. I never realized what you were going through.”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed—as thin and pale as the rest of him. With every moment, he seemed more fragile, more breakable. His clothes hid a man barely hanging on.

“I’m sorry that the only way I can punish you is by making you remain the prime minister,” I said.

A faint smile flickered across Prime Minister Gilbert’s lips. He took my hand and raised it to his lips, kissing the back. A strangled note of surprise escaped my throat. The prime minister released me, but his hands went to my foot. I flinched as I realized his intentions, a hot flush spreading across my face. With

my memories of my past life and the game, I couldn't help seeing him as a love interest, even if I knew he was with Marianne here.

He made it all worse by removing my shoe and kissing along my foot from the toes all the way to the shin. I struggled not to reel away, face burning as his lips tickled my skin. He was near my father's age, but he was also beautiful, and I knew that he was romanceable in the game. I couldn't take any more of this!

I dared to steal a glance at Marianne, terrified I would find her glaring daggers at me. Yet she wore a beautiful, gracious smile. Of course. She and the prime minister were adults. They didn't know I'd lived eighteen years in a previous life; they simply saw a child and a chaste demonstration of loyalty. Arthur, meanwhile, was red to the tips of his ears.

Please don't watch this! No one's more embarrassed than me right now!

I took several steadying breaths, trying to remind myself that things were different here. My teacher had even explained this gesture to me. The toes were for "adoration," the top of the foot for "devotion," the shin for "obedience," and the hand for "respect." Sometimes I received a kiss of respect from nobles, but having the prime minister himself kissing all the way up my foot was something else entirely!

Suddenly, I wished I were wearing a proper dress instead of pants or leggings. How embarrassing! But how could I have predicted such a display? In the game, even Tiara never got more than a kiss on the back of her hand. So why me?!

I covered my mouth with both hands, trying not to scream as Prime Minister Gilbert finished his vow and casually placed my shoe back on my foot.

"I am not a knight," he said, "nor am I bound to you by a subordination contract. So I ask that you witness my vow to you here and now."

He gracefully took to one knee, looked up at my face, and clasped his hands together as if in prayer.

"Your Highness, Pride Royal Ivy, heir to the Freesian throne," he said, "I pledge my loyalty not to the daughter of Her Majesty, nor to the daughter of the prince consort whom I serve, nor to the holder of the title 'crown princess.' Rather, I pledge my loyalty to your very existence, with all of my heart."

After making this declaration, he bowed his head low. Compared to the man we'd seen in that alley before, he was a completely different person.

"I give you my sincerest thanks for offering this grave sinner such a chance to serve his country," he said. "I will never forget the blessings you've given me, including Marianne's life." At last, he wore a smile of genuine warmth.

"It's a promise," I said.

Just then, Father's shouts came from outside the room. "Gilbert! Gilbert! Are you in there?!" Word must have finally reached him that the prime minister was back.

What am I going to do? I was ready to get caught before, but now that I'm here, how can I possibly explain all this?

"Pride!" Stale called out to me. Then the room disappeared in a blink.

"Big Sister!"

Tiara dove into my arms the second I reappeared in my bedroom. Arthur and Stale were only a moment behind.

"I seriously thought you were gonna leave me there," Arthur said. He seemed a little stunned by his experience with teleporting.

"If you want, I'd be happy to send you back," Stale said.

"Don't you dare!" Arthur said.

Arthur sat down on the floor with a huff. Tiara, still in my arms, gave him an excited wave, then noticed seventeen-year-old Stale at last and gaped.

"Big Brother?! Is that you?!"

She actually had to crane her neck to look up at him. Elsewhere in the room, Lotte, Mary, and Jack all shot suspicious looks at the older version of Stale. While his face was familiar, he was otherwise a complete stranger.

"What the hell happened to you, anyway?" Arthur said.

"It's Gilbert's special power," Stale said. He smirked down at Arthur. "I have to admit, getting to look down on you feels pretty nice."

Arthur started to grumble but cut himself off with a gasp, eyes darting around

the room. “H-hang on! Where are we?!”

Of course. Arthur had never been in the royal residence before, let alone my bedroom.

“This is Big Sister’s room,” Tiara said with a grin.

Arthur flushed bright red and jolted to his feet.

“I-I’m very sorry, Your Highness,” he said. “I was in the middle of training, so my clothes and shoes are a mess.”

Well, I *had* dragged him away in the middle of practice. I didn’t mind the dirt on his clothes. We hadn’t exactly had time to clean up in the moment. Still, Arthur shrank in on himself, shifting from foot to foot. Stale turned away, trying to hide the laugh that shook his shoulders.

“By the way, was Marianne all right when you left her?” I said. Arthur and Stale had stayed in that room a beat longer than me and I wanted to be sure she’d be okay now that Arthur wasn’t actively healing her anymore.

“Oh, I think she’s probably all right,” Arthur said. “When I healed her, I could kind of feel it. It was like...all of the sickness was just gone.”

Arthur stared at his own hands as he spoke, as though trying to work out the mystery of his power by studying his palms.

Tiara tugged on my sleeve. “I want to know too!”

I hesitated. How much of this ordeal should Tiara hear about?

In the end, Arthur answered for me. “I don’t mind if you tell Tiara,” he said.

That was all well and good, but Lotte, Mary, and Jack were still in the room. I didn’t need the news of Arthur’s miraculous power spreading too far. Who knew what kind of trouble that could bring down on him?

Tiara caught on right away. “Please tell me all about it some other time,” she said.

That’s my perceptive little sister.

“Right,” Arthur said, scratching his head and sketching a bow. “I better get going now. I’ve probably still got training to do. Sorry, Stale, but do me a favor

and send me back.”

“To the training grounds?”

“Yep.”

Arthur bowed to Tiara next, then bid farewell to Lotte, Mary, and Jack.

“Wait, Arthur!”

Stale was already reaching for Arthur, but I called out to stop him.

“Everything that happened today, thank y—”

“Thank you very much,” Arthur cut in. “I’m very grateful for what you did for me.”

I didn’t even get a chance to refute him, to say that he was the one who’d salvaged everything, before Stale teleported him away.

“Why did he...? I was supposed to be the one thanking *him*,” I murmured.

Stale, who’d returned in a flash, just smiled at me. “I think he was happy.”

He looked so calm and relaxed now. I remembered this face—this handsome, smiling face. In the game, he reserved this expression for Tiara alone, but now Tiara, Arthur, and I all got to enjoy this softer side of Stale.

“Ah.” With a slight gasp, Stale’s body started to shrink. It seemed the prime minister’s power couldn’t keep a hold on Stale much longer. He got shorter and shorter, shrinking back down to his twelve-year-old form. It was almost like watching his life on rewind.

“If he can undo it from a distance, why’d he have to wait so long?” Stale grumbled in a higher voice than he’d had just moments ago.

“I’m glad you were able to go back to normal,” I told him.

“Big Brother’s back at last!” Tiara cheered, joining me.

Stale still seemed conflicted about his rapid shift. Tiara and I held out our hands, and he smiled shyly and rushed toward us, wrapping us both up in a massive hug.

I held both of them tight. Unlike Prime Minister Gilbert, we had no choice

about growing up, but I didn't want it to happen any sooner than it had to. These moments were precious, and they would be over all too soon.

"Let's grow up together, all three of us," I said.

If we were truly bound to the currents of time, then at the very least, I could cherish every moment we had together.

They nodded in my arms, and I thought again of Prime Minister Gilbert. The man who would live forever. Eventually, today's events might be no more than a flicker to him, a faint, faded out memory, but for now, at least...

May he find happiness with the woman he loves.

"I knew you'd be here," I said with a sigh.

After Stale teleported me out of Princess Pride's room, I'd gone to dad and Vice Commander Clark to report in. But everything that happened today was so exhausting that I quickly retreated to my room.

There he was, waiting for me.

"So you're back to your real age, Stale?" I said.

"Yeah. It happened right after you left."

My room lay within the order's facilities. Only knights who were part of the main squadron got to live here. It certainly wasn't the sort of place you expected to find the prince. But Stale reclined in my chair, as calm as could be. And why shouldn't he be? He'd visited me this way many times, though Princess Pride didn't know it.

"I don't care if you *are* royalty. I told you not to hang out here when I'm not around."

"It's not my fault it took you so long."

"I had to go talk to my dad," I told him, setting my bags down.

"Did you tell the commander about your power?"

"Yeah, and Vice Commander Clark too." I settled on the bed, since Stale was using my chair.

“Were they surprised?”

“Hm, well...” *Surprised* wasn’t quite the word. Though they both tried to hide their shock, Dad kept blinking way too quickly and Vice Commander Clark’s eye twitched as I explained my power.

“You’re getting more and more like the commander,” Stale said.

“Shut it.” I shot him a warning glare.

He scoffed and went on, “It’s not a bad thing. You should keep being a knight like him.

Your special power is incredibly valuable. Depending on how you use it, you could have all the money you want or even become a member of the royal family. Even if you don’t accomplish much as a knight, you could still be a national—no, a *world-famous* hero who’s worshipped like a god. If you make a name for yourself as a doctor, you’d be able to save many more people than you would as a knight.”

That all sounded a bit far-fetched to me, but there were certainly people out there who believed special powers were gifts from God. Maybe all this ran through Dad’s and Sir Clark’s heads as well, and that was why they’d looked so shocked.

Personally, I didn’t care much about money or status. Being a knight was more important to me than any of that. But Stale was right—I could save a lot of people with this power, just like I’d saved Marianne today.

And to think I’d once despised this power, believing it only worked on plants and couldn’t help me ascend to knighthood. Princess Pride helped push me out of my slump and onto my current path. That was why being a knight meant so much to me. I wouldn’t squander the gift she’d given. I could use my special power as part of that, using it to defend and save everyone I could while I served as Her Highness’s knight.

“Don’t talk like you’re the one making the decision for me,” I snapped. “I’m the one who wants to be a knight.”

“I see,” Stale replied with a slow smile.

Wait, is he worried about me? I looked down at my hands, the hands that had saved a life today.

“Princess Pride is so unfair.”

The words slipped out of my mouth when I thought back on this day. Once again, I’d believed I was useless, only to have her show me my own worth. She said I’d saved Marianne, but I felt like she’d been the one saving me today.

I collapsed back on the bed with a huff. Was this just going to keep happening? How would I ever live up to what she saw in me?

“Just give up already. My elder sister’s always been like that.”

“I know,” I grumbled. I’d pledged my life to her for that very reason, after all. “So, what about you? Were you fine with everything that happened today?”

“What are you talking about?”

I couldn’t even laugh at his way of playing dumb. “You really didn’t like Prime Minister Gilbert, right? But she showed him mercy in the end.”

I’d found the man shady from the start. When I met him at the accolade, I could just tell from the way he spoke and smiled and acted. I knew Stale didn’t like the man either; he’d told me all about how Prime Minister Gilbert was trying to tarnish Princess Pride’s reputation. I was just as dead set as Stale on kicking his ass someday.

But of the two of us, Stale was definitely angrier than me. Stale had served Princess Pride for years now, and all the while, Prime Minister Gilbert undercut his efforts. What he did was unforgivable—yet Princess Pride had shown him mercy anyway. Surely, Stale was seething at that...

“You’re right, I didn’t,” I told Arthur with a sigh. “I couldn’t forgive him. In the middle of all this business with Marianne, there was a moment when... Well, it was a good thing my elder sister was there.”

Arthur scoffed. “So you’re not pissed anymore?” He propped himself up on his elbows to peer at me. Maybe he really was worried about me, in his own way.

“Who knows?” I leaned back, forcing a smile, trying to set Arthur at ease.

Then a pillow smacked me right in the face, and I let out an embarrassing “Oof!”

“Didn’t I tell ya your fake smiles don’t work on me?! Gimme a break,” Arthur said.

I plucked the pillow off my face and fixed my glasses, crooked from the impact. Ignoring this, Arthur pressed me further. In the two years we’d known each other, he’d never fallen for a single one of my phony expressions. At first, he would yell at me for even trying, but lately he’d stopped doing that unless we were alone.

“If you’ve got something to say, spit it out already,” Arthur said.

In some ways, he could be even more of a pain than Gilbert. No one else saw through me like Arthur.

“I *know* you’re still pissed at him,” Arthur went on. “He’s the bastard who trampled all over you and your sister’s work. Just let it out already.”

I’d tried to push it away. Pride’s embrace back in her room had helped calm me down after everything, but as usual, Arthur punched straight to the heart of the matter and drew out my true feelings.

“Fine! He...he pisses me off!” I admitted.

I flung the pillow back at Arthur, but he was a full-on knight now; he easily swatted it aside. *Bastard.*

“What the hell is with that guy, anyway?!” I fumed. “He always acts so composed while he makes all kinds of weird, rude comments to my elder sister. Even when I call him out on it, he manages to weasel his way out. And on top of that, I have to admit he’s damn good at his job. And stronger than me. I can’t beat him!”

The words poured out as my irritation ramped up. The mere mention of Gilbert had my blood boiling—and Arthur wasn’t helping by encouraging me to let it out. I scooped up some of his clothes off the floor and tossed them at him in a childish outburst. *I can never let Pride or Tiara see me like this.*

“Hey! Careful with that!” Arthur shouted. He sent the same clothes and pillow flying right back at me. “You’re really gonna let that fox-eyed bastard beat you?”

“Argh! He may be a fox-eyed bastard, but he’s *powerful!*”

We kept throwing random objects at each other, voices rising as we vented our frustration. Arthur barely knew the prime minister, but he mirrored my anger, drawing it out as we let loose with names and insults.

“He’s got the brains and the skills to make the perfect prime minister! He’s got it all!” I said. “Unlike...me.”

I slammed the pillow down, suddenly deflated. I dragged in deep breaths, just sitting there stewing in my final words. *Unlike me*. I wasn’t good enough. I couldn’t keep up with a man I despised. My head hung heavy as I muttered to myself, the anger twisting into self-hatred as I contemplated being bested by a man like the prime minister.

“Hey,” Arthur said, “you okay?”

I jerked my head back up. “I don’t think I protected my elder sister today. I don’t think I did anything useful at all.”

Dread welled up within me. Pride had saved Marianne today. Arthur had healed her sickness. Meanwhile, all I did was watch as Prime Minister Gilbert debated trading Pride for the information he wanted. What would have happened if Pride hadn’t stepped in, and the bandits really *had* given intel in exchange for my sister? I went cold just imagining it.

“He was so strong. He beat up almost every bandit without even using a weapon.”

In my current state, I couldn’t even get close to accomplishing something like that. Pride and I had had to team up to take down Gilbert, but it only worked because we surprised him.

“If Gilbert had decided to bare those fangs directly at my elder sister...”

There’s no doubt in my mind—I would have lost her. At last, after a long, harrowing two days, the tears and insecurity I’d hidden from Pride came

pouring out. I scrubbed at my eyes, not wanting even Arthur to see me like this.

“In the end, I was no match for that man. I’ve worked so hard, but still... Today, I couldn’t keep her sa—”

Fwump!

A pillow struck my face once again. When it fell into my lap, I clutched it tightly, feeling the damp spots where it had absorbed my tears. Jolted out of my slump, I glared at Arthur.

“How can you be so *stupid*?” he bellowed. “What d’you mean you couldn’t keep her safe?! You’re the one who’s been protectin’ her! You’ve always protected Princess Pride, long before me or anyone else for that matter.”

I blinked, too stunned to retort.

“I used to hear nasty rumors about Her Highness all over town when I was a kid,” Arthur went on. “But now, when I go back and visit Mom, I barely hear a peep out of anyone. You’ve been putting a stop to it, haven’t ya?”

I opened my mouth but couldn’t find the words.

“I wanna hear it from you. When it was just the royal family and all those higher-ups around, who kept that creepy-eyed bastard from getting close to the princess? Who was the one by Her Highness’s side more than anyone else? Who was the one who made sure people heard all the *good* rumors about what kind of person she is? Who was the one who supported her all this time so that no one could ever make up reasons to complain about her?”

Arthur rose from the bed and strode over to me, anger lighting a fire in his eyes.

“All of that was you! You don’t think you could’ve protected her in a fight?! Of course you couldn’t! But why the hell do you think you have to protect her all by yourself?! That’s why you’ve got me!” He smacked his chest to punctuate this pronouncement.

I didn’t have the slightest idea how to respond. We’d spent so much time training in fencing and combat together, but I never imagined he would reject my strength so bluntly. I lowered my eyes, unable to meet his gaze, and bit my

lip to hold back a fresh wave of tears.

“Don’t ya remember what I said right when I first got accepted into the main forces?” Arthur said.

“How about it?! Finally satisfied, Stale?!”

“Two years ago, you told me I had to become a knight as soon as possible. You heard me, right? So why’re ya givin’ me all this bullcrap? Don’t tell me you forgot?”

He had me beat. I struggled to respond; the threat of his words was so palpable, I almost feared he’d end me right there. But I remembered exactly what he was referring to. I’d pushed Arthur to become a knight as soon as possible. Naturally, I was happy when he first joined as a new recruit, and then when he was accepted into the main forces. But it was all because...

“I will be my elder sister’s shield that protects her from political influences and threats unseen. Arthur, I want you to be her sword and cut down anyone who tries to hurt her by force.”

Yes, that was what I’d said to him. That was why I had Arthur obtain his knighthood early—I wanted him to protect Pride.

Arthur clicked his tongue and took a step back. “Anyway, stop spewin’ nonsense. You’re fulfilling your role of ‘shield’ just fine.”

I’m fulfilling my role. For some reason, those words spread through me like a healing balm, patching over my self-doubt. But I still sat there in a daze until Arthur reached his hand out to me.

“Promise me. Promise me that next time something happens with Her Highness, you’ll come get me. I mean it. You’re the one by her side. You’re the one who’ll know first. But I want to know second. I’ll protect all of you. Princess Pride, Tiara, even you.”

I took his hand. It was strong and warm as he squeezed mine. I felt small and frail in the face of his sturdy resolution. At the same time, I was grateful. Arthur had kept my words safe in his heart over these past two years, and he truly lived up to them.

How lucky I am to have met Arthur back then.

We let go. I opened my mouth to thank him, but this time, he suddenly cupped my face in both hands.

“I’ve had it with your apologies! You really want it all, don’t ya?! You’re smart, great with a sword, and you’ve even got status. What would be the point of havin’ me around if some twelve-year-old brat could take down a whole group of bandits on his own?!”

He squeezed tight, forcing me to stay in place.

“Just so ya know, both you and Princess Pride are plenty strong. No one your own age could ever beat the two of you. Ya talk like you’re some kind of weakling. But if you’re so weak, how come I defeated all those other recruits during my trial, but I’m always on my toes when we spar against each other, yeah? You better apologize a hundred times over to those recruits you just insulted!”



His hands kept tightening until I finally smacked them away. “Knock it off, idiot. I get it, I get it.”

Arthur clicked his tongue at me. But he backed off, tidying up the stray clothing on the floor. Not that the room was messy when I arrived. In fact, I felt a little guilty about helping create this mess of clothes and pillows, so I started folding the items nearest to me.

“I could have the castle maids launder these for you.”

“They work for the royal family. Someone like me shouldn’t be makin’ more work for them. This stuff isn’t even dirty.”

“Jeez, you’re like a real adult.”

Arthur had three years on me, and it really showed. Already, he was much taller and broader than me. Becoming a knight had only accelerated that process. But more than that, he’d gained a level of maturity that I was still trying to catch up to. He knew just how hard I struggled to be perfect, and he knew when and how to reach out and save me from myself. I had to wonder if I’d manage to reach his level in just three more years.

“You’re a lot more of an adult than I was at your age,” Arthur said.

I never expected to hear him say that. “Are you trying to be humble?”

Arthur just sighed and shook his head. “You knew me when I was only a year older than you. Remember how pathetic I was, and how much I cried? Don’t make me talk about this stuff. It’s embarrassing.”

He held up his stray clothes to shake out the wrinkles, hiding his reddening face in the process.

“So, not crying is what makes you an adult?” I said, only half-serious.

“That’s not what I mean,” he replied, scratching his head.

I could still remember what it felt like to be five years older, thanks to Gilbert’s special power. I was bigger and more defined than Arthur then, nearly as tall as the prime minister himself. I could’ve carried Pride in my arms with ease. Was that what I’d look like as an adult?

I didn't even wait for him to continue. "I've made up my mind," I declared, more to myself than to Arthur.

"About what?" Arthur asked, his brow wrinkling.

"I'm not going to cry anymore."

It wasn't just to receive the praise of people like Pride and Arthur. It wasn't just to be more like an adult. No, I needed to be reliable, steadfast. I couldn't have my emotions flying off like that.

"What, like, forever?" Arthur said.

"Not until I'm as old as I was today, when Gilbert changed me. Five years or so from now." I straightened, cracking my back after being on the floor folding laundry. Arthur stood as well.

"Okay, then I'll join ya," he said.

"What?"

"Five years, right? I'm not gonna let you do it alone. It'd be good for me too, since I just became a knight for the main forces."

With that, he started putting away his folded clothes, casual as could be.

"Hang on, Arthur. This was my decision. It's got nothing to do with you...and why would it be good for you, anyway?" I retrieved my glasses from my pocket, where they'd safely been tucked out of pillow range, and put them back on.

Arthur crossed his arms and turned back toward me, his face set and determined.

"Over these past two years, you and Princess Pride have seen some really pathetic sides of me. I don't wanna be like that around people anymore. So I'm not gonna cry either, even if *you* change your mind."

When I heard that, I put my head in my hands. I'd been too hasty when I'd judged him an adult. He was making this pledge half for his own improvement, while the other half...was probably for my sake.

"The two of us are gonna get stronger together," he added.

I'm really no match for him. Even in this situation, he was proving his

resilience. Whether it came to his body or his heart, I was simply no match for Arthur. *He's right; we will. But first...*

"Fine," I said, a smile tugging at my lips. I scooped up the pillow he'd thrown at me.

A fraction of a second later, it appeared over his head. Startled, he looked up just as the pillow fell directly on his face.

"Bwah!" He flailed.

"But I'm the stronger one today! See you tomorrow."

"Wait up, you little bastard!" Arthur yelled.

Before he could catch me, I blinked away, teleporting back to my own room. I settled on the edge of my bed, and my smile stretched as I remembered the silly, bewildered look on Arthur's face. I'd arrived at Arthur's room in a funk, but I'd left it smiling after only a few minutes with him.

It'll be okay. I'm still on the same path I was on before; I just have allies now.

I had to become the most cunning, calculating, and convincingly trustworthy person in the entire kingdom. I had to protect Pride, my beloved little sister, and my foul-mouthed best friend.

As long as I never stopped pursuing those goals, nothing would ever get the best of me. Then, five years from now, I would be able to stand next to Pride with my head held high.

Of this, I was absolutely confident.

I met Marianne Edwards, my beloved and the third daughter of an earl, when I was thirteen years old. As true as I was Gilbert Butler, she was my soul mate, and my name always left her lips like a love song.

My parents were commoners among the lowest classes of society. I lost both by the time I turned seven. Mother passed away, unable to afford the medicine she needed, and Father's despair grew so powerful, he took his own life.

I spent three years living like a stray dog. I got by however I could, including

begging, seduction, or theft. A far cry from the Gilbert Butler my beloved would know later.

I used my shabby condition to elicit sympathy and thereby get what I wanted. Once I chose a target, there was little they could do. I'd dress in fancy-looking garb and smile and whisper in their ears, using charm and allure to extract the coin I desired. I could become whatever they desired that night—for a price.

One evening, after such an escapade, I was headed back to my hovel when I saw some sort of cloth hanging out of the window of a sprawling mansion. A young girl climbed down the cloth, apparently making her escape. She had nothing with her but the clothes on her body as she scaled a tree and jumped over the fence around the property.

"Good evening," she said when she caught me watching her.

That was my very first encounter with Marianne. This girl, two years younger than me, smiled to greet a total stranger in a servant's uniform. Just like that, she took my hand and led me away.

I'm ashamed to admit that even then I was thinking about how I could use her, how I could gain more of the money I so desperately needed through her. I asked who she was, trying to tease out information, but she just kept moving, never stopping to answer.

Eventually, I did learn that she was the daughter of the earl who lived in that mansion. She had two older sisters as well, both perfect in every way. Marianne, however, was already sickly and an outcast among her family. Though her room was guarded, it was done poorly. Thus, she would sneak out at night to relish the only freedom and power she could acquire in her sheltered life.

"You're the first person I've ever run into while doing this, though," she said, eyes wide. Did she seriously not have any concern for her own safety? She had no idea who I was or what my intentions were.

"And what if I was planning on harming you?" I asked.

"What's wrong with being harmed?"

She said it so simply, like she truly was puzzled by the very idea. Marianne

explained that no one back home worried about her. They were simply waiting until they could marry her off for some kind of political gain.

“But what if you got hurt in some sort of noticeable way? What if it brought shame on your family? Or you couldn’t find a husband because of it?” I pressed. I had to admit, her carefree attitude bothered me. Here was a girl who had everything, yet she didn’t even value her own safety.

“I’m already bringing shame to my family. Whoever I marry will only be after my family name, so anything else doesn’t matter. He’ll just be a man who wants to gain access to an earl’s family. He’ll probably have a mistress, and he won’t care about me at all.”

Even living as I did on the streets, I suddenly felt that I enjoyed more freedom than this girl. All her status and money didn’t allow her to even choose her own future.

Suddenly, she stopped, stepping close. “*Do you wish to harm me?*”

I was dumbstruck by the bluntness of her question and froze in place.

“It’s all right if you do,” she went on. “You can take my life or do whatever you like. At least one of us can be happy that way, right? In exchange, I want you to show me the place you find the most beautiful in the whole world.”

In my various escapades, I’d heard plenty of sweet, tender words. But hers struck me as the sweetest of all. This was all she asked of me, this fragile, ephemeral wisp of a girl. It rang more sincere than any romantic nonsense I’d ever heard before, not a term of endearment but more like a final request, a last wish before she faded away in her grief. Her swaying, peach-colored hair, her anguished smile—her whole being radiated as if to cast me in light where I’d been cloaked in shadow.

I squeezed her hand, the hand of the earl’s daughter, and led her away.

We climbed a hill in town. It rose high enough that from the crest I could glimpse the castle on one side and the lower village on the other. My parents had taken me here when they were still alive, and I still treasured this place because of that. It made me feel tall, important. I could see everything from this height, from the castle illuminated in moonlight to the twinkling, flickering

starlight of the village below.

Marianne's eyes lit up when she saw it. "I've never seen something so beautiful before."

Her smile stretched across her face, sincere and unrestrained. I would remember it for all my life. We stood there a long time, so long the moonlight dimmed, washed out by the rising sun. As our time faded, burned away by the harsh sunlight, I dared a request.

"Shall I bring you here again, three days from now?"

Her smile faded to consternation. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," I said. "If you'd like that." She paused for a moment, strangely still. Then she lunged into my arms, burying her face against my chest as she wept. She ignored the filthy state of my ragged clothing, hugging me close while I stroked her hair. I knew in that moment that I'd do anything to make this girl happy.

"It's a promise, then," I said.

Marianne and I met up every three days without fail after that. She even began to call me "Gil" as we grew more familiar. In love and in reverence, I called her "Maria."

I came to treasure those times and found myself smiling and laughing more than I had in many years. The more we spoke, the more I revealed about my past, my life, and even my crimes. I expected disgust, admonishment, maybe even a threat, but this daughter of an earl just listened patiently to all I told her, then stroked my hair and said, "You've worked so hard in life."

The impact those words had on me was immeasurable.

No one had said anything like that to me before. Despite being two years my junior, Marianne was so much wiser—and the wisdom that flowed from her feeble lips made her seem all the more transient. It made me ashamed of my life, of the things I was doing to get by. Marianne saw more in me.

From that moment forward, I tried to live up to that. I picked up etiquette so I could find different work, acting as a servant for various middle-class

households. It wasn't a bad life; I garnered the favor of my employers, and I scrounged together any savings I could in the meantime. It took a year before I brought my savings back to Marianne.

"Gil...I'm engaged."

My heart dropped. For a year, I'd worked to live up to her expectations, to be worthy of her, never noticing that she was slipping away all the while.

"He's far too good for me," she said with a smile. "This wasn't supposed to be finalized until I was sixteen, but if I don't act quickly, I may lose the chance to find a man who will take me."

I should have congratulated her. It was a good match, a better future than she'd feared. But I could manage no celebratory words; I was already too in love with her by then.

Marianne would move to another kingdom. She would belong to another man. I would never see her again. I opened my mouth, trying to say something, anything, but my throat was too tight for words to pass.

The fact was, I wasn't worthy of her. Even beyond my low-class upbringing, the things I'd done just to survive would tarnish and shame her. She knew of my crimes and misdeeds; she knew I could only sully her.

"I won't meet him until I turn sixteen," she went on. "So I can still see you for now, Gil. But at some point, they'll post more guards outside my room, and then...and then I won't be able to come outside and meet you anymore."

We didn't even know when our final goodbye would arrive.

"That's why I think I should tell you now, while I still can," she said.

Why couldn't I be born into the upper class? Why did she have to be born to a station I could never hope to reach?!

I was still just standing there, barely registering her words, trying not to tremble. She reached out for me. When her fingers brushed my cheek, they came away wet, and I realized I was crying before her.

"Gil."

All I could do was stare back into those peach-colored eyes.

“I...I love you. I’ve always loved you.” She went swiftly on her tiptoes to press her lips against mine. I didn’t even have time to be surprised before the warmth of her mouth seeped through me, and I found myself kissing her back, desperate for this moment of contact, savoring the tangible evidence that our love was truly mutual.

“Let’s run away together.” If only I’d said something like that. If only I’d seized that moment. But at the time, I felt there was no hope, no way for someone like me to bring joy to an earl’s daughter who often slipped away to see the world at sunset. I broke the kiss but kept my arms around her.

“Four more years,” she murmured. “Please keep coming to see me for as long as you possibly can.”

Her frail voice carried a desperate plea. As I held her soft, warm body in my arms, I wanted so badly to keep that promise, to make her happy somehow, to find a way to fix this. But there was little I could do.

Until I encountered my special power, that is. It manifested only a few weeks later.

The middle-class family I worked for had given me a storage room filled with books for my sleeping quarters. It was there that I researched the nature of my newfound special power and learned that there was only one other person in recorded history who possessed the power of age control. Eternal youth, the power to manipulate one’s own life span. It was incredibly rare, but it did exist. And it meant I had a chance. I could use my power to gain access to the government, elevating my status to be worthy of Marianne.

Everything will be mine.

“I won’t be able to come see you for a while,” I told her after that. She looked confused, even distraught, so I took her hands in mine. “I promise I’ll come back for you! I’ll return before you turn sixteen. But first, I’m going to use my special power to join the government and become an official. Then I can come back actually worthy of you, Marianne.”

Until then, I couldn’t see her. I needed to dedicate every single day—no, every second—to honing my skills to ensure my position.

There's no time. I have to hurry! I can't come back to her until I've earned my place beside her.

Marianne nodded. Eyes shimmering with tears, she said, "I'll wait for you."

How could I ever betray her? Oh, Maria, I swear I'll make up for the time we're losing together.

I dove headfirst into my studies after that. Information, fighting skills, self-defense, classroom learning—I gobbled up all the education I could get my hands on. I wanted to quit my job to devote more time to my studies, but then I'd lose access to the storage room of books and money for new ones. So I stayed on as a servant and cut into my sleeping time to study.

I'm going to make her happy. I don't care if I have to suffer to get there.

"My name is Gilbert Butler. As you can see, I possess the special power of age control. With the eternity I've been granted, I believe it is my duty to serve my kingdom, which is why I stand before you today."

Don't let go of any possibilities. No matter how ill-suited you may be, sink your teeth into every opportunity and never let go.

"Gilbert. You have a wonderful power indeed, and you far exceed the abilities of any current advisor I know of. However, what drives you to use that impressive brain of yours for work here in the castle?"

You've been telling lies for years now. It doesn't matter who you deceive or antagonize as long as you get her back.

"I haven't officially introduced myself, have I? My name is Albert, soon to join the Royal Ivy family. Gilbert Butler, when I become the prince consort, do you wish to serve as my assistant?"

It's all for her. I'll give up everything I have for her.

"Yes, I do! I promise to support you in every possible way, and serve you for the remainder of my life, Alb—Lord Albert. Please, please grant me the opportunity to be made Prime Minister!"

"By the name Rosa Royal Ivy, I hereby appoint you, Gilbert Butler, as the prime minister of the kingdom of Freesia."

Knock. Knock.

I stood at her door again at last. The front door, not a window, not a wall, not some secret corner in the night. I walked right up to the main entrance of her home and knocked. A carriage sat outside, waiting for me.

Servants let me in and guided me through halls patrolled by suspicious guards. I'd met the master of the house before at a formal event. Back then, he'd invited me to his home, clearly with ulterior motives, but I hadn't taken him up on the offer until now.

The two of us conversed casually in the lavish drawing room, and I began to cast my line. I was an adult, old enough to make the request, as long as there was no other woman in my life, which of course there wasn't.

"M-my youngest daughter? You mean Marianne? Well, she's here, yes, but I'm not certain you'll find her suitable, Prime Minister..."

Little did he know she was still the only woman I would *ever* find suitable—and then some. When I reiterated my request, her father scurried off to fetch her, surely still confused. I had to remind myself to stay calm during the long walk to her room, not to seem too eager.

We reached a staircase, descended to the next floor, and then headed toward the sound of a commotion. Servants rushed around with makeup and dresses in their hands. They were trying to *present* her, to doll her up as what they imagined I wanted, as though my Marianne could be any more perfect than she already was.

I didn't care what she looked like. With all my heart, all I wanted was to see her again, to glimpse her beautiful, smiling face. They kept fussing until I expressed my impatience...and then finally, *finally*, I saw her.

As I glimpsed her for the first time in what felt like an eternity, I struggled to control the tempest of emotions raging inside me. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Marianne Edwards. My name is Gilbert Butler, and I serve as the prime minister of our kingdom. Please, call me Gil."

I've missed you so much.

I swallowed that down and offered a polite smile. I had to remember that I wasn't the boy from the lower classes; I was the prime minister. I was the kind of person worthy of coming back for her, someone who could make her happy and give her everything she could ever want in life. Her teary eyes went wide as she looked me over. She fixated on my face, gazing into my eyes, confirming all the words we could not speak in that moment.

"I apologize for asking this of you so suddenly," I said. "However, I would be honored to have your hand in marriage. I promise to make you happy."

I reached out toward my beloved, the girl I'd yearned for all these years. Back then, I had nothing to my name and could only daydream about a better life. But now I had everything I could hope for—wealth, status, power, social standing. When I reached out for her, I did so with the confidence of the prime minister, rather than the shame of that boy from the slums.

She took my hand in hers, gulping before she spoke. "I-I may be Marianne Edwards, but please...call me Maria. I would gladly accept your hand in marriage...Gil." Tears spilled down her cheeks, and her hands trembled in mine. A flush rose to her face, lighting her peach-colored eyes, making them as bright as the hair that tumbled over her shoulders. I'd never seen her look so beautiful in all our lives.

I came back for you. I clasped my hands around hers, gingerly so as not to hurt her. After all this time, I'd truly done it. I'd achieved the power and status I needed to give us both a happy life. We'd waited so long for this moment, for a chance to be together again, but here we were, united at last with nothing standing between our love anymore.

In that moment, I thought, *I must have been born just to meet her.* For surely, this was fate.

Marianne—my Maria—and I spent a few years living together after that.

Each and every day with her was bliss. I only began working as the prime minister to obtain a life with her, but along the way, it became a source of motivation for me as well. After a life of lying, deceiving, cheating, and instigation, my new work filled me with pride. I could dedicate myself to the

kingdom's people and ruler, Queen Rosa. The queen even granted me the right to submit laws for consideration, and I used that power to craft legislation born from my upbringing in the lower classes. As a result, the rate of poverty and hunger plummeted.

I felt like I was doing something meaningful, something important. In the meantime, I bought a house for me and Marianne. Every day, after working with the prince consort, I'd return to that home, *our* home, and there she was, waiting for me. I could ask for nothing more.

But that all ended when Marianne's illness overcame her.

One day, her condition took a turn for the worse. She struggled to breathe, and chills plagued her constantly. Not one of the kingdom's doctors I spoke to discreetly could make sense of the affliction. I didn't know what to do, so I went to Albert, the prince consort, a man who'd become not just my master but also my friend. He and Queen Rosa arranged for Marianne to begin living in secret in the castle.

There, she was safe. I could look after her myself. While I trusted her maids, if the servants back home would've looked after her and her worsening condition, the news could spread and stoke fears of contagion. I couldn't let such a vicious rumor spread. Thanks to the royal family, I was able to prevent that while keeping faithful to my duties as prime minister.

We tried various treatments over the first year, but nothing helped. No one could identify the cause. Soon, only one hope remained to me—finding someone with the power to cure disease. I'd heard rumors of such a power, but it was just as rare as my own. Finding it would be difficult but perhaps not impossible in such a vast kingdom.

The queen herself ordered soldiers to seek out whoever might wield this power. This, too, the royal family kept quiet on my behalf. We couldn't give the people the impression that I was getting special treatment. Plus, they might suspect that a high-ranking official in the government was the one who was ill. Keeping it all secret was better for everyone, including Marianne.

This was when I cooked up the Special Power Registration Law. It would speed up the process by allowing me to gather all the available information in

the kingdom on people's special powers. But Queen Rosa and Albert pushed back, saying the law would break precedent for the kingdom and violate the citizens' rights.

Two years passed this way, and I still hadn't found the special power to cure diseases. Then, two important things happened.

First, Princess Pride received the power of precognition that proved her right to the throne.

Second, she predicted the two faulty wheels on Albert's carriage and saved his life.

As the prime minister, it fell to me to investigate the incident. Her Majesty had left the castle on urgent business, and Albert rushed after her, creating confusion for all involved. I found that multiple servants had labeled wheels incorrectly, failed to confirm which were faulty, and replaced the wrong wheels in a cascade of human error. If just one of them had inspected the carriage wheels properly, the whole thing could have been avoided. Instead, the eight-year-old Princess Pride ended up saving Albert's life thanks to her special power, stopping him from ever entering the dangerous carriage.

Furious, I swiftly fired everyone involved. Accident or no, it could have cost the prince consort his life. But the whispers spread rapidly, suggesting a deliberate attempt on Albert's life. Plenty of high-level officials in the government weren't fond of the man. Albert was the second-eldest prince, not the firstborn, which rubbed some people the wrong way—namely those who believed in Freesian supremacy—but he was a tirelessly hard worker who loved this kingdom more than any of those rumor-mongering snakes could claim.

An idea took root in me then, though not one to be proud of. I thought I could use the opposition to Albert to get my Special Power Registration Law passed. If the block against him was vile enough to try to murder him, surely they'd help pass some little bill simply out of spite.

Of course, the queen would still get the final say. But if I gathered enough support, not even Queen Rosa herself would be able to ignore my idea without facing significant opposition.

I set aside the idea before it got too far, though. I couldn't betray a dear friend that way. And even if I did, there was no guarantee the opposition would be enough to push my bill through. Plus, trying to spread rumors about a man like Albert would likely gain little support; his virtue was clear for all to see.

But there was another option: Princess Pride.

When her precognition awakened, she officially became the heir to the throne. No one in the castle who knew of her arrogant behavior was happy to hear of this development. The complaints quickly grew, an undercurrent of restless murmuring I intended to seize upon. Perhaps I should have felt bad, but any remorse evaporated when the royal family went on the hunt for an assistant to the crown princess. I'd spent years searching for the special power that could cure Marianne's illness—yet they found young Stale in less than two days. All my searching, all my pleading, and they plucked this boy out of the lower classes at the snap of their fingers. Why couldn't they do the same for Marianne?

My bitterness only grew. They couldn't have located Stale without *my* efforts at finding a cure for Marianne. It was my hard work that resulted in the guards from the castle knowing about so many special power users out in the town. It was my grief and toil that resulted in the rapid acquisition of Stale. I turned that resentment—and jealousy, perhaps—on Princess Pride.

I'd only met her a couple times, but she provided a convenient outlet for my pain. While the arrogant princess acquired everything she could want or hope for in life, my beloved withered away—and no one even seemed to care. I turned her into a scapegoat, helping spread rumors that would tarnish her reputation. I knew that if anyone found out I was behind those whisperings, I'd bring disgrace to my friend, Albert, and the rest of the royal family. Not to mention the crimes I would be tried for.

Even so, I pushed ahead, so blinded by grief that even the threat of consequences couldn't stop me, not even if—

"Gil..."

Marianne's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

"What is it, Marianne?"

My beloved was already bedridden by this time, and I smiled, trying not to worry her in her weakened state. She stretched a pale hand toward me, trembling as she did. I clasped her hand in mine and she opened her mouth, struggling to speak between ragged breaths.

“I don’t want you...to push yourself for my sake...anymore. Gil...I want you...to do something for me. Promise...me.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes. I nodded even before she made her request, and a faint smile quivered across her lips.

“If...if I pass away...I want you to...to live the life...that I never got to... Promise me...”

My blood ran cold, and my smile faltered. Marianne was talking about her own death as though it was a surety, as though I’d already failed. The grief washed through me, a crushing wave pulling me under.

“Gil...I’m so incredibly hap—”

“Please don’t say such things!” The moment I spoke, the tears broke free, cutting down my cheeks. “You can’t die. I haven’t been able to make you happy yet.” I wiped my eyes and leaned in to kiss her brow.

“That’s not true,” she said, but I pretended not to hear her.

“I’m not making you any promises until you’re cured,” I told her. “Until then, don’t say another word of this. Please.” I couldn’t bear to stay around and hear any more.

I threw myself back into my duties, trying not to think about her demise. But once Marianne put the thought in my head, I couldn’t help churning over it. Her death was purely hypothetical to me, but evidently not to her. And with every day that I failed to find a way to cure her disease, her death became more certain.

No, I couldn’t accept that. I hadn’t made her happy yet. Despite my promises, I was the one receiving all the joy from our relationship. She’d reached in and lifted me out of a life of misery—every day a torturous routine of scheming and cheating to ensure I lived to see the next. I never thought I could climb so high, to leave the mud and the slop below, but it had all happened because of her.

“Right...without her, I...”

I left through a hidden door and made my way through the castle, musing darkly as I went.

If she didn't exist, I never would have made it this far. So what was so wrong about using every means at my disposal to secure her health and happiness? I *would* save her. Nothing else mattered. If I had to use all the power of my position as prime minister, plus every underhanded and shady connection I could find, I'd do it. If I had to plunge into the depths of hell, I'd take sure steps through the fire for her happiness. Even if I had to lie and deceive and manipulate, I'd push on with my goal. I only had this chance at all because of her, after all.

The smallest factors can add up to the most terrible outcomes.

It all seemed so simple at first, so inconsequential. I did small things, strengthened my relationships with those who opposed Albert. I wormed my way into their good graces by telling them the things they wanted to hear.

I cultivated my connections with the underworld as well. My work as prime minister placed me in legal proceedings frequently; it wasn't hard to build up a network of shady characters. With a little coin, they were more than willing to seek out the information I wanted.

Many factors came together to result in the damaged carriage that nearly killed Albert. One little crack in one wheel. Another wheel that didn't fit quite right and...

I turned my connections not just against Albert but more frequently and more easily against Princess Pride, the heir to the throne who had a reputation for arrogance. A small push, and people's preconceived criticisms of her character gained even more purchase in their minds. It took little to paint her as evil and scheming, which won me ever more allies in my quest.

Little by little, I gathered these disreputable friends to my side. Before I knew it, five years had passed. All I still waited on was the passage of my law in the assembly. If only the royal family would approve of it...

I was so, so close to saving Marianne.

“Prime Minister Gilbert, it’s Lady Marianne!”

And in the end, the only possible outcome was a total collapse.

Marianne had been sick for seven years. She was nearly out of time. Her body had deteriorated so much she couldn’t speak. Even her eyesight was nearly gone.

I leaned on those carefully curated contacts in the underworld in my desperation, but all they had to offer was cruel laughter. That’s where Prince Stale and Princess Pride finally caught up to me, confronting me in the midst of my scheming. Even if I could have talked my way out of this, Princess Pride had seen Marianne’s death with her precognition. She knew everything.

That was when the very person I’d plotted against, the very person I’d spread horrible rumors about just to further my own cause, offered me my only ray of hope.

Princess Pride thought she could help, but when we returned to Marianne, I couldn’t see how. My beloved lay pallid and still, hardly breathing. I tried everything, even forcing the air into her lungs myself, but nothing worked. I could call for a doctor, but it’d be no use at this point. Marianne was leaving me, and there was nothing I could do.

And still, she tried to smile, her dry lips moving faintly as she struggled for air.

“Please, please don’t leave me... I haven’t made you happy yet... I promised you, I swore I’d make you happy,” I pleaded.

I grabbed her limp hand, squeezing too tightly, trying to press my own warmth into her cooling body. But she hardly stirred, remaining cold in my grasp. I tried to keep speaking to her, but she didn’t respond. Tears blurred my vision. What little breath she drew grew shallower every moment. Her face drained of any lingering color. And still her lips moved as though she was trying to speak.

“Marianne, I can’t. I can’t... Please...”

All I could do was pray.

I'd spent years committing any evil required of me in the shadows, doing whatever I had to do if I thought it might save her. And now here I was, begging God to spare her—to spare me, as well. Yet I had no other choice in these final, horrible moments.

I can't lose her. Anything...anything but this! I'm so sorry, Marianne... I'm so sorry... I just couldn't find it. Even after I did everything I possibly could, I didn't make it in time... I never found a treatment, or the right special power, or anything that could save you.

"Your special power isn't limited to plants. In fact, you possess something much greater."

A young girl's voice suddenly rang loud in the room. My eyes flew wide when I turned to find her as she issued commands to the boy beside her.

"I want you to take us to your fiancée."

"All I can use it for is growing crops..."

I remembered both of their words, but...

It can't be. It can't be! Such a miracle isn't possible!

"You have the power to cure disease!"

I knew the boy who rushed to Marianne's bedside. He was Arthur Beresford, the boy who'd only recently become a knight. Could he possibly possess the power I'd searched for all these years? How long had I prayed to find someone like him, turning my life toward this singular quest?

He took Marianne's hand, and I set my hand over his. Then he clung to her arm. I couldn't see his special power, but I could feel it; I sensed it around us. He truly was the savior we'd waited for all this time.

"Ah... Ah..."

She was breathing. Her chest heaved, drawing deeper breaths than she'd enjoyed in years. Color rushed back into a face that had been deathly pale only moments ago.

"Marianne, Marianne, can you hear me? Marianne!"

I kept calling her name before I could even process the miracle I was witnessing. I squeezed her hand tighter, searching for something tangible, something that could assure me this was real.

Please answer me. Please, one more time, I want you to—

She squeezed back.

My heart leapt into my throat. That small motion was more than she'd managed in months. I hardly dared to breathe, afraid I might disperse the miracle before me. Every moment, more color returned to her sunken cheeks. I bowed my head, praying even as I kept calling out her name.

"Marianne?"

"Gil," she said. And oh, when I heard that voice, I couldn't even speak through the emotion clogging my throat. I'd yearned, dreamed, and prayed to see that smile on her face for so very long. It was the smile of my beloved in the moment she was freed from her suffering.

"I'm...really...happy."

I swept down, embracing her, holding her after so long without the touch of the woman I loved. In her weakened state, I was terrified to hug her like this, but now she felt solid in my arms; she clung to me just as tenaciously as I held her.

How many times had I wished for this moment? I'd put everything on the line to save her, diving into darkness with abandon if I thought it could help her. For her part, Marianne was probably prepared to die just moments ago. Now I was the one struggling to breathe as it hit me all over again that she would survive.

She was happy.

She'd said it herself—she was happy. That was all I'd really wanted all this time, just her happiness. And now she had the gift I'd always yearned to give her. The nightmare hanging over us dispersed at last, leaving us the freedom for joy and relief—and happiness.

Marianne managed to thank her savior, Arthur, but when I tried, my "thank you" came out as a choked sob. If it weren't for this boy, I would have lost

Marianne and gotten crushed by my own uselessness. I had to thank him somehow.

Wait.

Arthur Beresford? How had he gotten here?

My head cleared rapidly, the fog of despair and then intense relief dispersing. The only way Arthur could be here was if Stale had teleported him in. But Stale would only teleport him if he somehow knew that Arthur had the power to cure Marianne. How could he know that?

My blood went ice-cold.

It wasn't Stale at all. It was Pride. Pride Royal Ivy. She'd searched for me in order to save Marianne. Even when she learned of my betrayal and crimes, she showed Marianne mercy. She *saved* her.

What have I been doing to her all this time?

I spent years spreading those rumors about her and ruining her reputation. Even when she proved me wrong through her actions, I kept spreading harmful lies to discredit her. She was just a little girl, yet I spent five years trying to destroy her, even growing so bold as to do it in public.

The queen's approval was the only thing that made me change course. With the queen backing her, I had little choice but to try to win Princess Pride's favor. Even so, if my quest to cure Maria had come at the cost of the royal family, I would have offered that price.

For seven years, I tried to manipulate and use this girl, and still she'd saved Maria, dragging her back from the brink of death.

"What have I done?"

I trembled in the face of my sins. I was beyond forgiveness, beyond retribution. I'd betrayed this girl and her entire family, yet here she sat rejoicing with me and my beloved.

"Your Highness!"

I stumbled to the princess, falling to the floor to bow before her. I could never repay the debt I owed to this girl. Even if she demanded my head for my crimes,

I could do nothing but accept.

“If it weren’t for you, I would be... Marianne would be...” I couldn’t even speak of the fate that had so nearly awaited Marianne. My gratitude welled up inside me, alongside a stab of guilt.

She set a hand on my shoulder and called my name, telling me she hadn’t really done anything, but that simply wasn’t true. She’d done everything for Marianne and me. I tried to express how many unforgivable sins I’d committed to achieve this and how much I’d wronged her. Even if the saint before me was willing to forgive me, I would never forgive myself. I hadn’t just betrayed her but also Albert and Queen Rosa, the people who’d done so much for my beloved and me. I’d been willing to sacrifice the people who helped us through all this. I’d ignored the human trafficking required to get the information I wanted. I bent the laws of the kingdom to my own ends. My list of crimes went on, filling me with shame.

What was I thinking all this time?! How did I think I could live happily with Marianne after doing so many despicable things? Perhaps I would save her body, but I never would have managed to save her heart.

I’d sullied the title of prime minister itself.

But even so, I must.

I confessed everything right there in front of Marianne and the maids and everyone else in the room. I told them about my shady connections and the human trafficking I’d turned a blind eye to and about my numerous betrayals. It did not assuage the rage and regret, but Princess Pride deserved to know it all.

I made it clear that I was ready for her judgment. Whatever she decided, I would accept. After all this, she deserved to be the one to prosecute me.

“Does this mean you’ll leave your fate in my hands?” she said. I agreed, but incredibly, she didn’t use the opportunity to punish me.

Instead, she forgave me.

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. She said she wasn’t planning to punish me even though she couldn’t allow me to go free. This was more mercy than I deserved.

“Gilbert Butler.”

She tightened her grip on my shoulder, and I gazed up at her, this angel of mercy. I found it difficult to look at her with my regrets nearly crushing me.

“Are you prepared to keep everything that happened today from Mother and Father?”

I blinked. *Keep everything from them? What does she mean by that?* I was a sinner. I deserved torture, beheading, or public stoning. I was at a loss.

Princess Pride gazed straight into my eyes as she delivered her judgment. I would spend eternity serving this kingdom as its prime minister, so long as I was allowed to hold the title. I couldn't step down from my position. I had to keep that title forever, restoring to it the honor I'd stripped away.

“You'll withdraw from all illegal transactions,” she ordered. “Use your information on human trafficking to arrest and prosecute the offenders. Dedicate your life to serving this kingdom you attempted to betray.”

Being the prime minister was my atonement. It was the gravest of punishments but also my salvation. I could undo the crimes I'd committed. If that was what the princess wanted from me... If that was what she believed I could accomplish...

“I understand!”

There was only one answer.

I would repay my tremendous debt to her and atone for every sin I'd committed over these past seven years. I'd dedicate my life to the people of my country.

“I swear, right here and now, that I'll continue to protect the people of this kingdom until the day my heart stops beating!”

My entire life will exist for that purpose. This is my vow to you.

I grabbed the hand of the worthy future queen and swore my oath. She smiled down at me.

“I'm sorry that I let it get this far,” she said. “I never realized what you were going through.”

How was such forgiveness and understanding even possible?

I couldn't help but gulp. Faced with this girl's open-hearted compassion, I longed to beg for forgiveness all over again. My whole body quivered. If only she knew how she had saved and freed me in a single day. She was like an angel who'd come down to earth, willing to save even someone as wretched as me.

Her hands slowly made their way down to my neck, and the girl's serene expression began to warp. I wondered what was wrong, but the words that left her lips surprised me yet again.

"I'm sorry that the only way I can punish you is by making you remain the prime minister."

I could only smile at her apology. *What an incredible person.* She just didn't seem to get it. Punishing me? Continuing as the prime minister wasn't a punishment. It was a rebirth.

I cradled Princess Pride's hand, kissing the back of it.

A kiss of utmost respect. Respect for your understanding heart, and for the depth of your mercy.

I stood on my knees and took her foot. She allowed me to remove her shoe, and I placed another kiss on the tips of her toes.

A kiss of adoration for a girl who is more angel than human. The angel who granted Marianne and me salvation.

I made my way to the top of her foot for my next vow. Her slender, childlike foot fit snugly in my hand.

My saviors, my friends, my master, my people. Everyone I trampled and betrayed. To them I pledge my devotion. Instead of dying in a cell, I vow to live an even longer life to repay the people and the royal family.

Finally, I kissed her shin, but just before I did, I glanced up. Prince Stale scowled at the corner of my vision, just as red-faced as the princess.

Ah, they're so young. It was a reminder that the two of them were still just children, and I couldn't help but smile.

Instead of loyalty, I pledge my obedience. I pledge the rest of my long life, rid

of any further betrayals, to my master.

I finished my vow, made before myself, my master, and the woman I loved. Then I slipped Princess Pride's shoe back onto her foot.

"I am not a knight," I said, "nor am I bound to you by a subordination contract. So I ask that you witness my vow to you here and now."

Kisses weren't enough. I wanted to make a more concrete vow. I interlocked my fingers and bowed my head to make my declaration.

"I give you my sincerest thanks for offering this grave sinner such a chance to serve his country. I will never forget the blessings you've given me, including Marianne's life." Only at this point could I finally smile with genuine relief and joy.

"It's a promise," Princess Pride said.

Love welled up inside me when she returned my smile. The suffering and grief I'd endured over the past few years faded like smoke blown away by the wind.

I pledge my eternity to you. You're the one who reclaimed everything in my life and handed it back to me.

The rest of my life belonged not to the woman I loved but to the princess.

This infinite life of mine—it existed for the sake of the people.

Chapter 3:

The Insolent Princess and the Challenge

“A_{HH... AH...}”

Who is that? What am I seeing? Who is that sad, wretched old man?

“Aha ha ha ha! What happened to you? What a waste of a nice face, Gilbert.”

A girl was laughing at me. She cackled wildly, ugly in her cruelty before an old man. He was... *Me. That's me.*

Of course... I'd finally enacted my Special Power Registration Law.

Oh God, what have I done?

“I guess it's true. Your age control really did stop working, so you can only be an old man now,” she sneered. Her mouth curled in disgust at the mere sight of me.

I made a deal with the devil herself.

“You should be pleased; that clever law of yours has made me very happy. I'm the only special person left in the kingdom.”

She smiled. No, she was *smirking* as she looked at me, a sad, broken old man who'd withered away before her eyes.

I struggled to make out her face through some kind of fog or haze, but that smile was chillingly clear.

“Now I know about all the special powers in my kingdom,” she said.

“Everyone with one of those powers is my slave now, and anyone who resisted is dead. That means that all the rare special powers in the world are mine to use.”

I fell to my knees. She crouched down, rested her chin in her hands, and smiled wider.

“It's all thanks to you,” she said. “I'd say your five years of hard work went pretty well, no? You worked so, so, so hard, and now your law is a reality. Too

bad about that bag of germs, though.”

She meant Marianne. My Maria, whom I’d given everything for. My darling Maria, who’d died anyway. That was the “bag of germs.” Not only had I failed to save her, but I’d also let so many of the people of this kingdom suffer execution or enslavement.

“You know,” she went on, “I thought I’d make you choose between slavery and execution too. I mean, it’s not fair that you have the power to stay one age forever.”

She poked at my loose skin, as if my elderly appearance was utterly entertaining to her. I felt nothing. I didn’t care what happened to me anymore.

“But I decided to spare you. The fact that you have to spend eternity in such a disgusting state, well, what could be a worse curse than that? Aha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Her garish cackle echoed off the walls. She rose, footsteps reverberating along with her vicious mirth as she left me there like trash on her floor.

“I’m sorry...” I whimpered. “It’s my...my fault... It’s my fault that everyone is...”

Maria was dead. All those people with special powers were dead or forced into slavery. And it was all my fault. All my...

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!”

I reeled, unable to contend with the enormity of my sins.

Maria, if only I had you. If only I could go back to the day we first met.

My age control wasn’t working on my head, chest, arms, or legs, but it still affected parts of me almost at random. When I shrieked, my voice emerged shrill and young. I shrank and stretched, going from old to young over and over. The back-and-forth threatened to corrupt what sanity I had left. *What’s happening to me?*

How could I ever manage to apologize to you, Maria? I failed in my promise to make you happy, and now all these innocent people have lost their chance at happiness too.

I miss you. I need to see you. But...

“If...if I pass away...I want you to...to live the life...that I never got to... Promise me...”

That was the last promise we ever exchanged. I promised to live the life she couldn't.

I had to live.

I had to live for her sake, and for the sake of everyone whose lives I'd snatched away. I had to do everything I could for this kingdom and ensure no one ever fell victim to the hands of that demon again. As the prime minister, I would use every power at my disposal. I would spend eternity looking after this kingdom.

Maria, this is the life you gave me. With all the blood on my hands, a sinner like me won't be able to join you in heaven when I die. That's why I must atone here by fulfilling your wish.

My body settled back into its elderly form. Each step pained me. My voice was dry and husky.

“Maria...it's all for you.”

I'll spend eternity repenting for what happened to you and the people of this kingdom. Every second, until my heart ceases to beat.

“Gil, are you all right?”

I blinked through blurry vision to behold the woman I loved.

“Maria.”

I'd been dreaming.

I couldn't remember the details, but the tragic tone of the dream left my chest aching. Marianne wiped away my tears, tears I didn't realize were there until she brushed them off my skin. Concern knit her brows as she gazed at me, but the mere sight of her face put me at ease.

“Sorry, it must've been a dream.”

Perhaps it was a glimpse of the past. Certainly, plenty of tragedy had led to

this moment. But that didn't matter now, not so long as I had my Maria in the present.

I kissed her forehead, soothed by the tangible warmth of her skin against my lips.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sounding uncertain.

Stroking her hair, I replied, "Yes, I'm okay now that I have you."

I sat up and turned to look out the window. Warm beams of light shone through the glass, setting my heart at ease. It was the same window I'd looked through so many times, but only recently did it make me feel like I was truly "home."

When I first brought Marianne back to this house after her long illness, the two of us couldn't stop the tears from flowing. We'd both waited so long for the day when we could live peacefully together.

"Today's a big day," I said. "We can't leave everything to the servants."

Marianne's smile outshone the sun pattering into the room. She was perfect, and I couldn't help kissing her again. Afterward, I prepared for the big day ahead, though I told her to rest up in bed a bit longer.

I left her in our bedroom, but this time my heart and step were light with the knowledge that our separation was only temporary.

"Hmmm..."

"What's wrong, Big Sister? Do you need help picking out a dress for today?"

I was taking a break on the sofa after finishing my studies for the day. I sighed at Tiara's question, pushing aside the book I'd been pretending to read from our library. She was looking at me with those big eyes of hers, innocent as ever.

"Don't worry," she said. "You look good in everything you wear." She grabbed Stale by the shirt and dragged him over to the table where I sat.

"Is something the matter, Pride?" Stale asked me. "You can talk to us about it, if you want."

“Thanks, you two. I do have some stuff on my mind. Mind if I share it with you?”

They settled across from me at the table, nodding their assent. It was a huge relief; I had far too much on my mind, and I needed someone I could talk to.

The first problem was Lotte and Mary, my maids. Then the matter of my guard Jack’s compensation. And I needed to come up with a gift for the party at Prime Minister Gilbert’s house today.

Four months had already passed since the day Arthur cured Marianne. I wanted to find a way to thank Lotte, Mary, and Jack for their help in keeping the whole thing secret. All three deserved a promotion for what they’d done for me. They weren’t only my servants; when they weren’t with me, they had to see to their other duties throughout the castle. But I was hoping to change that and have Lotte and Mary work only for me. They’d get a pay raise in the process and take on less work. They deserved it after all they’d done, including whipping up that outfit I’d worn when Stale and I confronted Prime Minister Gilbert.

I knew Mary had originally intended to focus on clothing and needlework, yet when I tried to pay her extra for the uniform, Lotte offered to help too. It was a larger burden than they should have had to carry. They’d really stuck their necks out for me. If they were my personal servants, they wouldn’t run the risk of getting in trouble on my behalf, since they wouldn’t have any conflicting orders. Plus, I knew I could trust them with absolutely anything, and that was only going to become more important as time went on.

Yet it was thoughts of the future that made me pause. If they kept on serving me, they’d be candidates to become ladies-in-waiting someday. They’d have to train to serve not just a princess but a queen, and that would mean extra work. I was trying to take away their burdens, not increase them.

“Is that something you really need to worry about, Pride?” Stale said, and Tiara nodded beside him. “Tiara and I have already chosen our personal maids. A position like that is considered an honor. What’s the problem?”

His response had surprised me at first, but I was starting to understand.

“Big Brother is right,” Tiara chimed in. “It’s like a promise that they’ll get to be

with you forever, Big Sister. Why, I'd jump for joy if that were me."

Ah. I get it now. Yes, they'd get more work, but that wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. Plus, the honor of being a lady-in-waiting would outweigh the inconvenience. With all they'd done for me, it was probably more selfish to waffle about the promotion. When I considered that, it baffled me that I hadn't promoted them sooner.

"If you're worried, why not bring it up with them directly? If they truly seem opposed to the idea, you can give it some more thought," Stale suggested.

He was exactly right. I needed to hear from the two women first.

Okay, one problem down. But what about the guard, Jack? I didn't feel as much agency to go ahead and promote him the way I could Lotte and Mary. Unlike with maids, the royal family didn't have personal guards. The knights and guards sort of faded into the background, a faceless mass. Even so, Arthur—a love interest character—managed to stand out. In the game, he even served as an escort for the royal family's diplomatic journeys.

Perhaps Jack could be something akin to an imperial guard, then. That wasn't really an idea that existed in this world, and I only understood it from media I'd consumed in my previous life. I figured it would be like having a personal bodyguard. That would keep him by my side and give him a pay increase like Lotte and Mary.

"Why don't you take a personal knight?" Stale said.

"Huh?!" I'd never even heard of such a thing.

As if on cue, he and Tiara shouted in unison: "Arthur!"

A personal knight... When I really thought about it, I had a vague recollection of seeing personal knights in another otome game. They were just like bodyguards but held the status of knights.

"You can have Jack around as your imperial guard at all times," Stale said, "then have Arthur stay with you during emergencies as your personal knight. That way, as the crown princess, you're even more protected. You should consider it."

Wait, wasn't I talking about Jack just now? How did Arthur get involved in this?

"R-right," I said. "But the first hurdle is whether Mother, Father, and the other government officials will let me establish the post of imperial guard in the first place."

"In that case, I'll draft up an absolutely perfect law for you," Stale said.

"Oh!" Tiara clapped her hands together, grinning like she'd just stumbled onto some new idea. "I think it'd be best to go to Prime Minister Gilbert for advice about that."

Stale grimaced. Apparently, he hadn't overcome his distaste for the man.

"Don't make that face, Big Brother!" Tiara chided him, squishing his handsome face between her hands. "Who else is as good at drafting bills as Prime Minister Gilbert?"

I had to agree with her. The prime minister was good at his job before, but with Marianne cured, he worked like a man possessed. If anyone knew how to go about this, it would be him.

Unlike Uncle Vest—the seneschal and my mother's assistant tasked with aiding the queen's work, diplomatic matters, and keeping up with world affairs—Prime Minister Gilbert was my father's assistant, focused on national laws, trials, Freesian information, and even state secrets. Since Marianne's recovery, he'd thrown himself into his work, tightening security around the kingdom's secret information and denouncing every high-level official who'd ever leaked or forged information.

But it seemed Stale couldn't look past his previous transgressions. "It wasn't long ago that *he* was the one abusing his power for that exact same purpose," he grumbled.

How different the two of them were from their in-game counterparts. Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert both went beyond their ordinary roles and worked together to expose abuse in the world of ORL.

Prime Minister Gilbert was hard at work on that in this world as well. After everything that happened with Marianne, he strove to undo the nasty rumors

he'd spread about me. I already noticed a difference in how many members of the government treated me lately.

He also grew intensely focused on rounding up anyone involved in human trafficking. Working alongside Mother, he made time to prosecute the offenders even with his already packed schedule. When I asked Father about this frantic work ethic, he swore Prime Minister Gilbert was perfectly healthy.

"In fact, he's already preparing for the next lawmaking assembly by drafting up all kinds of new bills," Father had told me.

I might have worried about whether the prime minister had time for sleep amid all that, but ever since he'd moved Marianne out of the castle and into their house, he'd been returning home every night.

Still, the way he immersed himself in his duties was impressive, if not downright terrifying. Father informed me that he was working on a complex array of new laws, from preventing trafficking to compensating victims to securing personal information and establishing free public education for all children. He even had something in the works about supporting citizens with special powers.

Considering all that, he seemed like a good person to consult for advice on creating an imperial guard position. I thanked Tiara and the still-squished Stale for their help in solving two of my current conundrums.

"How could this have happened?"

I was face-to-face with absolute disaster.

Tiara, Stale, and Arthur surrounded me. I was too dumbfounded to speak as I took in the mess before my eyes. A foul stench curled my toes, yet I stood frozen in shock, hardly remembering to blink. My siblings reached out, one putting a comforting hand on my shoulder and the other taking hold of my sleeve.

"Elder Sister, why don't you just take a step back for a bit?" Stale said.

"There's always next time," Tiara added.

Their joint attempts to soothe me came out sounding quite strained. What could they possibly say in the face of the scorched, liquefied concoction before us?

I forced a smile, grateful for their attempt. "I'm sorry, everyone. I never thought it would turn out so bad."

This was my present for Prime Minister Gilbert's house party. Well, in theory, anyway.

A small, close-knit group would gather to celebrate Marianne's recovery. Considering a potluck seemed too rustic and I would never be allowed to swing a big butcher knife around, I thought some homemade sweets might be a nice gift for the occasion. They were simple treats; plus, I could impress the crowd by baking something from my past life that didn't exist here yet.

The head chef let us borrow the kitchen for a little while, and even Arthur took a break to join us. It had all the makings of a fun, lively afternoon of baking, something I'd enjoyed quite a bit in my past life. I'd had plenty of confidence in my abilities...until now.

I tried a simple version of Japanese-style melon buns first. But for some reason, the dough took on a bizarre color and devolved into a thick, syrupy goo. I popped it into the oven anyway, and what came out was a pile of charcoal.

What exactly went wrong here? I wondered, then decided I should try some cookies instead. Once again, the thick liquid batter burnt to a crisp. *This isn't right either!*

Next, I changed course and tried making my specialty rolled omelet, hoping savory would win over sweet. I'd perfected this in my past life, but here it was a lump of coal. This was far beyond simply being "bad at cooking." It was so dreadful that I couldn't help but wonder if I'd been cursed...

Can you even curse someone's cooking skills?!

Dread sank heavy in my stomach. I grabbed a nearby apple and a small knife. I should have no trouble peeling an apple; it was something I did frequently in my past life. But now, my attempt at peeling ended up breaking the entire apple into pieces. The skin I managed to remove was more than a full

centimeter thick. It wasn't just baking or cooking—I couldn't even peel an apple anymore. At a total loss, I stood there with my mouth hanging open.

Pride Royal Ivy, the cruel and selfish queen, had absolutely zero culinary talent.

It was possible that any household chore I attempted would turn out just as bad. Pride spent her youth as a spoiled princess who did whatever she wanted and was always dishing out orders. Someone like her would never bother with chores or cooking. I'd always thought Pride could do anything I could do and vice versa. I never imagined she'd be so terrible at something like this. To be fair, this was my first time trying it as her.

I was still staring at the remains of the destroyed apple when I heard a sound from behind me.

“Pfft!”

Arthur slapped a hand over his mouth, spinning away as quickly as he could, but that didn't hide the redness in his ears or the way his shoulders shook with laughter.

“Arthur!” I yelled.

But Arthur couldn't stop. “I...I'm very sorry,” he said just before another snort burst out.

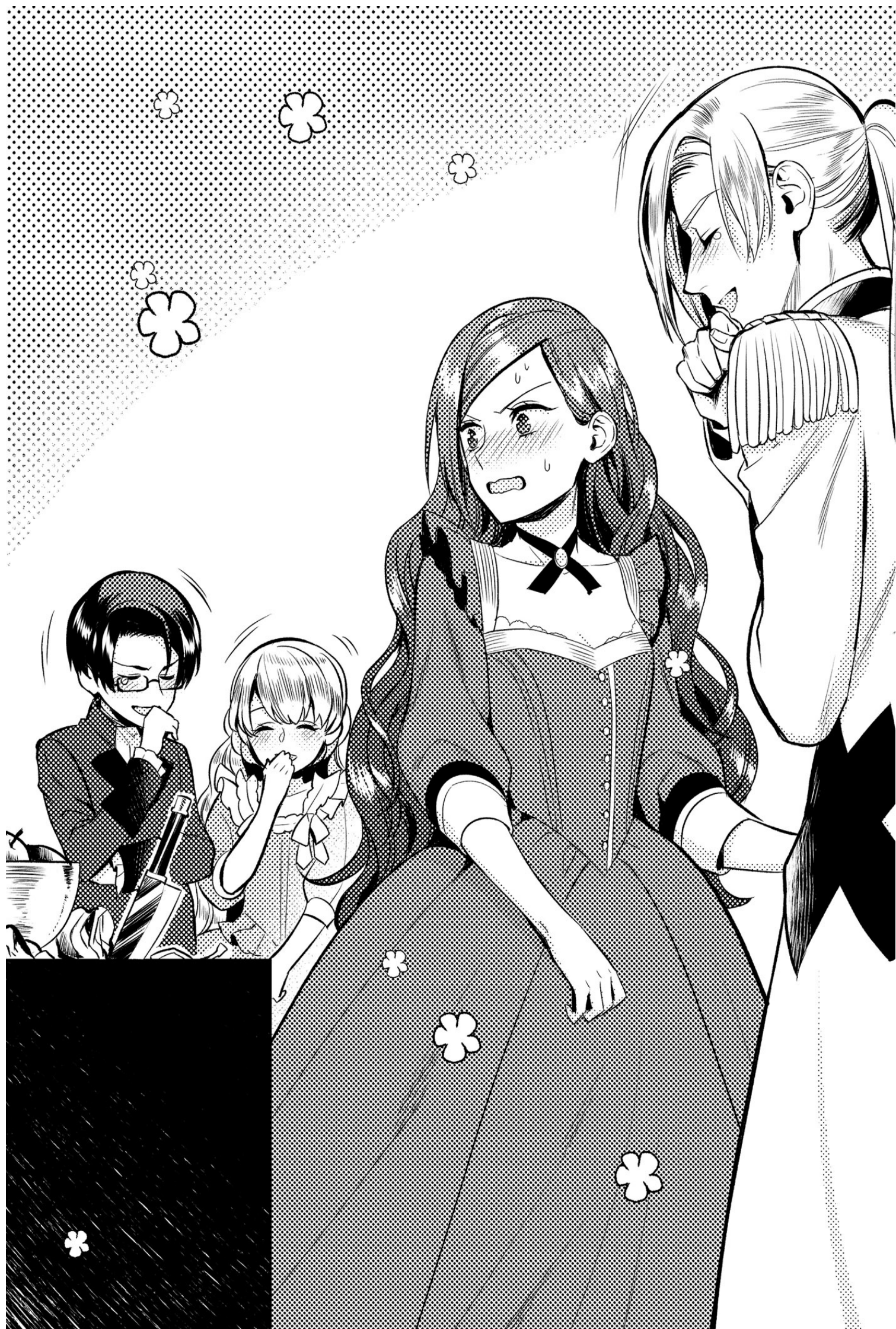
How rude! I mean, sure, even I'm horrified by my own cooking disasters, but do you really have to laugh that hard?!

I set my knife down and stomped toward Arthur, ready to drag him back by the ear. But the moment I stepped away, more snickers sounded behind me. I whipped my head around to find Tiara and Stale bursting into laughter as well.

“Sorry! I'm s-sorry, Big Sister!”

“I can't...believe...this is the one thing...you're bad at!”

They struggled to speak as more laughter bubbled out. I'd never seen Tiara laugh so hard before, nor Stale's face turn so red. My cheeks flushed with heat, frustrated tears prickling at the corners of my eyes.



This is just how the character was written for the game. I remember lots of recipes from my past life, and I cooked a lot before I was reborn too, but there's nothing I can do if they made her a bad cook!

Of course, I couldn't voice these thoughts, no matter how much I wanted to.

"Th-there're things even I can't do!" I said, stomping my foot.

Then I fled to a corner of the kitchen before anyone could catch sight of my tears. I crouched down, hugged my knees, and sulked. And cried, just a little, but I'd take that secret with me to my grave. Soon, my companions came slinking over to apologize and cheer me up.

In the end, the four of us ended up making apple jam together as a gift to bring to the party.

Fortunately, Stale, Tiara, and Arthur weren't cursed with an inability to cook, like me. They did the cooking for me, even using that apple I'd destroyed earlier. Tiara in particular, as the heroine of an otome game, showed surprising skill. Although it was her first time in the kitchen, she cleanly peeled the skin from the apples and even wielded a knife like a professional chef. I supposed that made sense, given that she'd make baked goods as gifts for the love interests in the game. She even cooked lovely homemade meals in Gil's route when she had to live as a commoner in the village. If I got the cheats of a final boss, she got the cheats of a charming heroine. Perhaps she could help me make more of the foods I remembered from my past life.

By the time we arrived at Prime Minister Gilbert's home, the party was already well underway. His maids—Agnes, Theresa, and Trixy—and Salman, his guard, greeted us at the entrance. I soon found Commander Roderick and some senior knights inside, here to represent the order. However, when I went to make my introductions...

"M-my name! Is A-A-A-Alan Berners! Yes!"

"Erm, Callum Bordeaux, Your Highness. I serve as the captain of the Third Squadron."

"I-I am Eric Gilchrist! It is an honor to meet you!"

“I’m Arthur Beresford. I recently joined the main forces.”

I couldn’t help but feel guilty about how nervous they were.

Commander Roderick merely said, “They’re my subordinates, and they’re all the most excellent of knights. Please feel free to talk with them at your leisure.”

Then he left me with the four men as he went to greet Father. I had no idea what to say to these men, even though I’d hoped to meet them. They seemed terrified of me. Even Arthur was acting like we were strangers.

The captain, Alan, was shaking with nerves. His voice went shrill. I could barely even understand what he was saying. Was his name even Alan or had I misheard?

Then there was Callum, another captain. He managed more composure than Captain Alan but stood stiff and formal. I’d met this man before at any number of ceremonies and training exercises. Yet now he held himself so rigidly, it was like talking to a statue.

Last came Eric, who I was pretty sure had been at that ambush two years ago. He swore his knight’s oath to me when I conducted my very first accolade, but today he greeted me as though we had never crossed paths. I supposed the men simply didn’t expect members of the royal family to remember knights they’d met a handful of times. But I felt bad for making them all so flustered. They were being so careful and polite around me. No wonder Commander Roderick was proud of his subordinates.

Next time, I’d speak first, greeting them all by name so they knew I remembered and didn’t have to be so guarded. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and some of them didn’t remember meeting me. Eric had looked nearly overcome when he swore his knight’s oath; it was certainly possible he didn’t remember the person who’d conducted the ceremony.

Still, I enjoyed getting a chance to actually converse with these men. Outside of Arthur, I never got to speak to the knights beyond basic introductions. I’d wanted to get to know them better for a long time.

But one thing that night made me even happier: Prime Minister Gilbert and Marianne’s announcement that they were getting married.

The guests showered them with congratulations and blessings. It was a joyous night, filled with laughter and smiles all around. I was sad when the party started to wind down, but upon witnessing Prime Minister Gilbert and Marianne standing there shoulder-to-shoulder to see us all off, so happy and peaceful together, I didn't feel a smidge of regret about my recent choices.

From the bottom of my heart, I wished for their eternal happiness.

Exactly one year had passed since the previous lawmakers' assembly.

"Huh?! What are you doing here?!"

Arthur stepped into Stale's practice room, ready for another day of sparring. But he found me and Tiara waiting for him as well. His gaze flicked between all of us. When I explained what I'd pushed through the assembly today, his mouth dropped open in disbelief.

"Imperial knights?! They passed that law in the assembly today?!"

"That's right. As the crown princess, Big Sister will always have an imperial knight at her side to guard her during emergencies," Stale said. A hint of a smile tugged at his mouth as he took in Arthur's confusion.

I tried to ease Arthur's shock with an awkward smile. "The proposal became a reality thanks to the hard work of Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert."

We'd been working on this for more than six months. When we went to Prime Minister Gilbert for help, he drafted up a bill to establish the posts of imperial guard and imperial knight the very next day. Stale offered revisions, Prime Minister Gilbert put on the final touches, and the bill was complete.

Of course, that didn't mean the process was perfectly smooth sailing.

"When it comes to personal protection, I believe that, in addition to an imperial guard and an imperial knight, we should dispatch three or four other guards," Prime Minister Gilbert said.

"I can't allow anyone I don't trust to be in charge of my elder sister's protection," Stale replied. "Do we have a way to vet that many guards? I seem to remember a certain person who abused their position for disreputable ends

not too long ago.”

Prime Minister Gilbert ignored Stale’s barb. “But leaving Her Highness’s protection in the hands of one person may send a message of weakness.”

“All that matters is that she’s safe. I don’t care about the public perception.”

“In that case, we can train knights for a few years and accept them one by one after they pass an examination, then aim to grow those numbers in the future. That way, the brilliant seneschal-to-be can personally identify the guard and knight he feels are worthy of trust.”

“I was already planning on doing just that,” Stale said. “I happen to know a knight who has a good nose for corruption.”

“Oh, of course. Aside from Mr. Jack, the question remains of how to implement Sir Arthur as an imperial knight as well...”

Despite the little jabs, I was relieved to see the two of them working together so well. It even seemed like Prime Minister Gilbert enjoyed the sarcasm and the back-and-forth.

Their combined effort resulted in the Creation of Imperial Guards and Imperial Knights for Protection of the Royal Family Law. It passed on its very first go around in the assembly, though I suspected Prime Minister Gilbert had something to do with that.

The law meant that, as future queen, I would get one personal guard and one personal knight for my protection. They had to pass an examination to be selected for the position. While I’d go about my daily activities with a handful of guards like before, I’d also have one personal imperial guard and imperial knight. After a few years, I could choose a few more if I deemed it necessary.

“Are you recruiting candidates?! When does the selection happen?! Do you have to be a commander or captain to be considered?!”

Arthur burst with questions as soon as we explained. Tiara and I were no match for such intensity. I was glad he was so eager, but I braced for his disappointment when I had to explain that he’d be serving me and not the heroine, Tiara.

As the only truly calm one in the conversation, Stale said: “The job’s already filled.”

“Wha?!” Arthur cried. “What the hell?! So you picked a captain or something already?! Or did you pick Dad or Vice Commander Clark? Who?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Stale said. “Who else could I trust as Elder Sister’s personal knight but you? Prime Minister Gilbert and I arranged for you to become her imperial knight right away.”

Stale made that sound easy, but I knew just how hard he’d worked. Tiara and I cringed a little at his performative nonchalance.

The exam excluded commanders, vice commanders, captains, and vice captains. We couldn’t disrupt the chain of command for this. But candidates still had to be exceptional and well qualified in order to make it through.

“Then shouldn’t one of the more experienced knights get the job instead?” Arthur asked.

“Normally, sure. We thought it might be a good idea to structure the evaluation just like the main forces entrance exam—”

“Easy enough.” Arthur cracked his knuckles, as though preparing to fight his way into the position. I would’ve expected nothing less of the future commander of the order.

“No, that won’t be necessary. You and I have sparred together for three years now. You’ve already proven both your fighting capabilities and your trustworthiness around members of the royal family.”

“But what’s the point if I’m just using my personal connections to get the job? Let me compete just like anyone else.”

“What if the unthinkable happens and you don’t win?”

“No way in hell I’m losin’. Shouldn’t you know that after training with me for three whole years?” Arthur smirked and Stale soon followed, caught up in his enthusiasm.

“You know what happens if you lose,” Stale told him.

“Ha! Of course I do.”

Tiara jumped up with excitement, beaming just as brightly as the boys. “Now we get to be with Arthur all the time!”

The tournament took place three days later. Anyone not excluded due to rank could compete...and every single eligible knight ended up arriving. I could hardly believe the massive turnout. It took two days for them to fight it out. They dueled with such vigor that I occasionally covered my eyes and couldn’t watch.

Perhaps they fought for the prestige of the title “imperial knight.” Perhaps they fought for the pay raise and promotion. Perhaps they fought to secure the honor of protecting the royal family.

Whatever the reason, two days later, a victor emerged...

Arthur Beresford would be my personal knight.

“What am I going to do? I don’t have any ideas at all.”

“Don’t worry! You’ll think of a great name, Big Sister!”

“It’s nothing to be so worried about, Pride. Gilbert’s the one who asked you to be the godmother, after all.”

Tiara, Stale, and I were leaving the royal residence with my imperial guard, Jack, at our side. At fifteen, I now faced multiple problems all at once. Firstly, the tension between the kingdom’s autonomous institutions and our joint policies with allies. Second, finding a name for Prime Minister Gilbert and Marianne’s baby daughter.

“Not this again,” Stale groaned. “Gilbert’s requests aren’t always your problems alone, Pride. Let’s just think it over in the carriage.”

But Stale wasn’t focused on baby names. He was looking at something in the distance. Following his gaze, I saw a knight rushing toward us. When Tiara recognized the knight, she called out and waved. Our imperial knight ran toward us, early and eager as always.

“My apologies!” he said when he reached us. He was panting for breath.

“What’s wrong?” I said. “We’re just going on a simple observation of the village. You didn’t need to rush.”

“No, no, I apologize for my unseemly behavior,” Arthur said, bowing.

“It’s perfectly fine,” I replied. I was touched that he’d rush for our sake, but he didn’t need to beat himself up over something like this.

“Seriously,” I said. “Thank you for everything, Arthur. I’m glad to have you along for today’s observation.”

Arthur Beresford, my imperial knight, joined the three of us in our carriage. It was just another day for the four of us, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Chapter 4:

The Cruel Princess and the Criminal

“WE’RE A LOT LATER than we were hoping for,” Stale murmured to himself as he gazed out of the carriage window.

Nearly one year had passed since Prime Minister Gilbert’s party.

“Indeed,” I said. “But we don’t have any other plans after this, so we’ll be fine as long as we make it home for dinner.”

We’d gone to visit Prime Minister Gilbert with Arthur tagging along. It was supposed to be a quick trip, but the prime minister couldn’t stop gushing about his firstborn daughter, and we ended up staying longer than intended.

For some reason, Prime Minister Gilbert had asked Arthur and me to name his daughter. I racked my brain for names, but we only ended up with two suggestions: Jeanne, a combination of Gilbert and Marianne, or Stella, a combination of Stale and Tiara. In the end, Prime Minister Gilbert and Marianne opted for Stella, and I breathed a sigh of relief that such a heavy responsibility was off my shoulders.

“We’re almost at the castle!” Tiara said.

I looked out the window at the familiar scenery. Arthur sat up to open the door for us, when suddenly...

Clack-clack!

The smooth carriage ride jerked to a halt. Arthur and Stale went right for their weapons as panicked voices rose outside the carriage.

“Hurry, out of the way!”

“Get up! Get up!”

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?!” Arthur shouted at the guards outside the carriage.

“My apologies!” one responded. “A vagrant is sprawled out in the middle of

the road. We're moving him now!"

Vagrants weren't an uncommon sight in the kingdom, but rarely did any get so close to the castle or royal residence. I wanted to see for myself whether this was a thief trying to target the nobility or a beggar after our sympathies. Still, it was safer for me to stay in the carriage and simply order the guards to leave food and water for the man.

They did so, and soon we got back underway. After we'd put a little distance between us, Tiara and I peeked out the windows to catch a glimpse of the vagrant. A tattered robe with a hood hid most of the man slumped over in the road. I was just about to ask Arthur to check up on the vagrant later when I caught sight of the dark skin of his hands and feet poking out from underneath the robe.

"Stop the carriage!" I said.

The wheels ground to a halt, the horses snorting at the sudden jerk on their reins. Arthur had to put out an arm to keep Tiara from tumbling right out of her seat, but I used the momentum to fling open the door and jump to the ground. The guards jerked toward me, shocked, while my companions called out to me from the carriage. Arthur leapt out after me instantly, and Stale wasn't far behind.

"Your Highnesses! Please wait!" the guards shouted. But I just pushed on, making a beeline for the man hunched over in the road.

"If you find yourself in trouble, if you're in desperate and utter need of help, come and speak to me."

If it really *was* him...

"If you never find yourself in trouble, you'll never have to worry about it."

If he was truly following those orders, then I knew exactly who he was.

"Val!"

I called his name as I rushed up to him. Arthur was still yelling for me, but I crouched beside the man sprawled on the ground.

"It's all right," I assured Arthur and then turned my attention back to Val.

He wasn't responding. I carefully drew his hood back to confirm my suspicions and saw a familiar face, though four years had taken a toll. He looked more like the character from the game now, a little more aged and worn. I rested his head on my knees, and he groaned quietly.

"Elder Sister," Stale said. "That man is..."

I picked up the water the guards had left for Val and tried to get him to drink it, but he coughed as he swallowed. His eyes creaked open, then flew wide when he recognized me. He promptly fainted.

"Your Highness, who is this?" Arthur asked me.

The other guards were equally baffled. None of them would have met Val before—although he had briefly appeared on the visual projection when the knight commander was in trouble. Only Stale understood, but he seemed too stunned to respond.

"This man's name is Val. He's a guest of mine, and you're to bring him along with us." Stale blinked rapidly, and Arthur's mouth fell open.

I still didn't know if Val was here by chance or if he'd really been on his way to see me, but I had to find out for sure before I sent him out on his own again. I was the one who bound him to my service; it was my responsibility to take care of him if he needed help.

At my orders, the guards carried the injured and debilitated Val to the castle infirmary. Thankfully, the doctors in the castle, some of whom had special powers related to healing, treated his wounds. They reported that he had mostly endured some rough blows and surface-level scrapes, and that he should stabilize after a day of rest.

I left him in the care of the guards and doctors before approaching Mother and Father about getting permission to let an "acquaintance" stay in the castle for a while. They agreed, and I resumed my vigil in the infirmary, accompanied by Tiara, Stale, and Arthur. Tiara seemed frightened of Val and hid behind Stale as she peered at the injured man.

As my guest, Val got a private room in the infirmary. He also got a bath and clean clothes. He looked nothing like the vagrant in the road by the time I saw

him next, but he still hadn't awoken. He must have been terribly weak by the time we found him. In the game, he'd been illustrated as an evil character with only two sprite variations: "devious" and "shocked." But here, lying peacefully asleep and cleaned up, he was rather handsome. He was probably in his early twenties, and he was quite beautiful.

Just how had he spent these last four years?

Timidly, Tiara made her way up to my side, drawing closer to Val. I squeezed her hand to encourage her, and she reached out for Val, smoothing his dark hair off his forehead.

He suddenly gasped, snatching Tiara's arm the second he awoke. Tiara squeaked in surprise, and both Arthur and Stale drew their weapons.

"Val, I order you to release her!" I said. "She belongs to the royal family!"

He let go instantly, and then his gaze shot to me. Val and I had signed a fealty contract some time ago. That meant he had to obey my orders, including the order never to harm someone else or lay a finger on a member of the royal family.

Val had heeded my command, but he seemed confused. He looked down at his hand as though he didn't recognize it. His head swiveled as he took in his condition, the room, and the other people standing around him.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What time is it? Who are you? Who are they?!"

"Just calm down and listen to me. You're inside the castle right now. You collapsed along the road on the way here. I'm Pride Royal Ivy, the master of your fealty contract."

He had to sit quietly and listen once I ordered him to, but his eyes widened as I explained. When I finished, he lurched as though attempting to escape, but then his body contorted unnaturally.

"What?! Agh... Grah... Shit!"

Val's body spasmed, the contract superseding his will. He even sat up on the bed and tried to get on one knee. Part of his fealty contract dictated that he always pay respect to the royal family, and we now stood before him

compelling that respect. It was all the result of his taking part in the ambush on the knights four years ago. He'd gotten off with having to sign the contract rather than a death sentence, and this was the result. Try as he might to resist, he couldn't help but kneel in our presence.

"Let me introduce the others," I said. "Listen well, Val. This is Tiara, the younger princess, and Stale, the firstborn prince and my brother-in-law. I'm sure you remember them. They're fellow members of the royal family."

It wasn't just my orders he had to follow. He had to obey an order from *any* member of the royal family, meaning he couldn't defy the people I'd just introduced him to.

"Val, answer me. Why did we find you passed out on that road?"

His face twisted and he jutted his chin, but the contract prevented him from lying to, misleading, or ignoring me. "I...came here...by Your Highness's orders...in the fealty contract." His hands trembled and hate soured every word, but he addressed me respectfully.

"You can act at ease around us," I said, "as long as you don't harm anyone."

At this, Val slumped as though suddenly released from chains. My heart went out to him for this cruel way we had to communicate; it was hard to watch. He slouched back in the bed, but he just as quickly threw aside the sheets and dashed for the window.

"Stop right there!"

My words halted him before Stale or Arthur could. He stood trapped with his back to us.

"Damn it. You little...!"

I drew as close as I dared. "Look at me."

Val turned on command and glared down at me.

"Why did you try to run away just now?"

"I'm only here because your fealty contract forced me to come," he spat. "I don't need anything from you or any damn member of the royal family!"

If the contract had forced him to come here, he almost certainly did need our help, however. That was the only reason he would've sought us out.

"You're here because you need something from me, right?"

"No! No way in hell do I need your help!"

"But you do need *someone* to help you?"

He turned his face away, a muscle in his jaw jerking as he tried to keep from speaking. "Yeah."

It seemed he didn't even want to admit the truth to himself. But even if he wouldn't accept my help, he did still need someone to step in.

"I have to ask you, Val..." I began, taking a deep breath, but he whipped back toward me, terror streaking across his face.

"No!"

The second I asked my question, he would have no choice but to answer. He obviously didn't want to say anything, but the contract wouldn't have brought him here without a reason. I had to know what he was after, even if extracting the information required cruelty.

"Val, tell me what you're truly after."

He instantly clutched at his throat, squeezing to choke off his own voice. His lips moved, but nothing but garbled wheezes escaped.

"Stop resisting," I ordered. "Put your hands down, Val."

His hands trembled, but he lowered them. He sank to his knees in front of me, balling his hands into fists.

"Save...em..."

I could barely hear his quiet voice. When I ordered him to repeat himself, his face twisted with self-hatred.

"Save...them. Save...ids..."

Even as I heard his teeth grinding in anguish, I needed to understand. "As your master, I order you to state your desire clearly!"

“The kids!” he finally shouted. “Save them!”

His demand echoed through the room. As soon as he finished speaking, Val slumped down on the ground, like he’d lost all strength. He breathed raggedly, sweating from the effort of keeping this hidden from me.

What does he mean by that?

“What kids?” I asked him.

He didn’t resist this time, resigned to his fate. “Two kids from the slums. They were taken by human traffickers.”

He stared at the floor as he spoke, refusing to look at me.

“How can we save them?”

“Two days from now,” he said, “at sunset, that’s when they’re getting traded. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Val’s contract prevented him from involving himself with crime of any sort. He couldn’t initiate it himself or carry out someone else’s request. He couldn’t even get involved in order to save those kids.

“There, I told you,” Val said. “Now just let me get the hell outta here already!”

I ignored his request. “When exactly is the trade happening?”

“I don’t know. I passed out in the afternoon on the day I tried to crawl here. I had two days left at that point. So it depends how much time has passed while I was out.”

He pushed up to sit so he could look out the window. The sun had long since set, leaving the city beyond the glass cloaked in darkness.

“That means the trade is taking place tomorrow,” I said. “What are you planning to do about it?”

“I’ve got nothin’ I can do,” Val replied. “Unless the compassionate Miss Princess has five people to give me to swap out for those kids or she gives me permission just for one day to kill all those bastards.” He barked a bitter laugh, eyes empty and dull as he gazed hopelessly out the window.

“I can’t do that.”

“I know.” He chuckled mirthlessly. Even if I released him right now, he wouldn’t be able to help those kids. In order for him to do anything about this, I had to command him.

“Val, you’re to stay in this castle tonight.”

“What?!” he cried, surging to his feet. “Hang on! You’ve got no use for me now, right?! Then hurry and let me go!”

“No. I can’t let you leave tonight.”

I turned to my companions, but Val screamed behind me. “What’re you planning?! Are you still tryin’ to punish me, you monster?!”

It wasn’t the first time he’d called me a monster, but this time it prompted Arthur to ready his sword in retaliation.

“Stale. Arthur.” I stepped up to the tense boys, forcing them to meet my eyes. I didn’t want them doing anything rash right now.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Stale said before I even had to ask.

Arthur dropped to one knee. Tiara watched them and gulped, offering a nod.

“We’ll save the children,” I declared.

Then I turned back to Val. He gaped at me, mouth hanging open. I couldn’t ignore this now that I knew. Human trafficking was illegal here, and moreover, this involved *children*. Plus, this wasn’t a request Val was making for himself. He was genuinely concerned about the well-being of others. I was obligated to help him.

“Here are my orders, Val,” I said. “You must tell me everything you know about these people, including the children who were abducted.”

By the laws of his contract, he could never harm, deceive, or steal from others.

“I’ll save the people you care about no matter what, Val.”

“...understand, Tiara? If I...then use...”

Who is that?

A man stood before me. I knew his voice, but something blacked out his face, concealing his identity.

“No! There must be another way!”

That was Tiara. The heroine version of Tiara. She was taller and older here, an adult woman instead of a child. Tears shimmered in her eyes as she shook her head, and she clutched something in her hands. She stowed the item in her dress pocket before offering the man a nod.

“If only you could run away...be enough...”

“Hearing you say that is all I need. But I must protect you, so I can’t run now. Besides...”

Tiara wept, even as she nodded along to the man’s words.

“It will be all right!” she said. “I’ll protect them too! ...Won’t die under my watch!”

Ah, this is the ending of the game. Just before the final battle, he and Tiara...

This was the one route where Tiara, the protagonist, acted on her own accord to protect this man and the Freesian people from Pride...from me.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

I grabbed my chest as pain shot through me. I staggered, shoes scraping against the cobblestones. Blood gushed from my mouth, too voluminous to contain. I glared for as long as I could before collapsing into a puddle of my own blood.

That’s me. This is when I die a death befitting the evil final boss of the game. Now the kingdom will be sa—

“Ngh... Hic!”

She was crying.

Tiara was crying as I died right there in front of her. She covered her face with her hands and wept. That was when I remembered. This was the route where Tiara...

“-ghness... Your Highness... Princess Pride!”

My eyes flew open at Arthur’s shout.

He peered at me with concern, Stale standing right behind him. But it wasn’t just those two. We’d summoned an expert in human trafficking and crime—Prime Minister Gilbert. They watched me now, worry written all over their faces.

“Oh, sorry, I...think I fell asleep?” I murmured. I rubbed at my eyes and only then noticed the wetness on my cheeks. My throat was oddly dry as well.

“So did Tiara,” Stale said.

Still in a daze, I found Tiara dozing in my lap. She seemed to be crying too, perhaps from a nightmare. Even asleep, distress distorted her features.

I called her name and nudged her to wake up. Her eyelids fluttered a bit, and she looked confused when she roused. I tried to wipe the tears away from her eyes.

After some time, she said, “You’re crying too, Big Sister.” She reached up to brush away my tears, instantly more worried about me than herself. What a kind girl.

“What’s wrong, you two?” Stale asked.

“I must’ve had a bad dream,” I said. “I’m sorry to scare you all.”

I tried to answer their questions, but I couldn’t really recall the dream. *Does Tiara remember hers, I wonder?*

What an odd time to have a nightmare, though. Prime Minister Gilbert rushed in and handed Tiara and me a towel each from the infirmary.

I was still dabbing at my eyes when Tiara gasped. “Ahhh! I’m on your lap! I-I-I’m very sorry!” she stammered, sitting up suddenly.

Apparently not.

“It’s all right,” I told her. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m sorry for resting you on my lap when I dozed off in the first place.” I stroked her hair to calm her.

“No, it’s my fault,” she said, a blush coloring her cheeks.

“I’m sure the two of you were just exhausted from all the planning,” Stale said. “It’s almost time for dinner, so why don’t we return to the residence?” We nodded at his suggestion.

“You’re going to go check up on Val after this, right?” Arthur said. “Bring me with you for that.”

Arthur knew all about Val’s role in the ambush thanks to Stale. It put him on edge around the man. Now Arthur insisted on being with me anytime I went near Val, and Stale seemed to agree with that approach. Therefore, I allowed all of them to accompany me to see Val after dinner.

The chefs made an extra serving that night. After a brief sojourn to our bedrooms, I took it with me when Stale teleported me, Tiara, and himself to the room where Val was supposed to be.

“Your Highness.”

Arthur was already there by the time we teleported in; we didn’t even have time to call for him. Stale must have sent him here before anyone else.

He held up a hand, urging us to stay back. “Please be careful.” He looked over his shoulder at the room where Val was supposed to be. I followed his gaze... and discovered the disaster awaiting us.

Unlike the infirmary, Val’s room was originally empty; it didn’t even contain any furniture. But the hallmarks of a struggle covered the space now. Dents dotted the floor and walls, as though someone had taken a bat to them.

And there was blood on the walls.

Despite the dread winding tight in my chest, I gently moved Arthur’s arm aside so I could see the whole room. Val hunkered in a corner, his hands bruised and bloody with fresh wounds.

“Well, if it isn’t the royal family brats,” he said, narrowing his eyes at us with a feeble smirk. “Do you like what I’ve done with the place? You told me I could act however I pleased, Miss Princess.”

“I should have ordered you to behave yourself.” I stepped past Arthur to

approach Val, setting the basket with his dinner in front of him. “Eat this. You’re not allowed to dump the food out or destroy it. The doctor who treated you with his special power said you should heal up if you rest well tonight. But I can see you haven’t been doing that, have you? It’s late, and this part of the castle is empty now, so go ahead and raise a fuss. No one will hear.”

Val clicked his tongue, but when I opened the basket, he reached for the food, taking out a plate and cutlery. He hesitated over something he found in the basket.

Then, he whirled a dinner knife right at me.

“Your Highness!” Arthur shouted.

The attack came so quickly and at such close range, I didn’t even have time to react. Air whistled past my ear, and the knife sank into the wall behind me with a soft *shink*.

Tiara shrieked. Arthur and Stale sprinted toward me. But I assured them I was okay and tried to stop their murderous rage before they could tear Val apart.

Val just sneered. “Sorry ’bout that. I saw a bug, that’s all.” He motioned with his chin, and I turned, shocked to find a spider pierced on the knife.

“You have good aim,” I said.

“My talents are wasted thanks to your little contract, Miss Princess,” Val said. “Want me to try it again with my fork?”

He went on grinning as he picked up a fork, pointing the tongs at me. *It’s fine. He didn’t hit me with the knife, either.* In truth, he *couldn’t* hit me or anyone else thanks to the contract. If he wanted to snipe at me, he had to do so through little displays of defiance such as this.



“Listen up, criminal,” Stale said coldly. “Don’t forget that Tiara and I are part of the royal family. We can give your orders too if we want.”

Beside him, Arthur unsheathed his sword. He looked ready to plunge it into Val’s chest if I gave the order.

Val just went on smiling. He tossed the fork away casually, eating the bread, roast beef, and other dishes with his hands. He made no effort to quiet his chewing or slurping, putting on a sloppy display.

“Was that hard to watch for the fancy Miss Princess?” he said when he finished. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and grinned. It seemed he wouldn’t stop until he managed to pick a fight.

“Your behavior won’t work on me,” I said. “I’m not going to let you leave this castle before tomorrow.”

He clicked his tongue and squinted at me. “You done feedin’ the criminal now? Yeah? Then get out of here.”

Val crossed his arms. I just sighed and started cleaning up his messy dishes.

“Now all that’s left is for you to get a good night’s sleep,” I said. “If you don’t, the wounds you got before you came here won’t fully heal. You have to be in good health if we want to save those children.”

“I already told you. I don’t need your help!” Val screamed.

He bared his teeth, hoping to intimidate. I couldn’t say I was completely unaffected, but I kept my composure, reminding myself that due to the contract he couldn’t lie—he truly did believe he could do this alone.

“Y-you don’t...want to save...Kh-Khemet and Sefekh?” Tiara said timidly.

Khemet and Sefekh. Those were the two children Val told us about. They were just seven and eleven years old.

“I do,” Val said. “But I don’t need help from the likes of you!”

He glared at the trembling Tiara. Both Arthur and Stale held out a hand, keeping Tiara at a safe distance.

“Aren’t those children important to you?” she said.

If they're important to you, why won't you just simply accept our help? I wanted to add.

"The hell're you askin'?! I don't give a damn about those brats!" Val said.

"Huh?" Tiara blurted.

I was just as shocked. Why did he want to save them so badly if he didn't care?

"You're not...worried?" Tiara asked.

"Hell no!" Val said. "Don't act like you know what you're talkin' about!"

I had to remind myself once again that he couldn't lie thanks to the terms of the fealty contract. But how could this be true?

"Then why do you want to save them?"

"Because I need them! I need them to make my life easier," Val told her.

To make his life easier?! Could he have been using them to accomplish things the fealty contract prevents him from doing himself?

Everyone else seemed as baffled as me. Stale furrowed his brow; Arthur clenched his teeth, gripping his sword.

"I can't believe it..." Tiara breathed, stepping back. "What exactly do Khemet and Sefekh mean to you?"

Val slammed his fist against the floor. "They're awful little brats. I've spent four years with them. Just thinkin' about it pisses me off! All I wanted to do was kill 'em at first."

I suddenly wished I'd ordered him to keep quiet. Tiara looked more horrified with every word.

"Get the hell out of here when you're done with me, Miss Princess. Go join the rest of the people in your world who get everything handed to them. You all make me sick." With that, he turned his back to us and sprawled out on the ground.

Something about what he'd just said sounded familiar, though. I tried to remember him in the game. There was one scene where Tiara escaped to the

local village and Val hunted her down, trapping her behind one of the walls he could make with his special power.

“Sorry, cute little Miss Princess, but spoiled brats like you make me sick,” he laughed in that scene.

It made me wonder if Tiara and Val couldn’t get along because he wasn’t a love interest character in the game. But Tiara was so compassionate. Surely she could care even for someone like Val.

When I thought about it, though, her relationships with the game’s love interests developed slowly and gradually throughout the story. Perhaps she and Val were simply strangers, having only met once so far, and she needed more time to actually come to understand him. Even Arthur was still telling her not to touch him halfway through the game, but they got married in the end. I decided I should keep a closer eye on things...once I had the time, that is.

Tiara tried to step closer to Val, but Stale and Arthur stopped her.

“Elder Sister, come with us,” Stale said to me.

It seemed Stale and Arthur were at the limits of their patience with Val. I couldn’t disagree. I’d given Val his dinner; I didn’t need to linger here rather than going to my room to rest up for tomorrow.

Even so, I said, “I’m going to stay a bit longer. Stale, Arthur, please take Tiara back.”

Val snarled at that.

“I’m sorry he frightened you, Tiara,” I went on, ignoring him. “But don’t worry. I’m going to talk to him.”

Tiara was a sweet and sensitive girl. Though terrified of Val, she still tried to reach him with her words. I couldn’t get their exchange out of my mind as I stroked her hair to reassure her.

Stale and Arthur seemed no more pleased with my idea than Tiara was. I reminded them about the contract and coaxed them to reluctantly agree to leave me with Val—on the condition that they could come back to check on me in one hour.

Before Stale could teleport her away, Tiara wrapped her trembling arms around me. “I’m sorry that I can’t do anything to help.”

“That’s not true.” I stroked her hair again, giving her one final reassurance before Stale and Arthur finally led her away.

Val snickered at my back as I watched the others leave. “You done with your little games, Miss Princess?”

Slowly, I turned to look down at the man still sitting on the floor. He crossed his legs and curled his lip into a sneer as he pierced me with that sharp gaze.

“So you wanna talk to me, eh? Do you think I’m some poor innocent victim like that other little softie princess did?”

“I won’t allow you to insult Tiara. She’s the younger princess and possesses a compassionate soul. She is this kingdom’s treasure.”

At my words, Val’s jaw dropped, but he made no further remarks about Tiara thanks to the contract.

“Shall I watch over you here until you’re ready to rest for real this time?”

“Huh?! Hell no! How am I gonna sleep with a brat like you in here?!” he blurted, baring his teeth. “I must be real entertainment for you pretty little princesses, huh?! You pick up the half-dead criminal, treat his wounds, dress him up, and feed him in his cage. Then you’ve gotta watch him fall asleep too?! Aren’t ya done toying with my life yet, ya little brat?!”

I get it now. The things I was doing for Val’s sake all came off as malice to him. That made sense given that all of this was happening against his will.

“What’s next? Want me to crawl around, wag my tail, and then come lick your feet, Miss Princess? All it’d take is one simple order,” he scoffed, as if he was prepared for me to ask.

“It’s just for tonight,” I said. “Tomorrow morning, you’ll join us in saving Khemet and Sefekh.”

“I don’t want your goddamn help!”

No matter how many times and ways I offered, Val just kept on refusing my help. I still couldn’t understand why he was so stubborn about this. That

conversation he had with Tiara made no sense. And despite all his barbs, Tiara still worried for him.

“Answer me. Why are you so insistent on refusing our help?”

Slowly, I closed the distance between us. Val gave me his best menacing look, his eyes full of hatred, but I continued.

“You’re the one who put me in this situation.”

“Answer me. Does that mean you think it’s too shameful to accept my help?”

“That’s right.”

I preceded each question with that command so he couldn’t refuse. “Answer me. Khemet and Sefekh, those children you wish to save. Is your pride more important to you than they are?”

“Ye...o...” He struggled, making a strangled sound that was neither “yes” nor “no.” Finally, his mouth twisted into a pained shape, and I made out a faint, reluctant “no.” He may not have wanted our help, but he truly wanted to save those kids. He couldn’t lie about either of those things to me.

“Tell me this. How did you meet Khemet and Sefekh four years ago?” I advanced closer, leaning down to meet his eyes.

Unable to lie, Val clicked his tongue. “We’re all poor. They used to live in the same place as me. Since I can’t hurt anyone, that brat Sefekh brought Khemet along to follow me all over the damn place.”

“Are Sefekh and Khemet Freesian?”

Both of their names sounded unusual for this kingdom. I wondered if, like Val, they looked different than most other Freesian citizens. Val turned his head aside and nodded petulantly.

“They’re both from here, no different than any other brats in this kingdom... Annoying little snots.”

“Why did you live with them?”

“I already told you. They wouldn’t leave me alone! They just came back to me over and over and over again. Even when I moved, they always came lookin’ for

me. But I couldn't lay a finger on them, even if I wanted to kill 'em."

"Do you know why they did that?"

"They said they'd be safe around a guy like me! Those annoying brats were glued to me for four whole years."

I see. It did seem safer for two kids to live with an adult instead of trying to make it on their own. Alone, they ran the risk of encountering hoodlums and gangsters in the slums. But if they stuck with Val, that could be enough to scare off potential threats. Even if he couldn't hurt anyone, his spiky demeanor would ward off most before a scuffle began.

Val crossed his arms and didn't say another word. Something still wasn't right. The way he spoke made it sound like he truly hated the fact that children clung to him. In that case, these words were most puzzling: *"Because I need them! I need them to make my life easier!"*

Easier.

Val had already admitted that the kids had special powers. Sefekh could create water; we weren't sure what Khemet could do. Making water was certainly useful, but I doubted Val was all that interested in it. It really just meant a constant source of drinking water. So what was he really after?

"What exactly are Khemet and Sefekh like?" I asked.

Val's shoulders flinched when I asked that, confirming my suspicion that there was more going on here. He set his jaw, still not looking at me, but he could only resist a direct command for so long.

"They're just kids," he said. "Khemet can speak like pretty much any adult, but the jerk's got no will of his own. Every single day, he'd just follow me or Sefekh around. He said he has a special power, but I don't know what it is."

His prickly attitude softened a little, and he went on. "Sefekh always took Khemet with her everywhere she went. They weren't blood-related, but she acted like his older sister, always keepin' her eye on him. She was real cheeky for a kid. If I got mad at her for it, she'd use that damn power of hers to blast me with water. Sefekh was the one who came up with the idea to follow me around in the first place. She was a restless sleeper so she'd end up stealing my

blanket every night. I even had to teach the two of them what money is. When we ate together—ahhh, damn it!”

He interrupted himself, slamming his fist against the floor.

“Now I feel sick again! Are you satisfied yet?” he said, yanking at his bangs with one hand as he kicked his legs in frustration.

Why does this feel so strange?

“Are you sure you’re not just worried about them?” I asked before I could think. These kids didn’t sound like mere hangers-on to me; they seemed special to Val. Moreover, why was this line of questioning making Val sick?

“I told you, I’m not!” Val snarled.

“What does it mean to you to worry about something?” I asked.

His eyes widened, but he didn’t answer, as though he didn’t understand the question.

“Val, what are some things you’ve cared about in your life?” I crouched down in front of him, and he finally met my eyes, though he leaned away.

“Money and my own life,” Val said quickly. “What else is there to care about?”

But he couldn’t hurry my interrogation along—I’d come up with a theory, and I wasn’t ready to give up on it. “That’s all there’s ever been? What about your family and friends, or the comrades you lost in the cliff collapse?”

“Why would I give a shit about parents who abandoned me? And I don’t got any friends. Those guys who died at the cliffs were just some people I partnered up with because they were useful at the time.”

“Then what about Khemet and Sefekh?! Would you really be okay if those two died?!”

At this, his face twisted up in pain. He sneered and gritted his teeth, but a quiet “No. Hell no,” finally emerged.

“Val! That’s exactly what it means to—”

To care about someone.

“SHUT UP!” he screamed before I could finish.

I slapped my hands over my ears as he roared his denial.

“They’re just brats! Of course I don’t *care* about them. If I did, I wouldn’t feel so damn sick right now!” His shoulders heaved with each breath. He hung his head, pounding against the floor. “I ain’t never felt like this before. I’m just about ready to puke. My heart is racing. My chest hurts. What the heck is happening?!”

He bared his teeth at me, face red with fury.

“If I cared about them, they wouldn’t make me feel so damn sick!”

The contradiction between his words and his body’s reaction revealed the truth. Val didn’t understand his own emotions, but they became clearer to me every second.

“Why? Why does my chest ache when I think about them? Why do I feel so sick? When I think about where they are right now, it’s enough to make me puke. My hair stands on end; my stomach cramps up. I can still hear their last words, their last screams. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before! I’ve kidnapped kids too, y’know! I’ve stolen all kinds of brats like them and killed ‘em too! It was as easy as sharpening the blade of a knife. So why...why can’t I accept it all of a sudden?!”

“Val, you—eek!”

I tried to reach out for Val in his state of confusion, but he swung his fist at me first. In shock, I shut my eyes and fell backward. But his fist never struck me. Instead, he lightly tapped it against the side of my head, incapable of actually hitting me thanks to the contract.

“It’s all your fault!”

I lay on my back now, and he planted his hands on either side of my head. When I opened my eyes, his face was right in front of mine, glaring down at me as he growled.

“Back then, if you’d just executed me instead of asking what I wanted, none of this would have happened. If you’d killed me back then, I never would’ve

suffered like this... I don't want to be this kinda person!"

He clenched his jaw, arms trembling. Then, incredibly, a single tear slipped from his eye to land on my cheek. Baffled, he reached out and touched it.

"What the...?"

He held up his hand and studied his own fingertips like he didn't recognize them. Yet even as he blinked in confusion, more tears welled up in his eyes. Once the dam broke, the water just kept coming, even as he swiped it away.

It was almost too awkward to watch. I sat up and shuffled back a little. Even after all this, Val still didn't realize how he truly felt about Khemet and Sefekh. He simply couldn't comprehend it at all.

I took a chance and reached forward to hug him around the neck. He yelped in protest and tried to jerk away.

"Don't reject me," I ordered. He fell still at my command, and his tears soaked into my dress. "I'll answer your question. The suffering you feel right now is punishment."

He shuddered. I leaned back, cradling his head in my hands for a moment before pulling him in closer.

"You're most likely going to keep suffering forever to repay all the suffering you caused others," I told him. "You don't understand what it means to truly care for something because you've never experienced those emotions until now. That sickness you're feeling? Its true name is fear. You're afraid for those kids, Val."

He didn't know there were things he cared about beyond himself and his money. He genuinely didn't know that he was worried about those kids. He couldn't comprehend the pain he caused the people he'd hurt and killed. Even after destroying the walls and floor of his room in his grief, even after wounding himself, even after failing to sleep because of the worry exhausting him—he still didn't understand his own anxiety and fear.

"The frustration you feel and the tears you're shedding..." I should have realized it sooner. Tiara had seen it right away, that pain in his heart. She'd taken one look into his eyes and sorted out what took me so long to realize.

“Princess Pride? Is there something you need from me?”

“Why can’t anyone save my dad?!”

“Those tears are...”

I struggled to finish my sentence around the lump in my throat. Val’s sorrow and regret welled up within me as well. If only I’d been able to relieve him of this pain sooner, the way I’d helped Stale and Arthur.

“They’re tears of love for your family!” I finally said.

Val gulped against me, shaking as the emotions broke within him, and he wailed—no, *howled*—with grief. My dress got even wetter as Val wept. He hugged me back, clinging to me now that the undeniable truth was out in the open air.

“Because I need them! I need them to make my life easier!”

That was what he’d said before when we pressed him for answers, but I read a new meaning in those words now.

“I know that without the two of them it would be too painful for you to continue,” I said. “Nothing would ever be easy again. You’d lose all sense of happiness.”

Now that I understood his pain, the tears flowed from my eyes as well. He couldn’t harm anyone anymore, but that meant he had to watch harm come to those kids. This punishment for his crimes was just too cruel. He might lose them entirely and be utterly helpless to do anything about it.

The weight of his body slumped against me as he gradually calmed, his breaths smoothing out until his crying ceased. But when he finally relaxed, the full weight of his body hit me, dragging me down beneath him. He lay limp atop me, his head against the floor. I held still, confused until I heard his deep breaths and realized he was sleeping. It was so strange to have him lying there against me like that, so at ease that he actually fell into an exhausted sleep, but I didn’t want to move him away.

All this from a man who’d once believed he had no capacity for compassion.

On the day of the trade, five people arrived at the slums—only one of many deeply impoverished areas—to make the handoff. All of them covered their faces with cloth, but one stood out among the group, a giant of a man wearing a bundle of chains from his neck to his shoulders that jingled with every step.

“I believe I said I’d make the trade for five people,” one of the men said. “This is only four.”

Val stood before the men. Behind him sat a run-down shack, barely more than four simple walls and a roof, surrounded by rubble. That’s where I lay with the others, three young boys and a girl, our arms and legs bound.

“I’m the fifth. Now gimme back the two brats you stole,” Val snapped.

The men burst into laughter. “Who the hell would wanna buy you?! We only deal in people from this kingdom! You’d never sell if we—”

“I have a special power.”

The debris around Val’s feet shifted as he summoned up a wall of stone and earth. The men raised their eyebrows. Their laughter took on a giddy tone as they observed Val’s ability.

“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about! And to think we almost let somethin’ so valuable slip away!”

“So what’s the problem?” Val said. “Just gimme back the k—”

Schwiiiiing! A shrill sound rang out.

One of the large man’s chains shot out in front of him and coiled around Val like a snake. It had to be a special power at work. No ordinary chains could crawl up his body like that and cover his mouth, preventing him from moving or speaking. Val lost his balance and toppled to the ground, completely bound. He groaned as the five men sneered.

“I can’t believe we actually got five people out of this!”

“We can get a real market going in no time now.”

One man lashed out at Val, knocking him unconscious.

“What an idiot. Who the hell gives away good product just like that?” he said.

The large man dug his heel into Val's head for good measure and then ordered his companions to carry off the four of us in the shack. The oldest of us was slung over a man's shoulder, two more were carried under his compatriot's arms, and the smallest was forced into a bag. In the meantime, his chains came back to life, dragging Val across the ground.

Everything was going according to Stale and the prime minister's plan.

"The carriage ride didn't take very long, so even if we end up going late, the knights will be able to make it in time tonight."

As he spoke, Stale undid the string of the bag I was curled up inside. I stuck my head out and took a deep breath of fresh air. The four of us had posed as offerings in the trade-off for Khemet and Sefekh. In so doing, we'd gained access to the very headquarters of this human trafficking organization. Prime Minister Gilbert already used his special power to change all of us, except Arthur, into young children. He'd even changed himself.

"Prime Mi—I mean Gil, are you all right? We both had a really bumpy carriage ride..." Arthur said.

"Yes, and thank you for your concern, Sir Arthur. It was hardly a bother at all."

"Gil" lay on the floor, a boy of just thirteen with light-blue hair that fell over his shoulders. He looked exactly like the character I remembered from the game but nothing like the prime minister people in this world knew. It was a good disguise, but it made me sad that this was how I got to see "Gil" in his younger form.

The rest of us also had fake names and altered appearances. Stale was now a ten-year-old named Phillip. Arthur hadn't changed, but I was eleven and went by Jeanne, a name I'd initially suggested for the Butlers' first child. I never imagined I'd be the one using that name instead. We also all dressed like commoners, which made it easier to move around when we weren't bound. Stale left his glasses behind, partially to enhance his disguise and partially to protect them from damage.

When the carriage arrived at the traffickers' base, Stale teleported all the

captives besides us to the knights' headquarters. Chains rattled as the large man apparently left the carriage behind. His four companions came to drag us out, but before they could even touch us, Stale teleported them to a cell in the castle's dungeons. The knights could take care of them now.

"Hey, wake up already," Stale said, slapping Val with his tiny hands. "We've gotta go save Khemet and Sefekh."

Val groaned, slowly rousing. Stale had to teleport the chains off of Val to free him.

"Where are we?" Val asked, still dazed.

"We're at the enemy headquarters, just like you wanted," Stale told him. "Remember what I told you about the plan? You're coming with me now. We're going to free everyone from this place, including Khemet and Sefekh. It's time to make use of your life of crime. I'm royalty, just like my elder sister, so you know you can't disobey my orders, right?"

Val simply nodded.

In all likelihood, the traffickers were keeping the children in an area for those with special powers. In this kingdom, people sold through human trafficking received a "grade," mid-grade if they *could* have a special power, top-grade if they definitely had a special power, and first class for those with rare or valuable powers. Khemet and Sefekh were probably with the top-grade prisoners.

"All right. I'll be on my way now, Big Sister," Stale said. "Please don't ever separate from Arthur. If anything happens, give the signal."

Right, the signal. I nodded. Stale and I had agreed on using a whistle when we needed to signal to each other. In the game, I saw Pride whistle or snap for Stale frequently, which gave me the idea to try it out. It turned out he could hear it quite well, even when Arthur whistled from all the way down in the village.

It was just another thing this world perfectly mirrored from the game. In ORL, Stale had incredible hearing, just like here. Tiara had her charm. I had my fighting cheats too—the other day, stressed about choosing a name for the

Butlers' baby, I'd accidentally sliced an old suit of armor clean in half while swinging a sword around, much to Stale and Arthur's horror. In the game, Pride used to feign innocence, "accidentally" running her sword through armored knights and guards, killing them instantly. Hopefully, those in-game skills could serve us now.

After warning Stale to be safe, I got back into the bag where I had to stay. They sealed it up, and Val and Stale left to carry out their part of the plan up in the top-grade area. Arthur and I would standby below in the mid-grade area so Stale could use us as a reference point for teleportation. All of this would ideally clear the way for the knights to sweep in and clear out the traffickers for good. We just had to get the captives out of the way first.

One of the men guarding us cursed. "Damn it! The kids that're left don't even have special powers! What's with our luck today?!" He hurried us out of the carriage. Through a small hole in the bag, I could see that this base was actually a large cave. There were some cliffs nearby but little else. We were truly in the middle of nowhere out here. An enormous cage awaited us once the men forced us into the cave. It was like a zoo from my previous life, but people were the animals. Already, people stood crammed into the cage. They didn't flinch or look up when the men forced us to join them inside.

"Well, what can you do?" the man grumbled. "Besides, these three've got some pretty faces. That'll fetch a nice price."

The man reached into the bag and grabbed my head. Prime Minister Gilbert and Arthur glared daggers at him. Even the trafficker felt their cold eyes and released me, instead strutting around the room to survey it, searching for the source of the chilling aura. Little did they know it came from the two boys at my side.

"A-anyway! We're gonna find the men we lost and the product that got away!" the man declared. He shoved Arthur into the cage and slammed the door shut. Four guards stayed behind to watch over all of us.

"Ya don't think they ran off with our product, do you?" one said.

"How would they even manage that?" replied another.

"Are you all right, Your Hi—J-Jeanne?" Arthur blurted.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Prime Minister Gilbert said.

They hurried to my side once the guards were occupied, helping me out of the bag and brushing the dust off my clothes.

“I’m fine,” I told them. “All we can do for now is wait for the next step.”

There was no sense getting enraged when the best thing we could do was sit and wait. While we did, I took in the room around us. The guards relaxed in chairs scattered throughout the cave. They didn’t seem to notice or care if we whispered to each other, but there were plenty of people in this cage with us, many of them drooping with weakness and despair. Some were so skinny it was hard to look at. The guards might have been starving them, but these people probably hadn’t had much to eat back in the slums either. Even if we freed them, they might not have the strength to escape. And while some were adults, a lot of them were very young, too young to run.

Many of the youngest sat huddled together. I crawled over to them. “Are you all right?” I asked.

They flinched away from me, apparently too terrified to respond.

“I’m sorry to scare you. Can I ask how long you’ve been here?”

The children still trembled, but at last they began to answer.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m scared.”

“A long time.”

It seemed that was the best I would get from them. It had to be difficult to mark the passage of time in this dim cave. I wished I could reassure them, but all I could do in that moment was hug them close and try to keep them warm.

“Val...”

What?!

I looked toward the source and saw a small boy just to the side murmuring to himself. A girl sat beside him. They looked...yes, they could certainly be seven and eleven. And they matched the descriptions Val had given us. The boy, who

was cradling his knees and staring at the floor, had wild black hair. The girl narrowed her sharp eyes at the rest of the captives. Her shoulder-length brown hair framed her face, and she had lent the boy her shoulder to lean on as if keeping him safe.

Shocked, I turned back to look at Prime Minister Gilbert and Arthur and found them staring back with wide eyes.

“Khemet and...Sefekh?” I tried. They jerked their heads up.

“Why are you two here instead of in the top-grade area?” I asked.

These two supposedly had special powers. They should have been in the top-grade cage, not here.

“Who are you?” Sefekh wrapped her arms protectively around Khemet.

“Wait, did Val...?” Khemet didn’t dare finish his question, but both children went pale.

Prime Minister Gilbert and Arthur drew closer. The children probably assumed we’d been captured and brought here because of Val. That wasn’t *entirely* untrue, but I didn’t want them to get the wrong idea, so I hurried to correct them.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’re just, um...friends of Val. He told us all about y—”

“Val doesn’t have any friends.”

Sefekh shot down my excuse before I could even finish. Even in a situation like this, she glared defiantly at me, protective of her younger brother. And she didn’t sound too pleased with Val, either. Honestly, her fierce stare rivaled mine when I put it to use.

“You don’t have to hide it,” she went on. “Val captured you guys, right? He must have actually thought they’d let us go. He’s such an idiot.”

Wait, why’s Val getting so much hate all of a sudden?!

The girl grabbed my hand. “I’m sorry. You’re here because of us. Val tried to save us, but he ended up getting tricked instead. I’m really sorry. What an idiot.” She offered the three of us a pleading look. So she was harsh on Val, but she really did care about him. Was it just my imagination, or were Prime

Minister Gilbert and Arthur smirking?

“What happened to Val?” Khemet asked timidly.

“Yeah! You’ve gotta tell us,” Sefekh said. “I’m sure you don’t wanna think about him anymore, but please. Where’s Val? In the town? Or did he get taken along with you guys?! Don’t tell me he’s dea—”

“Calm down. It’s okay. Everything’s okay.” I spoke slowly, trying to calm her down. The kid I was still holding squirmed away at Sefekh’s intensity.

“Would you be so kind as to answer our questions before we answer yours?” Prime Minister Gilbert cut in. His soft voice and gentle grin soothed Sefekh somewhat.

“Val told us that you two have special powers. So why is it that you’ve been put in this area?” I asked.

Sefekh knit her brow at that question. “Val and his big mouth,” she muttered. “Khemet didn’t want to. I’m his big sister, so I couldn’t just leave him.”

So Khemet’s power was still hidden. That had to mean that Sefekh had hidden hers as well in order to stay with him.

“But why is Khemet hiding his power?”

“I promised,” Khemet told me.

I didn’t understand, but when they begged us to keep their secret, we agreed.

“We answered your questions, so tell us what happened,” Sefekh said. The children buzzed with anxiety, their eyes glued to us as they awaited a response.

“Val is somewhere within this cave,” I said. “Right now, he’s probably searching for y—”

“I knew it! He got captured!” Sefekh said.

She jumped to her feet. A second later, Khemet joined her, and they clasped their hands together. Suddenly, they stood tall over me, no longer the cowering, shy children I’d first met.

“We have to save him right now!” Sefekh shouted, scaring away the few remaining children clustered around me. “You three should get out of here

too.”

Arthur tried to put his hands on the girl’s shoulders and calm her down, but it threw all three of them off balance.

“You there!”

The cage’s door opened with a screech. A guard entered, brandishing a knife. More guards crowded around the entrance, smirking at the display they apparently expected.

“Gonna teach ’em a lesson?” one of them asked.

“Gotta straighten out these newcomers already?” said another.

Arthur released Sefekh and faced the guards instead, placing himself between us and the man with the knife.

“Outta the way, you brats,” the guard spat. “The new blood’s gotta learn the rules around h—”

Ka-BOOM!

An explosion rattled the entire cage and echoed off the walls of the cave. Guards and captives alike stood stunned before they started shouting confused questions. The man nearest to us, the one with the knife, leapt away.

“What’s going on?” Sefekh cried.

Arthur, Prime Minister Gilbert, and I exchanged a glance. It had to be Stale and Val. This was the signal that they’d freed the top-grade captives. Soon, they’d teleport to us, and we’d regroup to free the mid-grade captives before turning this whole operation over to the knights.

One of the guards rushed into the room. “The top-grade cages are under attack!” he shouted. “I don’t know who it is, but they sealed off the entrance and are messin’ with our product!”

“What did you say?! Those assholes! We worked hard to round up the ones with special powers. Do you have any idea how much money we’ll lose if a single one of ’em dies or gets away?”

The guards shouted frantically at each other, like squawking birds. One yelled

at someone to go fetch the man with the chains.

“The top-grade cage?! Val!” Sefekh gasped.

Both of the children went pale, still gripping each other’s hands. They believed Val had been captured and placed in the top-grade cage. I rushed to explain the situation and reassure them that this was all according to our plan. But just as I leaned down to whisper to Sefekh...

“Hey, you! Whelp! What’re you up to this time?!”

The man with the knife glared at us. He stood just outside the cage now, but that knife pointed at us again. Sefekh and Khemet staggered forward, still holding each other’s hands, glaring right back at the guard. The guard drew the knife back. Arthur tensed, about to leap in front of the blade.

“Val,” Sefekh whispered.

Then a torrent of water shot right into the guard, flinging him away.

Arthur, Prime Minister Gilbert, and I fell speechless. The guard struck a wall and slid down it, unconscious. The water even warped and bent the bars of our cage. The remaining guards gaped before rushing at Sefekh with knives and guns drawn. But she blasted them away just as easily as the first guard.

When Val said Sefekh could create water, I never imagined something quite like this. This wasn’t just your average tap water—it was immensely powerful, like a blast from a fire hose back from my old life. She blew the cage’s door open with the force of a thundering waterfall.

“Give us Val back.”

Amid the shocked silence, Sefekh’s voice rang loud. Though small, she exuded power and ferocity.

“We’re going to live together. Khemet, Val, and me.”

She and Khemet ran through the mangled door. She then blasted the other guards, knocking their guns and knives away. I lurched after the children, but Prime Minister Gilbert stopped me.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

He chased after the children, lagging quietly behind as they rounded a corner and disappeared from sight.

As she ran, Sefekh swore, “I won’t let you people get away with hurting Val!”

It wasn’t that deep, after all.

I gazed back up the rope we’d just climbed down. It had led Val and I down here to the top-grade cages. I’d teleported the guards here right to the knight’s jail back at the castle, then sent the captives back to the order as well.

Meanwhile, Val searched for those two kids he knew, but it seemed like they weren’t here. Perhaps they’d hidden their special powers, in which case they were probably with Pride and the others now. Things should be okay once we reconvened.

I interrupted Val’s frantic search to ask where they were keeping the first-class captives. He pointed at a hole at the back of the cave, where a small flash blinked in the dark depths. It must’ve been about five meters deep, so I could probably jump down just fine, but there was also a tunnel in the wall that I could follow down instead.

“Rgh... Agh...”

Below, someone groaned. I picked up my pace as the cold and dark closed in around me. My meager torch attempted to push it back, but this deep into the cave, it could only do so much.

“Is someone there?” I called, holding my torch up.

The voice came from the same place as that flash of light I’d seen. Someone lay on the ground, head turned toward me, covered neck to toe by some kind of bag. What little I could see of the captive’s face revealed a young man, perhaps fourteen or so, roughly my age. A cloth covered his eyes. Only his mouth was free, probably so that he could eat.

“Who are you?” he asked, voice raspy and weak.

“I’m here to save you,” I said. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

First, I had to ascertain his special power. If he was here, it was something

rare and potentially dangerous, but I couldn't tell with those restrains on him.

"What's your special power?" I asked.

"I don't know," he groaned.

As he spoke, his body lit, the same flash I'd seen from above.

"What is that light?"

It blinked for an instant, blindingly bright. I wasn't sure if I could touch him if that light had any heat behind it. Even the bag he was in lit up, as though his whole body was shining.

"It's my special power," he said.

His special power is light?! I could see how that would be useful, but why did it warrant such extreme caution and restraint? Perhaps there were applications I hadn't considered. Regardless, I needed more information.

I loosened the bag around the boy, teleporting it away so I could get a look at his body. He wasn't bound or restrained within it. The boy gasped when I freed him. He reached for the blindfold, tugging it off his face. He blinked, having to adjust to even the meager amount of light from my torch after so long in the dark.

"It's nice to meet you," I said. "My name is Phillip." I offered him my fake name, trying to remain calm so he wouldn't panic.

I had to keep a cool head. If the traffickers were keeping this boy down here, there was definitely more to him than met the eye.

"I am...ah...my name is...Powell," he managed. He didn't seem aggressive or threatening, even once freed. He struggled to sit up, his shaggy blond hair falling around his shoulders. It must've been short when he was brought here. He'd looked so small tied up on the ground, but as he shook himself out of his daze, I realized he was actually bigger than me.

"Everything's all right now," I assured him. "You'll get to go home."

He seemed pretty banged up, but not dangerous, so I could send him home and get back to the mission. I reached my hand out for Powell.

At that moment, something tore through my skin.

I jerked my hand away, searching for a weapon or something. But it was still just Powell sitting there before me.

“No! I don’t wanna go home,” he said.

The blood drained from Powell’s face. He crawled away from me, his whole body shining with that strange light. Now it pulsed rapidly, crackling over his skin like lightning. That must have been what zapped my hand.

“I’m never goin’ home!” he screamed.

The light intensified, splashing against the walls. A buzz suffused the room, stings zipped along my skin, and I smelled smoke as my clothes started to burn.

“I don’t even want this stupid power!”

Powell probably wasn’t trying to hurt me, but as he lost control, that crackling light clawed at me. He just sat there cradling his head in his hands and crying over and over that he wouldn’t go home. A battle played out before my eyes—I was just collateral damage.

What would Pride do in this situation?

“Powell!”

The answer was obvious. Pride would reach out to him. She would try to reach him with her words if she couldn’t do so physically. But even as I called out for Powell, my clothes started to burn away, exposing my arms and legs to the heat.

“Where don’t you want to go home to?!” I called. “I can send you somewhere else! Somewhere much better than here!”

“I don’t have anywhere to go!” he cried.

Craaaaack! Powell slammed his fist against the floor, and pebbles flew off like a hail of gunfire.

“You have a special power, so you’re Freesian, right?” I tried. “How can you say you have nowhere to go?”

Only Freesians possessed these kinds of powers, and the kingdom was vast

and thriving. But if Powell didn't want to return to our kingdom, he'd have nowhere else to go. I gulped. Other countries didn't understand our powers and sometimes feared them. We had to register our powers to cross the borders between kingdoms. If Powell truly couldn't stay in Freesia, then where else could he possibly go?

I didn't know what happened to make this boy so terrified of home, but when I saw his special power lash out, it wasn't hard to imagine. It was an incomprehensible power capable of accidentally hurting the people around him, like a physical embodiment of lightning. And it didn't seem like he had much control over it. He likely spent his life being shunned and whispered about and avoided, too dangerous to get near.

I came to the realization too late. Powell glared at me.

"People suffer when they're with me," he said. "That's why I left. I left everything behind. But what...what did I do wrong?"

Naturally, I couldn't know exactly what he'd been through, but if he'd ended up here, it couldn't have been good. Powell trembled and bit his lip, tears streaming down his face. They sizzled away, burned off by the heat of the light emanating from his body.

"...with...to live?"

I couldn't hear him over the crackle of his power. I tried to shout, but I could barely hear my own voice through the thunder roaring in my ears.

"What's so wrong...with wanting to live?!"

My vision went white. The heat overwhelmed me, threatening to burn me alive.

I teleported away in desperation, slumping to the ground at the entrance to the tunnel I'd taken down to Powell. Lightning leapt up out of the darkness. Once it died away, a scent of ash and burning lingered in the air. I shuddered to think what would've happened if I hadn't teleported when I did.

"Took ya long enough, Mister Prince! Did ya piss off the guy in there?" Val said behind me. He held a gun in one hand and fired it at the ceiling to scare off the guards trapped behind a wall of rubble.

“You knew about the boy down there?”

“Not quite,” he said. “But I did hear the big fuss from the guys on the other side of this wall while I was waiting. Sounds like they’ve got somethin’ big kept away in there. They said he’s a rare product that took a lot to catch. So? What happened?” The mirth in his voice tempted me to order him to grovel on the floor, but I bit back my craving.

“Val, why did you ask for the fealty contract four years ago?”

He grunted, hesitating to respond, so I ordered a reply.

“Everything would be over once I died. I wish I could take it back, though.” He fired two shots at the ceiling in frustration, then regarded me with a toothy smirk. “You’re part of the royal family. You own my future, Mister Prince. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

It wasn’t the response I expected, and there was more behind it than just hostility. It was closer to...melancholy.

“I’m going back,” I said. “You stay here and guard the entrance. Keep your eye out for danger.”

Val grumbled but headed for the entrance as instructed. “Miss Princess would be none the wiser if you left the kid down there.”

“That would be a betrayal of her wishes. I could never do that to her, and neither could you.”

He stopped, looking over his shoulder at me. I wouldn’t normally bother with courtesy for a criminal like him, but...

“You’re part of the royal family. You own my future, Mister Prince. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

I shared no blood with Pride, Tiara, or Mother, but Val lumped me in with them anyway.

“When I was adopted at the age of seven, I signed a subordination contract with my elder sister,” I told him.

Val’s eyebrows shot up at that. He stared at me, speechless, and I couldn’t help a twinge of satisfaction.

“But even without that contract, she would still be everything to me.”

With that, I teleported away, back down into the pit for the first-class captives.

“Powell!”

I called out to the glowing mass before me. He was cradling his knees, curled up in a ball. Light glanced off his body in random flashes, accompanied by that menacing crackle.

“Phillip, are you okay?” he said.

Powell raised his head and sighed with relief. Tears evaporated into steam on his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You came here to save me, but...I hurt people, even little kids like you.”

Powell and I were probably around the same age, but he wouldn’t know that right now. I tried to reassure him as I approached slowly.

“Powell, you’ve got to go home to Freesia,” I said.

Powell’s shoulders shook when I said that. He scowled, tightening up as though preparing to lash out again. *I probably gave Pride that same look all that time ago.*

Seven years had passed since then, but I still remembered the very first night I met Pride. I lay curled up and small on my bed. She spoke to me patiently, understanding my pain even when I tried to hold it back. She’d saved me that night.

“I don’t even want this stupid power anyway!”

I’d hated my power too.

Ever since they took me away from Mom, I despised the fact that I was born with a special power. It was a curse to me. Powell probably felt the same. An ability like his, one that lashed out wildly, prevented him from having anything like a normal life.

I drew close, stopping when light snapped against my skin like a white-hot

whip.

“Stay back,” Powell warned.

That’s right. Back then, I was still pushing Pride away just like this.

“Don’t worry, I’m just sending you back inside the kingdom. I won’t lock you away or tell anyone you were here.”

The light grew stronger as I spoke. His power was spinning out of control as Powell’s emotions surged.

“Powell, I know that Freesia must be a hard place for you to live right now.”

Our kingdom certainly had its flaws. We’d strengthened our bonds with neighboring lands, but that didn’t mean they had a perfect understanding of special powers just yet. To put it in Val’s words, we were all “monsters” to them. And despite Prime Minister Gilbert’s efforts, we obviously had a major issue with human trafficking. The lower classes still suffered from poverty. We’d been making steady improvements over the past two years thanks to new laws, information control, and things like that, but plenty of Freesians suffered, including the boy in front of me.

“Just wait a little longer. In a few more years, Freesia will be the easiest place in the whole world for you to live.”

“How could you possibly know that?” He glared, power sparking.

Facing him head-on with complete calm, I said, “I’m sure of it. The kingdom of Freesia has Pride, the crown princess.” Powell cocked his head at me and his power quieted down just a tick. “By the time Princess Pride becomes queen this kingdom will be different. It will be much better than it is now. I know it.”

I took one step closer to the boy. A prickle of heat burned my fingertips, but I held steady.

Four years ago, Pride asked Val a question: whether he preferred a fealty contract or a death sentence. When I heard about this from Tiara, I didn’t understand why she’d bother giving him a choice. And Pride didn’t merely offer him an option; she also offered her help, telling him to return to her if he ever found himself in trouble. She did all that for a prisoner, someone she stood to

gain nothing from. At the time, I couldn't understand it.

Now, however...

"What's so wrong...with wanting to live?"

"Everything would be over once I died."

Now I understood. I understood why Pride had reached out to Val. Even if he'd hurt people in the past. Even if he hated and rejected our kingdom. Even with all that, we were all born in Freesia. We all came from the same land. He deserved one more chance at happiness just as much as anyone else. I had to reach out, unwavering, and take his hand. Just like Pride did.

My arm was hot. I reached for Powell, who sat there in a daze, and lightning snapped against my skin. The light seared my eyes. My whole body tried to revolt, but I pushed on, grabbing Powell's shining arm. His eyes widened as he gazed into mine.

"I don't have anywhere to go!" That was what he believed, at least, but I wouldn't let him stay that way.

"There's still a place for you!" I shouted.

Pain lanced through my body, but I held firm and yelled loud enough for him to hear through the crackling. White engulfed my vision. Through it, I could still make out his incredulous face.

"Freesia! Our kingdom! That's the home you'll return to once Pride becomes queen! I swear it!"

The crackling sound roared in my ears. I clenched, bracing against the fire boiling under my skin, when suddenly...

"You mean it?"

A soft voice rang in the sudden quiet. The heat and light faded. I struggled to find Powell through the pain and discovered his face red from crying and twisted with agony. I knew that expression well. He was burdened with so much despair, and now he glimpsed a single ray of hope.

"I...I don't know if...someone like me...could do that..."

Arthur.

My best friend. Another person whom Pride had saved, just like me.

The dear friend who saved *me* at times too.

Arthur was another person Pride pulled out of despair and hopelessness via her belief in him.

“I mean it,” I said, raising my voice. My head ached. It was getting harder to breathe. The whole scene wavered before me, but I tightened my grip on Powell and refused to budge.

I can save him, just like Pride saved me.

“That’s why you’ve got me!”

I can take that weight off his heart with just a few simple words, like Arthur did for me.

“If you really don’t believe you have a place in this kingdom, then go wait in Freesia for Pride to become queen,” I said.

Powell watched me with a pent breath. I mustered up all the power I had inside me. *If Pride can’t save this boy, then I will!*

“I’ll find a place for you to call home!” I declared.

The light pouring from Powell’s body flared bright, spilling out in a blinding wave. I threw up my arms, sure I was about to burn...

But then the light stopped.

Powell’s arm cooled with a hiss. The light pulsed in frail flickers, slower and slower. He stared at me, unblinking, silent for some time. I could breathe easier now, and my shoulders slid down away from my ears, rising and falling with my breath. I had light burns on my arms. Even so, I tightened my grip on him, refusing to let go.

“Why are you doing all this for me?” he asked, his face twisting as he hunted for my true intentions. “I’m...”

Ah...I know that face too. It reminded me of Prime Minister Gilbert when he’d confessed his crimes to Pride. Powell couldn’t comprehend the forgiveness I

offered, especially since he'd been attacking me all this time.

“Because of someone I know,” I told him. “She reaches out for anyone who needs help, regardless of their class or crimes or anything else in their past.”



I reached up to touch my glasses out of instinct, then remembered I'd left them behind.

"I'm one of the people she rescued," I added.

I let go of Powell's arm and offered him my hand instead. He looked at it like he'd never seen one before.

"If you go back to our kingdom, you'll probably get to meet her."

"All of you are citizens of my kingdom, just as you are knights, and my people are my pride and joy."

He lifted his hand slowly, hesitating before he finally set it atop mine. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

"This man is one of my subjects."

Pride's voice rang in my mind. In the face of Val, the criminal, and Prime Minister Gilbert, the traitor, she offered love and mercy. I mimicked her words.

"You are one of our subjects. I promise you won't hurt anyone else with your power. I'll make sure you and everyone you care about can smile for as long as I live."

His eyes got even larger, and fresh tears leaked from his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak.

Then he disappeared.

I teleported him not to the knights but to a spot outside the town I knew well. He would be safe there. It should make for a calming retreat too.

The cave fell into total darkness with him gone, my torch long lost along the way. I slumped down on the ground, too exhausted to care about the dark. My arms hurt, but it didn't seem too serious, especially if I could get them healed soon.

"I can't believe I used Pride's words just now..." I sighed, reaching again for my missing glasses. I was suddenly grateful I was alone when I realized what I was doing.

"I promise I won't cause you any more suffering," I said. "I'll make it so

everyone in this kingdom, including you and your mother, can spend each day with a smile on their faces! I swear it, for as long as I live.”

Seven years had passed since Pride made me that promise, but I never forgot her words. She swore that oath to me while I was still a commoner and not yet a member of the royal family.

I’d spent every moment since dedicating myself to becoming the perfect seneschal someday, all for Pride’s sake, all for the day she took the throne, all to protect her beautiful heart.

But another thought now stirred inside me. I didn’t just want to work for her anymore. There were others out there like Powell, people filled with hurt and grief. There were people like me, like Arthur, even like Prime Minister Gilbert and Val. None of us changed until we met Pride, but once I was seneschal, I’d work for them too.

With Pride beside me as queen, I would dedicate myself to her and the people, here in the kingdom we’d build together.

Just like the promise she made to me on that day.

“I need to get to Pride, fast...”

I stood up, intending to dust myself off and teleport back to her. But then, my vision went black. It wasn’t my teleportation; my body was failing me, dropping to the ground. I could hardly brace before I hit the stone. My mind went blank, and my breaths felt thin and insufficient, as though the cave lacked oxygen.

Then the whole world faded away into darkness.

“Arthur! What the hell are you doing?!”

“As her imperial knight, you’re supposed to be with Her Highness at the prime minister’s mansion right now.”

Captain Alan and Eric called out when they saw me.

After Prime Minister Gilbert left with the others, Princess Pride and I waited for Stale, but it was the Freesian order of knights who arrived first.

The first and third squadrons swept in to annihilate the enemy. The first squadron also approached the cage we were in, which drew a cry from the captives. My fellow knights recognized me right away. I tried to explain, but there wasn't time for it right now. Stale had never returned, which meant that I had to be the one to act. I scooped up Princess Pride and dashed for the cage's exit.

"Please save the people in here!" I called as I ran. My first priority had to be getting Pride out of this place. I pushed past Captain Alan, Eric, and the rest of the first squadron.

"Arthur, wait! Explain yourself to Captain Alan! And who is that girl?!" Eric yelled. He grabbed my shoulder before I made it past him. When he yanked, I lost my hold on Princess Pride, who'd been hiding her face.

"She's just..." I struggled to come up with an excuse on the fly. Meanwhile, Her Highness whipped her head straight up. *Oh, crap.*

"There are many criminal operatives up ahead! They'll have others with them, people I care about very much, so please save them!" she said, not even attempting to hide her face.

Oh, crap, oh, crap, oh, crap, oh, crap! Your Highness, if you show them your face like that...

"Your Hi—*gmph!*" I slapped my hand over Eric's mouth before he could finish. His mumbling continued, muffled and inaudible now. His eyes flew wide as he looked at Princess Pride. Behind him, Captain Alan's eyes were just as huge.

"A-anyway, I'll lead you there, so come with me as reinforcements!" I said, "There'll probably be a ton of enemies."

Ignoring the dazed knights, I shifted Princess Pride in my arms to hide her face. Then I brushed past them, hurrying along my way while Captain Alan shouted for Eric to help the captives.

"Everyone who's not on rescue duty, you're with me!" Captain Alan said. "Once Eric's group gets the captives away safely, regroup outside with Squadron Three."

So he thinks he's just gonna come with us?!

“Arthur, why do these people look so shocked? I know we met at Prime Minister Gilbert’s party, but...” Princess Pride muttered.

“They noticed you, of course,” I told her. “They remember the way you looked four years ago. They see through the disguise!”

After a beat of silence, Her Highness muttered, “Oh...”

You really don’t understand?! Everyone remembers how you looked four years ago when those cliffs went down, and that’s the age Prime Minister Gilbert returned you to. Your bravery back then was something people couldn’t forget. And even at a different age, you still carry yourself like a princess. Captain Alan is trying to stay by your side!

“Please pay a bit more attention to how the knights see you,” I groaned.

Captain Alan was slinking up to my back, trying to get closer. I hefted the princess in my arms and pushed on faster, not wanting the knights to catch up.

We hit a fork in the twisting passages of the cave. A cloud of dust billowed out of one side. I covered my mouth to keep the smoke out, but that thoughtless motion made me move my arm out of the way.

“Arthur, the girl you’re carrying—”

“Eeeeeeeek!”

I yelped when Captain Alan stepped up close.

“She looks exactly like the crown prin—”

“She’s Jeanne! Jeanne! A girl I know!” I said.

“I’ve never heard you mention any ‘Jeanne.’ Plus, she’s—”

“Anyway! My friend’s name is Jeanne! Please call her that, Captain!”

Captain Alan paused. Then his eyes took on a strange glint. “Oh? A ‘friend,’ huh?” he said.

It’s over. He totally knows.

He ran side by side with me. “Hey, let me carry little Jeanne too,” he said.

“Absolutely not,” I snapped.

Of course this guy's enjoying himself at a time like this.

As we approached the source of the dust, pops sounded—gunshots off in the distance. I stood torn between rushing toward the fight and getting the princess as far from it as possible, but then she whispered “Hurry!” and I dashed onward.

We jumped headfirst into the dust, the remnants of some kind of wall, apparently. The knights behind us tensed, sensing the looming battle. Princess Pride tightened her arms around my neck. Even she was nervous.

Another piercing gunshot rang through the cave. At Captain Alan’s command, the knights advanced slowly and quietly, trying to lie low. Just outside the entrance, a large group of enemies gathered, among them the huge man with the chains. He was stepping on Val, who lay trapped on the ground under his foot.

“There’s a lot of them,” Captain Alan whispered. He signaled to the knights. The traffickers hadn’t spotted us yet. They were all focused on the man with the chains, who was raising his gun, pointing it at someone.

“Pri—!” Princess Pride released my neck to slap her hands over her mouth.

Prime Minister Gilbert. That must’ve been what Her Highness was about to say. The thirteen-year-old version of the prime minister stood before the massive man, arms spread as though he was shielding something with his own body. Blood stained his shoulder. When I looked past him, I found Stale slumped over on the ground.

“Captain Alan, I’m borrowing your sword,” I said.

The captain had been trying to sheathe his sword to exchange it for his gun, but I grabbed the blade and yanked it out of his hands.

“H-hey!” he hissed, but the captain fell silent when I shoved Princess Pride toward him. Thankfully, she seemed to understand my plan and went willingly.

“Arthur,” she said firmly, and I glanced back at the enemies as I gripped my sword. “Go now.”

Her command was like a spark lighting a whole bonfire. Propelled by a fresh

sense of urgency, I took off running, my feet quietly tapping on the floor. The moment I got close enough, I leapt at the huge man. I raised my sword mid-flight, aiming at the filthy arm pointing a gun at Prime Minister Gilbert and Stale.

“Don’t you dare touch them!”

I swung.

Slash! The blade bit through the man’s shoulder as I fell. His scream echoed through the cave as blood sprayed from his severed flesh.

“Who’s this kid?!”

Guns swiveled in my direction as the large man clutched his arm and wailed for his companions to kill me. Captain Alan ordered the charge, and knights surged toward us at the same time. With the knights approaching, the enemy couldn’t focus solely on me. I could cut through three at a time with each step, or even five in one swing if I leaned into it right.

I adjusted my grip on my bloody sword and rushed at the traffickers. Springing into the air, I landed right in the middle of the group. With my natural speed and the element of surprise on my side, the enemy didn’t even get to pull their triggers before I cut eight of them down. I slashed off their arms before they could fire, lashing out too quickly for them to respond. Between my training with other knights and my bouts with Stale, these traffickers couldn’t throw anything at me I wasn’t ready for.

They tried grouping together, but that only made them easier targets for me. Five bunched together, each holding knives, and tried to lure me into close-quarters combat. Before they could act, I tossed my sword into the air. My distraction worked. While they were wondering about my sword, I smacked them in the elbows and legs. I grabbed one man by the arms and threw him aside. They were easy opponents, each one weaker than even Prime Minister Gilbert.

I caught my sword as it fell, then charged back into the group. But before I could finish them off, the large man with the chains turned toward me with murder in his eyes. He clutched the gaping wound where I’d cut off his arm, somehow still on his feet despite the blood loss.

The man with the chains was standing on Val. He winced as he uncovered his wound to unholster his gun and level it at me. *Bring it on.* He could threaten me all he wanted as long as it meant he wasn't going after Stale and the others instead.

"Sir Arthur!" Prime Minister Gilbert said. "Phillip is safe, as are Khemet and Sefekh."

I nodded but didn't take my sights off the large man. From the corner of my eye, I saw Princess Pride, now free of Captain Alan's arms, flying to Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert. Thankfully, Captain Alan followed to protect them.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I dodged each bullet. The moment he pulled the trigger, I leapt out of the way, running ever closer as I evaded his shots. I dove for the big man, slashing up before he could fire a fourth shot. I took off his hand with the gun still clutched in his grip.

"GRAAAAAAAH!" he screamed, now bereft of his hands. He stumbled backward and off of Val. I slashed once more, sure that would be enough to—

"Look out, Sir Arthur! Your feet!"

Prime Minister Gilbert shouted a warning, but a metal chain was already coiling around my feet. I braced my sword against the ground, pushing down on it to lift my feet up. Then I flipped backward, kicking the chain off as I somersaulted through the air, sword still in hand. How was the large man even conscious with such severe injuries? He sat slumped on the ground, still bleeding profusely. *What's going on here?*

"Ngh! Gaah?!" I heard behind me.

I swung around. Now it was Val with a chain wrapped around his neck. He scrabbled at the metal, desperately trying to free himself, but the chain only tightened.

"Drop your sword."

One of the men fighting with the knights approached, but something about him didn't feel right. He covered part of his face with cloth, so I could see little

but his eyes. Still, I placed myself between Princess Pride and this man. *Who the hell is this guy?*

“You were one of the five men who showed up for Val’s trade, weren’t you?” Prime Minister Gilbert said.

I gasped. I’d never gotten a good look at those men, aside from the giant. One had stuffed Her Highness in a bag. Another carried me. Yet another carried both Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert. That only left one more, a man who hadn’t carried any of us.

“So that large man with the chains was just a distraction—or rather, your pack mule?” Prime Minister Gilbert pressed.

This wasn’t good. If what the prime minister was saying was true, this guy was probably the one in charge. Was it possible that the large man had never been the one controlling those chains in the first place? I glanced over my shoulder and found Princess Pride tending to the wound in the prime minister’s shoulder.

“Lay your sword down,” the man growled. “If you don’t, I’ll kill him.” With a trembling finger, he pointed down at Val while he peeled away the cloth over his face. Val groaned as the chains around his neck coiled.

My grip on my sword tightened. The man glared, his threat hanging in the air between us, but I didn’t drop my weapon.

My vow to Princess Pride four years ago rose in my thoughts: *“I’ll protect you and those you care for. I’ll protect Mom, Dad, and all the people in the kingdom with everything in my power. That’s the kind of knight I’ll become!”*

Even though Val was one of the attackers who’d nearly killed my dad, Princess Pride saw him as one of her citizens, one of the precious people of her kingdom. If his life was in danger, it was clear what I needed to do.

I dropped my sword. Val’s eyes went wide in disbelief, even as he was being strangled.

“You fool!” Captain Alan shouted. Every knight gaped at me in shock.

The man smiled. “You better not resist now.”

His chain slithered toward me, snaking over my feet and coiling up to hips, my

arms, my chest, my neck. Soon, they covered my entire body, and I could barely move. If this man wanted to snap my neck, he could do it with a thought.

The man commanding the chains smirked, a cackle spilling from his lips. “It can’t be easy to stand with all that weight on you, hmm? You’ll be dead soon, so what’s the point in staying on your feet?”

The chain around my neck tightened.

“Agh...fine...to...” I choked out.

“Keep quiet!”

The man glowered and the chains constricted until I could hardly breathe. My vision went black around the edges as air struggled to reach my burning lungs.

“What’s ‘fine,’ huh?! Tell me, brat!”

There was no way I could answer him anymore, even if I wanted to. *I can hold on. I can stand here and be a wall between this man and all the others. That’s my duty right now. That way...*

The thought comforted me while my body screamed for air, and soon a small smile crossed my lips. Seeing it, the man’s face twisted with fury.

“Haaahhh!”

The cry didn’t come from the man—it was a cry of valor, of victory. Something red fluttered by my face, and I caught the scent of flowers as the chain around my neck cracked and crumbled into pieces, releasing me from its hold.

I made it.

Thanks to Arthur’s valiant distraction, I moved without hesitation, absolutely confident as I let out a deep breath and scooped up the sword he’d smartly discarded in my direction. I couldn’t tend to the prime minister’s shoulder anymore, but with Arthur’s body serving as a barrier, I could arm myself as Prime Minister Gilbert surreptitiously returned me to my actual age. Strength flooded my lengthening limbs. Back to my true age of fifteen, I leapt to my feet and launched at the enemy, brandishing Arthur’s sword.

I landed beside Arthur, whose face was turning an alarming shade of purple. I steeled myself, remembering the way I'd sliced through a full suit of armor thanks to my last boss cheats; surely I could handle a simple metal chain. With that conviction in my heart, I aimed at the chain and brought the sword down.

Craaaaaack! The blade cut cleanly through the metal. Shattered fragments scattered across the ground in all directions as Arthur collapsed, limp.

"Are you all right?!"

Prime Minister Gilbert was carrying the unconscious Stale as he raced toward me and Arthur.

I crouched beside Arthur to confirm he was still breathing. He gasped in a deep breath. Reassured, I dashed to Val and freed him as well. The chain fell away so easily, it made me wonder if I could cut through anything at all as long as I had my last boss cheats.

Finally, I faced the man commanding the chains, raising my blade toward him. He narrowed his eyes at me, tensing in the face of my aggression.

"You there, fiend," I said. "What do you intend to do with my citizens?"

The man's eyes swept over the destroyed chains. His mouth pressed into a hard line as he weighed his options before an enemy who could easily flick away his horrible restraints.

"Go to hell!" he finally yelled, red in the face. He sent multiple chains lashing out at us. They coiled together like a pit of snakes, then slithered toward us.

"Pathetic," I sneered. I ran right at the chains, cutting them down with one clean slice to each knot before they could reach my companions. I slashed right through the middle of the links and the chains fell apart, useless—hardly worthy of being called chains at all by the time I was done with them. A recovered Arthur moved in, and the other knights followed, forming a circle around me and the chain-wielder.

"Wh-what?!"

The man staggered, unable to speak. He kept stepping backward, eyes wide as he tried to escape me. With trembling legs, the man raised his gun in both

hands, pointing the barrel right at me. I couldn't jump out of the way, not with Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert and Val behind me. *In that case...*

I pointed my sword at the man, never daring to take my eyes off him. He stiffened and his finger twitched on the trigger of his gun. Flames leapt from the barrel.

"I see everything with my precognition!"

Pride, the final boss queen, laughed inside my head.

I knew what was coming before the bullets even left the barrel. Light flashed and I slashed with my sword, splitting the bullets in half. The fragments whizzed past me, harmless.

The chain-wielder ground his teeth in frustration, then fired wildly, unloading his gun at me. *Bang bang bang!* Each shot echoed through the cave. I twisted and turned my blade, and the bullets scattered all around me, as if I stood behind a force field. Eventually, his gun clicked, depleted of ammunition.

He had nothing left. His gun was empty; his chains lay destroyed around our feet. With my sword in one hand, I approached the man, and he pulled out a knife. He howled at me to stay away, but I just continued my slow pacing toward him. He barely even had any comrades left, with the knights dispatching most of them already. The man cowered, brandishing his knife fecklessly as his lips began to tremble.

"You monster!" he shrieked.

It wasn't the first time I'd been called that. I brushed the insult off. After all, I knew better than anyone that I was an unnatural freak.



“Since you have a special power, you must be a fellow Freesian citizen, I assume,” I said. “How unfortunate.”

His hand shook. He barely maintained his grip on his knife. I took another step forward. “J-just try it and see! We might stab each other at the exact same time, but before you kill me, I’ll make sure you’re d—”

“I won’t dirty my hands by killing you.”

He flinched, then a sly smile seeped across his face. “I see, I see. How kind.” He bowed his head and I closed my eyes, not wishing to see him any longer. Royalty rarely ever dirtied their own hands with bloodshed. We could hand down a death sentence, but we did not usually carry it out. I wouldn’t do so now; I didn’t want to be like the bloodthirsty Pride of the game.

I was the crown princess—the future queen of this land. No matter how guilty this man was, I could not directly take his life. Four years earlier, when I fought the ambushers at the cliffs, I never killed anyone either. My hands were still pure and unstained.

That was why...

“I won’t kill you. Not with my own hands.”

I tossed my sword high into the air. The man gaped up at it as it flipped and spun.

“Her Majesty, Rosa Royal Ivy, queen of the Kingdom of Freesia, has ordered the annihilation of all traffickers!” I declared.

I never took my eyes off him as I spoke. The man may have been one of my people, but he was also an enemy of my people. The queen had already sealed his fate.

“Eliminate him, Captain Alan.”

At my command, a shadow raced forward. Captain Alan caught his sword out of the air and raised it above his head. The man drew back, but it was already too late.

“By your will,” the captain said, grinning.

When he swung down, a spray of blood shot forth. The chain-wielder stood stunned for a moment, then collapsed, body sliced in two.

“Princess Jeanne...” Captain Alan said. Red stained his uniform, but he smiled over at me. Before he could continue, more knights rushed into the room, shouting for their captain.

“Did everyone make it out already?!”

“Captain! I received word that Eric’s squadron has finished the rescue operation and regrouped with Squadron Three!”

“Perfect,” Captain Alan replied. “All that’s left is our own escape.”

I exchanged a relieved look with Arthur and the others when we heard the report. It sounded like the knights had defeated the ringleaders and most of their underlings as well. But we had no time to celebrate our victory. We had to make for the exit immediately.

Just as we did, an explosion rocked the whole cave.

Chips of stone fell from the ceiling, soon followed by larger chunks. Whatever had exploded was bringing down the entire cavern. Prime Minister Gilbert turned me back into a child so Arthur could carry me toward the exit. It seemed like the blast came from outside, and that meant there could be more enemies waiting for us there, but we had no choice but to head that direction. Stale, still unconscious, couldn’t even teleport us away if we met with danger after escaping the cave.

I was worried about Sefekh and Khemet, but as we ran, Prime Minister Gilbert explained that he’d put them in the care of two of the knights. Afterward, he’d even made his way to the top-grade cage to see how Stale and Val fared. There he found Val, his defensive walls broken, pulling an unconscious Stale out of a tunnel. Prime Minister Gilbert had protected both of them while Arthur, the knights, and I arrived, which meant everyone was safe. There was just one thing left to take care of.

“I just received word that two children under protection of the order just escaped and fled into the cave!” a knight shouted at Captain Alan.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” Val said. I could hear the worry beneath his annoyed

tone.

“What the hell is Callum doing out there?!” the captain asked.

Callum was the captain of the third squadron. He should have been rushing to meet us, but since he wasn’t, Captain Alan ordered us to be on our guard.

“How exactly did those children escape the knights’ custody?!” I said.

Any knight should be able to handle a pair of kids. But as soon as I tried to voice this, Arthur shot me a warning glance and I realized I wasn’t hiding my face any longer. *That’s right. If I show myself like this, the knights will figure out who I am.*

I choked off my question and turned toward Arthur, who was carrying me. He voiced the question instead: “What kind of children are they, the ones who escaped?”

“A boy and a girl, both around ten years old. I don’t have many details, but I’m told they escaped by using a water power—”

“Aaaaahhhhh! Those shitty little brats!” Val cried. He took off running, leaving behind the knights who’d been leading us all this time. I tried to call out for him to stop, but just then Captain Alan roared over me.

“Hey, wait!” He drowned out my order, but I doubted it would even have mattered. Val was screaming for Sefekh and Khemet as he charged down the passageway.

At last, someone responded. “Val?!”

It was a girl’s voice. Sefekh’s voice.

Val took off after her before I could even register what happened. Captain Alan commanded his troops to pick up the pace and chase after Val.

“Val! Vaaal!” we called.

Sefekh stood at a fork in the path. By the time we reached her, she was already hugging Val’s legs with tears in her eyes. Val held her back by the shoulders. “Where’s Khemet?!”

“Down there!” She pointed away from the exit, back down a path sealed off

with rubble, probably because of the explosion.

Sefekh explained that the collapse had separated them and that she couldn't get back to him on the other side of the debris. Val looked like he was trying to use his special power, but it wasn't working. Perhaps it could only build up walls and not tear them down.

The cave shook again, even as the knights tried to dig through the rubble. More rock fell, undoing their meager progress. I even attempted to cut through the blockage with my sword, but destroying part of the wall just created more small stones to block it up.

"Damn it! Khemet! *Khemet!* Answer me!" Val shouted.

Val clawed at the rocks in front of him with his bare hands. He stuck his hand in any gap in the wall he could find, digging out chips of rock. The sharp stone cut his skin, but he just kept going at it, completely unfazed by the scrapes and bruises.

A few knights came to help him, but the cave was still crumbling around us. When they ordered us to evacuate, I clung to Arthur and refused. None of us wanted to leave while Khemet was still in danger, but the knights did carry away the unconscious Stale, as well as Sefekh.

"Arthur! Don't you dare let Princess Jeanne die!" Captain Alan called as he led his knights out to safety. Only two remained behind with us. Arthur set me down so we could all work on the rubble alongside Val. But it was hard going in the body of an eleven-year-old. I used both hands to lift rocks that the others easily threw aside.

The cavern rumbled and groaned around us, threatening to come down any moment. Even as Arthur and the knights begged for us to flee, a tiny voice squeezed through the rubble, crying out for help. Through a small hole, we glimpsed Khemet's terrified face.

"Val...?"

"Khemet! Stay right where you are!" Val yelled.

We dug furiously, trying to widen the hole, to get it big enough for Khemet to squeeze through. We expanded it to the size of an adult's arm before a rumble

trembled through the ground right beneath our feet.

The floor itself was collapsing.

“This is bad! We’re on top of a cliff now!” a knight shouted.

My breath got caught in my throat. The danger pressed in from below as well as above. We needed to save Khemet, and fast.

We widened the hole a little more, but Khemet still couldn’t reach us. That was when he revealed that he was pinned down, trapped between large rocks. We had to free him and pull him out before the whole cave collapsed on all of us.

“Val, you’re close to Khemet, so you can build a dome around yourself to protect both of you and—”

“I can’t! He’s too small! He’d be swallowed up with the rubble!” Val growled with frustration. “Forget it. Just get your asses to the exit!” He had to know that this was hopeless. His special power wouldn’t save them like in the cliff collapse. If the floor fell out from under him, there would be nothing he could do.

Two knights attempted to drag Val away from the rubble, but he fought their hold.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed. “Is this your first day on the job?! Did you all forget?! I’m a criminal. I attacked you four years ago, took your commander hostage, and got forced into a fealty contract. I’m trash! Just leave me here!”

The knights refused to relent. They grabbed Val and tried to pull him along, but he still refused to budge.

“Val,” I said.

“Don’t say it!” Val screamed. “Don’t say it! Don’t you dare order me!”

I could force him to leave right now. One simple order and there would be nothing he could do. He’d have no choice but to abandon Khemet.

This isn’t right.

Val scrabbled urgently at the rubble, desperate to act before I could order him

to stop.

“Val.”

“Stop,” he said. “Don’t do it.”

As the collapse continued, I looked Val straight in the eyes and gave my command: “Use your special power to force us away from you.”

With my permission, he shoved the knights away from him, then activated his power. Rubble piled up and formed a wall between Val and the rest of us. As the debris rumbled and gradually hid Val from sight, he turned to regard me.

Then, he smiled.

I couldn’t make out his words over the roar of the cave-in, but I could see his lips moving. “Thank you,” he mouthed just before the dirt wall overtook Val and he disappeared completely.

Arthur scooped me up as I stood there, stunned. “Let’s go,” he told the other knights, breaking into a run.

I clung to Arthur’s shoulder and bit my lip hard. I buried my face against his chest to hide my tears. Debris still rained down, swallowing up Val and his wall.

It was the only choice I had. This was what Val wanted. Forcing him to leave would have been unimaginably cruel. But it still hurt to watch him vanish, and we’d have to tell Sefekh what happened. Perhaps she’d hate me for not ordering Val to leave, but it was clear that he wanted to save Khemet or die trying.

We left Val behind and raced toward the exit, avoiding the large boulders along the way and enduring a shower of debris from above. Soon, a distant breath of fresh air reached us. Someone shouted “Hurry!” from outside the cave, and we charged up a sloped path and toward the dim glow of natural light and torches.

The second we reached the top of the slope, we dove out of the cave.

“Jeanne! Sir Arthur!” Prime Minister Gilbert shouted. He rushed up to us. “Are you injured? The knights are still looking after Stale.”

“Where’s Khemet and Val?!” Sefekh asked, shoving her way through the

knights.

Arthur and I fell silent, unsure how to break the news to the trembling girl. One of the knights stepped in to explain how Val forced us away, staying behind to dig for Khemet. Before he even finished, Sefekh dashed for the cave, but one knight caught her by the arm.

“Let me go, morons! Khemet and Val, they—”

She sprayed water at the knight holding her, kicking and struggling even as the men tried to calm her down and warn her of the danger awaiting her in the cave. She wasn’t listening, though, and just kept fighting, tears pouring down her face.

I bit my lip, head hanging. I had no right to try to calm her down. This was all my fault. It wasn’t a game; I couldn’t just rely on some sort of cheat like I would in ORL. Here, I was just a powerless child.

I longed to be stronger, to possess some skill or power that could make this right. But I wasn’t like my friends and companions. I wasn’t like Stale, who’d studied for years to become the ultimate strategist. I wasn’t like Arthur, who exceeded even the knights’ standards by practicing combat with Prime Minister Gilbert and Stale. I wasn’t like the prime minister, who changed the very direction of the kingdom for the better. All I’d ever done was rely on the knowledge and power I was born with in my previous life. How could someone like me ever become the next queen?!

Anger bubbled up to replace the regret and powerlessness. I hunched over, hands trembling as I braced against the ground.

“Jeanne.” I lifted my head when Prime Minister Gilbert called out for me. He averted his eyes for a moment, hesitant to speak. “This is only conjecture, but...” he began.

My eyes widened. *It can’t be!*

Arthur was listening too. “Wait, are you serious?!”

That’s it. That’s what we need.

I looked at Sefekh once more. She was weeping, calling Khemet’s and Val’s

names over and over. Seeing her grief, I knew what I had to do. Arthur borrowed a sword from another knight and I took off running—right for the collapsing cave.

Prime Minister Gilbert and Arthur stopped Captain Alan and the knights from getting in my way. I leapt into the cave with Arthur right behind me.

“I’m going with you!” he shouted before I could protest.

Just then, rocks tumbled from the ceiling, sealing off the exit and trapping us in the cave. There was no going back. We pushed on, with Arthur using his sword to clear out the falling debris blocking our path.

“Val! Answer me!” I shouted down the tunnel, trying to make myself heard over the roar of the collapse. We’d reached the rubble wall where we’d last seen him, but he was gone.

“That’s an order!” I said. “If you can hear my voice, answer me!”

“Why the hell are you here?!” he shouted back.

Thank God. He’s still okay.

“Did you find Khemet?!”

“Not yet,” Val told me. “But he’s so close! You guys need to get out of—”

“Val, I’m ordering you! Take down your dirt wall right now!”

He snarled with frustration, but the wall started to come down. Arthur and I rushed over it while he was still lowering it.

“What are you back here for?!” Val snapped. He glared, but scrapes and bruises and blood covered his arms. All this time, he must have continued trying to dig his way to Khemet, but the hole was still barely large enough for a child’s head.

“I order you, Val. Reach your hand inside and take Khemet’s hand.”

Val looked shocked, but he had no choice but to obey.

“Khemet, grab Val’s hand!” Arthur shouted.

“Hey! What’s going on?! I can’t pull him out of a hole this tiny!”

Val jammed his entire arm into the hole, all the way up to his shoulder. Even with his face pressed against the stone, he scowled at us. And all the while, the ground beneath us trembled, presaging the collapse to come.

“Once you’ve grabbed Khemet’s hand, use your power to—”

“I told you! I can’t just move rubble however I w—”

“It’s not just rubble!”

I didn’t have time to explain this to him. I had to use the power of the fealty contract to force him to act.

“I have his hand!” Khemet yelled from the other side.

“Val, heed your master’s order!”

The falling rocks clapped like thunder in our ears. I raised my voice, screaming as loudly as I could so Val couldn’t deny my order.

“Take control of this entire cave!”

Val’s face slackened with shock. He had to obey the order, but he didn’t look like he believed he could. Still, the fealty contract bound him to that command, and his special power activated, pouring out with more strength than it had ever possessed before.

“Ngh... Ahh! Aaaaaahhhhhh!”

Val screamed, incapable of forming words. His eyes fluttered as his body jerked from the force of the power flowing out of him. The next moment, the entire cave swelled around us, like we were standing on some enormous, breathing animal. The cracked ground contorted, rippling in waves like a carpet.

The constant rain of debris abruptly ceased as I looked up to find the dust and pebbles frozen in midair. Slowly, they floated up, returning to the ceiling and fitting back into place. Even the debris blocking us began to slide away, clearing an open path. The cave wasn’t just going back to its original state; it was rebuilding itself from the ground up, reconstructing itself around us.

“What’s going on?” Val blurted.

He gaped at his own power, blinking over and over, jaw slack. Suddenly, he

jerked, spinning toward the wall that had trapped Khemet. The rock and dirt fell away the moment he noticed them, as though they had a will of their own.

When the rubble cleared, we saw Khemet, still holding Val's hand, face soaked with tears. He stared up at Val, never taking his eyes off the man.

"Khemet," Val said. He hauled the boy up into his arms and hugged him tight.

"Val!" Khemet cried, fresh tears pouring down his cheeks.

Even Val's shoulders were shaking as he held the boy at last.

"Moron," he said. "Why the hell... Why the hell're you two always doin' stupid shit? Always..." Quieter, so soft I could hardly hear it, Val sighed, "Thank God."

"Did you do this, Val?" Khemet asked between sobs.

Val lifted his head, swiping at his eyes before saying, "I have no idea."

He turned his gaze on me and Arthur, waiting for an explanation.

"No," I said. "The two of you did this together."

They both blinked at me. Even Val seemed confused, as though he didn't understand his own special power.

"Khemet, how would you describe your special power?" I asked the boy. He had hardly spoken before now, but I was betting that he understood that he had a special power and how it worked.

"Only Sefekh knows my power," he said.

"Only Sefekh knows his damn power," Val said at the same time. They might not understand, but Prime Minister Gilbert had figured it out earlier and explained to me the moment before Arthur and I dove out of the cave.

Khemet's special power was the ability to strengthen others' powers.

The prime minister had been curious about Sefekh ever since the knights dragged her out of the cave. She'd tried to hit the knights with water, but it was a mere splash rather than a jet. Prime Minister Gilbert couldn't figure out why she was holding back; she'd blasted through the cage door and sent enemies flying when she was holding Khemet's hand. That was when Prime Minister Gilbert put it all together.

“Sefekh did that?!” Val said. Apparently, he’d never witnessed the children’s combined power before.

“Sefekh always said she could do things like that if she used her full power,” Khemet said.

Apparently, he’d believed her explanation. I could see why she’d want to keep his power a secret; it was too incredible to reveal. If others learned of it, more than just the traffickers would come after Khemet, hoping to use him.

I should have figured it out sooner myself. The night before, when Val told me about Sefekh, he said that she blasted him with water at full force to wake him up every morning. Hitting him with something that could warp the metal bars of a cage would crush his face. Her power obviously came at different strengths at different times. That was why she hadn’t had the power to clear the rubble with her water jets either. She couldn’t reach Khemet to get his help.

When Prime Minister Gilbert explained it all, I knew there was still a way to save Khemet—if Val could reach him. I bet on their combined powers being enough to stabilize the cave, but I never imagined they could achieve all this.

Khemet now stared at his own hand, clenching and unclenching it like he barely recognized it. As his hand flexed, the cave pulsed in time, a giant heart beating around him. Perhaps I should have warned him about playing around with a power like that, but in that moment, I was too awestruck to say much of anything.

A smirk spread across Val’s face. He motioned at the ground, and it swelled at our feet, a path to the exit forming right under us.

“Ha!” Val barked a laugh, then slammed a hand to the ground, and the whole floor lurched up with a roar.

I shrieked. Arthur grabbed me. Khemet, still close to Val, clung to Val’s shirt.

“Huh?! What?! No way! No way, no way, no way, no way!” I was screaming in panic as the ground swayed like waves breaking. We were flying toward the exit, carried along by a current of rock. But while most of us were clinging to each other and shouting in fear, Val’s laughter rang out over the groan of the churning rock. *Maybe I shouldn’t have shown Val this after all...*

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha!”

He was like a kid with a brand-new toy. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me nervous. *I told the man with quite possibly the worst judgment about Khemet’s power.* The ground was moving so fast beneath us—until it stopped just as abruptly, launching us all forward.

For all his hysterical laughter, Val had timed it well. He landed smoothly, even with Khemet still in his arms. The rest of us weren’t so lucky. Arthur skidded across the ground, keeping me out of danger and taking the brunt of the fall himself.

Prime Minister Gilbert and the knights ran up to us, shock splashed across their faces. They had to be confused, what with the crazy shifting of the cave and us suddenly shooting out of it like some strange carnival ride.

“Khemet! Val!”

Sefekh pushed her way through the knights and let out a cry. Val set Khemet down and he flew into his sister’s arms. I decided I’d protect them by explaining everything away as Val’s triumph alone.

“Thank God... Thank God...” Sefekh sobbed as she held Khemet.

Relief washed through me. *I’m so happy they’re all safe.*

Clang... Clang... Clang...

“Woo-hoo! Everyone’s saved! I’ll just bet that’s what they’re all thinking right about now.”

Looking down on the knights from my place in the sky, I cackled at their little celebration. I adjusted my binoculars to bring them into focus and muttered to myself.

“Oh, but that sure was impressive. They moved that whole cave around somehow. So they’ve got themselves an earth power, huh? Whose is it?! Teepee! You’re not letting those knights catch on, right?”

It was tough to see the people below between the dark and the distance. Still, I scanned, trying to pick out anyone identifiable.

Beside me, Teepet listened silently, blank and mute as a doll. With the rope they wore around their head, it was difficult to determine their expression, their gender, or much of anything else. But I didn't care. Teepet didn't need to respond; they simply had to obey.

"Whoa! No one from Freesia was killed or injured? Or are they still stuck in there? If none of the products died once the knights got their hands on them, that'd be so anticlimactic, don't you think?" Ignoring Teepet's lack of response, I grinned at the men steering the hot air balloon we rode in. "You don't really wanna haul the remaining half of our bombs back home, do ya?"

The men nodded, understanding. I wasn't really commenting on the state of the bombs so much as issuing an order, one they were happy to comply with.

They leapt to obey.

And a shower of bombs rained down from the night sky.

Bang! Bang! Ka-boom!

Explosions cracked, sending shock waves through the air. Part of the area where we stood with the knights got blasted away in a blinding shock of orange.

My ears rang. My vision blurred. Pain pounded in my head as I searched for the knights, Prime Minister Gilbert, Val, the kids, anyone at all. I crouched, unable to stand quite yet.

"Are you safe?!"

"Call out if you're injured!"

The knights shouted commands, trying to find order among the chaos. A figure emerged among the hazy cacophony. I squinted, but couldn't make them out until they started screaming, "Sefekh! Khemet!"

Val found me before the kids. He furrowed his brow, searching around us.

"V-Val!" a small voice cried. Sefekh.

Val scanned all around, trying to see through the kicked-up dust.

"Val! Behind you!" I said, pointing.

The blast must have carried Sefekh quite a distance, because she lay sprawled out a meter from the edge of the cliffs where the cave perched. She dragged her way toward us, one leg lame, face twisted in pain.

“Sefekh!” Val bolted toward her, but just as he reached out for her, the ground beneath her crumbled.

The earth fell away like a slice of cake cut by a fork. Sefekh was too shocked to move.

“Goddamn it!”

Val leapt for Sefekh. He stretched his hands out and grabbed the girl’s arm. As he continued falling, he twisted, flinging her back to safety. She landed with a hard thud and coughed from the impact.

And then, Val...

Why...? Why is this happening to me?

The ground beneath me gave way. I made the mistake of looking down but couldn’t even see the bottom of the pit I fell into after throwing Sefekh to safety. It was like floating, wafting downward on the crumbling rock like a leaf drifting down off a tree branch.

Why’s someone like me doin’ this for one little brat?

But it wasn’t just one. Earlier, when I thought the cave-in would crush Khemet, I couldn’t leave him behind. What the hell was I thinking, throwing my own life away for some random punks? I never used to care what happened to anyone else as long as I made it out fine. Hell, I’d killed plenty of people myself. Now I was saving some kids?

Some part of me just couldn’t let them die.

I never wanted to lose Khemet and Sefekh ever again. The image of them right before they got kidnapped played in my mind over and over until I felt sick from the sight. My heart beat all funny, and something roiled in the pit of my stomach, leaving me nauseated. I couldn’t stand it anymore. Dying had to be better than living like this. The me from four years ago never woulda believed

what a pathetic mess I was.

He never woulda believed how I'd given up everything for a pair of brats.

"I'll answer your question. The suffering you feel right now is punishment."
That was what the princess told me the night before, and damn, was she ever right. This was one hell of a punishment.

I'd changed. I wasn't the bastard who only cared about his own happiness anymore. And I hated it.

Whenever I thought about those two brats suffering, I hurt all over again. I couldn't take it. When they smiled...I didn't hate having them with me. For some reason.

"You're most likely going to keep suffering forever to repay all the suffering you caused others."

This was the end, then.

That was fine with me. I was finally gonna be free from all the pain. All the happiness too. All these damn confusing emotions would be gone. When I thought about it like that, dying didn't sound so bad.

In fact, it was perfect.

"You don't understand what it means to truly care for something because you've never experienced those emotions until now."

She was right. I never cared about anything before. I never kept anything close to me. It made life easy; I could do whatever I wanted. I didn't need anyone's understanding if it meant they could affect me like this. I preferred to live the way I wanted without worrying about anyone else. It was so easy that way.

But for some reason, I'd reached my hand out to Sefekh. I knew when I did it that I'd die, but I just couldn't let her take this fall. I'd rather die than sit back and watch her go through this instead. And even as I fell, the relief of knowing she was safe eased the fear.

Sefekh deserved to live more than someone like me. Khemet still needed her. That annoying princess who never shut up about saving her people was

probably pretty pleased as well. But none of that had anything to do with why I saved her. My body had started moving before I could even think about it.

“Caring about people,” huh?

The wind brushed my back as my thoughts wandered. I couldn’t even tell up from down anymore.

I guess I found people to care about in the end.

Khemet and Sefekh were a blessing I’d never imagined for someone like me. I couldn’t even regret trading my life for theirs to protect them.

Maybe it wasn’t such a bad life, after all.

Even as I scoffed at myself, a warmth suffused my chest. I closed my eyes and surrendered to fate, letting the end come as it would...

“Open your eyes! Val!”

I gasped. My eyes flew open. Someone was there, diving toward me like a bird plunging out of the sky.

“What?!”

I blinked, but the person falling toward me didn’t disappear. This was real.

“I order you to grab my hand!”

My body responded before I even processed the princess’s command. I reached out for her, and our hands smacked together. She yanked me up, pulling me in against her.

“What the hell are you doing?! You’ll die too!”

What’s going on here?! What do you think you’re gonna do, brat?! You already saved all the captives. Khemet and Sefekh are safe too. What’s the point in coming back for me?!

“You’re one of the people of my kingdom, aren’t you?” she said without hesitation.

The princess looked right at me as she raised one hand to her mouth. The wind whipped past us, and I couldn’t tell what was up and what was down anymore. I stared back at her, unblinking, as she took a deep breath and...

TwEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

The piercing whistle rang even louder than the wind whipping past our ears. I grimaced at the sound, but the princess just drew a deep breath to do it again.

“Pride!”

The princess twisted and, seeing someone above us, broke into a wide grin.
“Stale!”

He plummeted toward us, taking her hand. He offered me his other hand. The moment I accepted, the entire world blinked away. Looked like I wasn’t done with this life quite yet.



The wind vanished. The open air turned into solid ground. I was lying on my back, no longer falling, though my mind rocked at the sudden shift.

I was saved, saved by the princess of Freesia. Me. A man abandoned by the whole world. I just couldn't understand it.

My parents were the first. Mom was born and raised in Freesia. She fell in love with Dad, a traveling merchant from a foreign country, and then they had me. Dad was barely around, always bouncing from place to place. When he came back, he'd leave us a souvenir. That was all I ever really knew of him. "The guy who leaves souvenirs."

Sometimes he'd read me a book he brought back, usually ones from his homeland and written in their native language. I was way more interested in stories and customs from his homeland, since everyone there had the same dark brown skin I was born with, unlike here, where no one looked like me at all.

When I was seven, Dad disappeared for an entire year, and Mom finally gave up on him. Gave up on me too. She found a new man and ran off with him, leaving me behind at a garbage dump in the slums. Strangely, it didn't really make me upset when Mom abandoned me. She'd never really given me a second glance those first seven years anyway.

I'd had to fend for myself my whole life. I was good at making do with what I had. As long as I had a roof over my head, it didn't matter where I had to live. Part of me was glad to be rid of her; she spent half her time grumbling about Dad anyway.

Or, at least, I thought I was glad. Soon enough, the harsh realities of the world changed my mind about being on my own.

People threw stones at me. They robbed me. They threatened my life. I could barely do a thing about it until my special power finally manifested. Once I started growing, I could finally fight back—I could finally throw *my* weight around.

At fifteen, when I was staying with bandits, I heard whispers of an easy score with a good profit. I just had to head to some cliffs outside the city. Three years

later, the damn princess ripped away my life, my work, my whole place in the world with that fealty contract.

“Those are my orders. You’re free to go, so begone from the castle.”

With that ridiculous order, she sent me out of the castle. I had no clue what she was thinking, but at least I didn’t have to deal with her anymore. So I thought, at least.

That princess was a monster. No eleven-year-old should have been able to cut down a bunch of grown men. And she even knew about my special power somehow. It gave me the damn creeps. If she hadn’t ordered me to stay in Freesia, I would have tried my luck somewhere else, just to get farther away from her.

“You’ll be released very soon. Tell me how you plan to live in the outside world.”

How the hell would I know? I’d lived on the fringes of society pretty much my whole life. She cut off my way of life and then demanded I find a means to go on. Still, it sounded better than dying, at least in the moment.

I decided to go back to the place in the slums where I’d been living a few years earlier. I wasn’t attached to it or anything; I just couldn’t think of anywhere else to go. With all my usual means of making money and surviving cut off, I couldn’t just stroll back into my old life.

By the time my feet had dutifully carried me to the house, I was surprised that anything at all remained. It was hardly more than four walls and a roof, but at least it still stood.

“There’s nothing in there.”

A little girl called out to me when I tried to step inside. My time as a trafficker had taught me how to guess at kids’ ages. I placed her at roughly seven or so.

“What, you live here or something?” I said. Out in the slums, folks would live in any place they could get.

“No, I don’t. I just sleep, eat, and hide in there.”

How’s that any different from living there?

“Okay, then,” I said, turning away.

“Are you leaving?” the brat asked. I wanted to strangle her for continuing to whine at me, but the contract wouldn’t allow it.

“Who cares?” But when I turned...

Clack!

A rock hit me in the back of the head. A couple of kids stood behind me, holding rocks, but I didn’t think I was their true target. No, they were actually aiming for that girl. It was so much like when I was a kid getting picked on for being weak. That was just how things went around here.

I glared at the brats with the rocks. They paled and took off running, not wanting to mess with the dark-skinned adult. If only I could chase after them and give them a proper beating, but that stupid contract held me back. All I could do was click my tongue and walk away.

I needed somewhere to sleep. I’d returned to Freesia from the cliffs just this morning; the second I found a place to rest, I passed out. But when I woke the next morning, I found that girl from the house sitting there staring at me, an even smaller kid in her lap.

“You slept a lot,” she said.

For a second, I just lay there, mind fuzzy. *What the hell?*

“Why the hell are you here?” I asked her. “Why aren’t you at that house?”

“We live here now,” she said, pulling the kid in her lap closer to her.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? I’d just woken up, and my head was already pounding. If only I could physically kick these kids out.

“I figure the safest place to be is with a guy like you,” the girl said.

I scowled. “Who’s the runt?” The brat stared up at me with big round eyes.

“I made him my little brother.”

“Made him,” she says. So I guess they weren’t related until they wound up here together.

“I’m busy,” I grumbled. “What am I supposed to do with you bringin’ your

baggage here?”

“He’s not baggage. He’s the only family I have. Without me, he’d die.” She hugged her brother tighter as she spoke, and I noticed the bruises all over both kids’ arms and faces. They were so small, such obvious targets, like I was, with my brown skin that made me stick out in this pasty, pale kingdom.

“And that’s how you protect the kid?” I said.

She had to be using her own body as a shield. It was the only explanation for those bruises all over her.

“I’ll protect him from here on out,” she declared. “All I need to do is stay with you.”

“What the hell?!”

Just when had I agreed to be a babysitter for a couple of brats? This had to be some kind of sick joke. I wanted to smack her even for suggesting it.

“Cut the bullshit! You think I’m gonna walk around with a couple of brats on my tail?!”

“Don’t pay any attention to us. We’ll just hang behind you wherever you go. Think of us like air.”

I couldn’t dredge up anything more than a glare, but no matter how much I scowled, they just wouldn’t leave me alone.

At first, I just kept trying to get away. Up until that day, I’d sold, stabbed, and hurt all kinds of kids just like them. Now I couldn’t shake two brats who weren’t even ten years old. I even used my power to try to get them off my back, but they always found me again eventually. When I asked how they managed this, they smugly told me I was easy to spot.

An entire week passed this way. I eventually gave up and stopped bothering to check over my shoulder for them. I knew they’d be there.

Due to the fealty contract, the only work I could take was legal work. I ended up hauling rubble at a construction site. It paid enough for food and water, but the brats had to scavenge in the trash. They never once looked at me with envy or begged, though.

One month passed, then two. Then three. At times, I forgot they were even there, completely comfortable with their presence.

“Hey, brat,” I said one day as I lay in bed. “How long do you two think you’re gonna follow me around?” It was the first time I’d spoken to them in three months.

“Um...forever?”

“Are you serious?” I said with a sigh of frustration.

Gimme a break already. Was I actually stuck with these kids until I could find a way to shake them off?

“Hey, Mister, is your name Val?” the boy asked. He’d never spoken to me directly before. He sometimes whispered with his sister, but for the most part, he kept quiet.

“Yeah? What about it?”

The boy ducked his head. The girl muttered “Val” to herself. They must have heard someone use my name while I was working or something.

They sat in my house now, their shyness about getting closer completely gone. They huddled in a corner, wrapped in ragged sheets from my bed. Annoying as hell.

“What’re your names?”

They shot each other a glance.

“Trash? Scum?” the girl tried.

“Scum? Trash? Um, ‘Little Brother’?” the boy said.

I groaned. They were just listing the things other people called them. *Gimme a break. It’s not like I can call you Trash and Scum on a day-to-day basis.*

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “So annoying...” I pointed at each child in turn. “Sefekh. Khemet. That’s what you should call each other from now on.”

“Sefekh. Khemet.”

“Khemet. Sefekh.”

They pointed at themselves, then each other, still confused by something as simple as a name. A headache started to form behind my eyes. Why couldn't they just accept it?

"Why is she Sefekh and I'm Khemet?" His voice quavered as he asked.

I rolled onto my side, putting my back to them. "They're words from another country. Sefekh means seven and Khemet means three. Those are pretty close to your ages, right?"

I didn't know much of the language my father had taught me up till I was six, but I still remembered some numbers and a few basic words.

"If you don't like them, then come up with your own names."

With that, I shut my eyes and fell asleep to the sound of them muttering, rolling the names around in their mouths.

From that day forward, they talked to me more. It was a waste of time and a pain in the ass. I honestly spent a lot of time wishing I could just get rid of them once and for all.

It took a full year before I taught them anything useful. First lesson: Money. They didn't even know what the stuff was, but once I taught them, they learned to beg and could earn enough for their meals.

After another year, they really got the hang of it. I learned about Sefekh's special power when the kids came up with a scheme to use it to sell water. They both had special powers, which is how they'd ended up out on the streets. Sefekh had had to run away from her family, while Khemet was abandoned by his, all due to those natural gifts. Somewhere along the way, while they were sharing their stupid life stories, I shared a bit of my own as well.

I didn't know why I kept talking to those clingy brats, but before I knew it, three years had passed and I still hadn't eradicated those parasites.

"Hey, Khemet. Stop grabbin' my pants. You're getting in the way," I snapped one day.

"Oh, sorry!"

"If you don't want your clothes to get stretched, then you should hold our

hands,” Sefekh said.

These brats had only grown cheekier as time passed. Khemet let go when I told him to, but the next day, he’d go right back to clinging to my pants. He and Sefekh were always holding each other’s hands, and sometimes they even tried that stuff with me. I just shook them off, bought dinner for the night, and headed back home, the two brats trailing behind me as always.

“Val, what did you buy for dinner tonight?” Sefekh asked me.

“Can’t you tell by looking?” I held up meat, an entire roast, and then explained it to them. We were lucky to have it. The butcher couldn’t sell it because it came from an animal that folks in this kingdom didn’t eat. That also brought down the price to the point where even I could afford it. I had only started eating it at my last job, when I started living at the cliffs.

After so much pestering about what it was, the kids cocked their heads at the explanation. Curiosity overtook any qualms they might’ve had about my snapping at Khemet only minutes ago.

“Give it a try,” I said.

I tore off a piece of meat and tossed it to them. I chewed some myself and found it pretty fresh. They’d already eaten the fruit and bread they bought for themselves, but now their eyes went wide. They rushed to grab the meat with both hands.

“Ouch!” Sefekh threw the meat on her lap and produced some water to cool her burning hands.

“We’re really allowed to have some of this?” Khemet asked. His eyes were so wide as he looked at me, like he didn’t even care that he just got hurt.

“It’s payment for the water,” I told them. “I don’t want to be spoiled by a couple of brats.” I bit off another hunk of meat and turned away, trying to forget the annoying brats. If it weren’t for the contract, I could have just left the kingdom and found whatever food I wanted.

The kids were gushing behind me.

“It’s delicious!”

“I’ve never tasted meat before!”

So damn annoying. This wasn’t a big deal. I was just repaying them for the water Sefekh made. It was no different from feeding stray dogs.

I glanced over my shoulder. Sefekh and Kemet were beaming as they bit into the cheap meat. Their eyes lit up. Grease smeared their faces and dripped onto their clothes. They were like animals eating. No, not animals.

“Little kids.”

All this time, and we’d never eaten a meal together. Just that took three whole years.

By the fourth year, they were living with me, infiltrating every single aspect of my life.

“Val! Val!”

I was at my construction job when I heard them calling for me. Sefekh and Khemet ran up to me, carrying something between them.

“Huh? What happened?”

I slung the bag of rubble over my shoulder and faced them. Maybe they’d had all their money stolen again or something, though that hadn’t happened in a while.

“We got fish! Fish! Someone gave me fish for water!” Sefekh cried.

“They let us have a whole fish, since it didn’t sell today!” Khemet said.

Their fish was bigger than Khemet’s head. The kids held it up proudly.

“I heard sunlight makes it go bad, so we’ll take it home now,” Sefekh told me.

“Please come back early today,” Khemet begged.

They were talking faster than I could keep up with, too excited to slow down. I figured they wanted to share their spoils with me, since they were taking it “home” and all. Behind me, my coworkers muttered.

“What’s that about, Val? Having a treat with the whole family today?”

“Aww, I’m jealous.”

Usually we kept to ourselves around here, but they got chatty when they saw the brats come around. They must've been looking down on me.

"They're not my damn family," I muttered.

"Right..."

"Oh...okay."

I shooed the brats away, but my coworkers would be right back to pestering me about it the second we got our break. As soon as I told the kids to scram, they hung their heads and wouldn't look me in the eye. *What's wrong with them?*

"Let's go, Khemet."

"Um...Val, we'll be waiting for you!"

Sefekh hugged the fish like some precious prize and tugged Khemet after her. I just shook my head and went back to moving rubble.

"Aww."

"That wasn't good."

My coworkers tried to goad me into responding, but I ignored them and went back to work. We weren't family. We just ate together. And lived together. They clung to me because I was useful to them. We'd started sharing the same bed and ragged blanket about a year ago, and those brats would cozy up to me even when it wasn't cold. Every single morning, Sefekh stole the blanket for herself in her sleep, so I was thinking about getting another one soon. I could buy it if I had some spare change after I bought today's dinner and tomorrow's breakfast. Maybe I should have just gotten one for Sefekh, since she was such a restless sleeper.

I was still musing through all that when I finished work and headed home. I wandered without paying much attention, walking aimlessly through the slums until I wound up back at the hut without even noticing.

My house was a heap of rubble.

The old shed was completely gone. Three men stood before what had been my home, with the two brats wrapped up in chains. Khemet and Sefekh were

sprawled on the ground.

“What the hell are you bastards doing?!” I shouted before I could pause to think.

No, what the hell am I doing?

I could tell right away that they were human traffickers. Kidnapping people from the lowest classes was exactly how they operated. That was part of the reason Sefekh and I kept our powers hidden—that kind of thing only made you a bigger target around here.

Then why bother with them?

Khemet and Sefekh screamed for me, but what could I do? There was no way I could get them back from the hands of the traffickers.

If they haul away these annoying little brats, it'll be the answer to my prayers.

A huge beast of a man with a chain draped around both shoulders rumbled a laugh. Something coiled around my feet—another one of those chains. I gaped as the chain wound its way up my legs, but I wasn't actually surprised. This was one of my coworkers. He was well known for a special power that involved chains.

I had only a moment to register all this before the large man whipped the chain around his shoulders at me. With my feet bound, I couldn't dodge. The chain smacked into me, and I flew back until I hit a wall. The blows just kept coming after that, with the chain whipping down to sting my arms, head, shoulders, anything it could reach.

“Hey, stop hittin' a good product,” a man growled.

“We've gotta get going. These days, it's easy to get caught in the slums if you're not careful,” another said.

The brats were still yelling my name. Sefekh struggled in her chains until one of the men snapped at her to shut up. She shrieked when he lashed out at her with his foot.

Just shut up and watch it happen. Don't fight back. You'll finally be free.

“Damn...you,” I groaned.

My whole body throbbed with pain, and blood rushed to my head. I tried to grab at the big man, but my limbs trembled. The chains came down again, a bright streak of pain lashing over my shoulders.

“Wait a second, look at his skin. He’s not from here.”

“No good then, huh? Should we kill him?”

The large man smirked at that suggestion. I’d known plenty of his type in my more disreputable past work. He’d like nothing more than to finish me off, but I sneered up at him and told him to piss off. I was going to add more, like the fact that I *was* actually Freesian despite my appearance, but a chain wrapped around my mouth and muffled me. Chains also gagged Sefekh and Khemet now.

“I know how we can use him.”

One man gave a signal, and the big man held back from ending me. He gave me another good kick in the stomach, though.

“Two nights from now,” he said. “Bring five people here. Five Freesians, and nothing else. Do that and you’ll get the kids back.”

Even with his mouth covered, I could *hear* the creepy smile in his voice. I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but I could manage nothing more than a groan. He kicked me in the head, leaving me with a pounding headache and a sneering “Good luck.”

The group dragged Sefekh and Khemet away by their chains. They were still crying out for me, though it was hard to make out with their gags. I felt sick. But why? What the hell was wrong with me?

Don’t screw with me. Give ’em back.

I gritted my teeth, trying to find some rubble to grab and fling at them. But my body froze up. I couldn’t fight back. All because of that damn fealty contract.

As I watched the men walk away with the kids, the princess’s words from four years ago flashed in my mind.

“If someone harms you, you can never retaliate.”

That monster had demanded that of me.

“No matter how hard someone strikes you...”

With my feet bound by chains, I couldn't even chase after the traffickers. I tried to crawl instead, but my body screamed with pain at even the slightest movement.

“No matter how much they take from you...”

Khemet and Sefekh were screaming. Their shrill voices rang out until a man shouted, “Shut it!” A heavy thud. Then they went abruptly silent, knocked out.

“You can never so much as raise a hand.”

Gravel crumbled in my fist. I reached in the direction the traffickers went, but I couldn't do a damn thing.

That didn't stop my body from moving before my head could catch up.

“For you, it might be a fate worse than death, if you choose it.”

Give them back!

I pounded my fist against the ground, screaming around the chain gag. Hatred welled up in my chest, murderous intent burning hot.

“Aaaaahhh!”

Give them back, give them back, give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back give them back!

An incomprehensible rage washed through me. I could do nothing but lie on the ground and writhe with nausea and heat and pain until the special power controlling the chains finally slackened. Some strange desire filled me, an urge I couldn't control.

“If you find yourself in trouble, if you need help, come and speak to me.”

The fealty contract...had activated.

“I teleported us next to the medic carriage,” the prince said. “I don't know what's happening at the cave right now, so I think we should avoid going

directly back and try to stay hidden.”

Stale teleported the princess and I behind a group of carriages and horses belonging to the Freesian royal order. Before he could teleport back away, the princess grabbed him and said, “Wait, let me confirm that no one nearby is injured.”

She peeked out from behind the carriage, standing on her tiptoes to get a better look. A few broken carriages sat around us but almost no injured people. It seemed the bomb targeted the cave specifically and not the broader area. The knights ringed a group sitting inside the carriages, protecting them from any sort of follow up attack.

“Those people over there were in the same cage as us,” she said. “Thank God they’re safe.”

She sighed with relief, still worried about everyone but her damn self.

“We need to get moving,” the prince said, and the princess took my hand again.

Just then, a shrill wail rose above the clamor of the crowd. There was something about that sound...

“Is that one of the rescued kids?” the princess asked.

No, that voice was...

My legs were churning before I realized what I was doing. I’d been tossed about by rubble, beaten with chains, and kicked sideways and back by life. But I couldn’t stop myself from rushing toward the sound. The wounds on my arms tore back open, gushing blood.

The freed captives sat in a carriage, but the cry came from just past that. The knights stiffened when I approached, but the prince and princess were at my side, ensuring I could pass without issue.

I rounded the carriage and finally found the source of the cries. It was the brats, crying and screaming. If the knights had even dared to approach them, Sefekh had probably fought back against them every step of the way. She was always on guard. When I worked back at the construction site, she wouldn’t

even acknowledge my coworkers; she only spoke to me and Khemet. As for Khemet, well, he never did anything without his sister's prompting, so if she was giving the knights a hard time, he was too.

It must have taken so much courage for her to approach me that first day—and all so she could make a better life for Khemet, a life where they were both safe. She'd probably switched over from begging to selling water so fast because she was terrified of adults. I'd realized a few years ago that she must've had some pretty terrible parents.

"Are they over there?" the princess asked, looking up at me. She and the prince were so small that they couldn't see the kids.

I offered a quick obligatory nod, then started through the crowd. If I could have, I would have shoved the knights out of the way to get to those brats, but the contract prevented me from doing it, making my whole body scream. As I got closer, I could make out Sefekh and Khemet whining, "Val, Val" as they cried. They didn't even attempt to quiet their synchronized wails, ignoring the droplets soaking their faces, their clothes, and the ground. They were like a pair of animals howling at the moon. My eardrums stung.

What're you cryin' so hard for?

My skin crawled, and my chest ached. Nausea clenched in my stomach. I never once heard them cry like that in all the four years I knew them, not even when the traffickers kidnapped them. It didn't make any damn sense to me. Why were they crying if I'd just saved them?

I staggered, and one of the knights caught me by the shoulder. How humiliating, getting help from a knight. They were no better than the royal family, who had me figuratively in chains with their damn fealty contract. Even when the brats got kidnapped, my body had acted almost on its own. I trudged after them, screaming for somebody, anybody to help them in the ways I couldn't due to the contract.

I knew I'd be better off without the brats. I'd be better off dead than having them attached at the hip. But while I could repeat that in my head as much as I liked, my heart betrayed me, forcing me to act whenever they were in danger. Struggle all I liked, I couldn't shake the desire, the need, to rescue them.

Just what exactly *was* that pain in my chest? Or the anger that felt so much like nausea? That irritating feeling of suffocation? What could I call the sickness that was eating away at me?

Caring. Worry. That was what the princess called it. But up until that point, I'd never cared about anything beyond where I'd sleep any given night. I'd never worried, either. What point was there in worrying when I was already at the bottom of the barrel? It was almost comforting to look at things that way.

The suffocating feeling was new, though. I'd never felt anything like it before. Whenever I thought about those kids, it threatened to overwhelm me, to crawl up into my throat until I couldn't even breathe.

I braced against the knight and stood up straighter. I shambled toward the kids, who had their backs to me. The people nearest drew back, opening a path from me to Khemet and Sefekh.

I stood right behind them, looking down at their shaking shoulders. I froze for a moment. I could run. I could let them think I was dead, escape them once and for all, and never have to deal with them again. The old me urged me to do it too.

But instead I just watched them cry. I watched their little red faces gush with tears as the trembling hollers tore from their throats.

I'd never cried like that in my entire life. I didn't cry when my parents abandoned me, when people made fun of me, when the princess forced me to sign the fealty contract. I stood there and took whatever life threw at me...until that night. The princess's words kept ringing in my mind, no matter how I tried to shut them out.

I dropped to my knees. Some part of me screamed, but I ignored it and wrapped my arms around Khemet, then Sefekh. They both jerked when I hugged them. They spun around, eyes fearful, instantly on the defensive with Sefekh about to strike—until they recognized me and gasped. Their mouths hung open, and they sat there frozen for an instant.

The next moment, they nearly tackled me to the ground. I sank to my knees, pathetically balanced by these little ones, and I couldn't help but chuckle. If they called for me, I couldn't tell. The sound came out as garbled sobs. Sefekh's

shrill voice pierced my ears from so close. Khemet buried his face against my chest, tears soaking into my clothes and stinging the wounds on my body.



Nothing had changed. They were still a couple of annoying brats. But I wasn't going to let go of them now.

I tried to speak, but only a hoarse wail came out at first. I had to swallow and gather myself to try to rise over the sound of their crying.

"What an annoying family..." I grumbled.

They held tight and didn't let go. The moonlight poured down, wrapping us in gentle light.

Clang... Clang... Clang...

"Heads up, everyone! It's time to retreat back to the motherland. Freesia's invasion was already over by the time we showed up. Some idiot went and used all our bombs by mistake!"

I yanked on the chains of the man in front of me. The prisoner lurched after me, already beginning to beg and whine.

"What sounds better?" I asked with an unabashed smirk. "Dying a horrible death to my special power or a regular old punishment once we get home?"

The captive trembled and cried, but I just grinned. "Oh, don't you worry. I already know. I just wanted to be sure is all."

I flicked the chains away and went to the edge of the balloon's massive basket, ordering the driver to head for home. Knights in chains clanked and clinked as they shifted around.

"Don't you forget, you slaves are nothing more than products to the rest of us," I said.

I ignored the captives and gazed down at the Freesian knights far below. They scuttled around like insects waiting to be crushed.

"Just you wait, Freesia. Someday, every last one of you will be products to display on our kingdom's shelves."

My grin spread to include all my teeth. Oh, how I'd enjoy seeing those proud knights groveling.

“You’ll belong to the empire of Razia, and me, Adam the magnificent!”

I laughed to myself as the balloon drifted out of sight.

Chapter 5:

The Destructive Princess and the Proposition

THE DAY AFTER the knights wiped out the traffickers at the cave, we went to visit Val and the children. The knights were looking after them and the rest of the victims, putting them all up in their own rooms while they recuperated.

We took a carriage to the area where the victims were recovering, and then a knight led us into a private room. Eventually, they brought in Val, Khemet, and Sefekh. We tried introducing ourselves to the kids, but they hid behind Val, quick-blinking eyes going wide as saucers. They didn't seem to recognize us now that Prime Minister Gilbert had returned us all to our true ages.

"That's the firstborn princess, the younger princess, and prince of this kingdom," Val told the hiding children.

Their faces flushed red.

"Huh?! No way!"

Khemet shrank even farther back behind Val, but Sefekh peered closer, looking us up and down without reservation.

"Hang on, Val! Wh-why do you know who they are?" she demanded. "Wait, don't tell me they're gonna execute you?!"

When he heard that, Khemet ran out in front of Val and linked hands with Sefekh. These two small children stared us down, as though they were trying to protect Val.

"Val had a reason for kidnapping those people!" Khemet shouted.

Val just smirked from behind the kids.

"Don't worry, we're not going to do that," I assured them. "I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Pride Royal Ivy. This is Tiara, and that's Stale. The knight's name is Arthur. We know Val from..." How could I explain this? Fealty contracts and ambushes seemed like a bit much for kids. I turned to Stale for help.

“We became friends with Val,” Tiara said instead. “Big Sister found him collapsed on a road and helped him. Now we’re all very good friends.”

Wow! She referred to him as a friend so easily—and she wasn’t entirely lying either. That’s the heroine for you. Always willing to see the best in others.

“Val told us what happened,” she went on, “and that’s why we could send the knights out to help. We’re so grateful to him!”

She leveled a meaningful look at Val, who hesitated only for a moment.

“Th-that’s right,” he said. “That’s how it happened.”

Tiara shook Khemet and Sefekh’s hands and told the children she hoped they could all be friends. Her kind manner instantly forged a bond between her and the children.

“Let’s all be friends!” they agreed. This time, they didn’t try to argue that Val had no friends.

“Big Sister Pride worked hard to save the three of you,” Tiara told them.

“Thank you very much,” Khemet whispered in his shy, fragile voice.

Sefekh’s face turned bright red and she didn’t manage a reply.

Suddenly, Khemet gasped. “Arthur?”

Sefekh followed his gaze and let out a cry. “You! You’re the one who got caught because of Val!”

Well, that was one way of seeing it. Arthur put up his hands, already trying to deny it.

“Arthur is a knight who worked along with Val,” Stale said. “He was there because he snuck into their headquarters. The Jeanne and Gil you met there are safe too.”

The children went from stunned to relieved as Stale explained the plan.

“So Val *didn’t* capture all those people,” Khemet said.

“Are you done yet?” Val cut in. “You said hi. What else do you need?”

He was right that we’d gotten what we came here for, but I still had more

questions. “What are you going to do now?” I asked Val.

“Huh?” Val seemed confused as to why I would even ask. “We’re going home to the slums.”

Sefekh and Khemet nodded, unperturbed at the prospect of returning to that place.

“Our house got wrecked in all this, so we’ll have to find a new one,” Khemet said.

Yesterday’s trip was the first time I ever went to the slums, though I’d heard some things about it. It was deemed too dangerous for me to visit, so the covert operation was the first time I’d really experienced it.

I was appalled by what I found. Rubble and trash covered the ground. Most houses barely stood. People slept anywhere they could find, anywhere they could put a roof over their heads. Prime Minister Gilbert had been working on improving the slums, but there was still so much to do. Sure, an able-bodied adult like Val could find work, but what about children like Khemet and Sefekh? They had to just scrape by and survive until they reached adulthood. We could build orphanages, but that wasn’t a solution to the underlying issue.

Wait. That law Prime Minister Gilbert was proposing...

I muttered to myself, musing over the implications, trying to fit all the pieces in place. Although I had an inkling that Stale, Tiara, and Arthur were trying to get my attention, the evil and brilliant Pride’s brain was firing on all cylinders. I couldn’t spare a moment to answer them.

That law... If I use it for that purpose... Yeah, I remember that from ORL... But that brings up another problem... Wait. If I do it that way...

“Val. Khemet, Sefekh.”

I whipped my head up, startling all three of them. Sefekh flinched back while Val and Khemet watched me warily.

“How would you feel about working for me?” I asked.

Val, Stale, and Arthur let out a simultaneous “Huh?!” while Khemet, Sefekh, and Tiara blinked rapidly in silence.

“It’s a new policy,” I said. “The ‘allied policy.’”

I launched into the explanation. Recently, our allies announced their intention to pass a joint law together. Mother had put me in charge of seeing it through. Basically, I would combine Freesia’s institutions with our allies to build a school more similar to the ones I remembered from my past life than the haphazard education offered here.

One of Prime Minister Gilbert’s recent triumphs included passing a law to establish free education for developing youth. That opened a door for me to form this joint institution between our kingdom and our allies.

The Kingdom of Freesia reached out to all the countries along its direct borders to form this alliance, meaning we sat in the geographic center. That, plus our ample available land, made building an academy here an obvious choice. We could also build a school alongside that so that young children would have shelter and education free of charge. This could raise the standard of living for lower-class children and provide a means of getting work in junior high and beyond. Even when they got older, they should have what they needed to survive on their own in the world. I hoped it would be a path to better understanding between kingdoms and a brighter future for the people of Freesia. I knew that ORL had academies in the game, so I felt confident all of this could work.

That was where Val and the children would come in. I needed people to get the word out and spread the news from kingdom to kingdom. Communication was slow here. A carriage ride could take seven or eight hours. Getting to the next kingdom over could require days of travel.

But with Val and Khemet’s combined power, they could cut that travel time down to nothing. Khemet could enhance Val’s power until Val created a sweeping carpet of rock like a roller coaster. That speed and scale would get them easily to other kingdoms. Val could protect them, and Khemet and Sefekh could take care of things the contract barred Val from doing. Heck, they could even create a national postal service that spanned the entire kingdom, alongside the new school system. Freesia would gain two powerful new institutions, aided by those with special powers in combat and mobility.

“So, erratic little Miss Princess wants me and Khemet and Sefekh to help her?” Val said.

He tried to glare, but I could hear the surprise in his tone. This was a huge offer. Stale rubbed his lips as he analyzed my plan, but Arthur simply gaped. Tiara smiled at me, eyes sparkling.

“That’s right,” I replied. “It’s an idea I’ve just come up with, and I’ll need to consult with Prime Minister Gilbert and Mother, but...”

Val crossed his arms, knit his brow, and glanced over at Sefekh and Khemet.

“Fine,” he said. “We can make a lot of money if we’re working for the government, and it’ll help Khemet out in the future.”

“I want to do it too,” Khemet chimed in. “I’ll go anywhere with Val and Sefekh. I really like your idea, Your Highness.”

Val sighed and shook his head, staring up at the sky in exasperation. “Sure you wanna use a criminal like me for this, Miss Princess?”

“That’s a good point, but I don’t think we need to worry,” Stale said. “We don’t know if Mother will give her permission for this, but there’s actually no one better suited to this job than you, Val. You can’t obey any contradictory orders. You’ll have to just do your job.”

Val hung his head at that response.

“I’m not ordering you, Val,” I said. “If you don’t want to do it, then we’ll pretend like I never said any—”

“I’ll do it,” Val interjected. Even with his head hanging, he jumped in to cut me off. “Why not? It’ll bring in more cash than haulin’ rubble.”

“That’s great news, Big Sister!” Tiara said.

“For real?” Arthur muttered.

“Are you sure?” I’d only just come up with this idea. I expected Val to reject it, or at least mull it over for a few days.

“Yeah. And hey, wasn’t it your idea in the first place? Ha! Chickening out already, Miss Princess?”

He smirked and stepped closer. I stood tall and faced him, even as Arthur and Stale flinched at either side.

“Just give me whatever orders you want.”

Khemet and Sefekh tried to stand beside him, but Val swatted them back and dropped to his knees. *Huh? Wait, is he...?*

I had a moment of déjà vu, then Val lifted my foot and pulled off my shoe.

What?! Hang on! Not this again!

“After all, I’m bound by that contract.”

Val kissed the top of my foot in a gesture of servitude.

“Everything shall be as you *desire*, Princess Pride,” he said, his grin curling.

Prime Minister Gilbert had made the same vow a bit more than a year ago, but Val’s came laden with a suggestive undertone. *Why is he doing this when we already have the fealty contract?!*

I turned my face away, squeezed my lips together, and held still. Val peered up at me from below, his lips pressed against my foot. A smirk spread across his mouth, and then...

Lick.

“Aaaaaaaahhhhh!”

Val...! Val just...! He just licked my foot!



I shuddered at the sensation and tried to jerk back, but I lost my balance and landed right on my butt with a thump.

Val howled with laughter at my fall. Sefekh and Khemet just watched all this with heads cocked in confusion, while Tiara's face flushed bright red. Stale came over to offer me a hand, but his face was a bit pink too. He shot Val a glare.

"Oh, don't be so upset, Mister Prince," Val said. "My contract won't let me do anything like what you're thinkin'."

Stale's anger did not abate, much to Val's amusement. He helped me up and slipped my shoe back onto my foot. My heart still pounded against my ribs. My face burned so hot, I could have lit a fire with my cheeks.

The fealty contract forbade Val from harming or forcing himself on anyone, not just me. Any rendezvous he had needed to be consensual. But beyond that, he probably just saw me as a little kid, being seven years older than me and all.

"Just thought I'd pay my respects," he said with a snicker.

Despite my embarrassment, this shift in Val encouraged me. He no longer hung his head and skulked around like a beaten down ex-convict. He was animated now, lively, joking even. Later on, he'd receive his official new job title from Mother.

The royal postman.

Once he got this new assignment, I allowed him a few exceptions to the fealty contract. First, I had to let him leave the kingdom, of course. Second, I allowed him to use his powers to capture any wrongdoers he encountered on his route. Third, I gave him permission to go on speaking to members of the royal family more casually, as he had been doing for some time now anyway. Finally, there was one last exception that Val himself requested.

Permission to fight back in defense of Khemet and Sefekh.

I granted his wish, and thus began my brand-new relationship with this found family of three.

“You’re back already, Val?”

Stale and I gaped at the trio before us. When Tiara and Arthur stepped out of their carriage and joined us, their mouths fell open as well.

“Huh? You’re the one who told me you wanted it delivered fast,” Val said, wrinkling his nose in annoyance. He then reached into the bag slung over his shoulder and offered me an envelope with a gruff, “Here.”

Still dumbfounded, I accepted the letter. As his master, I had to receive all new deliveries directly from him. This one came from the Kingdom of Sanzashi, where he’d headed yesterday for his first mission. Normally, it took five days in the fastest carriage money could buy. Val, Khemet, and Sefekh made the round trip in a day. I knew they’d be fast, but I never expected them to be *this* fast. In fact, I’d hopped on a carriage this morning, thinking to observe the village while I waited for them. I’d thought I had a whole extra day before they returned, yet here they were.

“Didn’t you leave yesterday?” I asked him.

“Yep. We delivered it yesterday, got the new one this morning, and came back. You got a problem with that?”

“No, not at all...”

I hesitated to say any more. Val was clearly annoyed, so it wasn’t worthwhile to push him for more details right now. Meanwhile, Stale scowled at the letter as though he doubted its authenticity.

“Well, great work,” I said. “I’ll report the results to Mother. I’m sure she’ll be astounded.”

It still didn’t feel real. I thanked them weakly, and Val clicked his tongue at me. Even Arthur quietly murmured, “Amazing.” Val had no response for that one. Khemet and Sefekh spoke up instead.

“It was so cool!” Khemet said. “We left the border, and then all of a sudden, we were in the kingdom of Sanzashi!”

“They went so fast right out of the gate!” Sefekh gushed. “Ugh, I wish I could’ve had more time to take in the sights! It was my first time leaving the

country!” Obviously displeased, she gave Val a smack.

“That cave the traffickers took you to was outside the country,” Val pointed out.

“It really is an amazing power,” Stale said. “Too bad about your ‘control problem,’ though.” He pushed up his black-framed glasses.

Val gave a loud laugh and smirked at Stale’s attempt to dig at him.

It took a little more trial and error to sort out that Khemet couldn’t control his powers on his own yet. His amplification varied depending on who he worked with. With Stale, basically a stranger, Khemet provided only a slight boost. But he could turn Sefekh’s trickle of water into a fire hose. Even Val’s power surged when Khemet boosted him. For now, at least, Khemet’s powers only seemed to help Sefekh and Val.

“You better not rope Sefekh and Khemet into anything dangerous,” Arthur said, glaring at Val.

“Too bad. Sefekh jumps to violence a lot quicker than I do. She’s the one you should really worry about.”

“What was that?!” Sefekh snapped. She shot a weak beam of water at Val, but she was holding Khemet’s hand as she did, so even that little trickle was like a whole bowl of water dumped over Val’s head. Quick to violence, indeed.

“C’mon, Mistress,” Val said. “Gimme my reward already.” He held out his hand to me, expectant.

“I have to go get it from the royal residence,” I told him. As ever, I was due to pay him for his deliveries.

Lately, Val (and even Khemet and Sefekh) had started calling me “Mistress.” Tiara had inherited the title of “Miss Princess.” At the very least, it made it easier to tell which of us he was speaking to.

“Elder Sister, you don’t need to go all the way back for that now,” Stale said, putting me first as always. “Just let them wait for you to return from your observation.”

“Sadly, we ain’t got no money right now. If I can’t get some booze, then I’m

puttin' off the jobs you and the prime minister gave us."

"Don't forget that I'm allowed to give you orders too," Stale snapped, irritated by Val's response.

Val just snorted and set his hands on his hips.

Outside of delivery work, Val would do occasional jobs for Prime Minister Gilbert. On top of that, he met regularly with an informant in the village to receive intel that he passed on to Stale. Stale would review it and then send it on to the prime minister. This little network proved incredibly powerful; it had even helped us take down more traffickers.

"It's fine, Stale," I said. "I want to get this letter to Mother quickly anyway."

I tried to divert Stale's menacing glare. Tiara tugged on his arm too.

"It won't take too long," Arthur added.

Stale glowered a moment longer but finally let out a sigh. "As you wish, Your Highness."

I bit back my own sigh. I didn't need them sniping at each other when we all had work to get done. But when we turned toward the carriage, Val just had to sneak in a final jab.

"Would ya look at that," he said. "Your little prince is a bit of a handful, huh?"

Swish! Stale whirled around and glared anew at Val, face flushing bright red. Val snickered, and I tensed for a confrontation, but Stale had no response this time.

"Ah," I said softly, realizing what this was about. Everyone but the three of us tilted their heads in confusion.

This was about more than just the present moment. It was about the rescue outside the traffickers' cave. When I jumped over the cliff to try to save Val, we both ended up in free fall. I'd whistled, hoping that Stale—who'd passed out after saving that boy—would somehow hear it. He did, and he dove after us to teleport us to safety.

"What would you have done if I didn't hear your signal?" Stale had asked at the time. I didn't know what to say; I hadn't really thought about it. I'd simply

wanted to save Val. I was so sure Stale would hear me, that he would come to my rescue if I called. Because...because...

“You’re my prince, Stale.”

Stale was always by my side. Maybe I was too spoiled by him, but he really did remind me of a prince from a fairy tale. Though, I supposed in this instance he really *was* the prince of an entire kingdom.

Val mocked Stale for this new moniker back at the cave. And now he mocked Stale again by calling him my “little prince,” and “a handful” to boot. Both times, Stale went red in the face and glared daggers at Val, lips trembling.

“Hey, Mistress. You’re sure surrounded by a bunch of kids here,” Val said. “What do you say to getting some lessons from an adult? I could teach ya all kinds of things these kids know nothing about. Why don’t we start tonight?”

“Wh-what the hell do you think you’re saying to Her Majesty?! Knock it the hell off!” Arthur shouted. He rushed to his feet, his face as red as Stale’s and his fist drawn back, ready to sock Val in the face.

Sefekh raised her hands to protect Val, keeping the young knight at bay. Khemet stopped her, but I could still see Arthur heaving ragged breaths as he eyed Val like a threat. Val grinned in the face of Arthur’s rage.

“So young,” he sneered, sticking his chin out. “What? Wanna join us? I’d be happy to judge just how much Mistress’s brat of a knight is able to please her.”

Nope, now I had to say something. “Please stop saying creepy things to Arthur!” I tried to sound imposing, but Val burst into laughter. When I huffed and stomped my foot, he only laughed harder. I was used to his weird comments by now, but I wished he could leave Arthur and Stale out of it.

“Arthur is a diligent, kind, strong, proud, incredible knight,” I said. “I’m happy enough just to have him by my side. That’s all I need.”

I hugged Arthur’s arm protectively as I stared down Val. But he just kept on cackling. In fact, he might have laughed *harder* when I grabbed Arthur. *Wait...* I glanced aside—and found both Arthur and Stale red as tomatoes and refusing to look at me. Arthur looked to be swaying from side to side, a shell of himself.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

I tightened my grip on Arthur’s arm, but he just straightened up and kept his eyes downcast. Val was nearly doubled over with laughter.

“I could make things much more fun for you than these *kids*!”

Infuriated, I gave the best comeback I could muster. “I’m having plenty of fun already! I don’t need your help!”

“Well, that’s all that matters,” Val said, though his smirk belied his words.

Stale, Arthur, and Tiara scurried to the carriage, eager to get back to the residence. I couldn’t really blame them. I was eager to be off too after all this. But before the guard could close the door, Val called out “Mistress!” one more time. I sighed and turned, ready for another argument...but instead, I found him standing there holding Khemet and Sefekh’s hands, oddly subdued for once.

“I’m lookin’ forward to that ‘school’ of yours. Let my two brats here attend when it’s done, okay?” he said, his mischievous smile more innocent than before.

Khemet and Sefekh looked at each other at the phrase “*my* brats.” Though Val’s smile still held an edge of laughter, it was genuine too. Much as he joked around, when it came to those two kids, he was deadly serious.

“Of course,” I said. I returned his smile, a true smile this time, one from the bottom of my heart.

I had high hopes for the new school. I wanted it to benefit everyone, including Sefekh and Khemet. Stale even said he hoped the boy with that strange light power could attend.

A national mail service, an independent school system, and strengthened ties with our nearest neighbors.

I did it all for the people of Freesia.

But we still had a long way to go.

Nothing Gained, Nothing Lost

“SORRY. Let’s try it one more time, please!”

The powerful voice echoed pleasantly underneath the bright blue sky.

I laughed alongside Tiara as we sat back and watched Arthur spar. Clad all in white, he launched at his partner. Perhaps this time he’d finally land a hit. But in an instant, his momentum shot the other direction, and he struck the ground so hard that I could feel the reverberations beneath my feet. Tiara covered her mouth and shrieked, but Arthur’s opponent wore a serene smile.

“Wonderful as always, Sir Arthur,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “I do admire your ability to absorb so many blows.”

Prime Minister Gilbert applauded, while Arthur, still sprawled out on the ground, let out a sigh.

“Thank you,” Arthur grumbled. He was on his back in the dirt for the tenth time this day.

Stale sat beside me with his arms folded and legs crossed. He pursed his lips at Prime Minister Gilbert. “Arthur, land a hit already. I want to see you knock Gilbert around.”

“I’m sorry, Prime Minister,” Arthur said. “One more time, please.”

“Of course. As many as you like.”

Stale’s heckling propelled Arthur back onto his feet. He brushed the dirt off his crisp uniform and prepared to face the prime minister once again.

This little arrangement had started about a year and a half ago, during the party at Prime Minister Gilbert’s house to celebrate his upcoming wedding. At the time, the prime minister said he wanted to thank Arthur for helping save Marianne, but all Arthur asked for in return was a chance to train together.

From then on, when they found time, they would go to unoccupied spaces to spar. Stale alone still seemed displeased with this development, perhaps

because it meant the loss of his training partner. He'd had Arthur to himself for a while, and the two had become best friends, but now Prime Minister Gilbert, a man he still didn't entirely trust, had stolen some of his time. Stale wasn't great at hiding his irritation either. On top of that, Stale had to face the fact that he wasn't enough of a challenge on his own to keep Arthur's attention.

Stale only tended to come to these bouts when I was there too. Otherwise, he would just pout and rage on his own.

"Gilbert of all people..." Stale muttered, his voice laced with venom. A year and a half and he was *still* indignant about this whole setup.

I stroked his hair to try to calm him down. He pursed his lips and didn't say another word. He shifted as though embarrassed to endure the gesture in front of the prime minister, but he didn't reject me.

"Would you like to try too, Prince Stale? We could have ourselves a mock battle. It would be a nice chance to hit me," Prime Minister Gilbert said.

"As nice as that sounds, I'll pass. I'd die before I sparred with you," Stale snapped.

He turned his whole head away from Prime Minister Gilbert with a "hmph!" The prime minister just shrugged at Stale's immaturity and remarked mildly that Stale's refusal was "unfortunate." Yet Stale would never cave.

The prime minister returned his attention to Arthur, who stood ready to face him. They'd been practicing more than just swordplay, so when Arthur held up his bare hands, Prime Minister Gilbert was prepared. Arthur seemed to have picked up some martial arts moves from him too. At times, their hand-to-hand bouts became so intense that it seemed like a sword would only weigh Arthur down. But Arthur never gave in or let himself relax. Just when he would fall to the ground in defeat, he would leap back up to cry, "One more time, please!"

Yet this time, Prime Minister Gilbert hesitated before he and Arthur could begin their next bout. Based on his expression, beating on the boy who saved his beloved must've been painful for him. He stood there for a moment without a word; perhaps he was coming up with an alternative way to honor Arthur's wish?

Just then, he clapped his hands together. “Why don’t we have a competition?”

Stale scowled, probably fretting about whatever scheme he thought was going on, but Tiara and I sat up straighter in our chairs.

“Let’s have a practice battle,” Prime Minister Gilbert went on. “If you can land a hit on me, though it’s a bit early, I’d be happy to teach you the move I showed you before.”

“For real?!” Arthur blurted, thrilled.

“Yes, of course.”

Arthur’s eyes lit up with excitement, and he pumped his fists. The “move” that Prime Minister Gilbert was referring to was a palm strike. I couldn’t help my surprise. This was a rare form of self-defense around here, rarely studied even by the royal family or the knights’ order. The prime minister was versed in all sorts of self-defense practices, though. His palm strike could knock someone unconscious without even leaving a mark. Even Stale had been impressed when he saw that one.

“Please teach me!” Arthur said the day Prime Minister Gilbert used it on him.

Prime Minister Gilbert hadn’t done so right away, but Arthur had never stopped asking. Now, however, it seemed Arthur would finally get his chance.

“He can fight however he wants in a practice battle, right?” Stale said.

I glanced over at him with dread, and Tiara’s jaw dropped. His voice had lowered when he said that, and now Stale sat forward so he could set his hands on the ground. His eyes bore into Prime Minister Gilbert, unwavering.

Prime Minister Gilbert raised an eyebrow, but his surprise shifted to an oddly pleased smile a moment later. I guessed he hadn’t expected Stale to jump in to help Arthur win, but Stale seemed as interested in that palm strike as Arthur. I shuddered to imagine what he was hoping for.

“Battle however you please, with the exclusion of weapons and special powers,” Prime Minister Gilbert said.

With that, Stale rose from his seat, slowly unbuttoning his jacket. “Fine,” he

said, never taking his gaze off the prime minister. He tossed his jacket back over his chair and set his glasses atop it. Then he teleported to Arthur's side. "We're teaming up for this one, Arthur. We'll knock Gilbert off his feet together."

"Hang on, that's cheating! Besides, we've only gotta land one hit to win," Arthur replied.

"Doesn't matter. I'm allowing it."

Arthur's eyes flickered between Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert. He wore an uneasy grimace, as though perturbed by the two-on-one odds. Practice matches were generally more like duels. But Prime Minister Gilbert simply smiled at the boys, utterly serene in the face of their teamwork. I doubted he intended to lose to them even if he *was* outnumbered.

"Good luck, you three!" I called as they braced themselves for the fight.

"J-just don't get hurt, okay?" Tiara said.

After a beat of silence, Arthur and Stale inhaled, then took off running at Prime Minister Gilbert in perfect synchronization. But the prime minister predicted their strategy. Arthur was faster and reached him first, but Prime Minister Gilbert just took advantage of that momentum to send the boy flying. Stale kicked at his blind spot, but Prime Minister Gilbert blocked with his elbow and swiped Stale's legs out from under him. I winced, bracing as Prime Minister Gilbert dodged the boys like a matador deftly evading a bull.

"Hey, Mistress. What kinda game do ya got goin' on here?"

I turned in my chair to find Val sauntering toward us from the direction of the royal residence. He had his mail sack slung over his shoulder and Sefekh and Khemet trailing in his wake. The two kids immediately fixated on the brawl.

"Are you finished with your deliveries already?" I asked him. "You had stops in three different kingdoms this time."

"Some trafficking bastards picked a fight with us on the second stop," Val said. "I dragged 'em back here to the order, so I thought I'd drop off a letter while I was around."

Val pulled an envelope out of his jacket and presented it to me.

“Again?” I sighed in disbelief.

Ever since Val began working as a deliveryman, he got attacked by criminals pretty frequently. Capturing and bringing them back to the Freesian knights, at my orders, had become a regular part of his job.

“Forget all that,” Val said. “What’re you up to here? Are the monsters finally battlin’ it out for your heart, Mistress?”

“Of course not,” I insisted. They were all just as spirited as usual.

“Pride! Don’t let your guard down around that man!” Stale called.

Prime Minister Gilbert casually said, “You’ve done great with your deliveries, Val.”

They didn’t even pause their battle as they spoke. Arthur snuck up behind Prime Minister Gilbert, but he never landed the blow. The prime minister leapt up, and Arthur crashed into Stale instead.

“Val, now that you’re here, may I play with Sefekh and Khemet before your next delivery?” Tiara asked, eyes sparkling. For the past three months, she’d been spending more and more time with the kids, inviting them and even Val to her room whenever they returned to the castle.

“Huh?” Val grunted. He seemed like he wanted to move on to his next delivery instead of hanging around the castle.

“I happen to be having strawberry cake with lunch today, which I know is Sefekh’s favorite.” Tiara clapped her hands together, voice cheery.

“For real?! Yay, cake!” Sefekh cried, her eyes lighting up.

Ever since she began spending time in Tiara’s room, Sefekh had grown comfortable speaking to her as an equal. Khemet was just as eager as his sister. Tiara didn’t wait a moment longer before leading Sefekh away by the hand.

“Val! Khemet! Hurry up!” Sefekh called.

Val grumbled a “gimme a break” but reached for Khemet’s hand. “Oh, uh...”

“Huh?” I blurted.

He’d made a mistake. The hand that Val reflexively reached for wasn’t

Khemet's. It was mine.

Val hadn't looked before reaching, and with me and Khemet being near each other, he'd accidentally grabbed my hand instead of Khemet's. When he realized his error, maybe because mine was slimmer, he whipped around. Now, his eyes flew wide. We met each other's gaze and froze.

Khemet tugged at Val's shirt, but Val was pale and still. He just kept looking at me, like he was seeing me for the first time. I wondered if he was trying to discern how I'd been able to overpower him on several occasions.

"I, um..."

Val jerked his hand away. The whole thing probably only lasted seconds, but it felt like years. Val didn't apologize; he didn't even sneer sarcastically like I expected. He snatched up Khemet's hand and turned away, following Tiara and Sefekh without another word.

Weird. I watched him stomp away, shoulders tense, but I hadn't done anything wrong. He was the one who grabbed *my* hand. He threw one glance back my way and scratched his head, then kept on walking with a grimace.

Tiara looked over her shoulder and called back to me in her singsong voice. "Big Sister, be sure to cheer on Big Brother and Arthur for me!"

I let out a little murmur of surprise. Was that it? She didn't have any message more specific than that? They probably wanted some actual encouragement from Tiara. I couldn't cheer them on alone. I climbed out of my chair, meaning to chase Tiara down and get a more thorough message of support from her, but Tiara stopped me after only a few steps.

"Please stay with them, Big Sister," she said. "Let them hear how you feel. That way, Big Brother and Arthur will be filled with motivation. I'm sure of it!"

With one last wave, Tiara disappeared into the royal residence, bound for her bedroom. I feared the failure that loomed over me. I steeled myself to cheer on Stale and Arthur alone. They needed to earn that palm strike technique!

"Oh my. I sense a loss of concentration," Prime Minister Gilbert said with a smile.

It was true. Instead of looking at the prime minister, Stale and Arthur were now looking at me, especially fixated on the hand Val had grabbed. They looked unbelievably distressed. Were they so easily distracted by a mistake? Prime Minister Gilbert seemed to think so—and he looked disappointed by the prospect. Maybe they'd lost focus the moment Val, Khemet, and Sefekh came onto the scene, and now he could fight them off with one hand, tops. In that case, it could take ages before they learned the technique!

"Stale! Arthur! You can do it!" I said, trying to snap them back to their senses.

I needed to cheer enough for me and Tiara both now, so I shouted with all my might. The boys flinched at the sudden volume.

"Tiara's so proud to call you her brother, Stale, and so am I! You're really clever and cool! You can do anything you put your mind to."

If Stale had intended to resume the fight, he now came to a screeching halt. His face flushed, and his throat worked as he swallowed. Was all that praise too embarrassing for him? He was practically floundering, lost in some kind of thought loop. Perhaps this was way too much on top of the whole "little prince" thing, and he was worried it'd become a point of mockery later.

As he fumbled, Prime Minister Gilbert lunged, scoring a hit against him.

"Arthur, you're such an amazing knight already!" I yelled. "You're strong, and brave, and you've protected me in so many ways! There's no one you can't beat."

This time, Arthur froze, fist extended toward his opponent. On a real battlefield, this would've spelled his death. A cherry-red blush spread up his neck and all the way to the tips of his ears at my words; had my commendation really rattled him so? But he looked kind of happy...

Prime Minister Gilbert easily batted Arthur's hand aside and knocked him off his feet. He could finish them both off in a flash now. Heck, he could've probably read a book and learned a new technique while he was at it!

I had no idea what was going on, but it seemed like Stale and Arthur were almost too flustered to function. If this had been a real battle, they'd be in big trouble, but I tried to encourage them.

“The two of you can win! I believe in you!” I called.

Something shifted. Perhaps spurred on by my words at last, Stale and Arthur surged back onto their feet. Prime Minister Gilbert stiffened, his casual confidence gone as both boys focused intently on him.

Stale and Arthur fixed on the prime minister, both of their faces still flushed. The boys breathed a bit easier. In particular, Stale’s focus was leagues beyond what it had been before. When they moved, they had a singular intention, as though they were both charging toward the same goal, their minds and hearts synchronized. They were like two edges of a finely sharpened blade, ready to strike. I could almost smell bloodlust.

A bead of sweat rolled down the prime minister’s brow, and it looked like he’d acknowledged this as a real battle. As soon as Stale and Arthur broke out into a run, Prime Minister Gilbert had to go on the retreat. For once, it was the prime minister playing defense as Stale and Arthur unleashed a furious attack born of single-minded determination.

I thought I saw Prime Minister Gilbert glance at me and smirk, just a bit. It almost looked like he was saying, *You win*. Despite being on the sidelines, I found myself questioning whether I was involved in the battle somehow. I’d distracted the boys, then motivated them... Was that anything worth acknowledgment?

Before I could think on it further, Stale and Arthur bore down on him.

“Want me to teleport you?” Stale said.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. I could have run to my destination, but I was too drained, so I accepted the offer.

Sweat soaked through my shirt. I stood, brushing myself off. At least Stale looked just as bad. The normally neatly groomed prince was just as disheveled as me after our sparring. His hair stood up in messy spikes. Mud was smeared down one side of his face. His shirt was just as sweaty and gross as mine.

“You’re a mess,” I said.

“Look who’s talking,” Stale replied.

Stale wiped at his dirty cheek once, then twice. I knew I didn’t look much better. My white uniform was stained. Strands of silver hair came loose from my long ponytail to hang around my face and shoulders. I pulled the tie out and let the hair fall free so I could comb the knots and pebbles out, but that alone wouldn’t erase the evidence of that fight with Prime Minister Gilbert.

“Someday soon, I’m gonna beat him on my own,” I said to myself.

Stale frowned at me, but I just put my hair back up and continued.

“Once I can beat Prime Minister Gilbert with my bare hands, you’ll feel a bit better too, right? Just leave it to me.”

Stale raised an eyebrow. He was probably thinking of that time nearly two years ago, when I told him that saving the princess wasn’t his sole duty. *“Why the hell do you think you have to protect her all by yourself?! That’s why you’ve got me!”* That was what I told him at the time—a time when Stale felt like he couldn’t stand up to the prime minister to protect Princess Pride.

I’d been sparring with the prime minister for nearly a year and a half now, and Stale still obviously hated it. He’d gone around sulking whenever I did it. It was tough to admit how strong Prime Minister Gilbert was, but I hoped Stale could understand that my sparring with him benefited all of us. We couldn’t get stronger on our own.

“I’m glad we finally took him down two-on-one,” I said. “Now I’ll get to learn a new move from him, and... Hey, what’s up?”

I cocked my head to the side. Stale was staring at the ground, fingers pressed where his glasses would normally sit, and I couldn’t quite read his expression.

“It’s nothing,” he said, but his voice sounded strange and quiet, like he was ashamed of something.

Stale finally looked up, clenching his fists, and mumbled a few words. I couldn’t understand a word of it, and he had to repeat himself.

“I said... That move Gilbert taught you. Teach it to me too sometime. I wouldn’t mind learning it, as long as *you’re* my teacher.”

Stale unclenched his fists, crossed his arms, and pouted at the floor. My eyes went wide. We'd taught each other plenty of moves in our time as sparring partners, but Stale had always refused to learn anything directly from Prime Minister Gilbert. "I don't ever want to use the same moves as that guy," he'd say. But it seemed he was finally ready to put that aside in order to get stronger.

"All right!" I cheered, patting Stale on the back. I grinned at my sulky best friend. "So we'll start tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'm ready to learn."

I couldn't wait. Heck, he might even pick up the move faster than me. Stale always was a fast learner.

"Stale! Arthur!"

We turned to find Princess Pride running over to us, grinning broadly.

"Pride!"

"Princess Pride!"

The maid attending her handed Prime Minister Gilbert a towel to mop up his sweat. He flashed us an amused smile, as if he already knew what was coming next. Pride stopped before us, a dampened handkerchief in her hands.

"Great work out there, you two," she told us. "That ending was intense."

Princess Pride reached out with her own handkerchief to wipe the sweat off my brow. I couldn't move. Perhaps I should have stopped her—she was a princess mopping up the sweat of some random knight, after all—but I hardly dared to breathe when I stood so close to her. Her sunny smile and the cool cloth drowned out any thoughts I could've expressed in that moment.

"You were so cool out there, Arthur," she added. "I'm so impressed that you managed to land a hit on Prime Minister Gilbert. It was so enchanting to watch."

My heart beat against my chest, thumping in my ears. I tried to muster a "thank you," but the words stuck in my throat. I stroked my long ponytail instead, trying to quiet the blood pounding in my ears. For half a second, I really

worried I'd suffer a heart attack.

She moved on to Stale next. The prince squeezed his eyes shut as she started wiping the dirt from the very tip of his nose. She moved to around his eyes before she cleaned the rest of his face, even combing through his hair strand by strand with her fingers. "There, all done," she said, yet she continued stroking Stale's hair. He stood rigidly enduring all this, jaw clenched. Only when he managed a shy smile did she relent.

"I like that expression better, Stale. You've really grown up to be so handsome." She smiled and tucked his hair behind his ear.

He flinched from the brush of her fingertips. His throat worked as he swallowed, hands frozen at his sides.

"I-It was all thanks to your support, Pride," he managed. "Thank you very much."

Hearing his voice snapped me out of my stupor as well. "Thank you so much," I said. A little late, but it was better than nothing.

Princess Pride smiled, then reached out for both of us. She intertwined her fingers with ours. I knew Stale's shoulders went just as stiff as mine in that moment.

"Please protect my subjects, and Tiara too," she said softly. "I know the two of you can do that. Just look at how hard you've been working."

She looked at our hands as she spoke, as though seeking out the strength in our fingers. We'd both grown over these past few years; I hoped when she looked at us now, she saw dependable people who could protect her.

The princess squeezed our hands. I wanted to reassure her, to promise her that of course we'd live up to that promise, but there was something missing from her words, some sadness I yearned to fix.

She was forgetting about herself.

"We'll protect you too," Stale and I said together.

Had she really not considered her own safety as well? Of course we'd protect Tiara and the citizens, even without her orders to do so, but we had a duty and

a desire to protect her too.

Startled, Pride looked up at us. She blinked almost fearfully, like she'd said the wrong thing, her eyes reflecting our blue and black irises staring back at her. Her mouth opened and closed as if to take it all back, or to apologize.

We'd spoken in tandem without even planning it. The desire in our hearts was perfectly in sync; I knew Stale felt just as strongly as me. We both gently squeezed her fingers.

"I am your assistant and your future seneschal," Stale said. "Please rely on me more. I'll protect Tiara, the people of this kingdom, and you."

"I will never falter," I told her. "I'll never betray the vow I made to you that day. Now that I'm your imperial knight, I will always be *your* true knight, both in name and deed."

Pride just stared at us for a moment. Our faces were burning, but we held her gaze, resolute. Joy and relief replaced her shock as our words sank in.

The wind whispered past us, carrying a scent of changing leaves and creeping cold that announced the coming shift in the seasons. It blew the princess's red hair toward us. My ponytail fluttered behind me. Princess Pride spoke a little louder, her words carried to us by the breeze.

"You two are so cool!"

She smiled wide, her happiness infectious as she clasped our hands and squeezed them in return. We grinned right back, her loyal attendants, prepared to make all her dreams and wishes come true.

Words of Love

“**A**ND THEN Captain Callum gathered all the victims in one place and ordered his troops to protect them. That’s how no one got hurt in the explosion. We got Sefekh and the others over to the carriages too...”

My eyes lit up as I recounted the tale. The princesses smirked as they watched me.

After my usual practice with Stale, we took a break in the training room, though I wasn’t quite tired yet. Stale was somewhat out of breath, but I was bubbling with energy, eager to chat with the princesses instead of resting.

Currently, I was recounting the story of wiping out a human trafficking organization. The longer I talked, the more I couldn’t help bringing up the accomplishments of my order brethren.

“That guy Eric, the knight who Captain Alan put in charge of guarding the captives in the mid-grade cage, he worked as the rear guard and didn’t let a single enemy esc—”

“Arthur,” Stale cut in. “Save your lovey-dovey stories and your boasting for later. Just tell us what happened in the battle.”

I clamped my mouth shut. I hadn’t even realized how animated I was getting over this. I never talked about myself for very long, but when it came to the other knights, I got so excited that I could hardly stop myself.

“Sorry,” I said, bowing my head toward Princess Pride.

“It’s all right. Gushing about the other knights shows how much you love the order. I’d like to hear more stories from you, Arthur.”

She chuckled, and my whole face flushed red at the sight of her smile. The heat crawled down my neck and into my belly.

“Th-thank you,” I replied awkwardly. But I couldn’t stop thinking about her words. She actually wanted to hear my stories. *Gushing about the other knights shows how much you love the order.*

I clung to that. Ever since the other knights learned that “Jeanne” was actually Princess Pride, they never stopped talking about her and the amazing things she’d accomplished in that cave. I suddenly understood how she would interpret such praise as love. It was the same way the knights sounded when they talked about her.

It’s been four years now, and her popularity still shows no signs of waning.

Afterword

HELLO THERE. My name is Tenichi. I'd like to thank you very much for purchasing *The Most Heretical Last Boss Queen: From Villainess to Savior*, Volume 2. Thanks to all of your support for the previous book, I was able to write and release this second volume. I truly can't thank you enough.

Volume 1 ended with the protagonist at eleven years old. For this book, she ended up reaching age fifteen. That created the opportunity to have Suzunosuke-sensei draw the older versions of these characters.

This story follows characters who only appeared briefly in the previous volume, so I believe readers may find new things to enjoy if they reread the first volume after this one. I combined the "Quitter" and "Criminal" chapters together for one big "Sinners" chapter, which I think you'll enjoy too. Then I re-edited the text, adding new episodes and stories without changing existing content, so that those who were already familiar with the web version could more easily read it in book form.

If you read this volume and had a particular chapter or character you enjoyed, I'd appreciate it if you read the web version on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. You'll be able to take in the same story from other perspectives and see other scenes featuring the same characters there.

Suzunosuke-sensei, thank you for another batch of incredible illustrations. It's a true honor to see the grown versions of Pride, Gilbert, Val, and the others drawn with your incredibly skilled hands. As an author with no drawing talent, I've always wanted to see what Val and the kids look like in an illustration ever since I published those parts. I was very attached to those scenes, so when I learned Suzunosuke-sensei had drawn one of them, I was so happy, I could hardly take it. Thank you so much, truly.

Once this volume is out, I believe the information about this story's manga version will be released too. Those in charge of the manga provided such lovely, appealing art in the way they portrayed the story. It's not one to miss, so please check it out! I couldn't believe my ears when I first received the manga offer. It's all thanks to the support I've received from all of you readers. I can't thank

you enough.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, all the readers of the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, everyone at Ichijinsha, those involved with the publishing of this novel, sellers of this work, employees who placed the book at the front of their stores, bookstore workers, my editor who supported me, my family who cheered me on, and my friends—I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Your help is what brought me this far. I hope to see you again, in all of your kindness, in the future.



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