

NOVEL

6

7th TIME LOOP

The Villainess Enjoys a Carefree Life
Married to Her Worst Enemy!

Written by Touko Amekawa ♦ Illustrated by Wan☆Hachipisu

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Rishe confirmed the feelings
she'd only just become aware of.

*I think I fell in love with
him a long time ago, but
it happened so naturally
that I didn't even notice it...*

She gasped. Arnold tilted her
chin and kissed her again.

"Mm!"

He brought his free hand up to her cheek and brushed the corner of her eye, sweeping away the teardrops that had yet to fall. There was no emotion in his eyes as he lowered them, but his voice was gentle as he said,

"I know nothing as beautiful as you."



*“I want to be your
bride in my next
life too...”*

Arnold's hand
froze atop
her head.





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WRITTEN BY

Touko Amekawa

ILLUSTRATED BY

Wan☆Hachipisu



Seven Seas Entertainment

7TH TIME LOOP: THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE
MARRIED TO HER WORST ENEMY! VOL. 6

Rūpu 7-kai-me no Akuyaku Reijō wa, Moto Tekikoku de Jiyū
Kimamana Hanayome Seikatsu o Mankitsu suru Vol. 6

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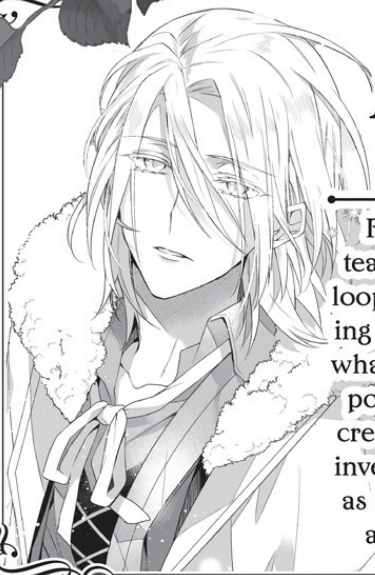
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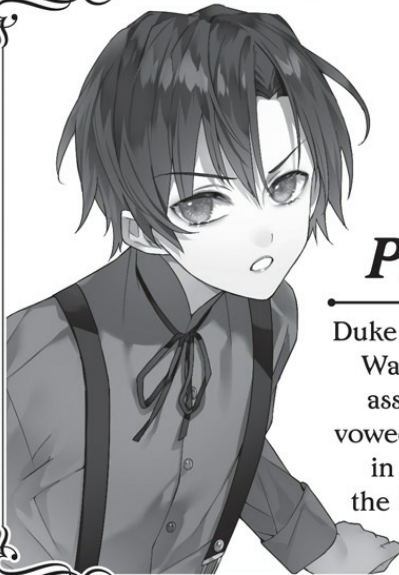
Michel Hévin

Rishe's alchemy teacher in her third loop. His understanding of ethics is somewhat lacking, but he's possessed of an incredibly gifted mind, inventing things such as the pocket watch and gunpowder.



Kyle Morgan Cleverly

The eldest prince of the snowy country of Coyolles. Was suffering from a chronic illness, but his health is improving thanks to Rishe. Has entered a technological partnership with Galkhein.



Leo Philips

Duke Jonal's servant. Was raised as an assassin but has vowed to serve Millia in earnest after the incident at the Basilica.



Millia Clarissa Jonal

The young, only daughter of Duke Jonal. The true royal priestess of the Church, whom Rishe served in her fourth loop.



Raul

The leader of Rishe's troop in her life as a hunter. He's aloof, he's mysterious, and he excels at deception. He's even lied about his own name.



Harriet Sophia O'Fallon

The eldest princess of Siguel. She was withdrawn and insecure until an incident helped her recover some confidence. She's eager to make political contributions to her country.

Dramatis Personae

7TH TIME LOOP: THE VILLAINESS ENJOYS A CAREFREE LIFE MARRIED TO HER WORST ENEMY!



Arnold Hein

Crown prince of the military nation of Galkhein, known for being coldhearted and cruel. He's been the cause of Rishe's deaths, directly or indirectly, in each of her previous lives. But this time, he asked for her hand in marriage out of the blue.



Rishe Irmgard Weitzner

A young woman who keeps dying at age twenty and rewinding to her broken engagement at age fifteen. On her seventh loop, she's now engaged to Crown Prince Arnold.



Oliver Laurenz Friedheim

Arnold's attendant. Taken into Arnold's employ when his dreams of knighthood were crushed due to an injury. Something of a philanderer.



Theodore Auguste Hein

Arnold's freewheeling younger brother. After reconciling with Arnold, he now supports his brother from behind the scenes.



Kaine Tully

An up-and-coming merchant and head of the Aria Trading Company. Rishe's boss and mentor in her first loop.



Elsie

A new maid who grew up in the slums and now serves Rishe. She's very opinionated about Rishe's wardrobe.

Prologue

THE KISS RISHE SHARED with Arnold on the roof of the opera house lasted several seconds, but felt like it was over in an instant.

“Mmn...”

Arnold’s lips slowly pulled away from hers. Rishe let out a heated sigh, already missing his touch.

“Your Highness...” she murmured.

Instead of answering her with words, Arnold entwined their fingers once more. The gesture seemed to say, *I’m here. I won’t let you go.* Rishe nearly burst into tears.

I love him. I love Prince Arnold. Rishe confirmed the feelings she’d only just become aware of. *I think I fell in love with him a long time ago, but it happened so naturally that I didn’t even notice it...*

She gasped. Arnold tilted her chin and kissed her again.

“Mm!”

He pulled back just as quickly, their lips parting with a soft smack. But then he kissed her again, just another quick peck. He kissed her again and again, and Rishe’s eyes widened.

“Ee—mmh!”

She was about to yelp, so he sealed her lips—but only for a moment. He loomed over her, lips crashing onto hers over and over again from every angle imaginable, eliciting a cute little sound from Rishe each time they separated.

“Mmm...”

Arnold had kissed her senseless. Rishe had no idea what was going on anymore—he’d planted so many of them on her mouth. She wanted to push him away, afraid he could hear the thundering of her heart—but Arnold

wouldn't let her.

"Ngh..."

He had to know how flustered she was, yet he showed no signs of stopping. She'd been short of breath for some time now, and she got the feeling her poor lungs were at their limit. It didn't help that her neck had been craned back this whole time.

"Mm, mmph...!"

Though she slapped at Arnold's chest, he didn't budge. He just kept on brushing his lips against hers. She'd only just realized how she felt about him, so how could he torture her like this?

My heart's going to explode!

Rishe gripped Arnold's shirt and somehow managed to look up at him in the split second their lips were apart. She quickly regretted it. When their eyes locked, a sharp glint set his blue irises alight. The sight was so beautiful that tears welled in her eyes once more.

Still, her wordless plea seemed to have had an effect. Arnold finally loosened his grip on Rishe. As he let her go, he dropped one last kiss on her forehead.

"Prince Arnold..." Rishe whined, wondering just why he had kissed her so many times. She gulped when he fixed her with a gentle, protective gaze.

"Have you memorized it?"

"Huh?"

Arnold pressed his thumb to Rishe's lips. "I promised I would kiss you as many times as you wished."

Rishe finally remembered. She'd asked him to kiss her so that she could learn how to do it for their wedding, and that was what he'd said in response. The torrent of kisses just now had been him granting her request.

She squealed at the outrageousness of what she'd asked for, her cheeks

reddening more every second. “I-I-I have!” she replied, bobbing her head emphatically.

Arnold chuckled, then reached out to stroke her hair. “Good, then.”

How could a voice this soft pluck her heartstrings like a harp?

He cupped her cheek and murmured, “It doesn’t matter whether it’s your birthday. I want to do everything in my power to grant your wishes. Don’t ever forget that.”

His words were unmistakably ones of celebration.

I’ve always hated my own birthday, but... She couldn’t believe how happy she was right now.

“Thank you, Prince Arnold.”

“Mm-hmm.” He pulled his hand away and guided her back to the bench on the roof. “I’ll get our carriage ready. Wait here.”

Rishe nodded, and Arnold headed downstairs. When she couldn’t see him any longer, Rishe sank onto the bench, exhausted.

I can’t believe he kissed me so many times...

Everywhere he’d touched her was feverishly hot. She wanted to cherish the memory of her name on his lips and those lips kissing hers, but her heart twinged each time she thought back to it.

“Rishe...”

“What am I going to do?” She held her scarlet cheeks, completely at a loss. “I didn’t figure out how to kiss him at all...”

Chapter 1

RISHE'S SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY came and went—for the seventh time, by her count.

The next day, she sat on a couch in her room, staring languidly out the window. She had a schedule of ships docking and departing port in her hand.

Her wedding was rapidly approaching, and she had yet another heap of work to do. Unfortunately, she couldn't focus one bit; her mind was occupied completely by the dawning of her feelings for Arnold.

I'm in love with him.

Each time the thought crossed her mind, self-consciousness and restless fluster had her in their grips. Her maids were so worried that they'd come to check in on her multiple times since morning, but she could only give them vague reassurances—which devolved into misery for causing them dismay.

I wasn't imagining the pain in my chest that accompanied my thoughts of him...

She could recall several instances when the feeling had plagued her, though she hadn't ever seen it for what it was.

The other day, when Prince Arnold kissed my hair after the emperor saw us... the reason I was so comforted even though my heart was pounding out of control was because of my feelings for him.

Her face felt so hot at the memory, she feared it might catch fire. Rishe smooshed her palms into her cheeks, lapsing further into thought.

Was I despondent during our fight in Vinrhys because I was already in love with him then? The whole reason she'd fought with him in the first place was because what he'd said had bothered her so much. Was *that* because she was in love with him too?

Then what about when my chest hurt in the Grand Basilica, when he used my lap as a pillow? And when I was sad because he told me I didn't need to wear

the ring he so graciously gifted me?

No, that wasn't all.

The very first time he kissed me, in the chapel...

She'd been surprised but not upset. She had felt no disgust; she'd just wanted to know why he'd done it. But that had happened a mere three weeks after their first meeting in this life.

"Ugh..."

She thought back to the rain of kisses on her birthday.

No matter how far I think back, I can't remember a moment when I didn't love Prince Arnold. Rishe had no idea when she'd fallen for him. *Wait, was I the one who fell in love with him at first sight? But that can't be...*

Much as she wanted to find a hole to hide in, she couldn't stop the warm, fuzzy feeling in her heart.

Oh, pull yourself together, Rishe! You got so flustered, you could hardly talk to Prince Arnold yesterday and this morning! But we need to keep preparing for the wedding, and...

Rishe hung her head, Arnold's words from back then flashing through her mind.

"You don't need to be resolute to become my wife."

The words lanced her heart.

I need to stop Prince Arnold's war. She was more determined than ever to do so. *But I can't just stop it. I need to find out what the Emperor Arnold Hein of the future is trying to achieve and face whatever that is...*

The Arnold whom Rishe was in love with and the Arnold who ruled through brutality were contiguous people. No matter how different they seemed, the cold, cruel emperor who conquered the world had all the same qualities that the current Arnold had.

The way he thinks, his practicality, and the kindness he so clearly displays...

Rishe slowly closed her eyes and squeezed the schedule in her hands. *It's because I care so deeply for him that I must avoid that future*, she swore before opening her eyes once more.

I'm sure that Prince Arnold's father holds the key to all this. Though it's not as if I can approach him carelessly, and I dread the mere thought after what happened the other day...

A knock came at the door.

"Pardon me, Lady Rishe!"

"Elsie. Come in."

When her maid entered the room, Rishe said, "I'm sorry about earlier. I was so out of it, I didn't even realize you were trying to get my attention."

"Don't mention it. Are you feeling better now? If so, I'm glad. I was worried."

Elsie's relief just pricked at Rishe's guilt all the more. She wasn't physically unwell at all, but she didn't have the courage to open up to the girl about her feelings.

I really am sorry. Please allow me to keep this a secret from you for just a little while longer.

Elsie handed Rishe an envelope. "A letter for you, Lady Rishe."

"Thank you."

She opened it up and confirmed its contents. Rishe had been waiting for the letter—which began with an apology—for some time now.

"What is it, Lady Rishe?"

Rishe stood and said, "Elsie, can you pack me a bag? I think I'll be gone for another few days again."

"V-very well. But your wedding is in two weeks, Lady Rishe! Aren't you a bit busy at the moment?"

"I am. But I need to go on this outing before the wedding."

Elsie cocked her head to one side.

It's no problem, Rishe thought to herself. In fact, I planned for this little delay to occur. But for my plan to proceed, I'll need to speak with him...

Rishe steeled herself. Her next move? Going to see the man she'd just realized she was in love with.

"...Your wedding dress?"

"Y-yes, Your Highness." Rishe stood across from Arnold at his work desk, her skirt bunched up in her fingers. "The dress was sewn a year ago, when I came of age in my homeland. But since I'm going to be married here, I sent it for embroidering in a style native to Galkhein."

"The dress that was wide open in the back?"

I just showed him the design once, but he even remembers the details... The thought gave her a ticklish feeling. When she locked eyes with Arnold, she hurriedly averted her gaze.

Rattled, she went on, "Um... A dressmaker was supposed to come to the capital for a last fitting and final alterations."

As Oliver organized documents behind Arnold, he smiled warmly at her. "I hear wedding dresses are quite sentimental for women. You must be greatly anticipating wearing yours, Lady Rishe."

"Well, the dressmaker hasn't been able to acquire the thread I requested, so there's been a delay. Considering the time for travel and alterations, I think it would make more sense for me to go to him."

This delay was hardly surprising. In fact, Rishe knew exactly when the thread she'd requested would be difficult to acquire, thanks to her life as a merchant.

My wedding dress being delayed gives me the perfect excuse to travel there

right about now. I'm so glad things worked out the way I expected when I sent it for embroidering.

Masking her relief, Rishe broached the topic she wished to discuss. "To that end, I was hoping to stay there for a few days to procure my wedding dress." She summoned her courage, faced Arnold, and told him, "In Bezzetoria... Galkhein's primary port."

Arnold's expression didn't change, but Rishe could predict his next words. Setting his chin in his hand, he made his declaration like it was the most obvious thing in the world: "I'll accompany you."

I knew it! Arnold also had a reason to visit Bezzetoria. *There are always several different reasons why Prince Arnold does what he does. Once again, he's not just indulging my whims.*

But Rishe couldn't let on that she knew that.

In any case, she realized she was asking something unreasonable of him. "Prince Arnold," she said sincerely, "I know I'm always making these requests, but aren't you awfully busy with your official duties?"

"Oliver."

"Of course, my lord. I'll make the adjustments."

"Not you too, Oliver!" Rishe cried, flustered. The attendant had responded as though he knew exactly what Arnold wished, though the latter never issued a command. Even if she'd been expecting this, she still felt guilty. Yet Arnold just ran his pen over his documents, cool as a cucumber.

"We can take a ship part of the way to Bezzetoria. It should only take two days or so."

"How about this, then?" Taking a document from Arnold, Oliver flashed a dazzling smile. "We could call this a pre-wedding getaway for you two."

"Eep!" Rishe's shoulders jolted at the suggestion.

"Considering your circumstances, it seems prudent. A trip by the crown prince

and his future wife will help stimulate the economy in Bezzetoria as well.”

“P-perhaps you’re right, but still!”

Oliver spoke of it matter-of-factly, yet the words resounded in Rishe’s head.

A “pre-wedding getaway”?!

As she floundered internally, she asked Arnold, “Wh-what do you think, Prince Arnold?”

“I don’t particularly care what we call it.”

I didn’t think you would!

Arnold’s gaze softened as it landed on Rishe, even though he remained expressionless. “I notice you’re not protesting.”

Rishe flinched.

“Don’t hesitate to let me know if you’re unhappy with something,” he said softly.

She hung her head and shook it. “I’m not...”

Her tizzy over the words “pre-wedding getaway” was in no way because the idea displeased her. Embarrassing as the phrase was, she was happy about it. She mustered her courage to express as much to Arnold so that he knew.

“I *want* to have a pre-wedding getaway with you, Prince Arnold...”

Arnold’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

Oliver beamed and all but chirped, “Not to worry, Lady Rishe! It’s beneficial to promote how you and my lord have a close relationship.”

“Is it? I know marrying solidifies His Highness’s position somewhat, but...” That depended on *whom* he wed. “I’m nothing more than a duke’s daughter from a small nation. I can’t imagine my status benefits Prince Arnold in any way.”

“You misunderstand. The benefit is entirely due to you as an individual, Lady

Rishe,” Oliver said with that dazzling smile of his.

“Huh?!” Rishe glanced over at Arnold, who agreed with Oliver.

“True enough.” He seemed slightly amused as he went on, “This country is already seeing the benefits of our technological exchange with Coyolles. Our new currency minting is proceeding without issue thanks to Siguel’s cooperation as well.”

“Your wedding is receiving international attention too. After all, the next archbishop of the global Crusade faith will be in attendance. This is practically unprecedented.”

“You two can’t be serious!” The conversation was taking a wild turn, so Rishe hurried to stop them. “You give me far too much credit. It was Prince Arnold’s decisions that led to every one of those outcomes!”

“The citizenry are impressed by your invention of nail polish and the relief the Aria Trading Company has brought to the slums.”

“Hrk!”

“Even people without much interest in politics are looking forward to the ceremony. We have a special congratulatory performance by the famous songstress Sylvia lined up for it now, by the way.”

Sylvia herself had requested to perform. She’d visited just the day before and made it known to Rishe she wanted to do something to repay her and Arnold—and a performance by a world-famous diva wasn’t something one heard every day.

“My lord’s relationship with Prince Theodore also improved since your arrival, Lady Rishe. Several members of the nobility have already taken note of your prowess.”

“Y-you overestimate me entirely!”

Rishe was shocked. She had no idea she’d attracted so much attention. She looked to Arnold for help and found him smiling in satisfaction.

“Let them look. A little attention won’t hurt.”

“Ugh... You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?!”

She couldn’t dwell on this, however. For now, she had to concentrate on stopping the war.

It’s all for Prince Arnold’s future. I’ll use the wedding dress as an excuse to take care of another matter...

Even if Rishe knew the broad strokes of Arnold’s future war, it was still difficult for her to predict anything about it. There were a few reasons for that. The first was that Rishe didn’t know the Arnold of her past lives; she didn’t know what had happened to him in the time leading up to the war. The second was that Galkhein’s military had behaved differently in each of Rishe’s previous lives.

A third possible reason is...me.

Rishe sighed. At present, she was on the deck of a ship navigating a canal.

In my first life, I became a merchant and did business with Mr. Tully. The land and sea routes we pioneered came to be used for worldwide travel...

Merchants lived and died by their trade routes. Rishe and the Aria Trading Company had worked with experts to develop new ones in her first life.

Armies use those same routes to travel. Emperor Arnold Hein used the routes we paved to conduct his invasion. Rishe reflected on her past lives, gazing down at the river below. *I paved routes like that in my lives as an apothecary and as an alchemist as well. I needed different things in each life, so the routes were slightly different. And every time, Galkhein’s army used those routes in the most efficient way possible to invade its neighbors.*

During her life as a maid, she’d taken Millia along optimal routes to visit churches in every country. In trying to find the best routes for gathering intel in her life as a hunter, she’d learned new ones from her leader, Raul.

In her sixth life, she'd been nothing more than a simple knight, but she'd gone to the commander of the knight order—and through him, to the king—to bring attention to the movements of Galkhein's army. As a result, she'd even influenced travel routes somewhat in her sixth life as well.

Travel routes throughout the world have changed in each and every one of my past lives. Because of that, Prince Arnold's invasion route and the order in which he attacks other countries has changed each time too. Unbeknownst to her, Rishe had affected Arnold's actions before even meeting the man in her past lives. The thought left her feeling conflicted.

In the future, Prince Arnold will carry out his war in the most efficient way possible. It's easy to imagine him killing his father to usurp the throne simply because of the animosity between them, but...the rational Prince Arnold wouldn't start a world war for no reason at all.

Rishe sighed again, holding the railing that ringed the deck. *There's a reason not only for his murdering his father but for the war afterward as well. It's just as likely that he'll only take his father's life to gain the power to start the war in the first place...*

"Rishe."

"Whoa!" Rishe jumped when a voice called out to her from behind. She spun around to find Arnold out on the deck. "O-oh, it's you, Your Highness..."

Just a moment ago, he'd been in a cabin belowdecks, discussing work with Oliver. Rishe had left to get some fresh air since she'd been uncomfortable sitting so close to Arnold in the cramped room.

"You forgot your hat."

"Agh, thank you..."

Arnold plopped a hat adorned with ribbons and flowers onto Rishe's head, then looked out at the scenery with disinterest. "You were really caught up in the view."

I actually wasn't seeing it at all.



Rishe adjusted the hat and looked up at Arnold. “It’s a very large canal. So this is Galkhein’s main port city...”

Countless ships of all sizes sailed to and fro over the glittering water. Rishe and Arnold’s ship was a two-level vessel that transported passengers rather than goods. Brick buildings faced them from either side. The canal-side view of the town was beautiful, and a cool breeze blew over the water.

“I can feel the energy. It’s like this place has its own heart, and it’s expressing its excitement with everything it has. I can’t wait to disembark and walk around town!”

“We’re almost to the harbor. I’ve arranged for a carriage, but I don’t mind if you want to walk to the hotel.”

“Oh!” In that case, she wanted to take the scenic route. That way, they could stop by as many places as possible. Rishe’s eyes sparkled at the thought.

Arnold watched her for a few moments, full of tenderness. “So you weren’t feeling unwell,” he remarked.

“Unwell? No, I’m bursting with energy!”

“Good.”

Rishe cocked her head, and Arnold ran his fingers through her windswept hair. “You’ve been somewhat on edge since I fulfilled that request of yours on your birthday.”

“Urk!” Rishe could tell she was going red up to her ears.

That’s because of all the kisses we shared that day, and because I realized my feelings for you...

If Rishe was even the least bit out of sorts, Arnold would know. She didn’t have the courage to explain the reason for her behavior, though. *I can’t believe I’ve been acting so weird that he thought I was sick! I can’t worry him when he’s already so busy...*

After puzzling over the matter for some time, Rische reached for Arnold's sleeve and grasped it.

"What is it, Rische?"

He would probably think her strange for this too, but Rische steeled her resolve to plead with him for the sake of their future.

"Can we stay like this for a little longer?"

Arnold frowned, hesitating. "Why?"

"I, um... I have some...secret training I'd like to do."

"Training, you say?"

Rische lowered her face to hide her blossoming blush. *Ugh, I need to get used to being next to the man I love!*

As long as she got more practice in, she was sure she'd be able to interact with him like normal again...eventually. So she mused as she timidly peeked up at Arnold.

Arnold just gave her his usual sour look before sighing and saying, "Do as you like."

"Thank you!" Rische tightened her grip on Arnold's sleeve, relieved. She wasn't ready to hold hands with him yet, but if she maintained this distance for a while, surely she'd get used to his presence at some point. At least enough that she wouldn't worry him anymore.

I'm so glad he's kind.

Still frowning, Arnold glanced at a ship passing by. It appeared to be a two-level vessel like their own, though it was a size smaller. The sailors were cleverly using the ship's sails to maneuver upstream.

"Hmm?" Rische sensed the same thing Arnold had. They were both scrutinizing a piece of cargo left on the deck.

What an unusual shape. It was a large burlap sack, but the peculiar, almost

cylindrical form within had to be something other than a box or a liquid container. *It can't be...*

The moment Rische formed the suspicion, the bag wriggled.

I knew it! It's a person!

As soon as the bag moved, Arnold said, "Stay here."

His sleeve left Rische's grip, and he climbed the railing before leaping onto the other ship without a moment's hesitation.

"Your Highness!"

Arnold landed, and one of the sailors on the deck yelled, "Ack! Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Stop the ship."

"Wha—eek!" The sailor shrieked when Arnold pointed his sword at him.
"Damn it!"

The sailor turned on his heel and ran down the stairs to the lower deck. Arnold clicked his tongue and turned back to the "cargo." He'd doubtless chosen to remain instead of pursuing the sailor because Rische had already followed him onto the ship.

"Are you all right?! Just hang in there! We're here to help!"

Arnold sighed as he watched Rische frantically untie the cord keeping the bag closed. "Rische."

"Leave this to me, Prince Arnold. Please, do whatever you wish to do!"

"Don't jump onto a ship with thieves on it like it's completely normal, with only a dagger for self-defense."

"Oh!"

Arnold removed the scabbard at his waist and tossed it to Rische, who caught it.

“Won’t you be in trouble if I borrow this sword, Your Highness?”

“I’ll procure one below.”

“Well...be careful!” She was worried about him, but she decided to trust him as he headed belowdecks.

For now, this is more important!

Rishe drew Arnold’s sword and cut the bag’s cord with its black blade. She hurried to open the bag, and a woman emerged from inside. Her face was wet with tears, her arms and legs were bound, and she had a gag in her mouth. When she saw Rishe, her face crumpled.

“Mmph!”

“Don’t worry, you’re safe now!”

After cutting the woman’s bindings, Rishe removed the gag. Relief washed over the woman’s face—and then she passed out.

She’s not dehydrated. She doesn’t appear gravely injured, but the way she lost consciousness... Has she been given some sort of sleeping drug?

There were several other sacks on deck. Rishe hastily cut the cords tying them all shut and found an unconscious woman inside each one.

I can only assume there are more in the hold.

Rishe made sure all the women were resting in a way that wouldn’t obstruct their breathing, grabbed Arnold’s sword, and dashed into the lower decks of the ship. She arrived in the ship’s hold at the precise moment Arnold’s kick to the gut sent a sailor flying into a stack of barrels.

“Gah!”

The barrels tumbled loudly to the floor. Panicked, the remaining sailors charged at Arnold. They wielded cutlasses—short, curved blades that could be used in confined spaces like these lower decks.

“Prince Arnold!”

Without batting an eye, Arnold grabbed one of the men by his collar and jammed a knee into the man's gut. The sailor groaned. Arnold snatched the cutlass from him and flipped it into a more comfortable grip.

"You think you can take us on?!" one of the sailors shouted.

They rushed at Arnold once more, but he stopped every single one of them with a single swing of the cutlass. He raised his leg at the surprised men and landed a heavy kick on one of them.

"Argh!"

He's incredible! Rishe thought, amazed.

The prince combined his martial arts and swordsmanship skills to handle the men with ease. She wanted to give him back his sword, but she would only get in his way.

Just then, Arnold called, "Rishe! In the back!"

"Right!" Rishe was thrilled that he trusted her to handle the other room. She raced past Arnold and the gaggle of sailors to the back of the chamber.

When she opened the door to a cabin, she found five women held captive inside. They shrank back with a frightened cry.

"Don't worry. I'm here to help. You'll be okay!"

Their eyes flooded with tears at the sight of another woman. Having put them at ease at least a little bit, Rishe quickly confirmed the situation.

These women are conscious, unlike those on the deck of the ship. Either they haven't been drugged yet, they've only just been drugged, or it's already worn off. Whatever the case, that's why they've been confined down here.

Four of the five seemed to be fine, but the red-haired woman closest to her was curled up on the floor, hands tied behind her back.

"Excuse me, but how long has this woman been in this condition?!" she asked, but the women were in no state of mind to answer her.

“P-please, let us out of here!”

“They’ll catch us again if we don’t get away!”

They’re panicking. Understandable, but it’s only going to be more dangerous if they go running off on their own through the ship. I shouldn’t untie them yet.

She hated to leave them bound, but she moved to help the one collapsed on the floor first.

“Pardon me. Please respond if you can hear my voice!”

“Ugh...”

“I’m going to roll you onto your back, okay? Are you having any trouble breathing?”

The woman was tall and wore a red dress. Rische cut her bonds, then rolled her onto her back so she could treat her. The woman’s long hair fanned out around her like flames.

Hmm? Her breathing is steady and she seems healthy. Rische blinked a few times, then focused on the woman’s face to judge her complexion. Upon doing so, however, she froze. *Huh?*

Closer inspection of the woman’s familiar face brought one of Rische’s past lives crashing down around her. *Hey, I know her!* She had enjoyed an incredibly close relationship with this woman in a past life. *What are you doing here?! No, I’m not surprised you’re in town. In fact, one of the reasons I came was to meet you. But how did this happen?!*

She could figure it out later. Rische slapped the woman’s cheek, remembering how she would’ve spoken to her in that bygone life.

“It’s time to get up! Wake up, it’s morning!”

“Morning...?” came the woman’s sleepy voice. Her brown eyes peered blearily at Rische as she rose with a yawn. “Are we in Galkhein already?”

“We are not! I would love to hear more regarding whatever that’s about, but

first, I need to know how you're feeling! Are you hurt? Do you feel nauseated? Does anything else feel off?!"

"Mm... No. I was just so bored while captured that I got sleepy..."

I-I see you're the same as always!

Just then, they heard the pounding of rapid footsteps.

"That black-haired guy is a monster!" hollered one of the sailors. "Stay away from him!"

"Abandon ship!" shouted another. "Everybody scatter and run! Leave the cargo! The other ship's getting the extra merchandise ready!"

Rishe grimaced. *Even Prince Arnold can't take on several enemies running in different directions.* Of course, neither could Rishe. This was the sort of situation that required strength in numbers.

She reached under her dress and drew the dagger affixed to her thigh. Then she asked the sleepy woman, "You're not hurt—you were just sleeping because you were tired, correct? Here, then! Take this!"

The woman balked when Rishe handed her the dagger. "Hey, wait a second. You—"

Rishe sprang to her feet. "I'm going to go help the man outside!" she said, then ran out of the cabin.

There were two staircases leading from the hold to the deck of the ship. There were also several windows from which the sailors could jump into the canal.

There are only this many of them left, though?!

From the footsteps, she estimated that only ten crewmen remained. From the size of the ship, there should have been thirty to forty of them in total.

"Move, girl!"

One of the men swung his cutlass to get rid of Rishe. She deflected the attack

with the still-sheathed sword in her hand. She grabbed the sailor's wrist, twisting it behind him and throwing him to the floor before striking him on the nape.

"Urgh!"

How many of them are left? We must make sure they don't get off the ship.

In the time it took her to defeat two men, she could sense Arnold handling most of the rest of them. Just then, however...

"What are you doing?! Leave the cargo and get out of here!"

"Whatever, we can get away with *one* of 'em! I don't care which one it is, we'll drag her out if we have to!"

Two more men entered the cabin between Arnold and Rishe, where the women were being held. Arnold knocked out the last man near him and whirled toward the cabin, clicking his tongue, but Rishe knew things would be fine even if he couldn't arrive at the cabin in time.

"It's okay, Prince Arnold!"

Arnold narrowed his eyes questioningly as a woman screamed.

Immediately after, something collapsed inside the cabin. Arnold and Rishe reached the door at the same time and peered inside. Standing there was the redhead in the red dress to whom Rishe had given the dagger.

"Sheesh, what a pain..."

The two burly sailors had collapsed on the floor. The redhead grasped the hem of her dress, then grabbed her long hair just as roughly.

"This dress is in the way. So's this hair. Haah... I beat up the damn pirates already, so there's no need to keep up with this, right?"

"That's—"

"Yep. It's as you suspect, Prince Arnold."

The long-haired wig slid to the ground, revealing short, curly hair in the same

red hue.

“This woman snuck in among the others...but she appears to be a man.”

The man glowered at the dress he wore and artlessly pulled it off to reveal the thin shirt and pants underneath. In this light, his figure, which had seemed large for a woman, looked rather slender for a man.

The listless man yawned. “I’m sleepy...” He rubbed his half-closed, deep-set eyes framed by long eyelashes.

He’s the same as always, though I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.

At this point, he would be seventeen years old—Rishe’s senior by a year. He was old enough to be called a young man, but his slender build earned him the moniker of “pretty boy” among women. At a glance, his eyes appeared brown, but this was because they were always half-lidded against the light. Rishe knew all too well that, in bright sunlight, those eyes blazed a brilliant gold.

I roomed with him all through my life as a knight.

The sailors had been knocked out by the dagger he held in his hand. Arnold observed the man quietly, having deduced as much himself.

That’s the genius swordsman of the island nation of Siarga... In my sixth life, he died protecting me from Prince Arnold.

The man’s golden-brown eyes slid over to Arnold.

It’s really you, Joel!

Still holding the dagger, Joel stepped toward Arnold, who stood between him and Rishe. Rishe flinched, remembering Joel’s usual attitude.



Oh no! If he's the same old Joel I know, he's definitely going to provoke Prince Arnold!

"You, with the black hair." Contrary to Rishe's unease, however, Joel simply asked him in a sleep-laced voice, "What's your relationship with that girl with the fluffy pink hair behind you?"

Huh? Me? It was only then that Rishe realized Arnold had stepped in front of her, likely to protect her from Joel.

"Um, Prince Arnold?"

The prince said nothing to either of them.

"Well, I don't really care right now. I'm just...so sleepy..."

A moment later, Joel crumpled to the floor. Rishe lurched forward, worried that he was hurt, but he soon started snoring.

Arnold observed him with a sullen gaze before muttering, "What's wrong with him?"

"H-he might have been drugged! Let's drop anchor. We need to stop the ship and make sure everyone's okay!"

Rishe was busy for a while after that, with no time at all to dwell on the unusual way she'd come across the very man she'd been planning to meet.

Chapter 2

RISHE BECAME A KNIGHT several months into her sixth loop. At the time, she had trouble narrowing down her career path; she had an endless list of things she wanted to do and be. While she was deliberating, her ship was attacked on her way to an island nation, and she handled the situation with two men who also happened to be on board.

Throughout her lives, Rishe often disguised herself as a man for safety. On top of that, she had the sword skills she'd acquired in her noble life (and which she'd secretly continued practicing), plus several combat skills she'd honed in her fifth life.

It wasn't so surprising when, after the skirmish, one of the men invited her to join his country's knights. As it happened, he was the king of Siarga, the very country Rishe had been aimlessly traveling to. After they landed, the other man—who turned out to be the king's companion—ended up doing all sorts of things to help Rishe out.

"Your room will be down this hall." He was the knight commander, and he'd been on the ship to guard the king, who—like Rishe—often traveled in disguise. "I didn't think His Majesty would offer a fellow passenger a knighthood, or that said passenger would go, 'I'd love to!' with stars in his eyes."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry about it. It's my policy to make whatever ridiculous ideas my king has a reality. Knights are normally two to a room, so I've assigned you to bunk with Joel. He doesn't tend to show much interest in other people, so I don't think you've got much to worry about."

As it turned out, the knight commander had been quick to realize that Rishe was a woman—and he'd been the only one. He chose Joel as her roommate because she wouldn't have to worry about him finding out her secret.

Rishe, meanwhile, was blissfully unaware that her secret was out. As she walked down the hall, she asked the commander, “Has Joel always had his own room?”

“No. He’s been out of the country, and he only just returned recently. The room assignments shifted while he was in Galkhein for a few months on a mission.”

“Galkhein...” Rishe muttered, and the commander flashed her a good-natured smile.

“If nothing else, Joel’s sword skills are the real deal. He’s always been the youngest one here, so as his first junior knight, I hope you can learn some things from him.”

“Yes, sir! I’m looking forward to...” Rishe answered enthusiastically at first, but her head whipped toward the commander when she finally parsed his words. “Um, sir, what do you mean by ‘if nothing else’?”

“Don’t worry. He *really* doesn’t let much bother him. You seem like you’ve got a lot going on, so he’ll be the perfect roommate for you. Isn’t that great?”

“I-I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

“Well, this is you!”

The moment the door opened, Rishe’s eyes flew just as wide. The person inside, not quite a boy but not yet a man, lay on the stone floor with his eyes closed.

Rishe dashed over to him right away. “Excuse me! Are you all right?!” The frail-looking fellow with curly red hair was completely limp. “Please respond if you can hear my voice! Are you hurt?”

“Mmn...” He opened his eyes just a tad, patting the floor and grumbling, “Ngh... This bed is so hard...”

“Huh?”

“Lucius.” After addressing Rishe by her pseudonym, the commander said

apologetically, “I apologize for the fright, but he’s only sleeping. Get used to this. I’m sure you’ll be seeing it every day from now on.”

“Pardon?!”

“It’ll really help having you here. I hope you’ll take good care of Joel for us!”

“...”

The reason Rishe hadn’t been too surprised the first time she’d caught Theodore napping in her field was because of the “training” she’d received in her sixth life from Joel.

Her roommate was infamous as someone who could do nothing *but* wield a sword—or rather, who *chose* to do nothing but wield a sword. That much was clear from the very beginning. Everything about Rishe, especially the way she’d joined the knights, was abnormal—yet when Joel finally woke up and the two got to talking, their exchange went as follows:

“It’s nice to meet you, Joel. You might think it strange that I joined the knights so suddenly and that I’m rooming with you, but I promise you I’m no one suspicious. My name is Lucius Alcott.”

“Whatever. That’s fine.”

“Huh?”

Showing no interest in her whatsoever, Joel yawned and said, “You don’t have to introduce yourself to me. It’s not like I’m gonna remember your name. Any time I’d spend with you, I’d rather spend sleeping or playing with a sword.” His deep-set eyes drooped with drowsiness, long lashes casting shadows from above. “You can do whatever you want. Just don’t get in the way of my sleep, yeah?”

“Um, Joel, I think it’s time for dinner soon!”

“Don’t need it. In fact, you don’t even need to talk to me. Let’s have nothing to do with one another, shall we?”

“But we’re sure to fight together on the same battlefields from now on...”

Joel glanced at Rishe before telling her, “Nah, I’ll never fight ‘together’ with anyone.” He was as sleepy as always, but for just a second, there was a sharp glint in his eyes. “I’ll only get weaker if I do something like that. You should be alone when you fight. If you spend too much time worrying about other people, you’ll die too easily when you’re finally in a real battle.”

Rishe blinked in surprise, but the light in Joel’s eyes vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

“If the commander’s finally back, I should go get him to spar with me, though.” With another yawn, he left the room.

Now that Rishe was alone, she thought, *Does he really do nothing other than sleep and practice the sword?* She picked up Joel’s blanket, patted the dust off, and folded it neatly.

The commander said he wasn’t on night watch or anything yesterday. If his sleep is irregular and he’s not eating meals either, then maybe... Rishe wasn’t comfortable leaving such a person alone since she’d once been an apothecary. *He doesn’t want anything to do with me, but the commander asked me to look after him. I suppose I don’t even need to think about whose request I should honor.*

Thus began Rishe’s struggle as Joel’s roommate and the only knight younger than him. Her first task was to wake him up at the same time every day so that he was able to get up in the morning without issue.

“Good morning, Joel!” She climbed the ladder next to the bed and shook Joel’s shoulder up on the top bunk. “We’ve got training again this morning. The commander said attendance is mandatory!”

“Nope. Not getting up. Don’t need training...”

“Oh well. Then I’ll just have to make sure you get some sunlight for thirty minutes every morning. Okay, I’m opening the curtains!”

“Ugh... So bright!”

After repeating this several times, she was finally able to have something like a real conversation with him instead of the sleep-talking he'd been doing up until then. At that point, Rishe could move to the next stage of her plan.

"Good morning, Joel! I don't suppose I could interest you in a sparring match this morning, could I?"

"You wanna spar...?"

"Oh, you're awake! That's a new record! All right, I'll go with this strategy from now on."

"Y'know, you fight more like a mercenary than a knight. Or maybe an archer. It's no fun to spar against people who rely on stuff other than swordplay. I'm going back to sleep..."

"Aah! Oh, think of it as an investment for the future, then! I promise I'll improve with a sword, so please give me some lessons so I can get better!"

By appealing to Joel's love of swordplay, Rishe was able to get him out of bed one out of every four times. Moreover, by training with the "genius swordsman" Joel, Rishe's skills improved by the day.

"Listen to this, Joel! Thanks to your advice, I was able to beat ten people in training today!"

"Oh yeah?"

Sitting with Rishe at a table in the mess hall, Joel broke the meat in his stew into smaller pieces with his spoon. He was spending more time awake lately, and when Rishe dragged him there with both hands, he would obediently follow her to the mess hall for mealtimes.

"I don't really care who you win or lose to, though."

"Urk! I-I suppose you wouldn't..."

"But, I guess..." He peered at her with his brown eyes. "Uh, Lushe? Ricius? Uh, what was it?"

“Are you actually trying to remember my name?!”

When they first met, he had told her not to bother introducing herself because he didn’t intend to remember it. Now, he thought about it for a moment and said, “You’ve gotten decently strong lately, haven’t you?”

Rishe could only gasp in response.

After that, she spent more and more time with Joel, but his love of sleep was just as deep-rooted as his love of swordsmanship.

“Good morning, Joel! You’ve been able to get up in the morning a lot lately. It’s great progress! I think it’s time to join in on the training!”

“Don’t need it. Not going. You can go by yourself, Lucas.”

“Oh, you’re so close!”

Most of her mornings ended up like this. After a year of living together, however, Joel started acting more and more like a mentor to her. In fact, he seemed to have really taken a liking to the word.

“I’m your mentor, so I’ll teach you something nobody else will. You know, since I’m your mentor.”

Of course, this also led to a lot of the older knights teasing Joel for finally acknowledging that there was a new recruit.

“When you want to skip one of the commander’s lectures, there are two ways to sneak out: one is through these hedges and the other is through the aqueduct out back. I should really keep this a secret from everyone, but since I’m your mentor and all...”

“Th-thank you, Joel. I don’t imagine I’ll ever have a reason to use them, but I’m grateful.”

“In exchange, you can wake me up when I pass out during lessons.”

“Of course! That’s my job as your junior!” Rishe said sincerely, standing up straight.

Joel grinned and chuckled in response. “Hee hee. You’re a pretty cute one too.”

I’m not really sure why, but Joel’s in a great mood.

Slowly but surely, Joel took his role as Rishe’s mentor more seriously. He was the youngest son of a noble house, and since joining the knights, he’d been their youngest member—that is, up until Rishe came along. At some point, he started calling her “Lu” for the simple reason that saying Lucius every time was a pain. Yet along with the nickname, he started looking out for Rishe more now that he could take on some responsibility for the first time in his life.

“Why the long face? Stick your nose into something annoying again? Ugh, what a pain... But I don’t want you missing out on morning training, so I’ll help you.”

On another occasion, she told him she’d been invited to a party with another squad, so she was going to stay the night in a different room—and for some reason, he was awfully worried about her.

“No. No matter how late your return, you must sleep here. It’s too dangerous to stay somewhere else.”

“Dangerous? Aren’t you worried I’ll disturb your sleep when I arrive in the middle of the night?”

“Either way, you have to come back. If you don’t...there won’t be anyone to wake me up in the morning.”

I can’t believe he’s more worried about me than his sleep!

Rishe was concerned at the time that he may have found out somehow that she was a woman. *Wouldn’t he treat me at least a little differently if that were the case, though?*

“What’s your answer, Lu?”

“O-oh, yes! I hear you loud and clear!”

Their first year together passed in this way, with Rishe stressing out that she’d

been discovered every once in a while but convincing herself otherwise.

“What are you eating, Lu? You got so wrapped up in training that the mess hall closed? Hold on, that’s still no reason to eat nothing but a boiled potato with some salt. Haah... Oh well, I’ll just make you something. Come here.”

Sometimes he’d beckon her over like so and cook her a meal from scratch.

“They chose you for the next expedition? Maybe I’ll go too. I mean, if you’re not here, I won’t be able to get out of bed in the morning.”

Other times, he showed great appreciation for her as a morning wake-up device.

“Even if the room assignments change, you’ve always gotta bunk with me, Lu. I get someone to wake me up so I’m not late for training, and you get sword lessons from me every so often. It’s not a bad trade-off, right?”

“Right! If possible, I’d love for you to teach me every day instead of just every so often, though!”

“What? No. That’s too much work.”

“Come on, Joel!”

Eventually, Rishe reached the second year of her sixth loop, and one day, Joel sleepily said to her, “You know how you mentioned Galkhein’s movements seemed suspicious lately, Lu? It turns out you were right.”

His expression seemed slightly more melancholic than usual.

“Galkhein’s crown prince has killed his father and usurped the throne.”

Back then, all Rishe could think was, *So this life won’t be any different.*

“I’m back, Prince Arnold.”

When Rishe arrived at the royal villa, she skipped unpacking and headed straight for Arnold’s office to give him an update.

“I finished treating the women who were being held captive on the ship. I left them in the care of a local doctor. I believe we’ll be able to question them tomorrow.”

“Got it.”

Oliver chimed in, “I’m so sorry you have to accompany my lord into such danger. I’m always telling him to stop leaving his guards behind and taking matters into his own hands...”

“P-perish the thought, Oliver...”

Arnold was paying his attendant no heed, but the man was making Rische’s ears burn.

“Thank you for seeing to the women’s first aid as well.”

“Of course! I’m glad that the herbs I just happened to have on hand were effective in treating their conditions.”

There was nothing coincidental about the medicines she’d brought with her, but she kept that to herself.

She quickly wiped the smile from her face and told Arnold, “I was only able to hear bits and pieces from them, but the situation seems clear enough. I think it’s safe to say we encountered pirates engaging in human trafficking.” Staring straight into Arnold’s blue eyes, Rische added, “But you knew from the start that such incidents were occurring in this area, didn’t you, Your Highness?”

Arnold didn’t respond. Rische hoped that her act—that is, that she’d only just noticed it now—was convincing. She’d previously deceived all sorts of people as part of her business dealings when she was a merchant, but Arnold was the only one she had no confidence in lying to.

I knew his business here from the beginning, Rische thought as she stared into his eyes. *After all, I was going to investigate the slave trade too.*

It was why she’d chosen an artisan from Bezzetoria to finish her wedding dress *and* why she’d chosen a certain thread for the embroidery despite

knowing it would be hard to procure. It was all to arrange a visit to Bezzetoria at this time without arousing Arnold's suspicions.

Rishe had a crucial objective she had to fulfill. *I need to stop the slave trade before the weapon falls into Prince Arnold's hands.*

Arnold sighed, his chin propped up in his hand. "I received a response to our wedding invitation from Siarga a few days ago—along with a note about their ships being attacked in our waters and their citizens being abducted."

It was exactly as she'd heard in her sixth life. Right around this time, the pirates were giving Siarga serious trouble.

"According to their own investigation, they thought it highly likely that their stolen goods were being sold in Galkhein. Rather than recovering the goods and money, however, their primary request was aid in rescuing their abducted citizens."

"And you determined the pirates were using Bezzetoria as their place of business."

"It is easier to trace stolen goods if they're sold in smaller markets. Bezzetoria seemed the likeliest place to unload goods straight from their ships."

Rishe knew it was happening in Bezzetoria because she'd heard about it from Joel in her sixth life. Yet Arnold had used nothing more than his own judgment to accurately predict where he'd find the offending pirates.

"I don't care what sort of criminal activity goes on in Siarga, but pirates are a different matter. They're not bound by the sea to one country alone."

"True, you have no idea when the pirates menacing Siarga's seas may strike here as well. It appears they're already using Galkhein to sell their pilfered merchandise and kidnapped victims." Rishe hung her head and clutched at her dress.

That's how the weapon from Siarga makes its way to Galkhein. Prince Arnold only uses it in his war in the future because the pirates sold it here.

There was one more thing Rishe wanted to ascertain, so she asked, “Are you keeping this a secret from your father as well?”

“It’ll just become a bigger problem if he hears about it. I can guess how that man will react to most things.”

That’s why a “pre-wedding getaway” with me was the perfect excuse for Prince Arnold to visit Bezzetoria.

Rishe wanted to prevent Arnold’s war, but her desire to stop the pirates and their human trafficking was just as strong. She also knew a lot about Joel from her sixth life.

“Please allow me to assist you, Your Highness.” Her determination renewed, she begged to help him out once more.

Arnold sighed. “Come now, Rishe...”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s sly of me to ask when you can’t dismiss my requests outright.”

Oliver glanced at Arnold, who cast his eyes down. At length, the prince said, “Very well.”

“Oh! Thank you, Your Highness!” Rishe’s face lit up, though she apologized to Arnold once more in her heart.

My goal is to prevent you from achieving yours... The war, that is.

Rishe was essentially working against him. She endeavored to make things harder for him, all while keeping her cards close to her chest. If he knew the truth, he would never allow her to have her way.

In a sense, this is a betrayal. I have to at least do what I can to help him as much as possible in other matters, she thought as Oliver made his way to Arnold’s side.

“If that is the case, my lord, what do you wish to do with the Imperial Guards looking after the women?”

“There are likely more victims to locate. I’ll reconsider the guards’ assignments.”

Before Arnold fully returned to work, Rishe raised her hand to get his attention. “Do you mind if I give that, um...fluffy-haired, sleepy-looking fellow a little examination, then?”

The women on the ship had been entrusted to several local doctors. Joel alone had been brought to this villa, since Arnold determined he would have to question him separately. Though meeting Joel was a reunion for Rishe, in this life, she wasn’t supposed to know his name yet. Unsure of what to call him for now, she’d settled on the characteristics that came to mind—but her request had Arnold scowling.

“You wish to *examine* him?”

“Yes. He should be waking up soon. Won’t it help your investigation if you hear what he has to say sooner than later?”

Arnold silently stood and approached Rishe, who was tilting her head quizzically. “Fine. But...”

“Hm?”

Arnold brushed Rishe’s coral-colored hair. “I want you to be careful.”

“Eep!” Rishe yelped at the intimate gesture, then slapped her hands over her mouth. She met Arnold’s gaze, her face aflame.

“I’ll head there after I finish assigning the guards to their new posts.”

“Y-you don’t need to! I know you’re busy, Your Highness! That man is... Well, he didn’t seem to be a bad person! Yes, um, he seemed kind! And gentle!”

“...”

I suppose Joel must have seemed awfully suspicious to Prince Arnold.

“I’m coming too,” Arnold reiterated, making sure Rishe understood.

“Urgh...”

He was worried about her—and it made her happy, which confounded her.

“Very well! I’ll...I’ll meet you there, then!”

Oliver smiled warmly at her. “Please do be careful, Lady Rishe.”

“I appreciate your concern, Oliver!”

With that, Rishe hurried out of the third-story room and descended all the way to the first floor. *Keep your cool, Rishe! Seriously, why does Prince Arnold touch my hair so much?! Ugh... I know he has no ulterior motive, but c’mon! She shook her head as she trotted down the stairs. Pull yourself together! You need to focus on Joel right now.*

Rishe arrived in front of the guest room and called out, “Pardon me! Are you awake?”

Then she knocked, but there was no response. She gently pushed the door open, slipped inside without closing it, and approached the bed. The tools she’d used to treat Joel were still laid out on the bedside table.

Joel was sound asleep. She studied him, thinking, *What an awfully familiar sleeping face.*

His fluffy red hair and pale skin. The long eyelashes women envied. His delicate facial features. Observing him as he slept, Rishe felt like she was seeing a friend after just a few months apart and reuniting with one from ages past at the same time.

I feel like my sixth life was just a short time ago, but there’s also a stark divide between it and my current life.

Rishe could remember her past lives with perfect clarity, but they existed outside a sort of see-through barrier from her present life. It was like reflecting on a dream she’d just been having after waking up in bed.

A string of memories from her sixth life rose to the surface of her mind. The events had occurred shortly after Arnold declared war on several countries.

“It’s been only two years since Arnold Hein slew his father and usurped the throne. I can’t believe he’s already restructured enough to declare war on other countries,” the king said to his knights, his tense expression lacking its usual cheer.

The commander at his side looked just as dour. “We’ve been busy with our own preparations for these last two years. And I imagine we still have some more time before Galkhein invades us.”

With a sigh, the king replied, “Don’t worry. Siarga is an island nation. Galkhein will have to solve their troops’ supply problem before they come to conquer. Up until now, they’ve only waged war on their own continent, so they should be unseasoned at naval warfare.”

“But, Your Majesty...”

“Prepare our forces. We will ally with Halil Rasha to take Galkhein down. If we come at them from the land and sea, we’ll have a solid chance at victory.”

His line of thought would prove to be naive, however. Siarga formed its alliance and set sail for war with Galkhein, fully prepared—but it would soon taste defeat.

“Urgent report, Your Majesty!” a messenger shouted, face pale. “Enemy ships spotted at sea! Judging from their eagle flag, they appear to be Galkhein’s!”

“That can’t be!”

No one could believe the sight greeting them from the shore.

“What is Galkhein doing with those warships?!”

Arnold Hein’s war of conquest adapted to the state of the world in each of Rishe’s lives. Not even Rishe, who had memories of his past invasions, could predict the speed with which he’d crossed the sea in her sixth loop.

Rishe hazily thought back to the final day of her sixth life.

“Evacuate His Highness and his family, quickly!”

“Our light, our lord! Protect him with your life! Get them out or die trying!”

The bodies of her fallen comrades littered the ground around her.

They're all dead...

The good-natured king who'd invited Rische to join his knights had died before her eyes while protecting his children. As the young royals cried over the loss of their mother and father, the knight commander who'd spent countless hours training Rische and the other knights died protecting them as well.

As an island nation that had long competed with other countries over resources, Siarga was considered relatively powerful as a fighting force. Yet even they hadn't been able to put up a fight against Arnold Hein's army.

Rische fought desperately to keep the children safe. They had fled through one of the “shortcuts” Joel once showed her, and which she now stood in front of.

I don't mind dying here. What happens to us doesn't matter. We just need to buy more time for the children to escape, whether it's a minute or a single second!

Joel had been the only one able to put up a fight against Arnold Hein and his forces. *Yet Emperor Arnold Hein killed him while he was protecting me.*

She had witnessed Arnold's sword rip Joel from gut to gullet.

Joel smiled so kindly when he saw I was safe...even though I was killed too just a moment later, when Prince Arnold's sword pierced my chest.

Now, in her seventh life, Rische was Arnold's fiancée. She could hardly describe how it felt to gaze upon the sleeping Joel, just as she had so many times before in these new circumstances.

“Mm...” Joel stirred and slowly opened his eyes.

Rische straightened up and greeted him very differently than she would have in her previous life. “Good morning, Sir Swordsman.”

After a few sleepy blinks, those golden eyes—brown at first glance—settled on Rishe.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did on the ship. They drugged you, yet you fought to protect the women there.”

Joel rose and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I apologize for forcing you to take up arms in that situation, but I assumed you had some skill with a blade due to the calluses on your hands.” Rishe curtsied. “My name is Rishe Irmgard Weitzner.”

As Joel stared wordlessly at her, she thought, *I’m keen to introduce myself, but I doubt Joel has any interest in me. He didn’t care one whit when we first met in my sixth life.*

His next words shocked her, however.

“One more time?”

“Huh?”

Joel took Rishe by the wrist. Blinking in surprise, she assessed his features. His pale arms were slender, but his bone structure and hard muscles were plenty masculine.

“Your name. Tell me one more time?” His sleepy voice sounded almost needling. Rishe had heard him use this tone plenty of times in her sixth life.

Taken aback, she stammered, “I-It’s Rishe Irmgard Weitzner.”

“Rishe...Rishe, Rishe...” Still holding her wrist, Joel repeated her name to commit it to memory.

She’d used a fake name in her sixth life, so Joel had never called her Rishe before. Even more puzzling was how it had taken so much effort to get him to remember her name in her last life, yet he spoke it so easily now.

“Hey, Rishe...want to play with me?”

“What?! Um...”

“Even after you left the cabin, I could hear how you fought just by listening to your footsteps. Those light, girlish steps *were* yours, weren’t they?” Curious, Joel looked her over. “It’s strange, but...it sounded like you fight the way I do.”

He could tell that just from my footsteps, without even seeing me?

In her sixth life, Rische had further refined the swordsmanship she’d learned in her time as a noble lady. Joel’s technique, which focused not on strength but on agility and flexibility, had influenced her style considerably. And it seemed Joel had noticed from merely listening to her footwork through a door.

“So...” His tone was pleading and predatory all at once. “Let’s play around and find out who could kill whom.”

Rische flinched, alarmed by Joel’s lower-than-normal voice.

Joel had zero interest in me when we first met in my sixth life. Rische gulped. *This life is different. I’ve piqued the interest of a man whose only concerns are sleeping and swordfighting...*

In a way, this was a mistake.

Rische tried to retract her wrist. “Um, Sir Swordsman...before we go any further, would you tell me your name and position?”

“Do we need my details in order to fight?” Joel frowned sleepily. “Joel Milca Roivas. I’m a knight of Siarga.”

“Sir Joel, then.” She could finally call him by name. Careful not to address him too casually, she went on, “I apologize, but I cannot accept your invitation.”

Peevishness crept into his gaze. “Why not? I told you my name.”

“Well, because...” Rische shook off Joel’s grip using one of her self-defense techniques. She peeled his fingers away with her free hand, twisted her wrist to escape, and gave him a light tap on the shoulder.

“Whoa...” That simple tap sent Joel sinking onto the bed, pressing a hand to his eyes with a groan. “Sp-spinning... Everything’s spinning...”

“Those pirates drugged you, did they not? I implore you to rest. The drug is still in your system.”

Rishe watched him for a moment. *From what I heard in my sixth life, Joel went undercover in Galkhein and met Prince Arnold after rescuing the abducted women.*

She had begged him to talk about it before bed on numerous occasions because she wanted to know more about Galkhein. She recalled her many nights spent imagining Galkhein as she listened to Joel from the bunk under his.

“I’m shocked you actually managed to stop yourself from attacking Arnold Hein, Joel.”

“You really think I’d be able to do that? Of course I attacked him.”

“You did?!”

“Heh heh heh...”

“Uh, that’s not something to be proud of, Joel!”

In response, Joel had whispered, *“But...he didn’t even draw his sword.”*

With that exchange in mind, Rishe fixed Joel with a somber look and sighed. “There’s something I should tell you, Sir Joel. That gentleman with the black hair back on the ship was Galkhein’s crown prince, His Highness Arnold Hein.”

“He was?” Just as she suspected, this piqued Joel’s interest. His gold eyes narrowed; perhaps he was trying to picture Arnold. “No wonder I found him so formidable just from hearing his footsteps. That’s the man who won so many battles all on his own...”

“Sir Joel.” Just as she had in her sixth life, Rishe told Joel, “You absolutely must not draw your sword on Prince Arnold.”

“Why not?”

“Attacking him is out of the question as well.”

“Why?”

“How many reasons would you like me to list?!”

Joel pursed his lips, unwilling to accept her words. “It’s not like I need your permission,” he grumbled.

If we were meeting for the first time in my sixth life right now, I would probably be lost. Thankfully, I think I know how to deal with him.

Ultimately, the knight commander had conceded that Lucius was the only one who could bring Joel under any sort of control. Rishe knew exactly what to say to pique Joel’s interest.

“Fine. If you won’t play with me, then I’ll go find Prince Arnold.”

“Say, Sir Joel?” Rishe smiled as Joel attempted to sit up in bed again. “Would you like me to help you negotiate a bout with Prince Arnold?”

She could practically see Joel’s ears perk up like a dog’s. “Negotiate a bout?” he repeated, sleepy eyes shimmering.

“I imagine a fair fight would be more fun for you than taking him by surprise, would it not?”

“A fair fight...” Joel sat up slowly, eyeing Rishe from the edge of the bed. “I wanna do it.”

“Hee hee. I had a feeling you’d say that.”

Now Joel was much more receptive to what Rishe had to say. She apologized to him in her heart. *I’m sorry, Joel. All I promised was that I would help you negotiate with him. I didn’t promise you a bout. It’s the standard tactic of a slimy merchant, but this is all for your sake!*

It hurt her to manipulate him, but she couldn’t very well have him leap headfirst into a diplomatic incident with Arnold. Everything seemed to work out fine in her sixth life, but it wouldn’t necessarily be the same this time around.

“In exchange for my negotiating with Prince Arnold, would you care to help us out a little as well?”

“How so?”

“It seems Prince Arnold actually received a letter from the king of Siarga. I’m guessing you’re here from Siarga to investigate the pirates’ human trafficking operation.”

Joel narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Come to think of it...what are you, anyway?”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“Well, you’re all...fluffy, like pink candy, but you jumped onto the ship and then fought the pirates with those spindly arms of yours.” Joel stood and padded toward Rishe on bare feet. “You’re a girl, but you’re a knight of Galkhein? And you can negotiate with Prince Arnold directly? That’s so weird.”

“Sir Joel, you’ll get dizzy again if you move like that...”

“On the ship, Prince Arnold stood in front of you, like he was trying to protect you from me.” Joel leaned in close and peered into Rishe’s face as if attempting to see through to her soul. “What are you to him?”

“I’m...”

Rishe had caught a second set of footsteps approaching her from behind, but she could never have predicted the emergency situation that unfurled a moment later.

“Whoa!”

The man standing behind her—Arnold—had lifted her into the air. She grabbed onto his shoulder for support but immediately regretted touching him. The more their bodies pressed together, the harder her heart pounded. She caught Arnold shooting a glare of intense displeasure Joel’s way.

“She’s my wife.”

“A-as yet, we are engaged and nothing more!” Rishe squeaked out as her face flushed crimson.

Joel frowned suspiciously before pointing at Rishe. “So I should call you...Her Highness?”

“I said we’re only engaged!” Rishe tried to explain even as her insides buzzed with panic. After all, she was right next to the man she now knew she loved—and he was carrying her like she weighed nothing.

I can’t breathe when I’m this close to him!

While she could still speak, she pleaded quietly, “Y-Your Highness, please!”

He said nothing in response, but her plea must have gotten through to him. Arnold knelt, one hand on Rishe’s back. He could have just let go of her, but of course he had to let her down gently.

“You’re not hurt?” Arnold asked, concerned.

He must have seen Joel closing in on me and whisked me away as fast as he could. That’s why he picked me up...

Scooping her up like that had been bad for her heart, but he’d done it with her safety in mind.

Rishe nodded. “I-I’m fine!” she assured him. “He may not look it, but he’s quite the gentleman, I promise! I was in no danger! None at all! He was very kind, and I was very safe, so I’m all right!”

Arnold narrowed his eyes, a long silence passing between them. Buckling under the pressure of those ocean-blue eyes, Rishe averted hers and stammered, “His...his name is Sir Joel, and he’s a knight of Siarga, just as we expected.”

The prince remained silent.

He couldn’t care less...

Meanwhile, Joel observed Arnold, boldly staring straight at him. Then his gaze suddenly flicked to her. “Hey...so, about that negotiation?”

“Negotiation?” Arnold said, glaring harder.

Rishe frantically waved it off. “W-we can discuss that another time!” If she asked now and he said no, it would be difficult to get Joel to help them again. “More importantly, Sir Joel, your complexion is awful!”

Joel had always been pale, but he was practically blue right now. He put a hand to his forehead, as if hearing it from Rishe had reminded him of his current condition. “If I relax for a second, everything spins... I feel sick...”

“Are you all right?!”

As Joel crumpled to the floor, Arnold didn’t so much as spare him a glance. “Seems like he won’t be much use right now even if he’s awake. Rishe, I’m heading back upstairs.”

“O-one moment. I’ll get Sir Joel off the floor and back into bed.”

Arnold sighed and held up a hand to stop her. He grabbed Joel’s arm in her stead. “Stand up.”

Prince Arnold is helping someone? Rishe was shocked. Though he was a kind person at heart, he tended to play the part of a villain; any acts of altruism were rare.

Joel groaned, lifting his head to stare up at Arnold. For a second, his golden eyes seemed to have slit pupils like a cat’s. “I can tell you don’t waste movement even when you’re just taking a step forward.”

It was equally impressive that Joel could sense Arnold’s caliber as a fighter.

“If you invaded our country, I bet you could slaughter every single one of us, me included.”

Arnold showed no interest in the matter. He removed his hand from Joel’s arm and gave him a light shove toward the bed. Joel stumbled backward and sat down, then took a deep breath.

“Hey, Princess.”

Come on, Joel... An amused grin played on his lips. *In my sixth life, Joel looked out for me as a mentor. But we can’t have that sort of relationship in this life.*

Seeing him through the eyes of Prince Arnold's fiancée, I didn't think he would appear so fragile.

One's relationships changed depending on their position. This fact surprised her in all her loops, especially when she reunited with a familiar face from a previous loop. The Joel in front of her now was the mentor she knew well; at the same time, he was a foreign knight she was newly acquainted with.

"You promise about the negotiation, right? You promise..." Joel fell back onto the bed. He was snoring softly in no time at all.

Arnold was sharp enough to notice Rishe's nerves. "Rishe."

She sighed and met his gaze. "We'll discuss the matter of the negotiation later. Shall we return upstairs for now?"

The prince paused a moment. "Sure."

Thank goodness... She was relieved that he had agreed to put a pin in the discussion for now. Still, she couldn't relax completely.

I need to focus. My goal in coming here is to solve the abductions using Joel's information. Considering Prince Arnold's skills, I'm sure we'll be able to resolve everything easily enough, but...I can't simply rely on him.

Watching Arnold's broad back as he planted one foot in front of the other, Rishe reminded herself, *This incident is what causes Siarga's information leak. And when Prince Arnold gets his hands on the intel, it becomes a powerful weapon in his future invasion...*

Rishe could never forget what she'd seen in her sixth life: the countless ships appearing from beyond the horizon on a jet-black sea.

"What is Galkhein doing with those warships?!"

They were one of the powerful tools Arnold's army wielded.

Those ships were a state secret of Siarga. Ships that excelled at both naval warfare and long-distance travel. Rishe found herself gripping her dress in tight fists. *Siargan engineers abducted by the pirates brought their techniques to*

Galkhein. As a result, Galkhein gained the ability to invade countries across the sea.

I must prevent Prince Arnold from obtaining ships he could use to wage his war.

That was Rishe's goal in coming to this town.

The waterways flowing through Bezzetoria were the same blue as the sea. Clad in a light dress for an outing, Rishe viewed the clear water below the bridge she stood on, her eyes twinkling and her heart swelling at the faint scent of the sea breeze.

"Look, Prince Arnold! Fish!"

"So there are." Walking beside her, Arnold dispassionately affirmed her sighting. When Rishe leaned over the handrail for a better vantage point, however, he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Whoa!"

"Don't lean out so far." When Rishe met his eyes—thereby realizing that their faces were entirely too close for comfort—he went on, again without a trace of feeling, "It's windy. You're so light, I can just picture a gust of wind knocking you clear off the bridge."

"Huh?! I can assure you that would *not* happen!"

"Heh." Arnold squinted with mirth at her hasty assurance. The slight smile on his face just caused her heart to hammer even harder.

"Um, Prince Arnold..."

"What is it?"

Rishe glanced around awkwardly. "Will this serve to show the citizens how close we are, as Oliver suggested?"

Arnold scanned the area as well, though he seemed more annoyed than

anxious. In addition to Rishe and Arnold, a group of Imperial Guards stood atop the bridge, shadowing them from a slight distance. Curious townspeople who had heard rumors of their presence peeked from behind them. With the knights keeping the citizens at bay, Rishe could just barely make out their expressions, but they smiled as they watched over the royal couple.

Earlier, when Rishe and Arnold had returned from Joel's guest room, Oliver had said to them, *"You want to continue your strategy meeting? Ha ha ha. What are you saying?"*

They did not immediately dignify his comment with a response.

"You're here on a pre-wedding getaway, or had you forgotten? You should be spending time out on the town and showing the citizens your close-knit bond!"

"I-I beg your pardon, Oliver?"

"Otherwise, it would be unnatural for you to be away from the imperial capital so soon before the ceremony. If you wish to discuss strategy, why not do so on the way to the dressmaker's?"

"But we plan to go tomorrow!"

"Then I suppose you'll just have to take a stroll along the waterways. I implore you to show the good citizens how harmonious the future emperor and empress's relationship is. Well, you'd best be off now!"

"Wait, huh?!"

"..."

Thus, they'd been summarily forced out on the town.

Arnold frowned, perhaps remembering the same exchange. "Just ignore Oliver. He'd find a way to spin whatever story he wanted even if we never set foot outside."

He doesn't make a point of it, but he really does trust Oliver.

She peeked over at the onlookers again, who were still watching them with

warm smiles. It made her feel unbearably awkward, so she looked out at the canal instead.

I know it's my job as his fiancée to have a good relationship with His Highness. I know that, but... She couldn't help worrying. *Isn't this technically an abuse of my position?!* After all, she'd only been chosen as his fiancée because of Arnold's mysterious ulterior motive. *I even made him kiss me for my birthday using the wedding as an excuse. I can't help feeling guilty over this closeness now that I know I'm in love with him...*

Arnold gave her a quizzical look while she stewed in her discomfort, then appeared to realize something. "Oh, right."

"What is it, Your Highness?"

His large hand gently wrapped around hers.

"Eep..."

Chatter rippled through the faraway onlookers.

Arnold guided Rishe's hand to his sleeve, allowing her to grip it. Rishe stared up at him in surprise, and he turned his soft gaze on her. "Will this suffice for your 'training'?"

Rishe flinched at his gentle tone. He'd taken her hand after letting it go when the fight broke out on the ship as well. It didn't mean anything to Arnold, yet he was fulfilling her request once again.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Rishe squeezed his sleeve tight, hanging her head. *And I'm really sorry...*

Still, she didn't think she'd be able to let go of him on her own. For the first time, she was realizing how troublesome love truly was.

Arnold regarded Rishe's fingers on his sleeve before turning to the canal. "The sale of human beings is forbidden in many countries."

Rishe finally raised her head at these words.

“That goes for this country too, of course—but as we have evidence of abducted women being brought into Galkhein, it’s safe to say there is in fact human trafficking occurring within our borders.”

Now this is something I can talk about with some semblance of calm, Rishe thought with relief. “The women were drugged, but other than that, they weren’t wounded and there was no evidence that they’d been physically abused. For the pirates to be so careful with them... Well, I don’t really like putting it this way, but...”

“They weren’t to be sold as cheap slaves but as ‘high-quality products,’” Arnold finished for her.

Rishe nodded, though it pained her to think of putting prices on human beings. “That would limit the pirates’ potential clientele, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s the assumption I’m working with. We’re investigating potential locations and dates for the transaction, plus the people and merchants who may be involved.”

So that’s why he brought him along with us as one of the Imperial Guards, Rishe thought, thinking of one very familiar man with red eyes.

“There’s one more thing, Your Highness. From what I was able to hear while I treated them, all the abducted women were from high-ranking families. I would guess that Siarga noticed and that was how they got Sir Joel captured as bait.”

While Joel wasn’t a woman, he *was* the second son of a noble house. He could have used his family name to go undercover. Rishe had never heard the details in her sixth life, but she guessed this was how it had happened.

“Mr. Tully once told me that the key to doing business was moving in such a way as to create profit and avoid loss. When you go somewhere to sell something, instead of bringing back just your profits, you should bring back something else to sell.”

“ ... ”

“Prince Arnold, what if the pirates were not just selling in Galkhein?” Rishe gazed up at him. “It would be a perfect place to replenish their ‘stock’—a hunting ground for women of high birth.”

Arnold did not reply. She was sure he’d already thought of that. Just as they abducted women in Siarga and sold them in Galkhein, the pirates were also likely abducting people in Galkhein to be sold elsewhere.

A knight approached them. “Your Highness, Lady Rishe, I have a report.”

The grinning knight had only recently joined Arnold’s Imperial Guard. Well, that was the official version of events, at least. According to the individual himself, he was “providing his services to Arnold in exchange for observing Galkhein’s national defense strategy for reference.”

Raul...

Raul the hunter—the leader of an intelligence organization—gave an exaggeratedly reverent bow, his red eyes narrowed with mirth. “I do apologize for interrupting the lovely couple when you’re *clearly* enjoying one another’s company. It pains me to be so boorish as to—”

“Spare us the preamble. Just make your report.”

“Oh, don’t rush me, Your Highness. Not when I’ve brought you precisely the information you requested.”

The other knights were still at a distance, ensuring none of the citizenry got too close. It was unlikely that anyone could hear their conversation.

“At a glance, there are many firms that deal with nobles and wealthy commoners. But when you consider the particulars, one trading method stands out the most to me. It involves a party on a large passenger ship, where many wealthy patrons are invited to browse the goods and negotiate their purchase.”

“A party on a passenger ship...”

“At a set time, the ship leaves port and anchors itself somewhere offshore, where the guests eat and drink. On the surface, it’s nothing more than a lively

banquet, but when the guest list is so strictly managed, it sure seems like a good place for secretive dealings.”

Rishe had a good idea of how it all worked. “That’s where they choose them. Either their clients for their secret dealings...or the people they’ll abduct to become their new merchandise.”

She looked up at Arnold, and he sighed. *I’m sure Prince Arnold already knows exactly what I’m about to say...*

First, however, he told Raul, “Confirm your findings with the victims. Even if they’re not fully recovered, they should be able to answer a few questions.”

“Yes, yes. I won’t even complain about how hard you’re working me. I’ll ask them if they’ve ever been invited to a trading party on a ship and where they were abducted. We can’t exactly take our time here, however.” Raul’s gaze swept over the sea on the other side of the canal. “From what I was able to find out, the next banquet will be tonight.”

“Tonight?!”

“I have the guest list right here. It seems many of the passengers will be visiting foreign nobles, not citizens of Galkhein.”

Raul really is amazing. I can’t believe he was able to find so much so quickly.

Rishe peeked over Arnold’s arm at the guest list, marveling at Raul’s skills. “It’s true. I don’t see any nobles from Galkhein on the list.”

“The local nobles would all know *we’re* here visiting at the moment. They would have canceled any plans of this nature and would be sending endless invitations to us to curry our favor.”

“Now that you mention it, I have gotten a few invitations to tea with various noble ladies...”

“Well, Your Highness? What do you think?” Raul asked Arnold.

Arnold laid out the facts in a neutral tone. “If they’re choosing their customers at the banquet, then the central figures of the human trafficking operation will

also be in attendance. Surrounding the ship and raiding it before it sets sail should settle matters..." He gave Rishe a sidelong glance as he trailed off, no doubt anticipating her objection.

"Prince Arnold, the pirates we apprehended spoke as if they had other abductees."

"I'm sure they do. I can't imagine those women were all of their 'merchandise.'"

"If the rest of the victims are being held somewhere other than this ship, and we capture the human traffickers before identifying the location of the remaining women, we may never find them."

There was no guarantee they would get any information out of the apprehended criminals. From the state of the rescued women, it was safe to say they were cared for by their captors to a degree. If the organization fell before they were rescued, it was possible they would remain in captivity with no one caring for them.

"We need to figure out where the women are being kept and guarantee their safety before going after the ones in charge."

"So you say, future crown princess." Raul shrugged, his tone light. "But we don't know when the next soiree will be. There will only be more victims if we don't crush them as soon as possible, will there not? What do you plan to do, exactly?"

"Well..." Rishe glanced at Arnold, who furrowed his brow. "Prince Arnold, I have something I'd like to ask you."

"I have an idea what you intend to propose," he said after a beat.

I thought so. He does know me well.

His shapely brows furrowed deeper.

"Prince Theodore told me about the identity you had him forge the other day, Your Highness."

“ ... ”

Oliver was the one to pass on the request, but Rishe had been touched to hear that Arnold had asked such a thing of his brother. It would have been unthinkable only a few months earlier. She met Arnold's eyes, recalling the warm feeling that blossomed in her chest over the gesture.

“He did it so you could legally pretend you're a Galkhein noble who possesses no imperial blood, yes?”

“...Rishe.”

“Uh, Your Highness? Your wife's shooting you such covetous eyes over a 'forged noble identity.'” Raul was starting to catch on as well. “Miss, please don't tell me...”

Rishe ignored him and pressed on with her plea. “If we want to find out as much as we can about the slave trade, there are two ways to go about it. One is to become a customer of theirs, but it takes time for a merchant to build trust with a potential customer. If we show up at tonight's party out of nowhere and ask them to sell us a slave, it's far more likely that they'll eliminate us out of suspicion rather than give us the information we're after.”

That strategy was out of the question.

“There's only one other option. And with it, we're far more likely to have another encounter with them after our initial contact. If it goes well, we'll find out the women's location too.”

“ ... ”

“Fortunately, there won't be other Galkhein nobles in attendance.” Rishe smiled as she spelled it out for Arnold, even though he'd clearly already caught on. “I'll become potential merchandise for them. I just need to make myself an inviting target, and then once they've abducted me, they'll show me right to where the other victims are.”

Arnold closed his eyes in resignation. Raul grimaced, saying, “Come now, you

can't be serious. Isn't the more obvious choice to have His Highness or me don the disguise of a lady instead?"

"You should understand better than most that it's difficult to make even a slim gentleman like Sir Joel look like a convincing woman. You and Prince Arnold are both tall, and with Prince Arnold's build, it would be quite the task to disguise either of you as women."

Even a master of disguise like Raul didn't try to pass himself off as a woman or a child. One's height and build were fundamentally unalterable, after all.

"While we *could* entrust the task to Sir Joel, it's impossible for us to know how he'll conduct himself on the ship. I believe I make the only logical bait."

Arnold's response was completely unexpected. "I have one condition."

"Huh?"

Rishe had not yet realized that Arnold was growing used to her outlandish schemes. Or that he'd figured out a way to get back at her for them.

"Excuse me, Your Highness?! Y-you must be joking!"

Thus, Rishe's own proposed strategy ended up taking a very different course.

That night, gorgeously dressed men and women boarded the large passenger ship moored in the harbor. A man in a vest was handling the boarding procedures. When he noticed Rishe, he smiled and approached her.

"I'm so glad you could make it. You must be the young lady Duke Toona referred to us..."

Rishe wore a deep-blue dress, one that exposed a bit more skin than her usual wardrobe. Her hair was in an elegant updo, and large earrings dangled from her ears.

She curtsied to the man in the vest. "It's lovely to make your acquaintance. I am Rize, sister to Lord Bernstein." Dressed in her soirée finery with a folding fan

in hand, Rishe smiled brightly. The fake name tumbled from her lips as though she'd been saying it all her life. "I do so apologize for intruding on you at the last minute, but I just couldn't resist after hearing about the event from my good friend Lady Cornelia."

"Oh, no apologies necessary. If anything, our firm should apologize for not introducing ourselves to your family sooner. I understand your brother just recently received a peerage in Galkhein? The president of our firm is just dying to meet you."

It had been quite the race to arrange everything for sneaking into the party on short notice. Rishe tried to conceal her nerves, feeling apologetic toward the people whose names they were throwing around to get on board.

H-how am I doing? Am I pulling off "new nobility here to shop"?

Rishe was no stranger to occasional amateur acting. Her anxiety primarily stemmed from her current companion. *Things are a little different this time. After all, tonight I'm accompanied by...*

"My mistress, the good Lady Rize, is attending by herself tonight. His Lordship is not with her," said the man standing one step behind her. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Yes, it's just me here tonight. But, um..." Rishe glanced back at him.

Arnold returned her gaze in silence.

Normally, at an event like this, it was her future husband, the crown prince, who would be addressed first. That wasn't the case today, however.

With his hair slicked back and his normally hidden forehead exposed, Arnold appeared even more mature than he usually did. He stepped forward and took Rishe's hand, using a much more polite manner of speaking than she was used to. "Your garments will grow damp the longer you stand there."

"Hrk..."

"Please come this way, where the waves will not reach you...*Mistress.*"

Eep!

It felt ludicrous to hear him say that while dressed as her attendant. Rishe's cheeks burned with embarrassment.

The merchant smiled in understanding. "Ah, you have a guard accompanying you? Please note that we forbid weapons aboard the ship."



“Y-yes, of course!” Rishe hastened to say, hoping her panic wasn’t too noticeable. She didn’t miss the amused smirk that flashed across Arnold’s face as he watched her.

“I think this goes without saying, but I’ll be accompanying you.”

That was the “condition” Arnold had imposed in response to Rishe’s plan.

“But, Your Highness...even if they take the bait and go after me, I doubt they’ll do it tonight. I imagine they’d make a plan and carry out the abduction later, so I should be safe at the party.”

“That’s not the issue. It’s stranger for a young noblewoman to be out by herself, isn’t it?”

He had a point. It made things a bit more complicated, but they continued their planning session under the assumption that Arnold would be tagging along.

“If we’re to use the forged family name Prince Theodore provided us, then we’ll have to be from the same household. Shall we play husband and wife, then?”

“I don’t know about that...”

“Hmm?” Rishe cocked her head, and Raul sighed in exasperation.

“I’ll refrain from poking too many holes in whatever nonsense you two get up to, but I agree with His Highness. Husband and wife won’t work. It could ruin the whole plan.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you must fit the criteria they want if you’re aiming to be kidnapped as a potential slave. Given that the rescued women suffered no violence, it’s safe to say they’re only after ‘pure maidens.’ Thus, a married woman won’t do.”

“I-I see...”

That just made things even more complicated.

“What should we do, then? If we say we’re engaged, we’ll need another fictional family name, which we can’t exactly produce on short notice...”

The forged identity from Theodore was not just a random name. Records of the family’s achievements and current address were part of the package.

“Shall we be brother and sister, then?”

“It’s just as unnatural for a brother and sister to travel so far for a shopping trip, isn’t it?”

“I-Is it?” Rishe didn’t think that was true, but as an only child, she wasn’t too confident in her opinion.

“The bait is the only one who needs to be of noble birth. I simply need to play the part of someone whose presence at your side would not be unnatural.”

“Hmm? You mean...?”

Arnold smiled almost imperceptibly. “This is my condition for allowing you to act as bait.”

“Yes?”

Was the impish—almost *vengeful*—smile on Arnold’s face just Rishe’s imagination?

Regardless, the next thing he said was this: “I’ll be accompanying you as your guard and attendant.”

“Huh?” Rishe said, and then a few moments later, “Whaaaaat?!”

I never imagined something like this would happen...

This was Rishe’s thought as she hung her head while climbing aboard the gangway. They had just completed the boarding procedure. She looked up at her escort—but instead of lending her his arm, Arnold held only her hand, guiding her as a personal attendant would.

“Please watch your footing on deck.”

With his swept-back hair, exposed forehead, black gloves, and almost distantly polite tone, he seemed like a complete stranger. The shock of it all meant Rishe gave him a dazed look whenever her guard was down.

“Are you all right, Mistress?”

“Oops! P-please forgive me...”

Arnold narrowed his eyes at Rishe’s blurted apology. “Your necklace needs to be adjusted, if I may.”

“Oh!”

Arnold pulled Rishe close and whispered into her ear, “Rishe.”

“Eep...”

“No lady speaks that way to her servant,” he chastised her.

She strained her ears to hear Arnold’s hushed words over the thrumming of her heart. “I-I...”

Voice husky, he pressed, “You can do this, right?”

“Ngh...” Rishe squeezed her eyes shut, nodding. “Y-yes, sir!”

“Hey. What did I say?”

“Ack!” She was desperate now. “I-I understand, okay?! I can do it...”

A small rumble came from Arnold’s throat.

He laughed!

Arnold pulled away from Rishe, unruffled as ever. “Your hand, my lady?”

“Right, thanks...”

After that awkward exchange, Rishe took Arnold’s hand once again, her nerves not at all diminished due to her feelings for him.

“The ship is about to depart. It shouldn’t rock much at this size, but do be

careful,” one of the merchants told her as they descended to a lower deck. The hall they emerged in was already bustling with partygoers.

Wow!

A lush, deep-blue carpet cushioned their feet. Countless glowing lamps adorned the walls and ceiling. Well-dressed men and women chatted and browsed the goods with drinks in hand.

Gems, accessories, and other rare items were displayed on velvet-lined counters. Merchants wore shrewd smiles as they discussed the wares with guests.

Admittedly, Rishe had been very intrigued by the idea of doing business like this, so she didn't have to put on an act to enjoy the sights. She turned to Arnold. “Do you see that, Your—”

“...”

She cleared her throat when he shot her a cautioning glance and started over like a noble lady casually chatting with her attendant. “L-Look over there! All the things they have here are so amazing!”

“I cannot guess at the value of these items, but if you're enjoying yourself, Mistress, that's all I could ask for.”

Cool as ever...

Unlike Rishe, he wasn't the least bit uneasy about their circumstances. She was anything *but* calm about Arnold walking behind her instead of at her side as he had at every other social event.

“Walk next to me,” she ordered.

Arnold frowned, betraying a hint of agitation. “Mistress.”

“I'm all alone at night in a place I've never been. I'll feel more at ease with you by my side, shopping with me.”

“...”

“You don’t have to escort me. I just want you...next to me...”

Arnold sighed and stepped forward, at level with Rishe’s side. “Will this suffice?”

Rishe nodded, relieved, but she still wasn’t used to their new “relationship.” She restlessly averted her eyes and noticed that many of the female partygoers were shooting ardent gazes Arnold’s way.

Even the looks he’s getting are different from how they’d be at a party in the palace...

Arnold was the crown prince and he had a fiancée, plus he intentionally spread rumors about his coldheartedness. In this setting, people didn’t have those preconceptions about the servant at her side, so women openly and passionately appraised him.

For his part, Arnold showed no indication that he noticed all the eyes on him. He merely said to Rishe, “Let us go, my lady.”

“Right...” Still nervous from his gentle tone, Rishe told herself, *It’s okay. I can do this. I’ll be of use to Prince Arnold, and then...*

She suddenly recalled a conversation she’d had with the knight commander in her sixth life.

“Historically, Galkhein only has experience fighting other countries on its own continent. The wars they’ve waged have been in service of expanding their own territory.”

Rishe listened from her seat beside Joel in a bar in the capital. As usual, she was disguised as a male knight. “I have a question, Commander!”

“Yes? What is it, Lucius?” The commander answered her enthusiasm in kind. His cheeks were red, perhaps because of the alcohol he’d already consumed.

Rishe ordered another beer, then asked, “Do you mean to say that Galkhein is not equipped to wage war with a country across the sea?”

“Indeed I do. They have no ships with which to wage nautical warfare. They have neither the knowledge nor the technique for shipbuilding, and it’s unlikely that they even have any sailors capable of captaining a warship.”

“But aren’t their vessels for trade and travel superior to almost every other nation’s?”

“They have fast, lightweight ships for trade, yes—but those are nothing like the sturdy ships needed to wage war. Right, Joel?”

Joel was busy nibbling on some cheese. When the conversation abruptly pivoted to him, he said sleepily, “Huh? Why are you asking me? You started this stupid conversation, you drunkard. You finish it.”

“Some mentor you are. You can’t even answer your junior’s question?”

“Mentor...” Joel murmured, turning to face Rishe. “Lu, in a naval battle, you board an enemy’s ship and fight with swords...”

“Yes?” she prompted.

“But first, you ram the prow of your ship into their side. That’s how the ships fight before the knights do.”

“So ships meant for war need to be capable of doing damage and taking hits...”

Rishe figured the impacts must have been tremendous, considering they were meant to open up holes in the other ship.

“But if you make a ship with both offensive and defensive capabilities, doesn’t the hull become very heavy? Just getting anywhere with a slow ship would take so much time that you could run out of war funds or lose your whole army in an accident.”

“Yeah, I guess so. That’s why it’s so impressive that our ships are strong, tough, and fast. At least, that’s what I remember His Majesty saying once when he was drunk...am I right, Commander?”

“Correct. Siarga would be done for if we didn’t have a means to defend ourselves from threats across the sea.”

Rishe absorbed the commander’s words as she drank her new beer.

“Our country excels at shipbuilding because we had no choice but to build warships to defend ourselves. In fact, our techniques are state secrets, and those with knowledge of them never leave the country.”

“State secrets!” Rishe repeated, awed. It made sense that they would go to extraordinary lengths to keep such knowledge within Siarga.

It’s like that conversation happened only yesterday. I never thought I’d be remembering it as Prince Arnold’s fiancée, though, Rishe mused as she browsed the ship’s wares. Naval battles and nautical invasions are more dangerous than fighting on land. I’m sure that’s why Galkhein avoids maritime warfare as much as possible.

Take Coyolles across the sea, for instance. Its ample gold deposits made it valuable territory, yet Arnold’s father had never attacked it head-on.

Lord Lawvine and Fritz discussed enemy ships attacking Ceutena in the north. Arnold had met the enemy, but not on the water. He’d lured them onto land before wiping out the whole force. At least up until two years ago, Galkhein avoided fighting on water.

Thus far, Galkhein had lacked the shipbuilding techniques and seafaring capabilities to expand their invasions any farther than their own continent. *And Prince Arnold is the one who changes that. He obtains the power to cross the sea and conquer even faraway countries...*

Rishe looked up at him, and he returned her gaze right away. Those eyes were her favorite color in the whole world.

Siarga’s shipbuilding techniques are a state secret, and its craftsmen can’t even leave. I must assume that in my past lives, one of those craftsmen was

abducted by these pirates and encountered Prince Arnold.

To prevent that from happening, Rishe had arranged to visit Bezzetoria around the time Joel would be there, even if it meant her wedding dress wouldn't be ready on time.

From what she knew, it took three or four years for a single ship to be crafted in Siarga. In Galkhein, where they wouldn't have the necessary facilities ready, it would take more than four years. For Arnold to make use of his warships in his conflict five years in the future, he would need to obtain the shipbuilding technology around now.

Since he had those ships when the war started, he'll have to start building them soon. Still, our biggest priority must be rescuing the abducted women as soon as possible.

Examining an array of brooches displayed in the hall, Rishe said, "They're all wonderful pieces, but it's too bad..."

She spoke to Arnold, but she made sure a nearby merchant could hear her. The man was listening in on their conversation; perhaps he was keeping an eye on her because she was a new face.

"I have the fitting for my wedding dress tomorrow, right?"

"...Yes."

"I wish I could've come here after the fitting and picked out an accessory to match the dress," Rishe said with feigned disappointment. "What poor timing that the party wound up being tonight!"

Arnold nonchalantly replied, "I'm sure any accessory would look stunning on you, Mistress."

"Hrk!" She knew they were acting, but this was bad for her heart. Rishe couldn't help getting flustered when *Arnold* of all people uttered such a line—especially now that she was aware of her feelings for him. Even if they were just doing this to deceive their enemies, she had to hang her head, her cheeks

blushing. “D-don’t be ridiculous... That being said, I’m not very good at judging these things. Do you think you could pick something out for me?”

So far, things were going according to plan. Arnold examined the items to his right and named one of them. “What about that tiara?”

Rishe admired the beautiful craftsmanship of the piece, but she grimaced and met Arnold’s gaze. “My brother has told me to choose something that won’t bring shame to our family now that we’re part of the nobility. That tiara is very pretty, but I think it should be something with more gems on it.” She made a show of contemplating her fictional brother’s words. “Do you see anything else?”

“What about that necklace, then?”

“I like the design, but the gems are a little small, aren’t they?”

“How about the piece near the wall?”

“I have something similar already. This is for my wedding! It must be completely unique.”

“I see some rings over there, then?” Arnold was doubtless just naming any and every item that caught his eye. They’d discussed how he would give suggestions and Rishe would find reasons to refuse each one—but she countered this suggestion with a serious answer.

“No rings,” she said, covering the sapphire ring adorning her left ring finger. “I already have one I treasure...”

Arnold frowned. The ring she wore was, of course, the one he had given her. She’d requested embroidery for her dress that matched its design.

Oh! She finally realized what she’d just said and hurried to explain herself.

“A-after all, my future husband gave me this ring! The stone is my favorite color in the whole world, and I’m very fond of it! I love this ring more than anything else I own!”

“Is that so?”

Rishe let her gaze drop to her high-heeled shoes, unable to meet Arnold's eyes. "When my husband-to-be put this ring on my finger, I was so very happy..."

"..."

Thinking back on that day, Rishe realized once more, *I must have already been in love with Prince Arnold then.*

She couldn't believe it had taken her this long to catch on. All too aware of her ears turning red, Rishe did her best to play the part of the engaged noble lady without it seeming unnatural. "I'm definitely wearing this ring for the wedding."

There was no need to pretend. She just had to make sure no one inferred that the man acting as her guard was the person she would be marrying.

"I would wear it everywhere if I weren't worried about losing or damaging it. So I don't need any more rings other than this one for the rest of my life!"

She may have just blurted out something incredibly embarrassing. Arnold studied her like he had something to say—but she still couldn't meet his eyes, so she pretended not to notice.

"I-I just had a good idea. Why don't I pick something out that goes with my ring?!"

"I believe that would be for the best."

"Hmm, but it's too bad... My brother said he would buy me an accessory to celebrate my marriage, but..." She turned her head this way and that, looking utterly disappointed. "I don't see anything that fits what I want."

The moment those words left her lips, it happened.

"I apologize for the delayed greeting, Lady Rize."

Upon hearing the fake name she'd given earlier, Rishe turned to find a man approaching her.

“I am the organizer of this little soirée,” he said. “We’re ever so grateful you could attend tonight’s party.”

Here he is. Rishe smiled, keeping her thoughts divorced from her expression. “Good evening. I am Rize Andrea Bernstein. I apologize for barging in on you so suddenly.”

“Nonsense. We had some last-minute cancellations, so we couldn’t be happier for the opportunity to show our prized goods to an esteemed lady such as yourself.”

Rishe observed the organizer as he spoke. *If he’s responsible for this event, he must be connected to the pirates. I should make sure to set the bait out for him.*

Beaming, Rishe said, “I’m going to be married soon, you see.”

“Well, that’s fantastic news! Congratulations!” The organizer had the bearing of a first-rate merchant. His demeanor suggested respect for his client, and he seemed both sincere and warm as he interacted with Rishe.

But... Having been the same sort of merchant herself once, the man’s intent was perfectly clear to her. *He’s also appraising me.*

In her first life, her boss, Tully, had told her, “*The very best merchants choose their own customers.*” The organizer was sizing her up, deciding whether to choose her.

Pretending not to notice, Rishe played the part of the blushing bride-to-be. “Thank you. My brother said he would listen to anything I asked of him as a wedding present.”

“Is that right? Then may I say what an honor it is for you to choose our firm to provide an item for your wedding.”

“Hee hee. It’s rather silly if you ask me.” Rishe turned to Arnold and giggled. “After all, he only just recently gifted me so many dresses and gems that they hardly fit in my room. Right?”

Acting as her attendant, Arnold responded coolly, “His Lordship values you

more than anything else in the world, Mistress.”

“Well, it *is* just the two of us now that Mother and Father are gone. But it’s a little embarrassing, really. Both my brother and my future husband spoil me as if I’m a child...”

The organizer watched over the conversation between the two of them with a warm smile on his face. Rishe knew he was hanging on her every word. On the inside, he was trying to evaluate what sort of customer she would be and what kind of profit she could bring him. Even the most trivial conversations could provide hints to such questions. Rishe understood this well, which was why she threaded lies into what she said here and there.

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s a competition between them, giving me gifts.” She leaned into her facade of a young lady with abundant wealth. One who didn’t know much about how the world worked and did her shopping with nary a care, and who never questioned the fact that she always got everything she wanted.

And for good measure... Rishe thought under the organizer’s watchful eye.

“Why not choose the item your fiancé wished to buy you as well, Mistress? I was under the impression that you changed your accessories with each place you visit to announce your wedding.”

“But he *just* gave me more gifts than I know what to do with for my birthday! I won’t seem selfish asking for something else, will I? I wouldn’t want my betrothed to hate me...”

Arnold’s smooth response was, “It is a husband’s duty to grant anything his wife desires.”

Her heart throbbed, but she didn’t let it show on her face. Discreetly taking a deep breath, she continued as if nothing had happened. “Well, we’ll have to visit some jewelry shops then, won’t we? Of course, it would be best if we could just find everything here on this ship, but...” Rishe’s eyes slid to the organizer, who grinned back at her.

“We would love to provide everything you might be searching for, Lady Rize,” he said, his tone a bit firmer than before. It was a purposeful change, as far as she could tell. He wanted to appear confident and trustworthy to his new client. “Those cancellations I mentioned earlier? The truth is that we decided not to display *all* our wares at tonight’s party to save on transportation expenses somewhat.”

“My, really?” Rishé covered her mouth with her fan, feigning surprise. “May I take that to mean that you have even lovelier pieces elsewhere?”

“Absolutely! I can guarantee we have something that would satisfy both your brother and your fiancé. What do you say?” he asked her with a polite smile. “Perhaps we could arrange a meeting at a later date with the viscount or your betrothed accompanying you?”

Rishé’s smile dropped for the briefest of moments. The organizer was probing her.

She topped up her cheer and told him, “They’re both just so busy, unfortunately.” She cocked her head at Arnold. “Isn’t that right?”

“Indeed, Mistress.”

“Is that so?” The organizer nodded sympathetically and fixed his eyes on Rishé. “In that case, please allow us to provide you with an opportunity to do your shopping on your own, my lady.”

Rishé faked starry-eyed excitement. “Would you really? Oh, I can’t wait!” She spun back to Arnold, wearing a big smile. “Now I’ll be able to choose the perfect accessory after my dress fitting tomorrow. I’m ever so grateful!”

“It will be our pleasure. Please enjoy the items we *do* have on display tonight, and have some refreshments. There will also be a performance shortly.”

Rishé enjoyed the rest of the night, giddily cooing over the wares and listening to the small orchestra’s performance. A little over an hour later, she and Arnold disembarked.

“Whew!” Rische exclaimed in relief after they boarded a carriage together. She felt like she’d been holding her breath the whole time she’d been acting as “Rize.”

She turned to Arnold as the carriage slowly began to move. “Thank you for playing along, Your Highness. I think I was able to perform well, thanks to you.” Rische smiled, thinking back on the party. “As a noble lady with a loving brother, that is. Being the lonely only child I am, I didn’t have much to draw on.”

Arnold regarded her and said, “It was exactly as you suspected. That man was without a doubt appraising you.”

It’s amazing that he can tell without any experience as a merchant.

Rische nodded, trying not to show her surprise. “Yes, as a product and not a customer. That wasn’t the look of someone sizing up a potential client... He was judging whether I would be a good target to kidnap and sell.”

Arnold scowled, and Rische hastily added, “B-but everything went exactly as planned!”

“...”

“A wealthy young woman with a loving family and fiancé would be searched for quite stringently if she went missing. The best possible target for them is a girl from an affluent family whose skin and hair is well cared for and who’s nothing but a burden on her family.”

That was why Rische had played the part of such a girl.

“A brother who *really* obsessed over his sister would never allow her to venture out alone to a nighttime shopping venue where alcohol is served. And even if he had no choice but to send her with protection, he wouldn’t be satisfied with only one man guarding her.”

From the organizer’s perspective, Rische had to be lying about her situation, since she only had one guard with her.

“He saw the ring I was wearing, so I’m sure he doesn’t doubt that my family is wealthy. He should only believe that I’m lying about being so loved by my brother and fiancé.”

“Right. Thus his promise to give you a place to shop on your own.”

At the end of their conversation, the organizer had tested the waters by asking if she would be able to bring her brother or fiancé along on another day. Rishe had purposely acted uncomfortable with the question, and when she’d told him they wouldn’t be able to attend, he’d suggested readying an opportunity for her to shop on her own.

I can’t believe he would actually propose such a thing. Rishe had a hard time accepting the man’s behavior, having been a merchant herself.

“I imagine that’s where ‘Lady Rize’ will be abducted,” she said.

Arnold sighed and closed his eyes.

She grabbed his sleeve, recalling that there was something she needed to comment on at her first opportunity. “To change the subject, Your Highness...”

“What is it?”

She peered up into his blue eyes and furrowed her brow in frustration. “How in the world are you so good at playing an attendant?!”

The prince cocked a brow, then changed the subject himself. “Let me ask *you* something.”

“Mmph!”

He squished Rishe’s cheeks with his big hands. “What did you think you were doing, trying to drink that wine? Don’t just blithely drink things at a shady place like that.”

“Hrmgh... Buh if you don’ drink a lihhle ah a pwace lihe that, it’s suspishous.” Rishe did her best to protest despite Arnold’s hold on her cheeks. “An’ you were the one who...”

She thought back to the party. The moment Rishe had picked up a glass of wine provided on the ship, Arnold had snatched it out of her hand, still playing her “attendant.”

“My, is this wine imported from Siarga? How wonderful. I must have some... Oh!”

“I would suggest holding off for tonight, my lady. You know you don’t hold your alcohol well.”

He’d taken the drink from her so casually and fluidly. They’d had opportunities to drink together several times now, so he should have been aware that she was a decently good drinker—yet he’d lied about it with such a convincing expression.

“I houbt hey would hab poishoned somefin’ there. Wouldn’t it be more suspishous to be caushious?”

“Even so, I can’t believe you’d go out of your way to drink something prepared by your potential abductors.”

Rishe sighed. It was a perfectly sound argument, she had to admit. She also had to acknowledge that she was having a hard time keeping her cool with Arnold’s face so close to hers.

Does Prince Arnold think squishing my cheeks like this is a punishment? If that was his aim, then he was succeeding. Rishe was unbearably embarrassed, her cheeks heating up by the second.

Evidently, her distress was plain on her face. Arnold huffed a sigh and said, “I understand that it’s part of your plan...but don’t be *too* defenseless in front of them.” He removed his hands, giving her a quiet but piercing stare. “Don’t forget they intend to do you harm.”

Arnold’s clear, blue eyes were breathtakingly cold.

I know you don’t even need to go along with my plan. You could use Galkhein’s overwhelming military might to destroy the slave trade in an instant

if you wanted to. He was only holding off on doing so to humor Rishe's desire to save the rest of the captive women. And I know you're really a kind person. That's why you always consider the fastest way to resolve a situation, even if it leads to sacrifice. And that's why I...

Rishe straightened up and told Arnold, "By playing the part of defenseless prey, I've invited the enemy to let down their guard. It will make their movements much more predictable."

"..."

"Don't worry. We'll use anything we need to rescue those women." Her determination renewed, Rishe frowned and muttered, "It's frustrating that we can't do anything but wait for their invitation now."

The women who'd been abducted likely hadn't suspected a thing about that organizer, and why should they? It would have been unthinkable for a merchant to harm them. After all, the relationship between a merchant and their client was built on trust and predicated on the assumption that both parties would benefit from their trade.

I wonder if my acting tonight was enough. I feel like I could have gotten things moving a little faster if I'd tried...

"Rishe."

She started when Arnold laid a hand on hers. He interlaced their fingers, which made her realize she'd been clutching her dress.

Rishe let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding as Arnold said softly, "You have your wedding dress fitting tomorrow, don't you?"

"Y-yes. In the evening..."

What they'd discussed on the ship hadn't *all* been lies for the slave traders to latch on to. Rishe's ostensible reason for coming to this town was to put the finishing touches on her wedding dress.

"I'll serve as your guard when you go. Do you mind waiting for me?"

“Huh?! You’ll come with me, Your Highness?” Rishe asked, eyes wide.

“We discussed doing so in front of the slave traders, didn’t we?” he replied, unconcerned. “As there’s a possibility they’ll spot us in town, we should make sure to keep up the act.”

So the farce had to continue. That made sense to Rishe, but it worried her a little as well.

“But, Your Highness...we’ll most likely be discussing the dress’s embroidery and ornamentation tomorrow. Won’t you be bored waiting for us to finish?”

“Why would I be bored?” Arnold looked tenderly upon her. “If you’re going to be wearing your wedding dress, I want to see it.”

Rishe gasped, heat flooding her chest. She was using the wedding dress as part of her strategy to avoid the war, but she’d also secretly been looking forward to trying it on. Arnold’s words brought all her excitement rushing to the surface.

He must have noticed that her heart was full to bursting. “If you need jewelry to go with the dress, then pick out as many pieces as you like. If the goods on that ship weren’t stolen, I would have bought every one of them for you.”

“N-now *that* would be suspicious!” Rishe spluttered, but she couldn’t help smiling.

He’s trying to spoil me... The thought truly delighted her.

“Say, Prince Arnold?” A wheedling plea filled Rishe’s eyes as she turned them on Arnold. “There’s something I’d like to ask of you tomorrow...”

When Rishe told him what she wanted, Arnold scowled in response.

Chapter 3

AFTER DEPARTING from the port where the slave traders' ship was docked, Rishe and Arnold's carriage entered a small alley in the seaside city of Bezzetoria. Though they'd made sure they weren't being followed, they wound through the alleyways and changed carriages a few times just to be safe.

Arnold left all this to Rishe. When he was being tailed, he usually handled things in a more...*direct* manner, so he watched Rishe give instructions to the coachman with great amusement.

Once they finally arrived at the royal villa, Rishe turned to Arnold and asked, "Are you really going to grant my request, Your Highness?"

Arnold shot her a sour look as he shook off his jacket and handed it to Oliver. "I will. However..." He bent down to whisper in her ear, and she squeaked. "You *will* keep you-know-what a secret, as you promised. Can you do that for me?"

Rishe squirmed at the ticklish sensation of his voice in her ear. She covered her mouth, nodding frantically. She was aware of her face turning crimson, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Arnold withdrew from Rishe, silent, though it seemed like he still had something to say.

After watching the exchange, Oliver said, "You really shouldn't tease your poor fiancée, my lord."

"I'm not teasing her. If I don't make my expectations absolutely clear, she'll put herself in danger like it's the rational thing to do."

Ugh! He knows exactly what he's doing!

Oliver was right on the money. Arnold was well aware of his effect on Rishe; he liked to tease her.

"I-I'm taking a bath! Good night to both of you!" Rishe yelled, scurrying up the

stairs. Meanwhile, Arnold would likely tell Oliver what she'd asked of him.

Anyway, I have preparations tomorrow morning before the dress fitting. I can't wait to meet the specialist Oliver arranged for... Oh!

On her way to third-floor bathroom, she sensed someone approaching her. When she reached the landing of the staircase, she found the two people she'd been expecting waiting for her.

"Hello, Raul. Sir Joel."

Standing behind Joel, Raul flashed her a roguish smile. "Hey, Princess. You're back late."

Joel was as sleepy as ever, barely keeping his eyes open.

"How are you feeling, Sir Joel? The drug should be almost out of your system at this point, but please don't push yourself."

"Mm..."

"The swordsman just awoke, Your Highness. As we discussed, I explained the undercover operation to him."

"You did? Thank you, Raul."

"It was the least I could do. I heard the two of you arriving just now, so I was on my way to meet you."

Joel watched blankly as Raul dipped into a sweeping bow. Raul was accompanying the Siargan knight on Arnold's orders.

"That swordsman has information from Siarga and has likely seen some of the faces of the men running the slave trade. There's no need to work separately if it's more efficient to make use of him." Nevertheless, the prince had instructed Raul to stay at Joel's side.

Prince Arnold can't judge Joel's trustworthiness right now. Raul is the perfect person to keep an eye on him.

As the leader of an organization of "hunters," Raul specialized in tracking and

locating people. Rishe had learned everything she knew about intelligence gathering from him in her fifth life.

Still, she was somewhat suspicious of this situation despite everything. *Prince Arnold makes use of Raul like he's a convenient tool. It's hard for me to believe how easily he trusts him.*

Raul obeyed Arnold because the prince had extended a helping hand to his homeland of Siguel. His service was out of appreciation for Galkhein and Siguel's joint venture into minting paper currency.

I know Prince Arnold is the type to make use of anything he finds convenient without hesitating...and maybe he's just applying the most fitting tool for the job, but still...

He used Raul a little *too* readily, didn't he?

I can't think about this in front of Raul. He'll catch on right away.

Rishe interacted with the two men as she always did. If Raul *did* notice, he didn't show it.

"You never cease to amaze me. To make the crown prince play servant and to offer yourself up despite being crown princess..." Raul teased her with mock exasperation.

"I-I keep telling you, we're not married yet!"

That was when Joel, who'd been drowsily observing them, stepped toward Rishe. "Hey." He peered into her face from just a little too close.

"Um... Yes, Sir Joel?"

"It just doesn't make sense. Prince Arnold is definitely stronger if he fights on his own." Joel's eyes, which seemed to hold limitless light within, honed in on Rishe. "What does he need you for?"

"Huh?" Rishe blinked rapidly, unable to process what he'd just said.

Joel studied Rishe and muttered, "If he really needed you for something, I

guess it would make sense, but I just don't see what use you could possibly be to him."

"Come now, Sir Joel..."

"Well, aren't I right? He's stronger than me, I can tell that much. Yet he's playing along with your silly little strategy, protecting you. It's strange that he's taking such a roundabout way to handle things. It only makes sense if he's just doing this to humor the whims of his wife..." Joel cocked his head, sincere confusion in his eyes. "Why does your husband humor you so?"

Rishe was thrown by the question. *I can't believe Joel's actually taking an interest!* The Joel she knew from her sixth life only focused on others' bladework, yet here and now, he seemed genuinely interested in Arnold as a person. She had an inkling as to where this curiosity stemmed from, though.

"Do you feel a certain kinship with Prince Arnold, Sir Joel?"

Joel's eyes went wide in surprise.

A genius with the sword. Someone overwhelmingly stronger than anyone else around him... Prince Arnold must be the first person Joel's ever met who seems so similar to him.

"How can you tell?" Joel asked, a little annoyed.

"I just got that sense from seeing your face."

In her sixth life, she'd been completely lost trying to figure out how to interact with him when they first met. *But Joel is a really straightforward person.*

If she paid close enough attention, she could see the emotions behind his expressionless visage. She'd grown to know him well enough to tell when he was excited by a strong swordsman or when he was unbearably hungry. She could tell the difference between when he truly was tired and when he merely slept because there was nothing better to do.

She also knew that when he went with her somewhere "as her mentor," it was because he was worried about her. She'd also noticed him smiling more the

stronger she grew, and the pride with which he gazed at her.

Seeing her peculiar smile, Joel muttered, “You’re strange too, you know that? Really strange... Maybe you’re stronger than average, but you’re obviously not as strong as me. I just don’t see what Prince Arnold sees in you.”

“Oh? Who’s to say I won’t grow stronger with time?”

“Sure, I guess, but you’re weak now.” One of Joel’s pale, bony hands reached for Rishe. “I mean, you’re so small and dainty and soft... You’re just a girl.”

Raul had been observing them without a word, but his hand snapped out and grabbed Joel’s wrist.

“Oh,” Joel said in dull surprise.

“Raul...?” Startled, Rishe peered into Raul’s narrowed red eyes.

After a brief silence, Raul released Joel’s arm. “Whoops! That was close. His Highness never ordered me to protect his wife. I almost did work I’m not being paid for!”

Rishe groaned. Still, she gave him a wry smile. He was cracking jokes about it, but it was obvious that he’d stepped in because he was worried about her.

“Thank you, though.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” he said with a shrug, his gaze landing on Joel. “Anyway, Sir Swordsman, I would suggest not touching the princess so carelessly if you don’t want His Dreadful Highness murdering you. I can personally vouch for the danger.”

“Mm. I can tell from how Prince Arnold protected Rishe. Maybe if I can’t get him to have a match with me, I’ll just pick Rishe up in front of him.”

Raul burst out laughing. “I really wouldn’t, if I were you.”

Listening to them, Rishe suddenly remembered something Joel had told her when they’d first met in her sixth life.

“I’ll only get weaker if I do something like that. You should be alone when you

fight. If you spend too much time worrying about other people, you'll die too easily when you're finally in a real battle."



At the time, Rishe hadn't accepted those words. *But it was just as he said. In return for looking out for me on the battlefield, he...*

What had been on Joel's mind in his final moments protecting Rishe from being cut down by Arnold? Rishe had died herself a moment later, so she'd never had a chance to think about it.

Masters of the sword like him are stronger when they fight alone. And that goes not just for Joel but for Prince Arnold too.

Worry prickled deep in her heart.

The next day, Rishe was holed up in the bathroom after breakfast.

"Mm..."

A sweet, comforting scent wafted from the bathwater as it lapped against her. The water was slightly cool, but hot water was added frequently to prevent her from getting too cold.

It's so warm... It feels nice.

Rishe soaked in the milky bath, eyes half-lidded.

"How is the water, Madam Bride?" a woman behind her asked.

"It's so relaxing!"

"I'm glad to hear it. Just let us know if anything's uncomfortable, all right?"

The woman was washing her hair. And it wasn't just her; there was another woman washing her skin, and one massaging her shoulders as well. There was even one moisturizing her face and another tending to her fingertips and nails. All Rishe had to do was lie back and let them work.

One of the women smiled and said, "We have to get you all dolled up before your wedding, after all."

This treat Oliver arranged for me. Could it be...? Under the women's careful

treatment to make her look her best in her wedding dress tonight, Rishe wondered, *Is this the first step toward the life of utter sloth I've dreamt of?!*

For some reason, Arnold sometimes asked her, "You still haven't given up on that?"

The question made no sense to her. In her mind, every one of her actions was leading up to that carefree life she so craved.

The women tended to Rishe in the bath, giving her every beauty treatment she could ever conceive of.

"You have such nice, smooth hair. I've finished applying the treatment, so I'll work it in with a warm towel now, okay?"

"Let's give you a scalp and facial massage too. You do a lot of reading, don't you? Let's get those muscles nice and relaxed."

"The water has warmed you up as well, so your circulation should be better."

Wow... Rishe let her eyes shut in bliss at the gentle but thorough services the women provided. *Now this is the work of professionals!*

The water wasn't even that warm, yet her whole body felt perfectly toasty. She'd had plenty of cream rubbed into her skin, and when it was wiped away with a special, finely woven cloth, her complexion became so clear, it was almost translucent. In fact, the sunlight shining into the bathroom made her skin appear almost luminescent.

I've only ever done my own beauty treatments in all my lives thus far. Being able to leave everything to other people is so new to me...

These maids worked primarily on cleaning, laundry, and academic pursuits to prepare them for any employer they might have. Rishe usually bathed alone, so she'd never experienced anything like this before.

There's even a cool, delicious drink nearby. I don't have to lift a finger, and I'm getting all dolled up for my wedding... This is the life! A life of total relaxation!

She sighed dreamily as another beauty cream was applied to her face.

“Feel free to have a little nap if you’d like.”

“That’s a very appealing suggestion, but first...” Rishe opened her eyes and asked the woman applying the cream, “Judging by the scent, does this cream use peach nectar petals?”

“My, you could tell?”

“Yes! They’re so valuable! I can’t believe you can use so many of them like this!”

The woman blinked in surprise, and Rishe piled on her questions.

“The buds must’ve been plucked an hour before the petals opened as well! Am I right?! They’re so rare, and it’s incredibly difficult to ascertain the right season to pick them, so they hardly ever show up on the market, right?!”

“I-It’s exactly as you say. How did you know?”

“The cream has a faint citrus aroma. It’s a particular scent peach nectar buds only give off when they’re plucked just before blooming, and the petals have amazing restorative powers at this stage...”

Rishe had done plenty of research using these flowers in her lives as an apothecary and an alchemist. She was never able to get very far because they were so difficult to obtain, but she remembered their distinctive smell well.

“There’s also honeyberry orange in the cream as well, yes? Plus honey and...?”

“Y-yogurt. There’s also mashed cielito fruit and shoots of olhuveli grass...”

“Olhuveli grass! I use it in a sunscreen I make. It’s very moisturizing, isn’t it?”

“A sunscreen *you* make, Madam Bride?!”

The women’s eyes sparkled, and they leaned toward Rishe.

“I *did* think you had wonderful skin well defended against the sun. Could you share your regimen with us later?!”

“Of course! I’d love to hear more about your own techniques as well. Each one is so amazing—I can just see these treatments gaining in popularity!”

Plans started to form in Rishe’s mind, her heart leaping with the possibilities.

In this life, I use the knowledge I gathered in my lives as an apothecary and an alchemist to craft my own makeup and lotions. I never had the confidence to put them on the market, since you need to follow certain usage rules—but if I joined hands with skilled specialists in the field, I could solve the problem! First, I would market it to nobles. Once women with the ability to hire specialists saw the benefits of their use, then I could... Oh!

She finally came back to her senses when she realized what she was using all this brain power on.

“Madam Bride?”

“I-It’s nothing! Please continue!”

She’d sat up without thinking, but she sank back into the water. *This won’t do. I need to relax and not think about work! Even medicine works better when your mind and body are at ease. Come to think of it, there’s a region in the east where they use hot springs to treat wounds, isn’t there? What if you could use lotions in a bath in a similar manner for skincare? Cost-effectiveness is what first comes to mind, but in this case—wait, no!*

Rishe desperately shook off the thoughts. “Thank you all, really. I’m so excited to wear my wedding dress after all of your careful treatments.”

“Oh, Madam Bride? It’s not just about the wedding dress, though, is it?”

“Hmm?” Rishe tilted her head, and the woman grinned at her.

“We need to make your skin nice and smooth to catch your husband’s eye!”

“What?!”

“Aah! Madam Bride?!”

Rishe slipped against the bath and her head plunged into the water. She shot

back up with a cough, but her heart was pounding.

“My husband?! His eye?! Huh?!”

“Well, isn’t that only natural? As the crown princess, you’ll have certain... bridal duties.”

A strangled sound escaped her throat as Rishe’s face burned. *C-calm down! It’s fine! That’s not going to happen! I mean...* She took a deep breath, sucking in the sweet-smelling air in the bathroom. *Prince Arnold has already declared this a mariage blanc...*

When they’d visited the Grand Basilica, Arnold had mussed her hair and told her, *“Even after we’re married, I won’t take advantage of you.”*

The words served as an echo of another promise he’d made her: *“You don’t need to be resolute to become my wife.”*

Rishe hung her head, chest aching something fierce. The reason those words had stung so much must have been because she was already in love with him then.

His Highness even said he hated his father’s methods but that he’d used those same methods to wed me. From another angle, that meant he had some reason to marry her that would drive him to such lengths. *But how can I blame him for hiding things when I’m doing the same to him? I have so many secrets and have told so many lies to stop his war. I must finish things if I’m ever to tell him how I feel...*

When she got that far, she realized something strange about her thoughts. “Hmm?”

“Is something the matter, Madam Bride?”

Rishe’s head snapped up. “I-I’m sorry. It’s nothing,” she said, making a vow in her heart.

Even if I don’t know what Prince Arnold is thinking...if it’s not the role of a wife or an empress that he desires of me, I can still stay by his side as myself.

And if that was the case, there was only one thing she could do.

When Rishe lapsed into thought, the women murmured among themselves and exchanged glances.

“There are all sorts of things to worry about before a wedding, so it can be easy to fall into a low mood. But please cheer up, Madam Bride!”

“Yes! You have your dress fitting tonight, don’t you?”

The women spoke kindly to Rishe, attempting to lift her spirits.

“Once we’re finished here, how about taking it easy till evening? You have something fun to look forward to, so I’m sure your mood will improve in no time!”

“Th-thank you, ladies...” Rishe accepted their feelings with gratitude, stuffing down her shame.

I’m thankful, but it hurts at the same time. I am going to my dress fitting tonight, but...

Once Rishe was all prettied up and ready, she left the villa. Those women could never have guessed where she was headed.

“Please inspect the state of our security to your heart’s content, Your Highness,” Bezzetoria’s guard captain told Arnold.

Standing behind the prince, Rishe observed the captain. She had a good idea of the state of things from his pallor when Arnold appeared.

This captain must be in some sort of opposition to Prince Arnold. Either this inspection is simply inconvenient for him or he’s taking orders from His Highness’s father.

According to Arnold’s brother, Theodore, the crown prince had a lot of enemies.

Rishe renewed her focus and asked Arnold, “Where shall we start, Your

Highness? I know you said you wished to see as much of the port town as you could since this inspection provided the opportunity.”

He merely looked at her, too full of possible responses to choose just one.

Fully aware of his gaze, Rishe nevertheless puffed out her chest. “Your humble Imperial Guard trainee Lucius Alcott will accompany you wherever you wish, Your Highness!”

Arnold could only sigh.

An Imperial Guard uniform worn over her freshly polished skin, Rishe grinned up at him.

“There’s something I’d like to ask of you,” Rishe had begun in the carriage the night before. “I’d like to confirm the state of security in town before my dress fitting tomorrow.”

Even though she knew no one else was listening, she put her hand to Arnold’s ear and whispered, “Do you suppose I could accompany you as a trainee knight?”

Arnold pulled back and cocked his head, frowning. “Why?”

“One factor that the traffickers are using to their benefit is insufficient inspection of ship cargo. At least one of the officials in charge of the area must be in on the operation. You suspect the same thing, I’m sure.” She assumed he’d already asked Oliver to investigate it.

“Our presence here must have put those officials on edge, don’t you think? It’s possible their caution will throw a wrench into our plan.”

“Criminals tend to be most brazen when suspicion is rising and they’re afraid they’re about to be caught.”

“Conversely, they’re most at ease when they think, ‘I’ve gotten away with it. I’m smarter than my enemies.’”

If the royal couple lulled them into a false sense of security, they wouldn't feel threatened. Still, that same sour expression lingered on Arnold's face.

"That's not what I was asking. Why do you have to play the part of a knight?"

"Well, because your Imperial Guard's entirely too competent, Prince Arnold. It would be unnatural for one of them to miss something that was obviously suspicious."

Conversely, it was almost a given that a "trainee" would fail to pick up on some shady activity. Rishe and Joel had used their less-than-imposing appearances to keep a low profile in her sixth life. She'd gained plenty of experience investigating and apprehending criminals this way.

"I brought a short wig and shoes with me just in case I needed to go into town in disguise. As for the size, I can just take in someone's uniform temporarily to fit me... I suppose it would be a bother to the actual knights, so I'll borrow Raul's!"

"..."

"Let's say I'm a talentless son of an influential noble, so you had no choice but to take me into your Imperial Guard. How do you like that backstory?"

Arnold narrowed his eyes, closing in on Rishe. "Is this revenge for my performance as your attendant?"

"Ah ha ha, of course not! I'm certainly *not* thinking that you seemed to be greatly amused by the part you were playing or that you were maybe a little mean!" Rishe said with a brilliant smile.

Arnold sighed deeply.

The very fact that he'd assumed she wanted "revenge" meant that he was aware of how he'd made her feel by having his fun.

"Your Highness, I'm finished going over the port entrance records!" Rishe reported crisply.

Her disguise consisted of a brown wig and makeup to make her appear more masculine, and she'd adjusted her bearing to be more like that of a boy's. She also wore a leather vest under her shirt and thick-soled boots to change her height and build. No one really knew Rishe in this town, and the merchants she'd met on the ship last night were unlikely to recognize her.

While Arnold himself may have stood out, few people could interact closely with the crown prince. As a result, no one looked too hard at Rishe's disguise, so she was able to walk around the docks' brick warehouses without suspicion.

"Captain, sir, may I see the items you've seized too?" Rishe asked with stars in her eyes. She was playing the part of the overexcited young knight on his first mission very well.

The knight captain who oversaw security in Bezzetoria nodded in return, smiling warmly at Rishe. "Yes, of course. Whatever you need."

"Thank you, sir! Please leave it to me, Your Highness!" Rishe chirped, then carefully surveyed the area.

If I were a hunter who had to lie low and hide my prey... She spotted several different places in the beautiful warehouse district that would serve such a purpose. It was human nature to seek safety in hiding places, but the average person might be surprised at how few and far between those places were.

And if I were a knight who had to expose such criminal activity... Rishe swept her eyes around the building and settled on a wooden crate. *There.*

She trotted over to a pile of them carelessly stacked outside the warehouse. Arnold kept an eye on her and observed the knight captain at the same time. Feeling his gaze, she paid attention to the presences around her.

The captain just sighed—out of relief, if I had to guess. That proved there was nothing suspect in the crate she'd approached. His reaction would signify failure if they were really trying to find something here today, but it was acceptable for their current objective.

What I'm really looking for is the trap you've set for us.

The captain had no way of knowing that everything was going just as Rishe and Arnold planned. *He'd never hide something he wouldn't want found. Still, it's not too obvious, so it's the perfect place for the rookie knight to latch on to.*

She rifled through the crate with gloved hands, careful not to let her thoughts show.

Watching her, the knight captain grinned wryly. "Quite a naive young lad, isn't he? A son who won't be inheriting his house foisted upon you by an influential noble, I hear. You do have a lot to deal with, don't you, Your Highness?" he said in a conspiratorial manner, not intending for Rishe to hear him.

Arnold had no reaction whatsoever.

His Highness is the same as always. Efficiency above all else.

Rishe chuckled to herself as she examined the contents of the crate. The dusty assortment of items within didn't seem terribly worth taking.

A shell lamp Halil Rasha forbids exporting...or at least, a fake made to seem like one. The surface is supposed to shine in rainbow colors when it's lit, but the border between yellow and orange here is too sloppy.

She held the item up and closed one eye, carefully appraising the seam. She knew exactly how to spot a counterfeit, as she'd handled these items in her first life.

Now why would they create fake contraband for their stores?

She lifted her head above the crate and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Turning around, she held up the lamp to show it to the captain. "Captain, sir! This is a lamp from Halil Rasha, if I'm not mistaken!" she said, pretending to believe it was genuine. "I don't think many people know about this, but export of these shells is actually prohibited! Was this cargo from a ship that docked here?!"

"Ah, good catch, Sir Lucius." The captain nodded, holding up his hands in

appeasement. “You’re absolutely right. The distribution of these lamps could become a diplomatic issue between our country and Halil Rasha. I discovered the item personally on an inspection, and the rest of the items aboard the ship are under thorough investigation.”

I thought so. It’s a prop to make it seem like the captain and his men are doing their jobs. That said, it was a very well-made fake. It would be difficult to identify as fake without summoning a merchant to appraise it.

There weren’t too many people familiar with goods from Halil Rasha in Galkhein. *I just happen to have experience as such a merchant due to my loops,* Rishe thought as she set the lamp back inside the crate and faced the captain once again.

He appears a lot more relaxed than he was earlier. He’s still blinking quite a bit and staring at Prince Arnold too much, but otherwise, he seems to be returning to normal.

Rishe was sure Arnold had picked up on the same things she had. Their eyes met, so she told him, “I’d like to check that warehouse next, Your Highness!”

“Is the door unlocked?”

“I’ll call someone to unlock it immediately, if you would just give me a moment.”

Arnold turned to the knight captain. “You mean to tell me that the captain doesn’t know where his own keys are kept?”

The captain snapped to attention before Arnold could press the issue. “O-of course not, Your Highness! I will go and get them myself at once! One moment, please!”

He sped off, only a tad bit hesitant, leaving Rishe and Arnold alone in the brick alleyway.

“Judging by how flustered he was, I’d say it will be some time before he arrives with the key,” Rishe said, jogging over to Arnold.

He sighed, reaching for her face. "Your cheek is dirty." With his gloved thumb, he gingerly wiped her face. "I can't believe you're out here doing actual dirty work of your own volition just before your wedding dress fitting."

"I-I'll take another bath before the fitting. It's fine!" Rishe let him wipe her cheek, flashing back to another time he'd done this. Compared to then, she was far more flustered by it.

When she squeezed her eyes shut, Arnold seemed to notice something. He bent down and brought his nose closer to Rishe's neck.

"Wh-what is it, Your Highness?"

They might have been alone, but this was an inappropriate closeness for a knight and his lord. Arnold's breath tickled Rishe's skin as he murmured, "I smell something sweet."

Ack!

His voice was as flat as ever, but for some reason, that only made Rishe more embarrassed. He must have smelled the various lotions that had been scrubbed into her skin during her beauty treatments earlier.

Rishe hastily backed up, covering her mouth with heated hands. "I-I didn't think it would hamper my disguise!"

"I imagine it won't. You'd have to be pretty close to notice it."

She whimpered at the thought that Arnold *had* been that close to her. She needed to stop dwelling on it, so she straightened up and donned her knight's demeanor.

"I-In any case, what matters most is rescuing the abducted women and preventing further victims!" Rishe strode forward, keeping up her investigative pretense as she and Arnold entered a narrow alleyway. "I think it's safe to say we're putting the captain at ease with our little sham. I know we already rescued some of the women on the day we arrived, but hopefully this will make the slave traders lower their guard..."

“We don’t want them escaping. We have no way to catch them with our own vessels.”

As I thought, he’s aware of Galkhein’s inferiority when it comes to naval warfare.

A ship with large sails glided by the alleyway. Rische’s eyes darted toward it, and she noticed the script on the crates aboard the vessel.

“Oh! Look, Your Highness—that ship is from Ceutena!”

Ceutena was a port town in northern Galkhein. Rische thought of her friend as her eyes glimmered at the sight of the familiar location. *I wonder how Fritz is doing? Last I heard, he’d gone back to Ceutena with Lord Lawvine.*

Rische had disguised herself as a boy and participated in Lawvine’s knight candidate training with Fritz about a month and a half ago. The dizzying number of happenings between then and now made it feel like she’d done it in a different lifetime.

It’s hard for me to visit him since I was disguising myself when we first met, she lamented as she turned back to Arnold.

“I wonder how Lord Lawvine is doing. He must be busy keeping things running in Ceutena.”

“Who knows.”

“My, you sound so disinterested. And yet you value him so highly when it comes to training your knights!”

“I admit he’s a skilled instructor.” Arnold’s tone had grown colder than it was a moment ago. “But I’ve never once considered him my vassal.”

The words were all too convincing coming from the man who would ruthlessly slaughter him in the future.

Rische clutched at the sleeve of her uniform, which was still a little big on her despite her quick needlework. “Is that...because he serves your father?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Arnold smirked, challenging her. “You realized that long ago, didn’t you?”

Rishe could only pray Arnold didn’t notice the way her chest pounded in response to his question. *Calm down... It’s not like he’s saying he knows I know the future*, she told herself, taking a quiet breath.

She let her head droop, then strolled forward. The air of an excited trainee knight on his first mission returned. “It *has* been bothering me for some time. Lord Lawvine was the one who was trying to apprehend Professor Michel in the gunpowder incident, right?”

Rishe recalled the incident Michel had attempted to instigate while she was participating in the knight candidate training.

“Lord Lawvine behaved as if he was acting under the emperor’s orders, but didn’t it seem like he was trying to hide Professor Michel’s existence from His Majesty?”

Arnold narrowed his eyes in place of a nod of confirmation. She wasn’t sure *why* she had thought so, but she clearly remembered the warning he’d given Lawvine.

“I have nothing more to say. Withdraw immediately. If this escalates, I can’t promise my father won’t hear of it.”

The rumors Rishe had heard of Lawvine in her previous lives painted him as a loyal retainer to the imperial family, and her impression of him after meeting him in this life aligned with that. Still, there were some things about the way he acted that bothered her.

Lord Lawvine spoke out about the future Emperor Arnold Hein’s misdeeds and was heinously murdered for it. But that just doesn’t line up with what I know about Prince Arnold now.

Rishe’s lips thinned at the theory that brought to mind. *Maybe what Prince Arnold really eliminated in the future was—*

A loud bell rang just as she turned a corner in the warehouse district. She flinched, turning her attention to a church on the water's edge. A golden bell swayed from the steeple towering in the blue sky, and at the very top was a beautiful marble statue of the goddess.

A Crusade goddess statue... Rische blinked slowly, staring up at the goddess. The goddess Prince Arnold despises. The goddess whose blood his royal priestess mother inherited.

Rische gasped. Arnold had reached out from behind her and covered her eyes, pulling her toward him.

His voice was at her ear, the world dark around her. "It's something I have no need for."

She didn't respond. Was he talking about the goddess? She only realized he wasn't when he continued.

"Thus, I have no reason to keep Lawvine by my side in the future."

Rische stood still in Arnold's hold. She gulped, unable to understand his actions. *Did he do that to stop me from looking up at the goddess statue?*

In a way, stealing her vision like this was stealing her freedom, yet Arnold had never forced anything on her outside of matters relating to her safety up until now. He'd never even forbidden her from anything aside from putting herself in danger.

Arnold's hand slipped away from her face as he took a step back. Rische turned around, hearing footsteps coming from where they'd just been. These were the footsteps of someone who normally walked silently announcing their presence.

"Your Hiiighness. Oh, and Lucius the newbie knight is there too, isn't he?"

It's Raul.

Dressed in a knight's uniform, Raul approached them, toying with a key in his hand. Rische ran over to him, playing her part.

"Good work, sir!"

“It *is* good, isn’t it? And how’s your investigation with His Highness going?”

“We’re just waiting for the captain to return with a key so we can check the next warehouse, sir!” She shared their status, treating him like he was a knight of a higher ranking.

Raul smirked and tossed the key in his hand to Rishe. “I’d guess His Highness is going to be firing that captain before he returns. Losing a key like this is a rather serious mishap, wouldn’t you say?”

“I wouldn’t do something so tiresome. I have more than enough evidence of wrongdoing to fire him already.”

Rishe held the key up to eye level as they spoke. The knight captain frantically searching for this key right now probably had yet to realize his fate.

“I have two messages for you as well. The first is from the artisan in charge of Lady Rishe’s wedding dress. He would like to postpone the fitting.”

Rishe almost cried out in surprise, but “Lucius” managed to hold his tongue. Though there was still no sign of anyone else around them, she wanted to be careful just in case.

“And why is that?”

“It seems he happened to see Your Highness and Lady Rishe on your stroll through town yesterday and realized the dress’s current embroidery did not nearly serve to complement the lady’s beauty enough. He wishes to improve on the design.”

The poor dressmaker is just making more work for himself! He must have decided the dress he envisioned didn’t suit its wearer after seeing her in person. Rishe appreciated his enthusiasm, but she felt bad for making him feel he had to go to extra effort.

“D-do you suppose the dressmaker will have time to finish?” she asked.

“Well, he did request the postponement himself. It all depends on whether Lady Rishe approves of the delay.”

“Why, of course—is what I’m sure she’d say...”

Naturally, Rishe wanted her dress to be as beautiful as it could be, and since she’d requested the embroidery specifically to complement the ring Arnold had given her, she was very much anticipating trying on the two items together.

I suppose it’s a little disappointing that I won’t be able to wear it today...but that just means I’ll be able to savor my excitement for that much longer.

“As for the other message, Prince Arnold, Mr. Oliver wishes for you to return. So if you would be so kind as to wrap up your part in this investigation...”

She was sure that Raul’s playful tone was one hundred percent calculated. Aside from that, though, he behaved far too perfectly as Arnold’s loyal servant.

“Little Lucius, Sir Joel, and I will finish up here,” he added.

Without changing his expression, Arnold told Raul, “Don’t let up on your observation of him, then.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll go and fetch him.”

Rishe’s mind reeled as she watched Raul retreat back the way he’d come.

“Is Raul someone you wish to keep at your side, Prince Arnold?”

“Not particularly. I just use what I find to be useful. There’s nothing more to it.”

He says that, but there’s a clear difference in the way he thinks about Raul versus Lord Lawvine.

Was he really just being pragmatic, or was there some other reason for his dislike of the northern lord?

Rishe faced Arnold directly and asked another question. “Am I proving useful to you, Your Highness?”

She’d asked him over and over again why he’d proposed to her, but she didn’t think she’d be able to ask again. She was too afraid of the answer now.

“There have been...” Arnold began, dropping his gaze to the ground, “... several things I could not have achieved without your presence.”

Rishe gasped at the unexpected revelation.

Arnold’s eyes were bluer and more beautiful than the sea. The sunlight filtering through his long lashes had shadows dancing atop the ocean of his eyes.

“And I’m sure there will be many more in the future.”

“Oh, Your Highness...”

“I guarantee it.”

Arnold disliked uncertainties, so his assurance was a surprise, to say the least. Rishe was overwhelmed by the manner of his response. She couldn’t say anything, lest her voice quiver with emotion.

No... She hurriedly looked down at the ground as well, unable to meet his gaze.

“I suppose I’ll have to make it up to you,” he murmured.

“Pardon?”

“You said you were fine with it, but you were also disappointed, weren’t you? I’ll just have to show you something else I think you’ll like tonight.”

Rishe’s head snapped up. He ran a thumb under her eye, though there were no tears. “In exchange for the fitting being postponed...will that do?”

Rishe didn’t know how to express the emotions welling up within her. “Thank you,” was all she managed.

She’d learned something new today: When you got too full of happiness, you didn’t know what to do with your face. Even so, she wanted to express what she was feeling *somehow*, so she squeaked out, “That makes me happy...really, very happy...”

“Good,” Arnold said after a pause. Rishe didn’t feel like she’d gotten her

feelings across at all, but he must have picked up on something. Unfortunately, the soft tone with which he'd replied only made her feel more embarrassed.

"Um, you'll be returning to Mr. Oliver then, Your Highness?! If you'll excuse me, I shall go and assist Sir Raul!" She ran off to help Raul, who was no doubt struggling to wrangle Joel.

Naturally, there was no way for her to see the gaze Arnold fixed her with as she left.

Rishe jogged through the narrow alleyways of the warehouse district, calling out to Raul when she caught up with him.

"Ra—I mean, *Sir* Raul!"

Raul spun around, grinning as Rishe stopped to catch her breath. "Ha ha. I do love you saying my name with such respect."

"Well, I *am* just a trainee."

While Rishe was still putting on the act, Raul was behaving as he normally would. This was a sign that there was no need to put on a performance for anyone. Raul was a flippant man at first glance, but he *was* the head of an intelligence organization. He was able to switch modes in an instant, so he didn't feel the need to keep the ruse up indefinitely like Rishe did.

Rishe glanced around, her eyes landing on an alleyway ahead of them. "Sir Joel is over there, is he? I can sense him slumped against the wall, sleeping..."

"As always, those senses of yours are on par with someone in my line of work or a real knight."

"Ah ha ha, I'm flattered you think so, sir! Still just a rookie knight here, though. That being said..." Rishe met Raul's eyes, smiling with a finger held over her lips. "I don't suppose I can ask a favor of you as well, Sir Raul?"

"Oh? And a mere rookie's in a position to ask me a favor?" Raul asked with an exasperated scowl. He must've seen something like this coming.

“I won’t force you, of course. If you don’t think you can do it, I’ll just have to do it myself, and I know I wouldn’t be able to do it as well as you...”

“Ugh, I get it already! I can never pay you two back for what you’ve done for me, so just tell me what you want.”

“Thank you!”

Rishe’s face lit up, and she listed her requests for Raul. On the inside, however, she was observing him carefully.

He’ll do what I ask of him too. It could be that he follows Prince Arnold’s orders simply out of the sense of obligation he feels—and maybe there’s nothing more to it, but...

From what Rishe knew of Raul in her fifth life, he *was* a deeply loyal person when he felt he owed it to someone.

If Raul is working with Prince Arnold for a reason other than obligation or loyalty, it would be because their interests align in some way. There’s no way for me to know right now, though. Besides, Raul would notice immediately if she studied him too much.

“I’ll leave it to you then, Sir Raul! Just one left...” Rishe jogged over to the alleyway, peering around the corner. “Sir Joel!”

“Mm...”

Seated on the ground was Joel, dressed in the same knight’s uniform as Rishe. He was dozing, his slighter-than-average frame curled in on itself.

Raul caught up with her and shrugged. “His Highness told me to stick close and keep an eye on him, but what am I supposed to do when he just plops down and goes to sleep? He’s like this ‘cause he was drugged, right? I thought I should just get you to examine him, so that’s why I left him here.”

“Sir Joel, if I may...” Rishe took hold of his wrist and checked his pulse, but every simple examination she performed led to the same result.

“Zzz...”

It's just his usual sleepiness!

Rishe sighed and backed up a few steps.

“What do you want to do? The captain might suspect that he's not a real knight when he gets back. Ha ha, wanna just leave him here?”

“His Highness wouldn't like that, now would he?” Rishe said, then eyed one of Raul's belongings. “I don't suppose I could borrow that?”

Raul blinked in surprise before sighing pointedly. “I think His Highness would be more upset about that, personally.”

“It's fine! His Highness is never angry with me unless I do something dangerous.”

“I get the feeling you have a slightly different definition of the word ‘dangerous’ than most...but here!” Raul unclasped the object and tossed it to Rishe.

She caught it in one hand, then tossed it to Joel. Watching it spin through the air, Rishe reached for her own hip and shouted, “Joel!”

She called the genius swordsman's name the same way she once would have, drawing the thin blade she kept at her waist as part of her knight's disguise.

This is the only way to wake him.

What she'd thrown was Raul's sword. The moment the sword entered Joel's reach, Rishe held her own blade up and called, “May I request a match?!”

Joel's eyes opened, light gleaming in his brownish irises. He blinked once, revealing their true golden color, and an instant later...

“Ngh!” Rishe grunted as Joel's sword struck hers from above. Its blade reflected the sun's light, the tip trailing through the air like a shooting star. Rishe leapt backward to dodge, then charged forward, swinging her own sword.

There was a high-pitched *clang* as their swords met.

“Good morning...Joel...”

“You fight like a swordsman, a mercenary, and a bowman all at once. The way you move, it seems like you’re relying on things other than your sword, but your technique is like mine too...”

With his face a hair’s breadth from hers and only their swords between them, she could see the fierce light blazing in his eyes.

“You *are* weaker than me, and Prince Arnold’s who I’d be most excited to fight—but it’s fun fighting you too. Dunno why, though.”

“Argh!”

Their swords pushed against one another, Rische’s arms trembling with the exertion of matching Joel’s strength.

Joel licked his lips and grinned in amusement. “Yeah, I like you too.”

“Ugh!” Rische leapt back reflexively as Joel’s eyes brimmed with bloodlust. She kept a careful distance from him as he switched his grip, calculating the best way to approach her.

Just like in my last life, he’s like a cat playfully extending his claws to toy with a mouse every time we have a match...

There was a clear difference between the way he’d acted then and how he acted now, though. In this life, he displayed none of the consideration he’d had for Rische as the younger knight he mentored. It had taken her ages to coax out his caring side, but now it was nowhere to be seen.

“Come on. Hurry up, Rische.” He had the demeanor of an enemy who was thinking only of how to fight the person in front of him—where to cut to take her down. “If you’re not gonna come to me, I’ll come to you.”

He rushed into her range, slashing at her.

Oh no! This was not the speed one used in a friendly match. Joel’s sword whooshed toward her, and if she didn’t do anything, she would take a clean hit. Instinctively, she realized, *I can’t block it with my sword!*

“Hey, will you settle down already?”

She spotted Raul drawing a throwing knife out of the corner of her eye. But she had an idea, so she left her sword in place to shield her and lifted her leg without hesitation.

If I can't beat him with swordplay, I'll have to resort to other methods!

Joel's eyes opened wide. There was a loud *whunk* as the sword left his grip. “Wha...?”

Rishe had aimed a kick at Joel's sword grip, impacting his knuckles and sending the sword upward. The blade flew from his grip and embedded itself into the pavement a short distance away.

Joel was speechless.

“Thank you for the match, Sir Joel.” Rishe sighed in relief, then bowed. She was out of breath, perhaps because of how quickly and intensely she'd needed to focus.

Raul gaped at them in shock. Joel stood before Rishe, looking like he'd made a major miscalculation.

“The girl who's gonna marry the crown prince *kicked* me...”

It's a bit strange hearing Joel call me a girl. Especially considering she was dressed as a boy right now.

Still somewhat out of breath, Rishe apologized to Joel. “I'm sorry for not sticking to swordplay, but there's someone who worries terribly when I'm hurt, so I was forced to defend myself...”

She hadn't been expecting Joel to be so aggressive in a simple match. He must have only gone easy on her in her last life because he was her mentor then.

Joel glanced over at the sword sticking out of the ground, his expression complicated. “Not even experienced knights mix martial arts with swordplay all that often. Especially not so seamlessly.”

It's just as he says. Most knights value chivalry too much to dirty their sword technique.

But Rishe had learned a different sort of swordplay in Galkhein.

"You should fight for your own survival without worrying about how you look. The one who worries for me believes that's the strongest way to fight."

Raul said nothing.

Rishe thought back to the first match she'd had with Arnold, and how she'd snuck into the knights' training dressed as a boy some two months ago. Ever since, Rishe had practiced the training methods she'd learned whenever she had free time. Arnold instructed her himself every so often, even sparring with her when he felt he could teach her something.

"You're more suited to leading an opponent on than a more orthodox approach," Arnold had told her once as he carried her back from their match. As always, she was so worn out afterward that she couldn't stand.

"Leading them on? Really?"

"You're swift, with a strong core that allows for quick reactions. Not only do you know each of the weak points of the human body, but you can use a bow and a sword at the same level... Plus there's your penchant for 'creativity.'"

"Is it just me or were you implying something with that last one?!"

From then on, Rishe had trained using the knowledge she'd gained since coming to Galkhein, without getting too caught up in form or chivalry.

I'm thrilled to know that some of the things Prince Arnold taught me are starting to stick. She felt herself smiling as she studied her hands.

Joel just watched her and muttered, "Prince Arnold Hein, eh?"

"Is something the matter?" Rishe moved to peer into his face, but Raul grabbed her collar from behind and yanked her toward him.

"Okay, okay. Lucius, Joel, wrap it up. We're done slacking!"

“But, Ra—*Sir* Raul...”

“If you go any further, I’ll get chewed out by the prince. You’ve done what you came here for, right? Let’s go finish fooling the captain and move on already.”

Rishe nodded. She couldn’t argue with that. Since she had free time now that her dress fitting had been postponed, she wanted to use it on something productive.

It doesn’t seem like Joel wants to kill me quite as much anymore, at least.

Joel leaned against one of the brick warehouses, still dazed with sleep. “Move on where? You know I’m no good at anything except fighting, right? Do I still have to go with you two?”

“At least *pretend* you can do other things!”

“Just call me when we need to fight someone. An enemy base where we can cut down everyone inside would be great...” He punctuated this with a huge yawn.

Smiling at Joel’s usual antics, Rishe focused on the task at hand.

Elsewhere, a tall man reclined on a couch. Beside him was a hearth, burning bright despite the summer season. The man directed a bored gaze at a bundle of documents he was leafing through. With each page he turned, he tossed what he’d already read into the fireplace. His hand stretched out languidly, casting the pages into the fire.

Eventually, he muttered, “Arnold Hein...”

Lights danced on the water outside the man’s window like shining stars. Without sparing a glance outside, the man let go of the last sheet of paper.

“I suppose it’s time to request an audience with that foul-blooded crown prince.”

When Rishe reflected on her sixth life, most of her memories were of Joel. After all, he'd been her bunkmate, her mentor, and the genius who taught her swordsmanship.

"Lucius... Hey, Lu, over here. C'mere."

Eventually, as they'd gotten closer, Joel began to call Rishe by a nickname and baby her like a little brother.

"Joel! I know your bedhead is a regular occurrence, but you can't possibly appear in front of His Majesty like that! More importantly, the commander will chew you out!"

"If it bothers you, then you do something about it. I'm gonna sleep until we have to leave... Haahm..."

"Ugh, Joel!"

Joel's catlike behavior had always thrown Rishe for a loop. Comb in hand, she'd tried utilizing the skills she'd honed in her fourth life, only for Joel to smile in satisfaction.

"A junior should listen to his senior. Yup." Having been the youngest until Rishe's arrival, he'd said to his first junior, *"In exchange, your senior will protect you."*

"Joel..."

She only ever heard the same things about Joel. He was always sleepy and slacking off. He never tried to fit in and didn't care one bit about chivalry. Yet he was such a genius swordsman that it made up for his many flaws. He never worked with anyone else and always fought on his own, but he was able to exhibit his full potential regardless.

"Joel never teams up with anyone. There's no one who can match his swordplay, after all," their commander had glumly told her once. *"You're probably the only person in the world he would ever help out on the battlefield,*

Lucius."

Sure enough, Joel had helped Rishe. In the end, he'd protected her and lost his life to the sword of Emperor Arnold Hein.

Rishe thought about all that as Arnold guided her through the port town in this, her seventh life. *Joel died that day because he was fighting alongside me. If that's true, then will the same thing happen to Prince Arnold?*

Holding a lantern out in town at night, Rishe watched Arnold as he walked in front of her. She pictured what she feared most, listening to the flow of the waterways under the starry sky. *I could put him in danger fighting by his side...*

"Rishe," came Arnold's voice.

She lifted her head to see that Arnold had turned around. Her heart leapt into her throat. The timing made it seem as if he'd read her mind.

Arnold gazed at her with his blue eyes. "Lost in thought?"

"Oh, no! I'm sorry, I was going slow, wasn't I?"

He could see right through her. She knew in her gut she'd never be a match for him. Still, she shook off her thoughts as she hurried to catch up to him.

"You don't need to hurry."

"B-but I—"

"Rishe."

The promenade on the water's edge was paved with reddish-brown stone. Arnold must have been worried about her running in high heels.

"C'mere," he said, offering her his large hand. She took it timidly.

He'd started calling out to her like this a week or two ago, imitating the way Rishe had beckoned a cat. He never spoke this way to anyone else, let alone so softly. It always flustered Rishe to hear such gentleness in the voice usually devoid of emotion. Just the tender way he held her hand made her fingers twitch with unease.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing! I’m just a little nervous about you escorting me, Your Highness...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He gave her a suspicious scowl, but it wasn’t as if she could admit it was because of her feelings for him.

Rishe scanned the surroundings, hoping he would take her nerves as simply a product of playing the parts of “lady and attendant” the night before and “crown prince and rookie knight” this afternoon.

“It really is beautiful, isn’t it?” Rishe said, gazing out at the waterway beside them. The dancing waves reflected the lights of the town like an aquatic meteor shower. Rishe smiled, deeply appreciative of his feelings. “I’m touched that you wished to show this to me, Your Highness...”

Arnold’s eyes softened for a moment. “What I really want to show you is up ahead.”

“Really?” It was already so beautiful. Was there really something better? Rishe’s eyes shimmered with excitement.

“Can you make it a bit farther?” Arnold asked.

“Of course!” she answered, hardly able to hold her enthusiasm back. Arnold laughed, and when they resumed walking, she hastily asked, “I-I’m like an excited little child, aren’t I?”

A pause. “No?”

You can’t fool me! I know what that smile means!

Rishe pursed her lips, scanning her surroundings once more. *I don’t sense anyone nearby. The knights must be keeping watch so no one interrupts our little stroll.*

Trying not to focus too much on Arnold’s hand in hers, Rishe told him, “I have a report on our progress.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Rishe nodded, pride in her heart for her second and sixth lives. “After removing my disguise, I examined the abducted women one more time. I believe the drugs administered by the pirates have fully left their systems.”

“I heard the same in a report. Looks like your medicine did the trick.”

“Yep, I’m no longer worried about their conditions. What’s more, since we’ve proven that an antidote is effective...”

Arnold sighed, guessing at what she wished to say. “You know you can nullify the pirates’ sleeping drug.”

“Precisely. I’m even more confident we’ll be able to pull off our plan if I act as bait.”

The most important part of their plan was having the pirates abduct “Lady Rize.” This step was essential to determine the location of the remaining abductees—but it would be meaningless if Rishe were powerless to act after being kidnapped.

“...”

“What’s wrong, Your Highness?”

For whatever reason, Arnold seemed confounded by Rishe’s remark.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but you need to prioritize your own safety over the success of the plan.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Rishe admonished herself for worrying Arnold, seeing him with his brow furrowed. Still, this was a human trafficking operation spanning multiple nations. If Rishe didn’t pull everything off satisfactorily, they wouldn’t be able to keep the damage to a minimum.

It’s the same as his war. Even chided by the person she cared most for, Rishe couldn’t let her determination falter.

“We’ll make sure we’re fully prepared when we carry out the plan.

Fortunately, the Aria Trading Company just opened a branch in Bezzetoria, so I imagine we'll be able to obtain anything we might need easily enough."

"Do you have enough hands to make your medicine? It's not just a matter of having enough ingredients, right?"

"There shouldn't be any problems in theory, but if it appears I won't have enough, I'll let you know right away. I learned my lesson at the Grand Basilica, don't worry."

"Good."

Several months ago, Rishe's neck had been grazed by a poisoned arrow just after she'd sent all of her antidotes away, including one spare dose. She had intended to be prepared for any trouble plaguing the delivery, but as a result, it had taken time to procure her own antidote.

The truth is that I came with a large amount of antidote at the ready. But I mustn't let His Highness find out, or he'll discover that I knew what would happen before coming here.

Rishe collected herself, then informed Arnold of something troubling her. "The women seem to have regained their composure. It's almost impressive that they even have the wherewithal to appreciate our assistance. They weren't harmed excessively, but their ordeal must have been terrifying."

Each one of them had thanked Rishe with grace during her examination.

"Thank you so much for saving us, Lady Rishe. To think the crown prince's fiancée herself would personally lend us a helping hand... I can't thank you enough."

"Please don't let it trouble you. All I ask in return is that you relax and focus on your own recovery."

As someone who had served as a Siargan knight in her sixth life, Rishe felt Siargans were her charges to protect. She'd often guarded noblewomen just like them, and being near them brought back memories of her working to the

bone to safeguard their smiles.

"If there's anything else I can do, please do let me know. I'll do whatever it takes to bring you peace of mind." Rishe took the hand of a woman sitting in her bed and told her firmly, *"I would give anything for your smile to return."*

"My word..." The woman gaped at her, wide-eyed. *"You sound almost like a real knight."*

"Oh! I-I'm sorry about that." Chivalric devotion to the fairer sex had been drilled into her in her sixth life. She searched for more appropriate words of comfort, embarrassed that her old habit had reared its head. *"You may be uneasy in this foreign land, but we've already sent word to Siarga. You should be able to go home soon, so please rest until we can see you returned safely."*

The woman had a faraway look in her eyes as she murmured, *"I suppose I'll really have to get married, then."*

"Hmm?" Rishe blinked, and the woman offered her a sad smile.

"It's a match my parents arranged for me. The man I'm to wed is said to be strict on himself and others, so...I find myself a bit afraid."

"I see..."

"Still, I suppose he's not nearly as frightening as pirates."

Though strained, the woman's smile brightened, so all Rishe could do was awkwardly return it.

"The abducted women..." Rishe began, her head drooping as she walked beside Arnold. *"Well, they seem to be dealing with some profound loneliness, even though they were all brides-to-be approaching their wedding day."* Asking any more would have been an intrusion Rishe wasn't comfortable making.

"..."

"I imagine the pirates fell for our ploy because there was similar precedent in place. The ladies all seemed to come from similar backgrounds to the unloved Lady Rize." Rishe's heart ached when she thought of their circumstances.

Meanwhile, Arnold picked up on her low spirits. He had already slowed his pace to match hers, and now he eased up even more. “Falling victim to a malignant marriage of convenience isn’t so different from becoming a slave.”

Rishe’s heart throbbed, but not just because their own marriage was also one of convenience. *Prince Arnold’s mother was victim to just such a marriage...*

Arnold’s mother, the royal priestess with the goddess’s blood running through her veins, had been offered up to Arnold’s father by the Church in a bid to prevent an invasion from Galkhein. His mother was dead now—killed by Arnold’s own hands, if the stories were to be believed.

Arnold glanced down at Rishe and huffed a sigh. “Close your eyes,” he said. Rishe tilted her head, and Arnold stopped. “We’re almost to our destination. I’ll carry you the rest of the way, so don’t open your eyes until I say so.”

“Carry me?! Wh-why?!”

“I’m picking you up.”

“Aaaah!”

He scooped her up, snuffing out her chances to protest, and Rishe reflexively clasped his neck. She squeezed her eyes shut on impulse and did her best to keep them closed as Arnold cradled her.

“Prince Arnold! Wh-what do you think you’re—”

“I didn’t bring you here to put that expression on your face. If you’re going to look so sad, you might as well just keep your eyes closed.”

“And you’re carrying me because you don’t trust me to walk with my eyes closed?!”

She was aware that she abused his good nature on a regular basis, but it still flustered her to no end when *he* was the one imposing his will.

“I-I’m sorry for bringing the mood down when you brought me here to cheer me up! I can walk by myself, so put me—”

“I imagine you’re holding yourself back from getting too involved with those girls, and you think it isn’t your place to interfere. But I think you should follow through on your convictions like you always do.”

Rishe gawped at him, and Arnold continued, “Don’t forget that your husband will fulfill any wish you have so long as it’s in his power to do so.”

His gentle sincerity made her chest tighten.

“I’ll say it one more time. Close your eyes.”

“Oh! Right!” Rishe squeezed her eyelids shut once more. She thought she heard Arnold chuckle.

“Give me your best, just as you always have. It’s what you’re best at, isn’t it?”

“I would hardly say that! And how long are we supposed to keep this up for, anyway?!”

“We just arrived,” Arnold said, setting her down.

Her feet landed on the same stone pavement, so they must have still been at the water’s edge.

“You can open your eyes.”

“Okay...” She was strangely nervous as she took a peek, her heart thrumming away. When she saw the view spread out before her, her breath caught in her throat. “Wow!”

Countless paper lanterns floated on the waterway. Candles burned within, their light dancing beautifully atop the water’s surface. The sight was magical. They resembled stars twinkling overhead. From above, the sight was something out of a dream.

“It’s like we’re standing on a river made of a starry sky...”

Arnold had spun around to watch her. This vibrant scenery was what he had wanted to show her.

“Just what *are* those lanterns?” Rishe couldn’t contain her curiosity at the

breathhtaking scene before her. She wandered closer to the water, and Arnold took her hand attentively.

“It’s my understanding that they’re a sort of prayer offering.”

“An offering...”

Arnold cast his gaze to the ground, careful of Rishe’s footing as he told her, “Sailors set them out before long voyages to pray for safe travels.”

“Oh!” Rishe stepped forward, relying on Arnold’s guidance. Her eyes shone brightly enough to rival the lantern lights. “There’s Crusade scripture about star fragments on the water guiding ships to calm seas, isn’t there? I think I’ve heard about this! The lanterns are made to imitate the stars!”

“I’m sure it’s more for them to follow the flow of the tides at night than that sort of superstition, though.” Arnold’s gaze was pointed toward the sea. They couldn’t see it from where they were, but they could smell the faint scent of salt on the breeze. “They have to seek permission before performing this rite, as the canal has to be closed for public transit to carry it out.”

“I see. So that’s how you knew it would happen tonight.”

It was hard for her to imagine that Arnold normally paid much attention to applications for religious rites, but she could believe that it had stuck in the corner of his mind somewhere if he was aware of it.

“The woman who taught me medicine told me about this. It was so long ago now...” Rishe looked out over the glittering waterway, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “She said that in another land, people prayed by sending lanterns out on the canal and that their light filling the waterway was such a fantastical sight. She said she couldn’t remember the exact name of the place, which disappointed me to no end.”

That happened in her second life. The woman in question had been Hakurei, her apothecary master. Rishe had searched for the match to her description on her travels throughout all her lives afterward. It was no wonder she was never

able to find it.

“She was talking about Galkhein...”

The floating lanterns were in a country Rishe had never visited in all her previous lives.

“Ooh! Look there, Your Highness!” Rishe squeezed Arnold’s hand without meaning to and pointed out at the waterway. “That lantern! It’s almost the same blue as your eyes!”

“You’re right.”

“That blue is the prettiest color there is...”

The light was weak, however, because the blue paper was close to black. She figured these lanterns were dyed, but a deep blue like that wouldn’t let much light through.

“Maybe experimenting with dyes would make a good alchemy project. There’s a country on another continent where blue dye is priced higher than gold, you know.”

“True. Demand for it might just go up in this country too. The whole country will likely be after this town’s needlework techniques because of the embroidery you requested on your wedding dress.”

“Ha ha! Thinking of a nation’s economic ripple effects from a grand imperial wedding is fun, isn’t it?”

There was even more she wanted to do now after seeing this beautiful view. But as excited as she was, Rishe found herself worrying yet again that she was coming off as a giddy little girl.

Even so, Arnold seemed to have eyes only for her. Rishe cocked her head, finding it strange. “What is it, Your Highness?”

“You were happy just seeing the town’s streets on the first day you arrived in Galkhein. Back then, I couldn’t understand what you saw in such scenery, but...”

He must have meant the conversation they'd had on the detached palace's balcony, back when Rishe had just started cleaning it.

Eager to hear his opinion, Rishe asked, "Are you any closer to understanding it now?"

"No." After this simple denial, Arnold's tone softened. "But I understand that you cherish it."

Rishe's breath hitched.

But this rite comes directly from Crusade scripture... Arnold couldn't have had any fond feelings for it, since he loathed the Church. *And he still brought me to see it.*

Just as the flickering flames of mock starlight guided the departing ships, they lit a warm fire inside Rishe's heart.

"Thank you, Prince Arnold." Rishe smiled, and Arnold squinted back at her like she was too bright to look at directly. "It's so, so beautiful..."

The prince must have realized that she was on the verge of tears. He brought his free hand up to her cheek and brushed the corner of her eye, sweeping away the teardrops that had yet to fall. There was no emotion in his eyes as he lowered them, but his voice was gentle as he said, "I know nothing as beautiful as you."

Rishe's breath caught once more. She could see the lantern lights reflected in his sea-blue eyes. His gaze and the brushing of his finger against her eyelashes comforted her deeply.

"I... Well..." Rishe hung her head, at a loss for words. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and her cheeks felt like they were on fire.

But he's more beautiful than anything else...

Still, Arnold had finally found something he considered beautiful, and he'd even shared it with her. She wanted to celebrate, but the feeling was wrapped up in embarrassment that threatened to overwhelm her—because what he

considered beautiful was *her*.

“Rishe.”

Arnold seemed to think it strange that Rishe could no longer raise her head. He likely hadn’t intended to make her feel so flustered. She covered one ear with her free hand, desperate to hide how they were burning.

“My face is red, so you can’t look at it...” she managed to say at length, determined to impress upon him that her current state was his fault. Yet there was no sign of Arnold taking his eyes off her. Of all the things he could’ve done, he pressed a finger to her cheek.

She balked. “Eep!” If she didn’t want him seeing her reddened face, then he should have realized that temperature checking her cheek was also off-limits. “Ugh, Prince Arnold!”

Rishe looked up to protest but found herself staring wide-eyed at him instead.

After checking the heat of Rishe’s cheek, Arnold laughed with genuine amusement. The grin that lit up his face made him look years younger. Then, his voice slightly teasing, he touched Rishe’s cheek again. “*It is red.*”

Rishe let out a strangled yelp as a vise clamped down around her heart. She hardly ever saw Arnold smile this way, and this time, she really couldn’t meet his eyes. Speech failed her as her heart pounded against her rib cage. Her thoughts were turning to mush. She couldn’t breathe with Arnold touching her, yet she didn’t want his hand to leave hers.

She almost turned her back on him, but she couldn’t flee with his fingers entwined with hers, and she certainly couldn’t shake off his grip.

How does anyone deal with being in love?!

Rishe squeezed her eyes shut, lost for what to do. Arnold patted her head.

Nevertheless, a sobering thought had been made all too clear to her. *I need to stifle this feeling for now*, she told herself, taking a shaky breath. *If I want to stop him...and if I want to fulfill my vow...*

She placed a hand on her chest. The heart Arnold had once run through with his sword yearned for him now.

The world is changing, little by little. And the changes in Prince Arnold will surely lead to a different future.

She slowly opened her eyes and tightened her grip on Arnold's hand. "Can we do things like this every so often?" Her face burned, but she mustered her courage and peered up at him. "Can you keep showing me things you want me to see?" she asked.

Arnold gazed at her with the most beautiful blue eyes in the world. "Yes," he promised.

Rishe had no words to express her happiness. She kept quiet, knowing that if she said anything, her voice would tremble. She smiled while doing her best not to cry.

A distinct hope bloomed in her heart. *Maybe now Prince Arnold will choose a path other than war.*

When she'd first become engaged to him, her task had seemed almost ludicrously daunting—but so much had changed since then.

No matter what his goal is, I'm certain he'll come to understand that he doesn't have to kill his father and start a war to change the world!

Rishe admired the lanterns anew, Arnold's hand secure in hers. "I hope these beautiful prayers float on forever," she murmured in a prayer of her own.

A strange sensation came over her, and she caught a glimpse of Arnold's profile. His gaze was trained somewhere over the water. "I see," he muttered.

Rishe's heart froze.

His eyes are...so cold.

She wanted to believe there was nothing to read into his reply. He was merely acknowledging Rishe's wish; on the surface, that was it. But he had chosen not to agree with her—and that, combined with the bloodlust in his eyes, led Rishe

to a realization.

In all my past lives, Arnold restructured Galkhein's largest canal to launch his invasion.

Having once been the knight of an enemy nation, Rishe knew exactly what Arnold had done to start his war.

Just before killing his father, he made sure he'd have a port from which he could invade any country he desired.

Prince Arnold's will... A conviction strong enough to squash her hopes took root in Rishe's heart. It hasn't changed. He's still just as determined to kill his father and wage war on the world.

She didn't want to regret holding his hand, but she knew how sharp he was. *Can he tell how scared I am from holding my hand?*

Rishe studied her shoes, unable to look his way. She had heard the same thing over and over again in her sixth life.

"He shut down the country's borders immediately after usurping the throne, and he allowed no leaks of his canal restructuring plan."

It was news that had come too late from another country while Rishe and the other Siargan knights desperately fought back against the onslaught of Galkhein's warships.

"He killed as many people as needed to make sure no information got out."

Rishe had just wished for an alternative future. She'd wished for the beautiful prayers of the departing sailors to remain unchanged. Was Arnold's faithfulness the only reason he didn't promise her that would be the case?

I've seen all the documents regarding recent public works projects. There are no publicly available records of plans to restructure Bezzetoria's canal. If I never see the floating lights on the water again, it's because Prince Arnold is secretly enacting his plans.

Her heart pounded for an entirely different reason.

His words might not have meant anything at all. They only bothered me because I know his future actions. She wished she could laugh it off as her being too sensitive.

Could he be keeping Raul around for his coup d'état?

The moment she hit on an explanation for what had been bothering her, Arnold quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

Once more, his voice was soft and tender, so much so that Rishe felt new tears pricking at her eyes. But that just made her more certain that the reason he went down the bloody path in the future was because of some unshakable conviction in his heart.

Deeply aware of her own selfishness, Rishe squeezed Arnold's hand tighter. *Prince Arnold will kill his father. And he'll invade the rest of the world. He's still preparing to do so even after I came to Galkhein!*

Rishe had to stop him from committing violence. She admired his beautiful visage; his eyes stared straight back at her.

Prince Arnold... My dear husband. He was the only person Rishe had ever yearned for in this way. *No matter what I do, I will always be his enemy.*

"Rishe..."

And just after she'd realized...

"Ah!" She caught sight of something upstream, and her eyes focused on a large sailing vessel.

"That ship..."

It was slowly headed toward the sea. Perhaps it was about to depart on a voyage?

Arnold spotted it at the same time, pulling his hand away from Rishe's. The light of a lantern swayed atop the ship, held in a woman's hand.

"Prince Arnold!"

It wasn't impossible for a woman to be aboard a vessel departing so late at night, but Rische recognized her.

"That's one of the women we saved from the pirates!"

A moment later, Arnold yanked Rische close. At the same time, an arrow zipped past them from the shore. From Arnold's protective embrace, Rische immediately identified the arrow's trajectory. Like a white bird cutting across the night sky, the arrow was flying straight toward the woman.

"Ah!" Rische cried as the arrow struck the woman's glass lamp. It shattered, and the woman screamed.

No!

The deck was immediately engulfed in flames.

Rische whirled around, but she couldn't see the archer who loosed the arrow. Apprehending the culprit could come later; the safety of the passengers on the ship had to come first.

Military boots stomped across the pavement as several Imperial Guards rushed over. The talented men had been on watch, so they must've sensed something was afoot.

"Your Highness! What's going on?!"

I can leave putting out the fire and contacting the relevant authorities to Prince Arnold. What's left is...

A rope ending in a sharp hook caught her eye—the kind sailors used to pull small ships toward shore by tossing them at a dock. She grabbed the rope and sprinted off.

"What are you doing, Lady Rische?!"

As she ran, she ignored the knights' surprised cries ringing in the air.

Arnold frowned, but he didn't stop her. "A large-scale fire could break out. Everyone form squads—one to put the fire out, one to evacuate the citizenry,

and one to aid the sailors. Someone contact Oliver immediately and summon more guards.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Round up some sailors who can help from the nearby residences. I’ll take command.”

I’m sorry! And thank you for letting me do as I please, Prince Arnold!

She was sure he was worried about her. She apologized to him in her heart as she ran alongside the ship.

Even with the oil from the lamp, that fire is spreading far too quickly!

Sailors were racing up the deck and turning back upon seeing the speed at which the flames were spreading, likely headed belowdecks to retrieve barrels of water on board.

That woman... She was just standing there absentmindedly, staring into the flames. It was the woman Rishe had spoken to earlier.

“I suppose I’ll really have to get married, then.”

“It’s a match my parents arranged for me. The man I’m to wed is said to be strict on himself and others, so...I find myself a bit afraid.”

She hadn’t pried into the woman’s circumstances, but that had been a mistake.

I don’t know what she’s doing aboard that ship, but for now, I just have to make sure she’s safe.

Rishe found a bucket lying nearby, scooped water from the canal, and splashed it over her head. Then she jammed her heels into the pavement cracks and snapped them off. Using the dagger she kept strapped to her thigh, she cut a slit in her dress. When she had wrapped cloth around both of her hands, she took the grappling hook she’d found and whirled it around to generate momentum.

She'd learned this trick in her fifth life. It was a technique she'd used many times to catch prey and to scale walls. She hooked a nearby roof and clambered up. By the time she'd reached the roof, the burning ship was right in front of her.

One more time!

She unhooked the rope, spun it again, and tossed it at the ship's mast. Once she made sure it was adequately attached, she gripped the rope with her wrapped hands and swung over to the boat like a pendulum.

The watching Imperial Guards cried her name as she shimmied onto the boat. Her underdeveloped muscles were already quivering, but she knew she would make it using the protrusions on the ship's side for footholds and handholds.

I was once a knight of Siarga, you know. Naval battles, shipboard skirmishes, and protecting civilians were all drilled into me!

She scrambled onto the deck and got a sense of the sailors' movements.

"Hurry and put out the fire!" crew members were shouting, carrying water barrels onto the deck.

In turn, Rishe told them, "Give up on putting it out!"

They were shocked by her sudden appearance. Regardless of their efforts, the fire on the ship's deck was only spreading.

"The deck's been soaked with an accelerant! Water won't put it out! Use the water to protect yourselves instead!"

"Who are you?! And what do you mean 'an accelerant'?!"

"Lower your anchor and bring the ship closer to land! Prince Arnold Hein is already taking command of relief efforts on the shore!"

At the sound of Arnold's name, the sailors were shocked. They agreed with her quickly enough when they saw what she meant about the fire.

"The girl's right! Get closer to land and we can use a ladder to get ashore! We

can put out the fire then!”

“Evacuating’s the first priority! Look, the wind’s already blowing toward the shore! Somebody unfurl the sails, and then we can drop anchor!”

The ship hadn’t made it out to sea yet, so its sails were still furled shut. Rishe was already climbing the mast by the time the sailor got the order out. She got to the lowermost mast easily enough using the rope she’d thrown over. Having no time to carefully untie the ropes holding them shut, Rishe’s dagger slashed through them instead.

“Augh!” She slid down the rope so that the sail didn’t knock her in the head as it burst open. She felt the heat of the friction through the tattered dress scraps around her hands, but she didn’t burn herself.

“Nice going, girly! We should make it to shore before the sail burns up with this wind!”

“Everybody up from belowdecks?! Nobody jump into the water—not from this height!”

Rishe scanned the deck quickly as the sailors ran about, but she didn’t spot her target. “Did you see a woman?! She was standing on deck before the fire started!”

“A woman?! This is a trading ship, we ain’t got no passengers aboard!” a sailor shouted and then headed toward the flames. Before she helped them deal with the fire, she had to make sure that woman was safe.

She didn’t jump into the water, did she? From this height, it was very difficult to land safely in the water if you weren’t used to doing so. Rishe paled before she spotted a fluttering skirt on the other side of the flames.

Oh, thank goodness! She breathed a sigh of relief. There was no time to figure out what she was doing on this ship right now, though.

“There you are! Please wait, I’ll be right along to help you—”

“Stay away!”

Rishe gasped at the rejection. The woman stood there on high alert, almost frightened of Rishe.

“I’m sorry, Lady Rishe...”

“Please calm down... I just want to bring you somewhere safe.”

The flames spewed dark smoke, the sails and rigging beginning to burn. Still, she could tell that the ship was steadily approaching the shore, where sailors and knights waited with ladders and water to put out the fire.

“Please step away from the flames. I beg of you, come this way.” Rishe held out her hand.

The woman shook her head, tears spilling from her eyes. “No... I can no longer return...”

“That’s not true. Everything will be fine. I promise you!”

Yet the woman hugged herself tight and shouted, “I was the one who arranged for everyone to be abducted by the slave traders!”

Rishe’s eyes went wide at the unexpected confession.

“I thought that by doing so, I could be free!”

“*You* did it...?”

“I’ve been nothing more than a tool for my family since I was born, with no worth but as a pawn to be married off. My only path in life was to submit to whichever man my parents decided on, just because I was born a noble!”

The woman’s shoulders shook as she grappled with the terrible weight of her burden.

“I told myself so many times that I was fortunate just to be able to live without worrying about my next meal. I was determined to endure it. I worked so hard!”

Her words stung.

The sea breeze stoked the flames. They leaped even higher between Rishe

and the woman, like a fiery wall.

I can't simply pull her to safety. It's too dangerous to knock her out and carry her through these flames too! Not to mention, there was nothing but the edge of the ship behind her, and it would be just as bad if she jumped off. To make matters worse, her all-too-familiar words cut deep.

"I know...I know it's just an excuse, that I brought this all on myself! But they wanted to run too! We all got together, girls in the same circumstances, intending to flee as a group. I didn't know it was a slave trader's ship... I didn't know all this would happen..." She backed up slowly, tears staining her cheeks, and said hollowly, "He just told us that he would take us away on his ship..."

They just wanted to be free. Rishe understood so much, it hurt. They thought they were choosing freedom, seduced by the sweet promises of someone taking advantage of their desperation.

Those men didn't just kidnap innocent noblewomen they were supposed to do business with. They lured them into slavery with promises of freedom. It was a horrible betrayal of their trust.

Rishe knew well the pain of living as a tool and the joy of finding a future beyond it. It was easy to imagine the woman's despair after having it all ripped out from under her, not to mention the guilt over getting the other women wrapped up in it.

"That's why I tried to run. It's only natural that he wouldn't meet me here..."

Someone told her to flee on this ship! Rishe needed more information, but now wasn't the best time to coax it from her. First, she had to calm her down and get her off this burning ship.

"I'm sorry, Lady Rishe. I can't leave... I cannot leave this ship!"

She's full of guilt, terror, and panic over having done something she can't take back! And the fire isn't helping!

"There's nowhere for me to go now anyway. I should just—"

Willing her words to reach the woman's ears, Rishe said firmly, "Then let's think of a way to die here, together."

The woman's eyes went wide, but Rishe didn't mean a *real* death.

"I want you to imagine it. What if you died here and went back to the worst moment in your life thus far?" Rishe spoke loudly enough that the woman could hear her over the roaring flames. "Would you make the same choices? Live your life the same way you did the first time?"

The woman blinked again and again. She shook her head—first hesitantly, then firmly. "N-no!"

Sparks flew, and the ship listed as if tugged. It must have finally been moored on the bank.

"I don't want to...do it all over again."

Her voice was quiet. She hugged herself, digging her nails into her shoulders.

"If I could go back, I would do it differently..."

Rishe smiled, pleased by the firm will in the woman's voice. "Then you should pivot *here* instead of the past. There are things you can do differently, starting right here and now."

"I can't possibly—"

"Did you know you were making a choice you would regret in the past? It's only recalling it now that you realize you made the wrong one."

The woman's face crumpled, tears still gushing from her eyes. She was caught between a desire to cling to Rishe's words and the inability to permit herself to do so.

"It might be difficult to do on your own, but I'll help you."

"I can't make up for what I've done... My mistakes can't be forgiven!"

"Still, you must try! You must find the path you truly wish to take forward!"

Rishe knew other people couldn't do the things she'd done, but that was all

the more reason she felt like she had to convince them to try.

“You still have the freedom to choose what to do differently.”

“Freedom...?”

“Please, don’t just let the flames take you... Don’t let someone promise you they’ll take you away!” Rishe prayed, believing in the woman’s inner courage.

“Choose the path that *you* want to take deep in your heart.”

The woman took one shaky step toward Rishe. There were still flames between them, but if she came closer, Rishe could take her hand and pull her to safety. They were so close.

“Boy, you two can talk.”

Rishe spun around at the unnaturally jovial voice.

Who is that?!

A tall man stood there clad in a black cloak with a hood pulled low over his face. Rishe could tell in an instant that the cloak was made of fireproof material.

“I knew you’d talk too much if I let you live.”

“Ah...” The woman’s voice shook as the man grinned and rushed toward her.

He has a blade!

It was obvious what the man intended, and from where she stood, Rishe had no way to stop him.

She surged forward, protecting the woman’s body with her own. Her mind wrenched back to the day she’d protected the lady she used to serve, when she’d been hit by that poisoned arrow.

I don’t want him to look at me like that again. She knew there was someone who cared about her well-being from the bottom of his heart, so she abandoned any idea of counterattacking and focused solely on preventing herself from taking a fatal wound. But just then, she felt someone grab her.

Rishe gasped and lifted her head, realizing someone had protected her. When

she saw him there, she called his name in a daze. “Prince Arnold...”

Arnold’s expression was unfazed, but he was bleeding from his side. He’d protected her. Rishe’s blood went cold.

His Highness is bleeding...

Memories of her sixth life scrambled for purchase in her mind. The knight Rishe had been had taken up her sword and pointed her blade at Arnold Hein. She’d fought with all she had and was finally able to land a single, grazing blow to his cheek. His blood had dripped from the wound then too.

Compared to back then, Rishe was filled with a terror far greater now.

A moment later, Arnold chopped the man’s wrist with his hand, not in the least bit shaken by the blood trickling from his side.



The cloaked interloper dropped his blade with a hiss. The force of Arnold's blow reverberated through the air.

Once the red-slicked blade fell to the deck with a *clang*, the woman screamed and the man leapt backward. The commotion broke Rishe out of her trance.

What I need to do right now is...

"Rishe." Arnold tossed his sword to her. *Protect yourself with this*, was how Rishe interpreted the gesture. But as soon as she caught the sword, she drew away from the woman behind her.

The man was trying to recover for another attack when Arnold grabbed him by the collar. He drew his leg back and rammed his knee into the man's gut.

"Ugh!"

Rishe heard bone cracking, but it wasn't a rib. The man had swiftly defended himself with his arms.

Eyes still covered by the hood low over his face, the man smiled with amusement. "Arnold Hein..."

He must have had a sword underneath his cloak. He drew a second blade—but before he could charge at the crown prince, another sharp *clang* rang out, the blade flying from his grasp. Rishe had unexpectedly appeared from his blind spot. Arnold's cold yet powerful bloodlust and the flames had hidden her from his view.

"Your Highness!"

Arnold swung his leg again, and the man dodged by a hair. His foot grazed the man's hood, but all that was revealed beneath it was a mask.

"Whoops!" After he dodged Arnold's kick, Rishe brought the sword's sheath down on him. Every bit of her strength was behind the blow, yet the man caught the sheath easily in one hand.

He reached for her with his free hand. Arnold sent another heavy kick his way,

knocking him away from her. Still, they hadn't done him any serious harm. The man laughed, regaining his balance atop the burning ship. He wasn't giving them an opportunity to close the distance and deal him a decisive blow.

He's strong!

Arnold's expression was still cool as ever, but the sweat on his brow and the blood spattering the deck proved that he wasn't in top form.

I must stop him!

Rishe made to charge again when the man produced yet another blade, but this one he threw toward the woman still trembling on the other side of the flames.

Arnold caught it, his voice clearly carrying over the din. "Rishe."

"Ngh..."

With the woman still near, they couldn't give all they had. Arnold knew that and so he'd called Rishe's name, forcing her to fall back and protect the woman instead of going after the man. He always knew how to get her to do what he wanted.

Rishe knocked away another blade with Arnold's sword, then threw it back to him as he traded places with her. She stepped toward the woman and Arnold toward the man, their backs to one another.

She grabbed the woman's hand and tugged before the inferno of burning sails above them came crashing down. "This way!"

"O-okay!"

By the time Rishe turned back to Arnold, he was swinging his sword. He'd driven the man to the edge of the deck, where his black blade unmistakably pierced the man's stomach. Rishe watched his display of swordsmanship wide-eyed.

His bladework is amazing even in this situation!

The man took a hacking breath. Then his hand closed around Arnold's, which gripped the hilt of his sword. As blood dribbled from the man's mouth, he smiled.

"You can't...fight your blood...can you?"

Arnold's brow furrowed. Rishe stared at him as she held the woman close to shield her from the flames.

Someone who knows Prince Arnold's father?

That was surprising enough, but she never expected the man's next words.

"That striking visage of yours is just like your mother's."

The ship lurched, and the woman screamed in Rishe's arms.

Rishe did her best to comfort her. "It's all right! It's going to be fine!"

The man grinned again and took a big step back. The sword slid out of his gut, and blood gushed out in torrents. Just before Arnold could grab him by his collar again, he toppled backward into the canal.

"Oh no!"

"Rishe." Arnold calmly flicked the blood from his sword, stopping her when she tried to stand. "You don't need to go after him."

She pursed her lips, unable to go against his soft voice. She heard the loud *splash* as their foe hit the water. Knights darted toward them from the other side of the blaze.

"Your Highness, Lady Rishe! The fire can no longer be stopped! Hurry and escape!" one called, unaware of Arnold's wound.

"Set up a perimeter around the canal. If you find a man with a wounded stomach and arm, apprehend him."

"Wha—?! Yes, sir! Understood!" The knight nodded. Arnold had behaved so in character that the knight couldn't have noticed the blood pouring from his side.

He's hiding his injury. I can't make a scene about it if he doesn't want anyone to know...

The ship would collapse soon. The knights were busy procuring an escape route for Arnold and Rishe using the water barrels.

“Lady Rishe, please leave this woman to us. We’ll make sure she’s safe!”

“Thank you,” Rishe managed, gripping Arnold’s sleeve. She’d seen countless injuries as an apothecary, as a hunter, as a knight—yet her fingers couldn’t stop trembling.

Arnold glanced down and placed his hand over hers, stroking it. All that was left for them to do was escape the floating fireball the ship had become.

Chapter 4

A FEW HOURS EARLIER, Raul heard that the ship had gone up in flames at the canal—and something about it struck him as odd.

A ship fire? And right when those two are on a canal-side stroll?

Galkhein's crown prince and his future wife had gone out together after their evening meal. They'd brought several guards with them for security, but Raul had stayed behind at the villa to keep an eye on Joel as ordered.

From the frenzied exchanges between the Imperial Guards and Arnold's attendant Oliver, it seemed the fire had broken out just as the ship passed by Arnold Hein and his fiancée.

Is this what His Highness warned me might happen? Resting his chin in his hand and his elbow on the banister, Raul denied his own idea. *No...there'd be much more panic if it were.*

Judging by the orders Oliver was giving at the front entrance, there was only one ship ablaze. What's more, Arnold Hein and that girl were present at the site of the fire.

This isn't what I should be prioritizing right now. With that monster couple taking charge of the scene, it'd be strange if things weren't under control out there, Raul told himself to quell the bad feeling that had settled in his heart.

He was forced to admit he was wrong when he saw Rishe's face as she climbed the stairs well past midnight.

"Raul!"

She'd supposedly just gotten out of the bath, but her cheeks were as ashen as if she'd taken a dip in a frozen lake. Raul had been waiting on the stairs so he could "coincidentally" run into her. He immediately noticed that she was out of sorts on her way up to her bedroom, somehow restless and listless at the same time.

She's trying real hard to act like she always does so nobody finds out something's wrong.

Her still-wet coral hair was proof enough that she wasn't even in a state to bathe properly at the moment.

Raul had noticed Arnold heading to bed a few moments earlier as well. *Should I have gone out there even if it meant disobeying His Highness's orders? Regretting it now won't change anything, though.*

Suppressing the urge to curse at himself, he told Rishe, "I'll tell the servants and knights that no one's to come up to this floor."

Rishe gasped softly.

"The crown princess isn't feeling well, so she'd prefer not to be disturbed.' I'll have Oliver back me up."

In truth, Oliver hadn't been inside the villa for some time now. There might have been rumors that Rishe herself was trying to keep people away, but if one of her "knights" spread the word that she wanted some privacy, people should at least not catch on that she had something she desperately wanted to hide.

"Thank you, Raul."

"Just get some rest. Sweet dreams." Raul casually waved her off, but he was secretly beside himself with worry that she'd miss a step as she raced up the rest of the stairs. That was just how out of sorts the normally stouthearted Rishe had seemed to him.

Now... There were some things he had to take care of before the sleeping Joel woke.

Without a sound, Raul slinked back down the stairs.

Rishe had been suppressing her panic up until now. She'd been working separately from Arnold, treating and calming down the woman they'd rescued and assisting with the evacuation efforts.

But even after finally returning to the royal villa, she shoved down her impatience and bathed to avoid attracting suspicion—lest she race upstairs still covered in soot. She'd abandoned the idea of fooling Raul from the start, but she was fairly certain no one else had caught on that something was amiss.

"Prince Arnold!"

When she finally burst into his bedroom, Arnold was just sitting on his bed looking no different than usual. He was even holding some paperwork. Rishe's eyes filled with tears as she grappled with relief that he was alive and frustration that he wasn't resting.

"You must lie down and rest, Your Highness!" She scampered to his side and seated herself on the floor next to his bed.

Observing the way she sat there, utterly exhausted, Arnold placed his hand on her cheek. His thumb traced soothing circles on her skin. "There's no need to panic."

"But you're injured!"

"I've already stopped the bleeding. It wasn't a very deep wound."

Rishe shook her head, thinking of the wound's location and the amount of blood on the deck. "Please allow me to examine it."

"Rishe."

"I'm not saying that I don't trust you to treat your own wounds, Your Highness. Just...please."

Arnold likely didn't want anyone seeing his wounds, since it was a display of weakness. Still, Rishe pleaded with him, clutching at his bedsheets. "*Please*, Your Highness."

When he saw that she was on the verge of tears, Arnold set his paperwork aside. He crossed his arms, grasped the hem of his shirt, and pulled it over his head. His toned, sculpted torso was bared before Rishe. When his head emerged from his shirt collar, he shook it in irritation, his disheveled hair falling

back into place. He always seemed slender when clothed, but when his muscular frame was exposed, his diligence in training became blatantly clear.

If nothing was wrong, Rishe would probably be beside herself with embarrassment at the sight of his statuesque physique. Right now, all she felt was worry and agitation.



There were two severe wounds on his body. One was the old scar on his neck. The other was covered in fresh white bandages.

“Here.” Arnold laid Rische’s hand atop his bandages. “Do as you wish.”

“Thank you.”

With his permission, Rische slowly unwrapped them, noticing the unique way they were tied at the end. It must have been the way Arnold had learned to wrap his own injuries as he fought on the battlefield. From her seat on the floor, Rische took her time undoing the knot. Arnold began loosening the bandages himself, unable to watch.

The bandages fell away with a rustle, exposing his solid abdomen. Rische’s eyes were glued to the wound at his side; she whimpered at the sight of it.

Then she picked up the disinfectant on Arnold’s bedside table. She had asked Oliver to deliver it to him from her belongings. Once she’d disinfected her hands with it, she said, “Please close your eyes for a moment, Your Highness.”

Arnold obeyed in silence.

Rische gingerly touched the area around his wound, careful not to hurt him. She traced a line down his skin and asked, “Can you tell what I just did?”

“...You moved your finger down my skin.”

She was relieved to learn that he had feeling in the area. His skin was hot near the wound, but it didn’t look too discolored from bleeding. Rische took Arnold’s wrist with her other hand and measured his pulse.

It’s a little fast...but still pretty relaxed for someone who’s just been stabbed. If he were in terrible pain or distress, his heart rate would have been higher. She peered into his eyes, but he was merely watching her, his face neutral as always.

The wound had indeed stopped bleeding, and judging from its angle, it was shallow. Rische pictured the dagger that had fallen on deck and estimated how deeply it had scored him, based on how much blood was on the blade.

“I’m going to gently press and move my hand. Is this where the pain stops?”

“Yes.”

If he was stabbed at this angle and it truly only hurts up to this point, then it really isn’t a serious wound, just as he said. But...

The bleeding had stopped far too quickly. It was possible she just wasn’t able to pick up on the pain he was feeling. If that was the case, then she had to be more careful with her examination. Just as she came to that conclusion...

“It’s the goddess’s blood.”

Rishe jumped at Arnold’s unexpected words.

“It makes my wounds heal faster.” Arnold, a descendant of the goddess, gave her a self-deprecating smile. “If I told you that, would you believe me?”

She considered it. As far as she was aware, Arnold was a realist. He wasn’t the sort of person who would joke about something like this, let alone say as much to another person. But several things were now becoming clear to Rishe.

It would explain the wound on his neck.

The gruesome wound had clearly been the product of many repeated stabbings. Considering the location, it was a miracle that he’d survived such a thing. Not to mention that the wound hardly limited his mobility in any way after healing. Yet Arnold was able to keep the scar a secret from almost everyone around him. He was even unparalleled on the battlefield, his sword skills peerless, injury or not.

I’m sure Prince Arnold trained himself with incredible rigor since childhood, but what if he also possessed an exceptional ability to recover?

She thought back to her fourth life, when she’d served Millia. The girl was related to Arnold as well, and possessed the same divine blood as his mother. *Mistress Millia was such an active child. She was always running around here and there, but she hardly ever got scrapes or bruises.*

Rishe gulped.

If the goddess's blood has some natural healing ability, then...

Arnold let out a breath, smiling softly. "I didn't think you'd take it so seriously."

"W-well, I can't think of any other reason for the bleeding to have stopped so quickly! I mean, the wound is so shallow, I can hardly believe you were stabbed."

"So whatever the reason is, you're satisfied that the wound is shallow?"

"I-I...!"

She *had* confirmed as much with her own eyes and hands. If this were a normal examination, it would be the part where Rishe smiled to comfort the patient and told him not to worry. But her heart was still hammering painfully.

I know the wound's not deep, but I'm so scared.

While she examined him, she'd been able to concentrate enough that her fingers had remained steady, but now that she was feeling even a shred of relief, the terror had returned full force.

"I'm sorry, Prince Arnold." She leaned her cheek against his knee. "This is all because you protected me..."

She heard a sigh from above her. Then Arnold bent over and picked her up. He put her on his lap and held her close.

Rishe went wide-eyed. "P-Prince Arnold?"

Arnold just held her tight. Seated as she was on his lap, their faces were right next to each other. Yet Rishe couldn't forget about his wound, so she tried to escape his grasp.

"Y-you mustn't, Your Highness! It's bad for your injury!"

"If you're concerned for me, then stop struggling."

"Ugh..." There was no way she could put up a fight.

Rishe at least tried to relax so that there would be less of a strain on Arnold's wound. When she did, Arnold began patting her back soothingly.

He's touching me like... Rishe remembered the first time she'd slept in the same bed as him, the day after Theodore had kidnapped her. It had happened about a month after they'd met. She had lain beside him and patted his chest to simulate a heartbeat, telling him it would relax him. Arnold was doing the same for her now.

His life had just been in danger, and he must have been in pain, but here he was putting Rishe above all else. She understood that so well that she wanted to cry.

"I never intended to frighten you so."

Rishe flinched. She'd shown him her naked terror when he was injured aboard the burning ship. Though she ached to say something, she feared it might come out as a sob instead. She stifled the urge to cry as best as she could.

"Will you scold me?" Arnold asked her gently.

She hastily shook her head, and he let out a puff of laughter that tickled her ear.

"You don't have to apologize for me protecting you."

That only made Rishe want to cry even more. "You're forgetting something important. You were injured doing so..." she managed, barely able to prevent herself from breaking down in tears. She was having trouble holding on, so she clung to Arnold's back. His skin was smooth and warm, and touching it directly made it very clear to her that his blood was still pumping underneath it.

"I..." She pressed her forehead to his neck, staunchly refusing to look him in the eye. "With you by my side, Prince Arnold, I feel like I can do anything." She rubbed her face against his old wound, down to her lips. Though she was acting affectionate, she knew he could tell her voice was twined with small tremors. "I always believed that people could do more by joining hands with one another..."

but Sir Joel says you're stronger when you fight alone."

His exact words tolled in her head like a bell.

"I just don't see what use you could possibly be to him."

"Well, aren't I right? He's stronger than me, I can tell that much. Yet he's playing along with your silly little strategy, protecting you. It's strange that he's taking such a roundabout way to handle things."

And Rishe did know someone who was stronger when he fought alone. *Joel...*

The genius swordsman had died protecting Rishe. *I know Joel's strength better than anyone.*

True, Arnold would likely still have beaten him, but if Joel had fought on his own, he may have survived long enough to make sure the royal family could get to safety. Then there would have been no reason for him to remain in the palace, and maybe he could have even gotten away.

"Prince Arnold..." Rishe let the question die in her throat.

What sort of life did you have in all those futures after I died? Rishe could only know what had happened up until her own death. *Did you obtain the goal you wanted so badly that it drove a kind and gentle person like you to start a war?*

Emperor Arnold Hein waged war on the world, invading any country that stood in his way. Did he carry his conquest out to the end, or was his violence eventually stopped? Rishe had no way of knowing. She knew nothing of the world beyond the next five years despite living her life over and over again.

Rishe reached out with trembling fingers and touched the hot skin near Arnold's wounded side. *I don't even know if you lived or died...*

She had never even thought about Arnold dying until now. In a way, she'd believed Arnold Hein the emperor to be almighty, a force no one could possibly stop. Right now, however, the thought of his death brought her endless terror.

"Your strength wanes with me at your side, Prince Arnold." She wrapped her arms around Arnold and buried her face in his neck.

“Rishe, that—”

“If you would tell me that it isn’t true...”

Rishe knew it was unfair of her to tearfully plead with him, but she pleaded nonetheless. She whined like a child to her kind fiancé.

“Then please, *please*,” she begged, bringing her lips to the scar on his neck, “never get hurt again.”

Arnold gently stroked her hair. “Never again, eh?” He held her close, burying his lips in her hair with a wry chuckle. “I’m sorry.”

Though he allowed her selfish outburst and apologized for worrying her, he made no promises.

The future that he sees... Rishe knew better than anyone that he was not the type to make promises he could not keep. No matter what he hid from her, he had never broken a promise, after all. It was his sincerity that devastated her so.

What he wishes for lies somewhere far in the future, after his war. Rishe slowly closed her eyes, trying to keep her tears at bay. She rubbed her cheek against him, desperately holding back her emotions. *I’ll never reach it with how I am now. I’m still so far away, even after seven lives...*

Still, there was one thing she was certain of. *I will use everything I’ve cultivated for Prince Arnold’s future.*

Arnold couldn’t possibly know what Rishe was resolving herself to do, yet he didn’t begrudge her clinging and stroked her hair over and over.

Arnold began wrapping new bandages around his side. As she assisted him, Rishe pressed her forehead into his neck once more and pleaded, “May I stay with you for just a bit longer, Your Highness?”

He probably didn’t want anyone near him while he was injured. That was why he’d tended to his own wounds while Rishe had treated the woman they’d rescued. But Arnold relented, entwining his fingers with hers.

“Sure.”

Rishe was relieved. This only made her want to ask for more, however.

“Can I stay forever?”

“I don’t mind.”

She finally felt herself relax, just a little. Rishe nuzzled against Arnold like a child might. She couldn’t see his expression, but his fingers brushed affectionately against hers. Surely he was smiling.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Rishe tried to keep the tears out of her voice as she mumbled, “You seem warmer than usual when I hug you.”

“Do I?” Arnold asked after a beat.

She’d touched him enough to know that his body temperature was usually lower than hers. The heat of his skin must have been related to his injury.

“You might have a fever...”

Arnold fell back onto the bed, arms still wrapped around her.

“Ack!”

He lay down with a soft *whump*, Rishe falling on top of him. She scrambled to get off.

“Oh no! Your wound will open again!”

“I told you, it stopped bleeding.”

Rishe nevertheless shot up and peered down at Arnold’s side. She couldn’t see the wound, newly wrapped as it was, but there was no red stain on the bandages.

Is it really the goddess’s blood at work?

Arnold put his hand on the back of Rishe’s head and forced her to avert her eyes from the wound. She let him pull her to his chest once more, lying atop him as he stroked her hair.

When she thought calmly about how she was lying on top of a half-naked Arnold, embarrassment threatened to devour her. Even so, she felt his warmth and the comfort that it brought all the more keenly.

I can hear his heartbeat.

She slowly lowered her eyelids and spoke her relief aloud. "The blood you inherited protects you..."

Arnold flinched at that.

"What is it, Prince Arnold?"

"I can never predict what you're thinking." Arnold traced a finger over Rishe's ring. "Any effects the goddess's blood might produce are fact mixed with fiction at this point. I've pored over holy scriptures in the ancient Crusade language, but I was never able to come to a concrete conclusion."

Arnold had told her before that he'd learned Crusade, the goddess's language, as a child. It was an incredibly difficult language, but it was one with close ties to his mother. He must have been all alone as a child, reading books that an adult might toss aside in frustration.

"That man..." Arnold murmured, and Rishe thought of the hooded individual they'd faced aboard the ship.

That man knew Prince Arnold's mother.

Rishe sat up slightly and reached for Arnold's neck. She touched the scar she'd secretly kissed a moment ago and rasped, "This wound... Did your mother do this?"

She'd asked him how he'd gotten the scar that first night she saw it at the party right after they'd met, but Arnold hadn't told her anything then.

Now he answered her, his voice so soft that it brought fresh tears to her eyes. "Yes."

She was devastated to hear her suspicions confirmed.

He was still so young... Oliver had regaled her with the tale of when he'd first met Arnold, a boy of nine with bloody bandages wrapped around his neck. *And she stabbed him enough times to leave all these marks...*

Tears swam in Rishe's eyes. What she knew of Arnold's mother from his own mouth made her feel anxious, but she also wanted to know why things had gotten so bad between them.

Instead, the first words from her lips were, "It must have hurt terribly..."

"Oh?"

Arnold's expression hadn't changed in the slightest when he'd been stabbed protecting her—but there was no way he didn't feel pain.

Rishe traced the lines of his scar with her fingers, pursing her lips into a tight line. *For his own mother to do this to him...I can't even imagine how he might have felt.*

Arnold sighed and stroked Rishe's hair. "I don't really remember the pain." She murmured his name, and he appeared to pick up on the question she couldn't ask. "What stands out more in my mind is the memory of killing her afterward."

Rishe's breath caught in her throat as Arnold continued caressing her hair.

"What was your mother like?" she asked him.

There was a gazebo set aside in a corner of the imperial palace for her. A brand-new structure that showed no signs of use.

"I have no way of knowing." Arnold's blue eyes glazed over; perhaps he was recalling some faraway scenery he'd laid eyes on long ago. "The mother I knew was always like a soulless doll."

It was rare for him to speak in metaphor like this. Rishe locked eyes with him as his shapely fingers combed through her locks.

"She'd break down when she saw me, so I never had a proper conversation with her until just before she died. I can hardly ever remember hearing her

voice, and I can count on one hand the number of times our eyes met.” Arnold spoke emotionlessly, filling in the information Rishe wanted to know as if he were mindlessly following a routine. “I ran into her that day and triggered one of her fits. I was covered in blood, which is probably why she snapped.”

“Blood? Why?”

“I was on my way back to the tower after killing my newborn sister.”

Rishe gasped. He’d told her about his father’s horrific deeds once before. Arnold’s father took brides from other countries as hostages, but he only allowed children who strongly inherited his own blood to live. The rest would die as infants. As his heir, Arnold had been forced to take part in the slaughter at a young age.

“She walked over to me calmly, as if nothing was wrong. The only clue was the single glance she’d given the sword at my hip.”

Rishe could picture it. Arnold’s mother, the royal priestess, would have had violet hair just like Millia’s. If Arnold resembled her, then she must have been stunningly beautiful. She was normally like a “soulless doll,” but she’d walked toward the bloody Arnold of her own free will. What expression could have possibly been on the young Arnold’s face then?

“I misjudged the situation.” Arnold cast his eyes down softly. “My mother smiled at me, cursed my birth, and drove the blade into me.”

He cupped her cheek when he saw her eyes grow misty. “There’s no need for you to look at me like that.”

“But—”

“I told you I don’t remember the pain. It’s true.”

Rishe bit her lip and shook her head. Voice barely a whisper, Arnold said, “The last thing she pierced was her own throat.”

His eyes were calm, like the sea on a day without a breeze.

“I think she cursed me once more as her blood coated me.”

“Oh, Your Highness...”

“She didn’t die quickly. She suffered. The wound she’d given herself was fatal, but if the goddess’s blood really helps a person heal, all it served to do for her was prolong her pain.”

Rishe understood immediately the course of action the young Arnold had taken. “You freed your mother from her suffering.”

So that was why it was said that he’d killed his mother. Rishe also realized why he had to kill his brothers and sisters. Arnold hadn’t blindly obeyed his father’s orders; she was sure the choice had been forced upon him. Just like with his mother, the children had been put in situations where death was the only way to save them.

That’s why he thinks marrying me is such a terrible thing. That he’s forced me into it.

Rishe hung her head and wrapped her arms around Arnold. She pulled him to her and buried her face in his neck again, and he gently returned her embrace.

“Please don’t cry,” he whispered. It was rare for Arnold to beg, but Rishe couldn’t help digging her heels in like a spoiled child. Arnold called her name to soothe her. He kissed her hair.

Being forced to kill his mother and his newborn brothers and sisters... He endures it all as if it’s his sin to bear. It was kindness through and through, as far as Rishe was concerned.

“Those bloody days of your childhood...” she said slowly, willing her voice not to tremble. Her tears still hadn’t fallen. Arnold waited patiently as she mustered the words she wanted to say. “That’s what marriage means to you.”

His father had waged war on the world, and the countries he’d conquered had offered him brides as hostages in exchange for these fleeting days of peace. Arnold had seen it all through his ocean-blue eyes. By contrast, as almost all his siblings were killed, the emperor’s wives viewed Arnold with nothing but bitter

resentment.

“That’s why you respect me as an individual and not as a consort, and why you give me so much freedom...”

“That’s not true.”

His fingers ventured down from her hair, brushing against her ear and cheek. Rishe peeked up from the comforting crook of his neck, and their eyes met. He’d never taken those calm blue eyes off her.

“I just enjoy it.” Arnold put his hand on the back of her head and pulled her close to him again. “Your freedom.” His husky voice in her ear was like the shell-bound roar of the sea. “Your strength. The way you pull anything and everything along with you as you fight for what will make everyone happiest.”

He was always like this. He affirmed the way she wanted to live like it was only natural. He’d probably never been able to live as he wished, yet he permitted Rishe to choose what was most important to her even after she’d already lived her life over and over again—not that he knew it.

He lets me have my way even if it would pit us against each other. When he’d refused the alliance with Coyolles or when he’d tried to take the archbishop’s life, he’d never refused Rishe the option to fight him.

He’s so strong and so kind. He must have been thinking that he’d gotten Rishe wrapped up in his plans after bringing her back to Galkhein.

What if I told him I was in love with him? Rishe shot down the thought immediately. *No, I can’t.* That wouldn’t change Arnold’s mind. She could become a heavy shackle binding him, but he would continue to move forward.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you, Your Highness.” While she wouldn’t demand an answer, this was something she needed to say to him. “If, say...by the time I turn twenty, I lose my life—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he said flatly. Another rare display of selfishness in which he rejected her whims. But Rishe couldn’t listen to him this time.

I'm sorry.

Arnold had asked her not to, yet she continued. Rishe knew painfully well how fragile her own life was. This man had been the reason for her death in every single life thus far. Remembering the pain she'd felt when he'd personally ended her life in her sixth loop, she said, "If I die...I want to be your bride in my next life too."

Arnold's hand froze atop her head.

If my wish to live a long life doesn't come true this time... Rishe took Arnold's hand with her left hand, the one bearing the ring, and entwined their fingers tight. *If it doesn't end there, and it repeats again...*

Up until now, every time she'd died and returned to that day, her heart had danced at the new possibilities before her. Even if she lost things she'd built up to that point, the view before her had seemed full of opportunity.

But now, in her seventh life, Rishe couldn't stop wishing for one thing and one thing only: *In my eighth life, and in my ninth life, and my tenth...* She could never choose anything else, and it didn't even feel like a restraint.

"I want to be by your side, Your Highness."

"Rishe..."

No matter what life she lived from now on, she wanted Arnold to be there with her. Yearning to hold hands with him in all her futures henceforth, she prayed.

"Please."

She had told him once in a chapel that she was resolved to be his wife. Arnold had kissed her then and told her she didn't need to be.

"If it's not a resolution but a wish," she said, keenly aware of how feeble her grip on him was, "would you allow that?"

Arnold gave Rishe's hand a light squeeze, and she timidly raised her head from his neck. He was staring down at her with his ocean-blue eyes. They

looked the same as they had when he kissed her in the chapel.

I wish he would just nod and say, "Fine," in that gentle voice of his.

That's not what he did, however. He simply closed his eyes and pulled her hand to him, reaffirming his grip on it. Then he placed a soft kiss on the ring on her finger.

"Your Highness..."

The gesture signified a proposal to both of them. There was no tradition that dictated it so, but when he had given her this ring and Rishe had asked him once again to be her husband, he'd kissed her ring just like this that evening on the shore.

There was no way Arnold had forgotten. Rishe's eyes swam once more, precisely because the kiss wasn't a rejection of her wish.

He won't give me a promise in words...

In an instant, Rishe was pressed against his chest.

"Rishe."

There almost seemed to be a wish of his own in the strength of his hold on her. But Arnold would never vocalize that wish.

All she could hear was his heartbeat.

He loathes his father's way of doing things. Yet he still proposed to me and keeps me at his side, accepting me. Arnold thought of even that as a sin.

He really is kind. More tears welled up in her eyes at that, and she could no longer hold herself back. Arnold's kindness devastated her.

I don't want Prince Arnold to feel any more pain! She didn't want him getting hurt for her sake.

Arnold stared down at her, tracing her wet lashes with his thumb.

"Ngh..."

“Rishe.”

When he gently called her name, she shook her head. And for a time after that, Rishe fell to pieces in front of him just as she had once before. No matter how many times he stroked her hair or murmured her name, her tears never seemed to end.

She burdened the kind Arnold for some time after that.

“Have you calmed down?”

“Yes...”

Rishe sniffled, burying her face in her pillow. She’d put away the first aid kit and changed into a nightgown that didn’t expose much of her skin. Arnold had put a nightshirt on and was resting his head on a pillow beside Rishe’s.

The light summer blanket was almost too hot with both of them under it, but Rishe found Arnold’s body heat too comfortable to leave his bed.

“You really don’t mind if I sleep with you?” she asked shyly.

“I’d prefer it if you went back to your own room and got some proper rest.”

“Hrk...”

“But if you plan to stay by my side all night, then I at least want you to sleep instead of staying up.”

It was the exact opposite situation from the night Rishe had been struck by that poisoned arrow. Back then, it was Arnold who wanted to watch over Rishe all night, so she had thrown a fit to get him to rest. They’d ended up sharing the same bed.

I never expected His Highness to do as I did.

Burrowed into the covers up to her nose, Rishe snuck a glance at Arnold. She was both embarrassed by her own childish antics and plagued by the same sorrow as before.

I've always known that I have to prove myself with actions and not convince him with words. I can't just cry and tell him not to get hurt. I must make sure of it, she told herself, clutching the blanket. If what he wants is beyond his war—the one he'll wage even at risk to his own health—then I have to stop it from happening and offer him an alternative means to his goal.

Renewing her determination, Rishe thought, *When we return to the capital, I really should try to see him before the wedding...*

She rolled over to face Arnold. "Say, Your Highness..." Arnold returned her gaze, lying on his back. "Is your wound really all better?"

Her anxiety must have been plain on her face. Arnold responded, "I'm fine."

"You're not just saying that so I won't worry?"

"You rebandaged it yourself and examined the wound thoroughly."

"But what about the fever you seemed to have earlier?"

Arnold patted her cheek with one hand. "See for yourself."

Rishe's heart throbbed. She tried not to show it, reaching out slowly over the sheets. The moment she touched Arnold's hand, he grasped hers.

"Oh..."

His eyes closed, Arnold pressed Rishe's hand to his own cheek and nuzzled up against it.

"Eep!"

It was hard to say who was indulging whom now.

Arnold slowly opened his eyes, the shadow of his lashes falling across the most beautiful blue in the world. "You're warmer."

"Well, I-I..."

Arnold's body temperature was usually lower than Rishe's, but she felt like there might be some other factors contributing to the difference in their relative heat.

I was fine just a moment ago! Rishe protested.

Just a short while ago, she'd seen plenty of Arnold's bare chest, sat on his lap, lain atop his half-naked body, and pestered him for affection. The facts of the situation made her face burn hotter and hotter.

Is it just me or have I been behaving most immodestly?!

Arnold chuckled at the way Rishe chewed her lip. He was clearly amused, but he wouldn't remove his hand. The kind—and sometimes teasing—Arnold stroked Rishe's ring finger, bared now for sleep. "Your expressions sure do change quite a bit."

"Mmgh..." Rishe was both frustrated that she had no retort and relieved that things were once again status quo between them. Arnold's wound really didn't seem to be bad.

Weakly squeezing his hand in return, Rishe prayed, *May your pain ease soon.*

"The woman from the ship is resting in a room under the Imperial Guard's watch," she told him. "As you requested, I left things to Oliver after finishing with her treatment."

Before dealing with his wound, Arnold had issued a number of commands to his vassals. Rishe had gone with the woman, treating her scrapes and calming her down, steeling herself to ignore Arnold's injury so no one would find out about it.

In reality, she'd been in no state to calm someone else down. If she let her concentration slip for a moment, her hands would start trembling, so she'd done all she could to keep her composure in front of the Imperial Guards.

She recalled the way Oliver had comforted her upon visiting the villa where they were keeping the women they'd taken in. He'd just been caught up to speed.

"Lady Rishe, please allow me to take over. I've heard the details from my lord, so I'll see if I can get any more information about what happened before the

ship was set ablaze.”

“Thank you, Oliver.”

“Please don’t mention it. In exchange, I only ask that you stop my lord if he insists on working in his bedroom!” The joking way he’d spoken was surely meant to reassure her.

Rishe had turned to Arnold’s trusted retainer and said, *“Oliver, I’ll tell you what I’ve already heard from her...”*

She told Arnold now what she’d told Oliver then. “The man in the cloak was the very same one who enticed the women to join him on his ship in Siarga.” The woman had been sure of it when she saw him. “She didn’t see his face either, of course, but she was certain he was the same man from his voice and build.”

Arnold said nothing in response.

“When they met, he had blond hair and deep-blue eyes. I’ve given his description to the knights, but he could have disguised himself. They’re focusing their search on individuals with injuries matching his.”

Arnold had stabbed the man in the stomach and broken his arm. Wounds like that would be much more difficult to hide than one’s hair or eye color. Still, they couldn’t be optimistic about their chances.

“I’m sure he’ll get away,” Arnold muttered.

“Right.”

They were in agreement on this.

Arnold’s Imperial Guards were excellent. Having faced off against him directly, however, Rishe could tell that the man’s abilities were far superior to theirs. That was clear enough from how much trouble Arnold had with him, though he *was* injured and protecting Rishe as they fought.

Then there was the way he unhesitatingly jumped into the canal from that height. If Raul had been there, he may have been able to track him, but...

He was a man with the strength of a knight and the mobility of a hunter. Even if the Imperial Guards did everything in their power to find him, he had no doubt taken measures to avoid capture.

“The name he gave her was Thaddeus, but I’m sure it’s fake.” A bigger hint to his identity was what he’d said to Arnold in the end. “Is it true that you resemble your mother, Your Highness?”

Rishe was hesitant to ask him things of this nature. The last time he’d seen his mother, she would’ve been a ghastly sight.

It must have shown on Rishe’s face that she felt terrible making him remember such a thing, as Arnold rolled over to face her. Their pillows were right next to each other, and their fingers were still entwined. In this position, they gazed into one another’s eyes with hardly any distance between them. She was worried about the wound on his side, but with that side raised, the burden on his wound should have lessened.

“Objectively speaking, I suppose so.”

Arnold squeezed her hand again. His hands were rough from wielding a sword on an almost daily basis—but the distinct shape of his bones and joints made them beautiful as well, like works of art. Rishe’s eyelids lowered as she took comfort in the strength of his grip.

“Then did that man know your mother was the royal priestess?”

“He could also have met her after she married my father.”

It wouldn’t be strange if portraits of the former royal priestess existed somewhere, but there should have been very few people who knew her to be Arnold’s mother. Even if the man had only known her as Arnold’s birth mother, that should have narrowed down his possible identity by a fair margin as well.

“The tower where the emperor’s wives resided could only be reached through my father’s living quarters.”

Rishe thought of when she’d seen Arnold’s father, lit by the moon high in the

sky behind him. She hadn't been anywhere near him, yet his dreadful bloodlust had been plenty palpable. The very air around her had dropped a few degrees, to the point that she'd found it difficult to breathe in his presence.

"The only people allowed to enter were the servants who cared for his wives, but they're all dead now."

Grimacing at the unjustness of it all, Rishe asked, "Then would he only have had the opportunity to know your mother as the royal priestess *before* she came to Galkhein?"

"If he did, he would have ties to only a few individuals high up in the Church."

Rishe gulped. "Someone with ties to the Church, with a ship that can take him across the sea, who does business with nobility as a merchant..."

She had a strange sense of déjà vu.

If you factor in his knight-like combat abilities and his hunter-esque moves, he's...

Rishe frowned, puzzled.

He's...like me?

She gripped Arnold's hand tighter.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." She was worried those blue eyes would see right through her, sharp as they were. "It's clear that this man who calls himself Thaddeus is no mere slave trader."

Rishe pretended that was her true concern.

"This international human trafficking incident is shaping up to be much more complicated than I expected." Thinking back to several things that had occurred recently, she added, "What worries me most is the possibility that this man intends harm to Galkhein somehow."

Arnold lowered his gaze.

The Fabrannian royal family manufactured counterfeit currency to weaken Galkhein. But it wasn't King Walter's own idea; someone led him to it.

That wasn't the only incident of clandestine maneuvering to date.

Whoever was behind that incident also attempted to rope my former fiancé, Prince Dietrich, into his schemes as well. And this was likely another trap designed to do harm to Prince Arnold and Galkhein.

Galkhein was a major world power with significant military might. It had influenced the history of nearly every other nation in this world at some point and would continue to do so, given what Rishe knew of the future. Countless people were wary of Galkhein, wanted to make use of it for themselves, or desired to see the whole nation destroyed.

"That man must be..."

Arnold narrowed his eyes and shifted. "In any case..."

Rishe gasped when Arnold tapped his forehead against hers.

"Granting your wish comes first." He relaxed his hand, pulling back his fingers and enclosing his hand around hers instead. "You want to rescue the human trafficking victims, don't you? It will be more efficient to concentrate our efforts there for now."

"True enough, I suppose."

He traced the edge of her nails with his thumb, the touch ticklish. The gesture was almost playful. She never imagined Arnold might touch someone like this in any of her past lives.

"You pushed yourself too hard today," he told her.

"Ugh... Speak for yourself," she said, confident that she had the upper hand this time.

She pouted and he let go of her hand, instead reaching out to touch her cheek.

“Ngh...” Rishe hunched her shoulders as his fingers brushed her near her ear. Arnold had surely noticed that she didn’t resist, though. Hardly able to bear the embarrassment she felt, Rishe timidly began, “Hey, Prince Arnold?”

“What?”

“You’re a bit needy today, aren’t you?”

Arnold merely blinked at her.

I mean, you keep touching me and all. His touch was obviously intended to calm her down, but he also ventured into teasing territory.

“Are you sure your injury isn’t bothering you?”

“...”

“Is it uncomfortable being in that position? If it hurts to lie on your back and on your side, it would be best to lessen the burden on your wound as much as possible.” If they had a thicker winter blanket, it might be able to provide some support; the thin summer pillows weren’t likely to help him much.

Rishe thought for a moment, then snuggled closer to Arnold.

“...Rishe?”

“Um, a body pillow may alleviate your pain somewhat.” She steeled herself and locked gazes with him. The best item to serve as this “body pillow” was Rishe herself. “I-I implore you to embrace me however you like, Your Highness...”

Arnold peered at her, eyes still devoid of emotion. His hand, however, stopped his gentle stroking of her cheek and instead roughly tousled her hair.

“Ngh?!”

Rishe remembered how, as a child, she used to pet a stuffed toy she’d loved to bits. The way he touched her now was less needy or soothing and more scolding, if she had to guess.

“Ack! Your Highness!”

“I can’t believe you.” He finally released her, breathing a short breath whose huffiness seemed laden with meaning.

“I-I’m sorry.” It was just a ridiculous suggestion. There was no way he’d be more comfortable with Rishe in his arms. In fact, he’d likely only exacerbate his wounds.

“I just wish there were some way I could help you get more restful sleep somehow. I feel like there’s nothing more I can do for you.”

She was painfully aware of how little she could offer, even with all her medical knowledge and maid training. When a person was badly wounded, there wasn’t much anyone other than the goddess could do for them.

“I understand,” Arnold said after a lengthy pause. There was a shine to his blue eyes. This time, he gently combed Rishe’s tousled hair back into place and said, “Let me borrow you, then.”

“Huh?”

The next moment, he wrapped her up in a hug. Rishe squeaked as he pulled her waist to him with one arm and slung the other around her back. She buried her face in his chest, temporarily unable to breathe due to their closeness.

I can feel His Highness’s warmth...

Rishe felt herself going red up to her ears. Her heart did somersaults as he rested some of his weight on her, practically clinging to her. With each beat of her heart, Rishe was reminded of her feelings for Arnold. Her chest tightened as she clutched at Arnold’s shirt.

“I suppose I am being a bit needy with you,” Arnold whispered, pressing a kiss to Rishe’s forehead.

“Really...?”

He didn’t continue, but Rishe sensed what he might be thinking. *He told me once that making me his wife, keeping me by his side, was just one aspect of his goal.*

Arnold would never forgive himself for what he perceived to be his sins. Even if Rishe herself wished to marry him, he despised the things he and his father did. He probably conceived of Rishe marrying him as sacrificing herself. *Even though I stand to interfere with your plans more than anyone else could.* She was a terrible wife who was determined to stop his war and lead him into a kinder future.

Rishe wrapped her arms around Arnold's back and held on to him as well. Arnold seemed a bit surprised by the gesture, but he stroked her hair gently nonetheless.

"May you have good dreams, Your Highness."

"Oh?"

Arnold had told her that his bad dreams went away when he slept next to her. Rishe hoped they would stay away again tonight.

"May a day one day come when you are able to desire even such a small blessing for yourself..."

Listening to Arnold's heartbeat, Rishe closed her eyes as he caressed her hair with his large hand. She'd wanted to stay awake until he fell asleep himself, but she was already sinking into a warm sea of slumber. Nuzzling her cheek against the beloved warmth before her, Rishe settled into sleep.

Arnold pulled back slightly from Rishe, entwining his fingers with hers once more. "I won't desire such a blessing," he said, though his words never reached her.

He cast his gaze down, kissed Rishe's ring finger, and told her, "But I do hope you'll make my wish come true one day."

For this last utterance, his voice was cold and foreboding.



Chapter 5

AS THE CHEFS put the finishing touches on breakfast the next morning, Rishe stood in the corner of the kitchen, making medicine in a boiling pot.

First, it needs to offset the effects of the sleeping drug.

Rishe had finished preparing the xeris leaves and crolaine grass the day before. She kept these plants on her in their dried form, then soaked them in water yesterday to make sure they'd fully reabsorbed their moisture. She sprinkled them into a large mortar and ground them into a paste. That done, she split a dried red nevila fruit and extracted its seeds.

The seeds warm the body, so I'll keep those for something else.

She added the meat of the nevila to the mortar and crushed it into the paste, then checked the pot where the firinz nectar was boiling. Steam burst forth when she lifted the lid, filling the kitchen with a distinct, sweet smell. Stirring the pot with a large wooden spoon, she added the paste from the mortar to it, mixing carefully to minimize how much air entered the concoction.

What a beautiful green! You'd never be able to guess at this stage that it ends up amber-colored when it's finished. I have to say, though...

Rishe glanced behind her as she stirred the pot. "Um..." She called out to the young man looking around curiously, watching her as she worked. "Sir Joel, what exactly are you doing here?"

"Hrmm..."

Her former mentor peered down at the pot and slowly blinked, sleepy as always. As Rishe moved between the table and the pot while she worked, Joel followed behind her like a duckling. Furthermore, since Raul's duty was watching Joel, the hunter sat in a chair behind them to observe.

"Well, what are *you* doing? That's not breakfast."

“The chefs prepared a delicious breakfast that’s out in the guest dining hall right now. I’m making medicine.”

“Medicine.”

“Yes!” Rishe nodded and held her head high with pride. “It’s an antidote so that when I act as bait for the slavers, I won’t be affected by their drugs!”

“The crown prince’s bride is making medicine so that she can be used as bait and captured?”

“Huh?” Rishe blinked a few times. Joel was giving her a highly dubious scowl.

Her gaze slid to Raul, who seemed to agree with the foreign knight. “My dear princess, that husband of yours accepted your proposal like it was completely natural, but *that* is the normal reaction to such an idea,” he said, gesturing to Joel.

“I-I’m not the princess yet, and he’s not my husband!” she protested, though she knew that wasn’t the point. But if she took this medicine beforehand, she shouldn’t be affected by the drug the pirates had used on Joel and the kidnapped women.

Ideally, I’d like to test it with a dose of the drug first, but... She’d given up on that idea since she doubted she could get her hands on any amount. Michel would have chided her for rushing into things without proper experimentation, but Hakurei would’ve told her, *“Take pride in your experience and intuition.”*

The only thing I have to worry about is how much we need, but I brought some with me from the palace and have made more since.

Rishe glanced at another pot boiling nearby. This one did not contain the antidote for the sleeping drug but a salve for wounds with a painkilling effect. She’d prepared this in advance as well, but the salve was most potent in the first twenty-four hours after the final step in its preparation.

When Rishe had awoken, Arnold was still asleep. She’d carefully extracted herself from his arms, and he’d shown no signs of waking. Her heart twinged at

the memory of his defenseless sleeping face.

I hope he got some good rest...though there's a possibility he was simply exhausted because of his injury.

She couldn't express how worried she was for him here, however. The crown prince being stabbed was a serious matter for a country, to say the least. Particularly when that crown prince's formidability in battle served as a check on any foreign powers with designs on Galkhein.

That was probably why Arnold hadn't wanted anyone to know he was injured. Thus, Rishe forced herself to behave as she always did.

Joel, who had no way of knowing of Rishe's internal torment, yawned. "I got up early today," he said, peering into her pot with utter disinterest. "'Cause we're supposed to have a strategy meeting, right? I might get to fight soon, so I woke up kind of excited..."

Yes, you did tend to wake up earlier when we had meetings to plan our expeditions, didn't you?

Rishe had done her best to wake him on those days, but he might have gotten up in time even without her help if she'd decided not to bother. Or so she thought, but she still couldn't picture him showing up to those meetings any other way than with bedhead and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Even now, Joel's red hair was fluffier than usual.

He just seems so vulnerable when he's not holding a sword.

Rishe found her thoughts wandering to a period in her sixth life before Arnold killed his father and started his war.

"If we can lure them into a naval battle, it'll be our victory."

Their training that day had taken place on the open sea, aboard several vessels sailing in parallel. It was a joint training operation with the desert nation of Halil Rasha, one of Siarga's allies. Halil Rasha's ruler, King Zahad, was on the

biggest ship of the group. While peering up at him nostalgically every so often, Rishe had listened to Joel's lecture with great interest.

"Our ships won't lose to anyone else. And the knights aboard those ships are more proficient at fighting on the water than any other country's."

Their ships were in a formation like a bird with its wings spread. The vessel Rishe and Joel rode on served as the bird's beak. There was a tailwind, but the tide was flowing in the opposite direction.

"The tide's flowing against us, but we're in the best possible formation for this fight."

The moment the drill began, their ship would be engaging the enemy first. They would charge into the enemy's formation, and the fighting would start.

"It's nothing like a fight on land. There's a great risk of being thrown from a swaying ship... You've practiced falling tons of times, haven't you, Lu?"

"Yep! I landed on my stomach and got knocked out a few times, but I'm confident now!" she responded brightly, eliciting grins from the nearby knights listening in.

"There aren't too many newbies who dive straight into the water on their first falling drill like Lucius. I don't think I've seen anyone else do that other than Joel."

"Well, he is Joel's very first junior. Do you get it from your mentor, Lucius?"

"Hey, you guys are making fun of me, aren't you?" Joel pouted before turning back to Rishe. "Anyway, this is as far as I can go with you today, Lu."

The flag signaling the beginning of the exercise rose on the ship bearing the two kings. They wouldn't be participating in the battle directly, but they'd watch over their soldiers' fighting and take command in an emergency.

"I'll be leaving you behind once it starts."

"What?! But the commander told us to act in pairs!"

“Whether it’s practice or a real fight, you’ll only be weaker fighting together with somebody.”

The sails of every ship unfurled all at once. With a *whap*, they caught the wind and shot forward on the water.

“If you don’t want to die, fight alone.”

Rishe gasped at the speed of the heavy ships. *Ugh! These ships really are fast!* The waters were also choppy that day, with the waves only promising to get rougher. Their ship rocked and swayed with great force.

“Here they come.”

Their practice partner was already here. Rishe crouched low, grabbing hold of a rope affixed to the deck and bracing for impact as she’d been trained.

The next instant, a crash shook the ship. The tremors were so severe, it was like a natural disaster—as if they’d been struck by lightning or gotten caught in an earthquake. Barrels and other objects that should have been tightly secured went flying, falling into the sea.

I feel like the rope’s going to rip off my arms, but...! Rishe swiftly righted herself and kicked off the deck. She’d learned that she could move faster than anyone else with her light, tiny frame. That instant, someone passed her by, and she glimpsed the back of a man who seemed so very free.

Joel!

He’d already drawn his sword, his knight’s cape fluttering in the wind behind him.

“Watch that mentor of yours well, Lucius.” One of her other senior knights grinned like he was boasting about his little brother. “That kid’s the spearhead of our forces.”

The drops of sea spray glittered like stars, reflecting the light of the sun. Rishe felt her heart leap as Joel raced ahead of them, carving them a path forward.

When he jumped fearlessly onto the enemy ship, she followed him without

hesitation—and though Siarga was at a disadvantage in the training that day, they'd been the ones to ultimately claim victory in the exercise.

“Sir Joel...”

In this, her seventh life, Rishe couldn't help Joel as his junior, and Joel wouldn't teach her or train her as her mentor. Knowing that all too well, Rishe set her spoon down.

“I have something I'd like to ask of you. Something only you can do,” she told him, and Joel gave her the exact response she'd been expecting.

“Don't wanna.”

“Hee hee.” Feeling nostalgic, Rishe went on, “Oh, please don't be like that. If you do what I ask, it will mean fighting in a unique circumstance!”

That piqued his interest. “Sword fighting?” he asked after a beat.

“I know you appreciate pure swordplay, Sir Joel, but I imagine you also enjoy fighting with restrictions for a little added challenge?” Rishe smiled and put a finger to her lips. “I don't think I'll be able to arrange that match with Prince Arnold for a while yet, but I can make things fun in the meantime.”

Rishe knew all about what Joel would find fun. She also knew that the aloof hunter leader had an unexpectedly caring side to him as well.

“I'd be relieved if you would help me as well, Raul...since it's something I'm sure you're the only one in the world who can do, at least as far as I know.”

“Come now, dear princess...” Raul said, a weary smile on his face. “If you don't stop leading us on, your husband's going to get rather scary, you know.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, but Raul wouldn't explain himself.

By the time her medicine was complete, everyone had finished breakfast and their morning preparations and gathered in the lounge.

Having helped Arnold with his morning prep, Rishe was relieved to learn his wound had healed well since last night. They headed to the lounge together and sat side by side on one of the room's many comfortable couches.

Joel looks sleepy, to be sure. Their Siargan guest was seated opposite them. *But this is him motivated—excited, in fact.*

The redhead was rather unsuited to things like strategy meetings. But considering that Siarga had sent them an official request for aid, his presence was necessary if they were to discuss the human trafficking operation plaguing both their nations.

Standing beside Arnold, Oliver started things off. "Let me begin with a review of the information we obtained yesterday."

Arnold sat with his chin resting in his hand, neutral as ever. He'd already healed quite a bit and had Rishe's painkiller to help as well, but his fortitude was also simply impressive.

Still, I'm sure Raul's noticed his injury. She glanced over at Raul, who stood by the door, and he made a little fox with his hand, moving his fingers to imitate its mouth opening and closing. Even when he was joking around, his powers of observation were impressive.

"The man who calls himself 'Thaddeus' introduced himself as a trader in Siarga."

As expected, they hadn't located the hooded man. They were still searching for traces of him even now.

Flipping through some papers he'd undoubtedly put together himself, Oliver went on, "He has blond hair, blue eyes, and reportedly striking features. It seems he got involved with the women when he appeared at a party where many of them were in attendance... But he wasn't there on a noble's invitation. Rather, another merchant had introduced him to the host."

"Have you found the referring firm, Oliver?"

“It was the ‘Culetta Trading Company,’ but there are no records of this company ever doing business in Galkhein.”

It was just like Oliver to already have the information Rishe considered valuable. Keenly aware of why Arnold kept him by his side, she told him, “Let’s ask Mr. Tully of the Aria Trading Company to find out more about them using their business connections, then. Even if this ‘Thaddeus’ isn’t really a merchant, it will be beneficial to identify anyone who might have had dealings with him.”

“I am once again impressed by the breadth of the connections you’ve forged for us, Lady Rishe,” Oliver said thoughtfully, then nodded. “If I may trouble you to write a letter to the Aria Trading Company, I will see that it is delivered.”

“Of course. I believe the chief is in the capital, so I’ll get it done right away.”

Oliver smiled and thanked her, then continued his report. “Thaddeus was a skilled negotiator, and he won the hearts of several of the noble ladies at this party. He was careful to stay in control of these relationships, behaving with the abducted women as if he were opening up to them alone in a bid to forge closer bonds.”

“Ugh... That’s the oldest trick in the book,” Raul muttered, and all eyes in the room focused on him. He shrugged and spoke from the perspective of a hunter who might kill or abduct anyone his lord wished. “It’s the most effective way to kidnap someone. You gain the target’s trust, and they practically kidnap themselves. It’s despicable.”

“It’s as Raul says,” Oliver agreed. “As a result, the women locked up on that slave ship had trouble suspecting ‘Thaddeus’ even after they’d been brought all the way to Galkhein.”

Arnold’s eyes narrowed. “You’re sure no one’s gotten inside the inn where we put up the women?”

“I’m sure. The woman who snuck out did so to go to a prearranged meeting.”

“Prearranged?” Rishe echoed. That was unexpected.

“Yes. She was instructed to sneak out and find the biggest ship in the harbor if they were discovered and ‘rescued’ by a third party before reaching their destination.”

“He was that careful?” Rische frowned and met Arnold’s gaze. “Your Highness, this operation really is...”

Arnold was thinking the same thing Rische was. “Yeah. Their goal is not to make money off the slave trade.”

“Hmm? It’s not?” Joel cocked his head drowsily. “But they were gonna sell the girls, right?”

“That was *one* of their goals. But they’ve made too many moves that would be unthinkable for actual merchants.”

She was reluctant to call people who kidnapped and sold human beings “merchants.” Yet regardless of Rische’s personal feelings, there was “trade” involved in the slave trade, and the people behind this incident didn’t act in ways that made sense.

“This is no way to do business.” Rische frowned, telling Joel what she found so strange about all this. “First of all, Galkhein is simply too far from Siarga. The longer a trip on the water, the more danger and expense such a trip incurs.”

When the war started in her sixth life, Siargans had judged that they had some time to prepare for hostilities with Galkhein. They’d miscalculated, of course, but their assumptions hadn’t been baseless. If Emperor Arnold Hein hadn’t obtained Siargan warship technology, his invasion would have taken much longer.

“The profit they’d make selling the slaves just isn’t worth it.”

Joel cocked his head again. “But slaves are expensive, aren’t they? Heard it from our king once. He said rich commoners buy them as well, not just royals and nobles, so demand is high. He also said they captured a suspicious ship in nearby waters once, and the hold was bursting with people who’d been

abducted.”

“That’s an example of the regular slave trade, certainly,” Arnold said. “This incident is different. They weren’t merely rounding up as many people as they could to sell off.”

“They only abducted unwed noblewomen, right?” Rishe chimed in. Hence her volunteering to be bait.

Joel blinked. “Aren’t they just selling to people who want that?”

“I can’t say for sure that there *aren’t* people who look to purchase slaves with such preferences...” Some customers made exacting demands, after all. “The question there is how many merchants would realistically deal with such customers.”

“So even if there are people who offer a lot for them, there aren’t necessarily people willing to sell them for the amount of expense and risk involved?”

“Exactly, Sir Joel.” All aspects of trade had to lead to profit in some way. “Even if I were the sort of merchant who dirtied my hands with the slave trade, I certainly wouldn’t put so much time and energy into dealings like this... Not unless there was something else in it for me.”

“I see.”

“Abducting people in Siarga and selling them in Galkhein is simply inefficient from a trader’s standpoint. Abducting more people in Galkhein to sell elsewhere would be the least they’d have to do to optimize their business.” The merchants *were* planning that, which showed some measure of foresight on their part. “But even that would incur costs and take a lot of personnel. It’s not worth it, particularly if they’re transporting their ‘merchandise’ by way of dangerous sea travel.”

“Gotcha,” Joel said, sounding a little more awake than he had earlier. He mussed up his hair in frustration. “So there really is something else in it for them. Or selling the girls is just one part of a bigger plan.”

“Most likely.” Rishe glanced sideways at Arnold. “Prince Arnold, Siarga requested assistance from Galkhein on this matter through official channels, correct?”

“That’s right. A Siargan marquess served as messenger, bringing with him a letter signed by the king.”

“Then may I ask if it was you who received that letter?”

Arnold had to know what Rishe was really asking. His blue eyes glinted as he smirked and told her what she expected to hear. “It was my father.”

I knew it. Rishe gulped. *An official letter from the king should have gone to the emperor. Yet it’s Prince Arnold who’s actually handling things here.*

They’d had this exchange regarding Arnold’s investigation of the slave trade on their first day:

“Are you keeping this a secret from your father as well?”

“It’ll just become a bigger problem if he hears about it. I can guess how that man will react to most things.”

He hadn’t meant that his father was unaware of the incident. *His Majesty simply ignored Siarga’s request for assistance.*

She kept quiet about this since Joel and Raul were present, but Arnold had likely caught on to what Rishe had noticed.

There are any number of reasons he might have ignored the request, but from what Prince Arnold has told me, one of His Majesty’s motivations might be...

Rishe paused for a moment and rephrased her thoughts thusly: “This ‘Thaddeus’ is a slave trader, but I don’t think human trafficking is his main aim here. I believe what he’s after is a concrete deterioration in relations between Siarga and Galkhein.” She gripped her dress and hung her head, muttering, “He intends to instigate a war...”

This incident was connected to Arnold’s war in the future.

Leaning against the wall, Raul murmured, “A warmonger... A merchant of death, eh?”

Rishe wished she hadn’t heard him.

Arnold lowered his gaze and said, “The man I fought on that ship had blades of exquisite make. Even with Galkhein’s many skilled blacksmiths, those who can produce such blades are few and far between.”

Rishe hadn’t been able to observe the blades closely, but from the way they shone, it had been clear to her as well that they were of high quality.

That’s one of the reasons Prince Arnold’s injury is healing so well. Blades that don’t make clean cuts produce worse wounds. The quality of his enemy’s weapon had been just as beneficial to Arnold’s healing as his divine blood. Rishe wasn’t sure how she felt about that, but it was hardly pertinent to the topic at hand.

“That man probably trades in weapons too,” she said. “And not just any weapons.”

“He fans the flames of conflict between nations and profits from the resulting wars. That’s the sort of merchant he is,” Arnold said dispassionately.

Rishe reached an unsettling conclusion. *He may not actually be Prince Arnold’s “enemy”...*

Last night on the ship, Rishe had been led to believe that the hooded man intended Arnold harm, but she was now forced to admit that that might have been a mistake.

She swallowed hard. *What if the future Prince Arnold, Emperor Arnold Hein, enlisted that man into his service?*

It was possible that that was how future Arnold obtained Siarga’s ship technology.

Maybe it’s not that Siargan shipbuilders were coincidentally abducted and brought to Galkhein. It’s much more likely that someone abducted them

intentionally and presented them to Prince Arnold to aid his war efforts...

The same way that Michel had chosen Arnold as the recipient of his gunpowder.

Prince Arnold would entice a war merchant. He's one of very few people who could wage war against the entire world and greatly change history!

Rishe could only hope no one had caught on to the reason she had frozen in her seat.

I know Prince Arnold is a kind person now. But I also know that he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Rishe took a short breath, willing the fear that gripped her heart not to play on her face.

Still, I'm changing things this time. Making that silent vow, she observed Arnold beside her. *My seventh life is clearly different than those that have come before it. Being at his side and forcing him to protect me from that man's blade means the future has already changed.*

At the very least, they were currently enemies. Rishe didn't want to feel relief over Arnold gaining enemies, as she was working so hard to gain him allies instead—but she needed to play with whatever was at her disposal if she was going to win against him.

“We can't afford to be picky about how we do things, no matter what happens.” With several layers of meaning in her words, she told her beloved, “Now that I think about it, the entity targeting Galkhein has involved a different country in each of their schemes as well.”

“...”

“If these incidents aren't meant to weaken Galkhein but to provoke international conflict, they're probably plotting all sorts of things to spark war.”

Arnold sucked in a breath and narrowed his eyes at Rishe. “Which is why you need to be bait to rescue the rest of the victims?”

Seeing the look on his face, Rishe realized he was being sardonic. But that wasn't how he truly felt.

"Do you feel that you're using me to solve one of Galkhein's problems?" Rishe was amused by the ensuing scowl. "Heh. If so, you're mistaken."

"What?"

It was rare for Arnold to be wrong. She met his blue eyes and smiled. "I have responsibilities, and I take pride in those responsibilities." Her smile grew wider. "*I am* the bride of Galkhein's crown prince, am I not?"

Arnold said nothing. Even if he wouldn't allow her resolution or her wish, the fact of their engagement didn't change. Rishe held her head up high and raised both fists.

"Besides, there's no need to worry! I confirmed the way the women were bound on the ship. If I'm bound in the same way, I'm confident I'll be able to escape!"

"...That's not what we're talking about."

Oliver laughed, watching their exchange. "Even you're no match for Lady Rishe, Your Highness." Arnold shot him a glare, and Oliver apologized, though he was still smiling.

Rishe puffed her chest out and proudly proclaimed as his bride-to-be, "I will carry out my mission. Not just for the sake of the victims but for the sake of relations between Siarga and Galkhein as well!"

Arnold slowly turned his gaze back to her. "I'm working with the Imperial Guards to determine our best course of action after you're taken, but we can't account for everything." He scanned the waterway through the window. "They'll try to flee, I'm sure. The final battle will likely take place on a ship."

Oliver agreed. "Fighting them at sea will be difficult. There are all sorts of things you must consider that differ from fighting on land, and our ships aren't necessarily going to be able to combat theirs."

“On that note...” Rishe’s eyes landed on each of them in turn, and she beamed. “We happen to have the most powerful ally we could ask for right here.”

She turned to Joel, who was staring straight at her. Rishe knew exactly what sort of person he was and how he fought.

“This man here is a knight of the country most renowned for its command of naval warfare. And he’s already promised to help.”

“My, Lady Rishe...” Surprise crept into Oliver’s face, while Arnold frowned in displeasure.

Thus, she had convinced them of her plan to act as bait.

That afternoon, Rishe was hard at work in Bezzetoria’s harbor.

“Has anyone still not had enough to drink?!” she shouted, and several hands shot up among the rowdy crowd she was serving. The tanned, burly arms belonged to those who made their living doing hard labor.

“Hey, Lady Rishe! May I have one more before I return?”

“Yes, of course! Thank you so much for helping with the fire last night!”

She took out a bottle from a crate and handed it to an Imperial Guard assisting her. They were handing out drinks to sailors who worked in this port. These men had helped with the fire late the previous night, then summarily went to fish at dawn. Only now were they getting the chance to relax and unwind. After their morning strategy meeting, Rishe had gone out to buy a ton of drinks and headed to the harbor with them.

“It’s not much in the way of thanks, but have as much as you’d like. If there’s anyone who doesn’t drink, there’s plenty of fruit as well!”

“Ooh! Is this stuff from the southern continent?” A sailor’s eyes sparkled at the sight of the bottle Rishe handed him. “Great choice! You really know your drinks, ma’am!”

“Hee hee. I’d love to hear what sort of drinks you enjoy in Galkhein as well. I’m particularly after household brews that aren’t too pricey.”

“You wanna get a taste of what the common folk drink? Huh, wouldn’t have expected that from the future empress! Well, this here’s your guy if you want to know about booze. Right?”

“Just leave it to me! I don’t know if they’d suit your palate, but the popular drinks around here are...”

Rishe conversed with the sailors for a time, always relaying her gratitude for their help with the fire. She felt bad making the Imperial Guards assist her, but they were happy to when they heard Arnold had requested it as well.

A full-on party broke out, and though Rishe didn’t participate herself, she had fun watching from the sidelines. She applauded their singing, dancing, and other antics, until she’d given out all the drinks.

“You really are good at wrapping people around your little finger, Princess.”

Rishe spun around. “Raul!”

The hunter was sitting on a wooden crate, but her eye was drawn to Joel, whom Raul had dragged along. The knight was snoring quietly.

“I see Sir Joel ran out of energy...”

“No, he’s pretty much like this all the time,” Raul replied. Joel had actually worked quite hard during the strategy meeting—that is to say, he’d woken up early. At least by his standards.

“Well, the sailors seem happy enough, though I’m not sure what you and His Highness are thinking. The crown princess’s popularity is sure to shoot up yet again, but we’ve got this mysterious enemy to worry about right now, you know.”

“I almost *wish* he’d come at me here. Besides, I have the Imperial Guards with me.”

The aforementioned guards were cleaning up the crates. Rishe had offered to help, but they'd insisted rather firmly that she rest.

"It doesn't seem like anything was strange about the canal or the sea this morning."

"You were gathering information as well? I'm in awe."

Raul shrugged. Rishe lowered her voice to ask, "Have Prince Arnold and Oliver asked you about Thaddeus, Raul?"

"Mm... I told them all the possible avenues he might use to escape, but His Highness didn't seem to expect that we'd nab him. He's focused on finding evidence or witnesses instead." Raul seemed to agree with the prince on that. "When chasing prey that's escaped through water, it's standard to follow the liquid trail they leave behind—but the white stone streets in this town make it difficult. It's hard enough to tell when they're wet in the daytime, and he fled in the dark of night."

"Not to mention it's summertime. The sea breeze would help dry him as well. Even if someone passed him while he was still sopping wet, it would have been tough to tell in the dark."

"Well, he might've just died in the water too. It'd be pretty impressive if he was able to swim away in his heavy clothing, with a broken arm, *and* after jumping into the sea from that height."

Rishe lay in wait for prey once in a shallow river in her fifth life. The cold was the most taxing part of the experience, but the heavy cloak she wore seemed to steal more heat from her than the flow of the stream. Whenever that thick cloak got wet, it weighed a ton more.

"I won't let him get away again," Rishe muttered, and Raul sighed.

"You two are really alike. You both assume you'll be fighting on the front lines."

"Huh?"

Raul leaned in close to her face, wearing an openly exasperated expression—more than usual, anyway. “Shouldn’t you be focused on a way to return safely after you’re abducted, ‘Lady Rize’?”

“Right.” Rishe nodded, touching the ring on her left hand. “I know how much I worry him now.”

“Very good.” Raul shrugged, and Joel stirred on the pavement. “Oh, is Sleeping Beauty awake? Hello?” He knelt and flicked Joel’s cheek. The redhead scowled and slowly sat up.

“Good morning, Sir Joel.”

Joel blinked and rubbed his eyes, sniffing the air. “I knew it... It’s the same smell.”

Rishe tilted her head.

Without missing a beat, he scrutinized her and said, “Did you sleep with Prince Arnold last night?”

Raul coughed as Rishe froze, her mind short-circuiting. “Huh?! H-h-h-h-how did you—?!”

She thought they’d hidden how she’d slept in his room well enough. She didn’t want to cause trouble for Arnold since such things were frowned upon before marriage—and more importantly, the idea of anyone knowing about it mortified her. She whirled on Raul, wondering if he’d caught on as well, and he in turn whipped his head to avoid her gaze.

Joel looked up at her, not grasping what she was so flustered about. “You smell like flowers. Prince Arnold smelled the same way in the meeting.”

My soap!

Interacting with a wounded person when one was dirty could introduce complications in the healing process, so Rishe had used some of the peach nectar soap for her wedding when she bathed last night.

“Um, I-I...”

She'd spent the night with him out of concern for his injury, but she couldn't explain that to Joel. The only excuse she could think of was that they'd just *happened* to sleep together that night.

While she was losing her head, Raul gave her some encouragement. "Well, you *are* husband and wife. It's no big deal, right?"

"I keep telling you, w-we're not husband and wife yet!"

"Husband and wife..." Joel said thoughtfully before his tone turned sulky. "Well, whatever."

"What is it, Sir Joel?"

"All right, all right," Raul interjected. "Let's start getting ready, yeah? If you've finished thanking the sailors and gathering information, then you don't need to be here anymore, do you? I've got stuff I need to collect still if I'm gonna fulfill your little request."

"I suppose you're right. I should really help everyone clean up first, though..."

When Rishe got down from the crate she was sitting on, the sailors waved cheerfully at her. They were on their way home for the night.

"Hey, Lady Rishe! Thanks for the drinks! We'll all be at the parade to celebrate you guys getting hitched, okay?!"

"Idiot! This is the crown prince we're talking about! Call it a 'wedding ceremony'! Really, congratulations, though. Cheers to the future princess!"

The sailors all gestured like they were toasting her.

Rishe smiled, happy to receive their well-wishes. "Thank you, everyone!"

Watching them go, she stood a bit taller. *I'll do my part as Prince Arnold's bride—as the future crown princess.*

In no time at all, the day of her kidnapping arrived.

A young noblewoman named Rize appeared in a small manor on the edge of Bezzetoria for a business meeting. As it was the middle of the day, she showed up for the meeting with but a single maid. During the talks, she was led to a small room to try on a dress, where she suddenly disappeared.

But the disappearance of this young noblewoman made no stir in Bezzetoria, and the afternoon went on as normal in the busy port town.

“Hup!”

After the slave traders left, Rishe opened her eyes and sat up in a dim cell. Her wrists had been bound behind her back, and her ankles were tied. A cloth gag in her mouth, Rishe assessed her situation.

It's gone as expected so far...

Playing the part of Lady Rize, Rishe had discussed business with a merchant over tea and gone into a fitting room after finishing her drink. There, she'd pretended to lose consciousness, and they'd brought her right to this cell.

I was prepared for them to handle me a little roughly, but they didn't give me so much as a single bruise. Why would they be committing crimes like this when they adhere so strictly to their rules about handling merchandise with care?

They hadn't even touched her clothing, perhaps because their “goods” were supposed to be pure maidens only.

Rishe drew in a breath and frowned. *They didn't even search me for weapons... They're far too lenient for slavers.* It was utterly strange to her, yet she couldn't deny that it worked in her favor.

The only light source was a lamp beyond the iron bars. Rishe scooted over to the corner of the cell and nudged her maid.

C'mon, Joel...

“Mm...” Dressed in a maid's uniform, Joel stirred drowsily. His sleeves were puffy, and his apron was covered in frills to downplay his physique. He may

have been small and delicate for a man, but Raul had helped devise an outfit that would hide dead giveaways.

This was what Rishe had asked Joel and Raul to help with. Joel had an androgynous face, so when he dressed in women's clothes and Raul put some makeup on him, he was able to pass for a woman with little issue.

Joel!

"Mmn..."

She gave up on trying to wake him up and reached toward his ear instead.

Got it!

She gently removed his metal earring. She'd attached a small blade and pin to it; these would cut the rope binds and pick the cell lock. They were tools she'd "just so happened" to bring with her that could be combined with a pair of earrings she owned—and it seemed they would be coming in very handy.

It was worth manipulating the positions of my wrists when they bound me. With this range of movement, cutting the rope should be simple enough.

She pinched the earring blade between her fingers and carefully sawed through the rope. Once she'd cut into it enough, she snapped the rope with a flex of her wrists. Her hands freed, she removed the gag and cut her legs free as well. Then she removed Joel's gag and shook him a little harder than before.

"Sir Joel... Sir Joel!"

Joel slowly opened his eyes. He was sleepy as always, but it wasn't the sort of drowsiness induced by the drugs.

"Thank goodness. I see the antidote is working on you as well."

"Hey..."

"Can you tense your arms so that the rope is taut? It's easier to cut through that way."

He sat up and did as she asked. She cut his wrists free, then his legs. All the

while, Joel gaped at her like she was the strangest thing he'd ever seen.

"Who are you, really? Those guys offered me tea too, so I drank it, but I didn't get tired at all... And it's not easy to use a little blade like that with your hands tied behind your back."

"It's fortunate that they bound us with ropes. If they'd used shackles, it would have taken me time to escape even with a pin to pick the lock."

"Yeah, they *are* awfully lax when it comes to taking prisoners. I mean, when you take a prisoner of war, the least you should do is—"

Rishe's voice overlapped with Joel's. "'Keep a close eye on them, search them thoroughly, strip them, bind their arms and legs, tie them to a pillar, and break all their limbs.'"

Joel went wide-eyed when they said the exact same thing. Then he gave her an even stranger look.

"Seriously, who are you?"

"Hee hee!"

The day their commander drilled this into them, Joel had appeared to be sleeping as always off in a corner of the training grounds—but he must have been listening. Finding that out after all this time made her happy.

"Well, as long as I can fight, I guess I don't care. I can take these frilly clothes off now, right?" Joel shucked the maid uniform, revealing the thin shirt and pants underneath. He almost seemed disappointed that they both still had the knives strapped to their legs.

"If I'd known they were gonna be this sloppy in searching us, I bet I could've brought in a longer blade."

"Well, it would have been bad if they'd found it, so I think this is fine... But they sure are careless with their captives, aren't they?"

Rishe sat next to the bars of the cell and poked her hands through, searching for the lock on the other side. She stuck two pins in the lock and pressed her ear

to it, listening carefully as she continued her conversation with Joel.

“Raul was watching our kidnapping site. If he was able to follow them, then there should be no chance of him losing us.”

“Whaaat? Then is help gonna come before I get to fight?”

“Unfortunately, I imagine that will be difficult.” When she carefully observed her surroundings under the light of the single lamp, she realized they weren’t in a jail cell. “After all, we’re on a ship.”

They were in a cage.

“I imagine we’ve already left port and reached the sea.”

Joel had to be aware that they were on a ship too. A dozen or so other cages surrounded them, occupied with unconscious women.

The redhead grunted and pressed his forehead to the bars. “Is it really that hard to fight on the ocean or on ships?”

“It takes a certain level of maneuverability, so I’m excited to see you in action.” Rishe felt metal shifting under the pins in the lock. She opened the door to the cage and glanced around once more.

Did they keep the women asleep so they don’t make a racket in their cages? There was no worry of them expending too much energy while they were kept asleep, but Rishe had other concerns about their health, both physical and mental.

“That being said, we need to save these women first.”

“...”

“Sir Joel, could I ask you to help me ensure the women’s safety before you fight?”

Rishe knew he wasn’t likely to say yes even if she asked. He had no reason to help her now that he wasn’t her mentor; he’d probably just burst out of the hold and draw his sword. Joel’s eyes only sparkled with life when he was

wielding a blade.

Will he tell me he's leaving me behind? Like he did in my sixth life...

But Joel just blinked at her. "Okay," he said after a beat.

"Huh?" Rishe went wide-eyed as Joel picked up the lamp hanging from a beam and knelt in front of a cage.

"First time I've ever met someone who asked me to do something that's not fighting."

Maybe that's true...but I know of a time when you taught someone a shortcut and made them snacks.

Even if they hadn't worked together on the battlefield often, Joel had helped her in countless other ways. They were precious memories to Rishe, and the reason she idolized him so much as her mentor.

Is he happy to have someone relying on him for help? she wondered.

Would he help illuminate her work with the lamp while she unlocked the cages?

Joel stared at her and cocked his head. "I know 'stay.' Am I a good boy?"

"Yes, you are." Rishe smiled, knelt by Joel's side, and stuck her pins into the well-lit keyhole. "Thank you, Sir Joel."

"Mm."

Joel was born to a noble family and had much older siblings. She hadn't met him as his junior in this life, but maybe he was just happy to be able to act like an older sibling to someone younger.

No, there were plenty of times he acted younger than me even when I was his junior.

Rishe opened the cage, thinking fondly of her sixth life. She checked the condition of the woman inside, cut the rope around her ankles, then tied her wrists to the cage bars in a position that wouldn't put strain on her body.

“Hey, why are you tying them to the cages instead of taking the ropes off completely?”

“To prevent the slavers from trying to escape with them or throwing them into the sea when the fighting starts.”

In her first encounter with the slavers, they’d tried to take some of the women and flee when they realized they were no match for Arnold.

“They’re sleeping so deeply, I doubt the slavers could rouse them and get them to run. I’ll open the rest of the cages, so can you handle the ropes?”

With Joel’s help, she was able to examine all the women quickly. No one seemed in need of urgent treatment, but from the state of their hair and nails, she was worried many of them were anemic.

“Now, then. Thanks for your patience, Sir Joel.” Rishe stood and drew the dagger hidden under her dress. “Let’s head upstairs. We’ll take control of the ship and keep it in place until Galkhein’s ships are able to catch up.”

“Wait.” Joel stopped Rishe, his voice sharp. “I’ll be going on alone.”

He strode ahead, whisking the lamp away from her.

“You’re weaker than me, but I won’t protect you while I fight. So...” His hand on the door, he glanced back at her one last time. “Why don’t you stay here and protect the women?”

“I—”

“I know. You think we should help each other and fight together, right?”

Joel had probably heard those words countless times before. A certain amount of cooperation and dedication to a plan was necessary to win on the battlefield. Rishe had tried to convince Joel of this in her sixth life. Yet he’d always left her behind when the fighting started, and the one time she thought they’d finally be able to fight together, he’d died for her.

“But I’ll be weaker if we do that.”

“Sir Joel...”

“That’s why I have to fight on my own.”

Rishe locked eyes with Joel and told him head-on, “My role here is to protect your freedom.”

Joel gasped.

“Feel free to go down your own path alone if you like, but I will be there to clear it for you.”

“You...”

“Don’t worry about keeping an eye on me. I’ll take care of whatever you don’t.”

Rishe knew exactly how Joel liked to fight. He raced across the battlefield, eyes shining brighter than anyone else’s. That was the sort of swordsman Rishe’s mentor Joel was.

“There’s no need for you to protect me or fight *with* me. I’ll just be there to help you fight on your own.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Of course not.” Rishe smiled, thinking of Arnold. “I know how heartening it is to be told, ‘Do as you like. I’ll back you up.’”

She didn’t think this would atone for letting him die, but she wanted to pay him back in some small way for all that he’d done for her. Even if she could never really reach the man who’d been her mentor in her last life.

“Come, Sir Joel.” She opened the door for him. “This is your battlefield.”

After giving Rishe a meaningful look, Joel tousled her hair. She flinched; the gesture reminded her of her sixth life, and she stared back at him in wide-eyed awe.

Then Joel leaped out of the dim hold like a bird taking flight from an open window.

There were two presences directly outside the door. Some of the sailors were probably just about to check on their prisoners. Sailors on this type of illegal operation tended to be pirates well accustomed to fighting. Unlike typical sailors, they wore cutlasses on their waists.

When they saw Joel, they balked in confusion. Joel had moved so fast that they hadn't been able to process what they'd seen.

"Huh?!"

Joel's dagger glinted in their lamplight. The redhead zipped close in an instant, driving his pommel into one pirate's gut. He got low and twisted as he lunged forward. He was good at making use of his weight.

"Guh!"

"Who the hell—?!"

As the first sailor collapsed to the deck, the second drew his cutlass. But by then, he too was collapsing with an anticlimactic yelp.

"Mm..." Joel licked his lips, eyes shining as though he were a little boy about to devour his favorite treat. "They weren't very strong, but...I haven't gotten to fight in a while."

He's like a bolt of lightning as always.

Rishe gulped, holding her lamp high for him. She felt like she'd just seen lightning arc from the sky and take out their enemies in a split second. His swordplay was nothing like Arnold's, whose each and every blow felt incredibly heavy—but *he* was unmistakably a genius with a sword too.

She couldn't just watch, though.

"Sir Joel, take this cutlass!"

Rishe procured the curved blades from the two fallen sailors, tossing one to Joel and keeping one for herself. In her sixth life, she trained with these blades, which were longer than daggers but more suited to shipboard fighting than straight swords. Rishe gripped the hilt of her sword and blocked the blow from

a third sailor, who'd just appeared behind Joel.

The impact barreling down her arm was nothing like when she'd blocked Arnold's sword. Rische twisted her blade, flicking away her adversary's weapon.

"Wha—?!" The third sailor's eyes opened wide. When he lost his balance, Rische crouched low.

"Sir Joel!"

She didn't even have to signal to him. He had already launched himself forward, smacking his still-sheathed blade into the man's forehead.

"Gah!" The sailor crumpled right as Joel landed.

Rische stood, exhaling in amazement at the close-up display of Joel's swordsmanship.

Such smooth moves! That's my mentor, all right. There's plenty to learn just from watching him up close. Even if she knew it was a technique he could only pull off with his agility and dense muscle, she still admired it.

Joel just gave her a dubious look. "You're so strange."

"Pardon?"

"I've never once thought it was easier to fight with someone else, but..."

Rische couldn't help delighting in those words as his former junior, but now was not the time to reminisce.

"Let's go. I don't sense anyone nearby, so the deck should still be several levels above... Ack! Wait up, Sir Joel!"

As Joel raced up the stairs, Rische hurried after him while doing her best to support him. He climbed the stairs with a lamp in one hand and a cutlass in the other, knocking out anyone they encountered. The pair did their best to keep the sailors from alerting their companions, but the bigger the commotion they made, the more sailors gathered to them.

But Joel's eyes only shone brighter the more enemies they faced. Each time a

strong-looking foe popped up, he ran right up to them while Rishe took care of the ones who didn't catch his eye. Joel's steps were a dance of their own, and Rishe understood the rhythm perfectly.

"I'll draw those enemies out! Keep doing as you like, Sir Joel!"

When faced with a more experienced adversary, Joel gave his unique appraisal of the enemy's skill. "You're the cherry on top, I see... You look tastier than the rest."

Smiling wryly, Rishe opened the door to a cabin, drawing the attention of the enemies within.

"You wench!" they roared, but she had the advantage in such a cramped space.

Plonking her lamp on a table, she held a cutlass in each hand instead. Even fighting with two swords, she was careful not to make too much of a mess inside the cabin.

"Augh!"

Rishe took a short breath after the last man fell with a yelp.

"Wait, what's with this map?" This must have been the cabin where the navigator kept his records. Rishe frowned up at the sea chart on the wall.

That marker, it's... She walked up to it and pinned the area with her finger. It was a northern seaport of Galkhein's, the closest location to Coyolles.

"Why Ceutena?" It was the city ruled by Lord Lawvine, the loyal vassal Arnold would execute in the future.

"Hey. Come on, let's go."

"Oh, right!" Rishe pushed thoughts of Ceutena aside and hurried after Joel. She was surprised he'd bothered to call out to her at all before moving on.

They fought their way to the deck, where they could take control of the ship. Climbing up an unstable rope ladder, Rishe realized that the new floor had

portholes.

We're almost to the deck! But...

The sky through the round windows was white. Rishe grimaced when they finally reached the uppermost deck.

"Look at this fog!"

Joel stood with his back to her, glancing around. They could see to the other end of the deck, so the fog wasn't absurdly thick, but they had no idea what was out at sea around them.

In this fog, our reinforcements may not be able to find us. Resolving herself for that possibility, Rishe tightened her grip on her cutlass. The rest of the crew, who'd by now caught on to the chaos belowdecks, stood before Joel and Rishe.

"I was worried about pursuers," said one. "Didn't think you'd *sneak* aboard."

I figured they'd be ready.

"Sir Joel, don't worry about me!" Rishe called out to his back.

He spared her a sidelong glance. "I know."

Joel sprang forth, and the enemies launched themselves at him.

Still, there are so many!

Rishe switched to her sheathed dagger and threw it at the jaw of one of the sailors targeting Joel. She struck a weak point with a heavy blow, and the man crumpled to the deck—but she'd only eliminated one threat.

I'm itching for a bow. Though I'd need this swaying to stop if I wanted to actually shoot it!

The ship had been rocking violently for a little while now. Rishe glimpsed the stern, where the helmsman was spinning the wheel to make it lurch on purpose.

I've got to head to the help, so—

A chill ran down Rishe's spine as she calculated the best route forward.

"Huh?"

She'd spotted a shadow on the sea, like a small island in the fog. It was another ship. As it slowly came into focus through the fog, she saw its shredded sails. The goddess figurehead on the bow was cracked and rotting, smiling with one eye gouged out. Rishe shuddered when she saw it. She felt like she'd caught the eye of the figurehead somehow.

It's like a ghost ship!

She knew it wasn't, however, judging by the figures moving on deck. They'd covered new sails and wood with old ones to give anyone who spotted them the impression that they were harmless. This old, abandoned-looking vessel was without a doubt a pirate ship.

Rishe grimaced and shouted, "Enemy reinforcements!"

The other ship launched weighted ropes at them, which caught on the deck's rail. The ship was pulled toward theirs and rocked once more.

"Ngh..."

"Sir Joel!"

Where Joel had planted his foot, there was a collapsed sailor lying on the deck. Joel lost his balance just as an enemy blade swung down at him.

No!

Rishe flashed back to Arnold protecting her, and to her sixth life. Joel had become her shield. He'd smiled at her when he saw she was safe.

She jumped in front of him, slicing into the sailor's arm with her cutlass.

"Gah!" The sailor backed up, clutching his bleeding arm. But Rishe knew better than anyone that it wasn't enough.

"You friggin' harpy! How dare you!" Another man tried to grab her hair. Rishe braced for the pain when a blade swung a hair's breadth from her face.

Joel?!

He pushed Rishe aside and cut down the sailor. The man cried out as he fell to the deck. But Joel hadn't fully recovered from losing his balance a moment ago. The ship swayed again, and Joel smacked against the deck.

"Agh! Ow!"

That shudder had been from the impact of the pirates boarding this ship.

This is bad! They were separated, and Joel was surrounded first because he'd injured himself.

"Sir Joel, are you hurt?!"

His only response was a hiss of pain.

He hit his head! Even if he caught himself when he fell, he won't recover right away.

Rishe lifted her cutlass above her head and avoided the swing of her sword. She swept the man's legs out from under him and, using the swaying of the ship to her advantage, struck the man's nape with her sheath.

I need to break through them and get to Joel first!

Joel couldn't get back on his feet, but he was still putting up a fight with his cutlass. He used his reflexes to roll around on the deck, avoiding multiple enemies as he tried to right himself.

Rishe broke through the foes before her and used her two blades to knock out the three who were closest. Timing her moves to the irksome rolling of the ship, she knocked the heads of the next two men together.

"How are these landlubbers moving so well on this rocking ship?!"

"Sir Joel, give me your hand!"

"I'm fine... Just get out of here..." Joel was panting hard as he writhed on the deck. He was too preoccupied fighting his dizziness to take Rishe's hand. "I won't help you anymore... I can't help you, so..."

“I don’t care! Please, just this once, don’t try to fight alone!”

“I don’t need you.”

One of the men tried to plunge his sword into Joel, but he knocked the blade away without even looking at it. He rolled across the deck to avoid the next attack, but there was no way he could keep that up for long.

“Come on already!”

“Go...” Joel pointed his unfocused eyes at the sea and narrowed them. “If you don’t, more enemies will come...”

Another ship had appeared in the fog.

“I’ll fight. On my own.”

“No...”

“If I don’t, I—”

“*No*, Sir Joel!”

Rishe scanned the new ship. The sailors followed suit, bewildered by its arrival. The ship was a size larger than this one, and it wasn’t the rotten flag of a ghost ship atop its mast.

“That’s...”

It was the eagle of the national flag of Galkhein.

The moment Rishe spotted it, someone jumped aboard the ship. Landing gracefully in front of her, he cut down nearby sailors in an instant, gazing at her with his blue eyes.

“Rishe.”

Even in this dim fog, his eyes were the brilliant blue of the sea. In that dear voice of his, he asked her as he always did, “Are you hurt?”

“Prince Arnold!” Her voice trembled, and not just out of relief from seeing his face. She knew he’d come to save her. Still, she couldn’t stop worrying about

the wound from a few days ago, so she couldn't help voicing her selfish complaint. "I asked you not to come, Your Highness!"

"And I told you I wouldn't agree to that," Arnold said, tugging her toward him.

A moment later, the ship rocked again. Rishe braced herself, trying not to put any strain on Arnold. She regained her balance quickly, and Arnold shoved a bundle into her arms.

"Oh!"

It was a bow, a quiver, and two swords—one of them likely for Joel. Now that they were out in the open, it would be more advantageous to fight with longer blades.

Arnold always knew just what she wanted. "Thank you!"

The sailors glared at Arnold and rushed him.

"Damn it! Who the hell are—?!" The man's voice cut out when he fell.

Arnold studied his enemies coldly and then focused on Joel. The redhead had finally gotten to his feet. Though his breathing was shallow, his center of gravity was low and he had a firm grip on his sword. The enemy slashed at him, but he swiftly evaded their attacks and cut them down instead.

How is he fighting even faster now?!

Arnold only squinted upon seeing Joel's swordplay.

"Sir Joel, here!" Rishe threw him a sword, and Joel caught it overhead with a stagger. She doubted she was imagining the hazy state he was in.

"Your Highness! Sir Joel helped me, but he's hurt. I don't think he can fight for much longer."

"The knights can join us when the ship stops swaying."

Rishe nodded, drawing her bow. She couldn't hit the helmsman from here, blocked as she was by the sails, but she could assist Joel and Arnold.

"We're taking the helm."

“I’ll back you up. Please don’t push yourself, Your Highness!”

Rishe nocked an arrow as Arnold headed for the enemy.

Why?

Joel was brimming with feelings he couldn’t understand as he watched Arnold and Rishe. His head throbbed, he was nauseated, and his vision was blurry. In his state, the juddering of the ship just made him more miserable.

Still, Joel’s limbs reacted to the bloodlust he sensed around him, and his body moved naturally to combat it without thought. But he found his attention drawn less to the people trying to kill him and more to the couple fighting together on the other side of the ship.

Prince Arnold is protecting her...even though that should make him weaker...

Joel was well aware of that fact.

“You really are a genius with a sword, Joel. There’s no other way to put it.”

A knight instructor had told him that while he was taking sword lessons with other young nobles.

The first person who’d taught him how to use a sword was his eldest brother. It was the first thing Joel had ever found fun. He’d spent most of his time sleeping out of a lack of desire to do anything else.

Whenever he was awake, he was thinking about the sword. When his brother was home, Joel would hang around him, pestering him for training. His brother had been patient with him, but when his studies as the next head of the family began to consume his free time, he asked Joel, “Do you want to take the same sword lessons I did? Everyone else will be older than you, but I’m sure you can keep up, Joel.”

His sister brought Joel to the lessons, and he learned with dozens of other

students who were five or six years his senior. But by the third day of lessons, Joel had beaten every single one of them.

“Joel! You’re really amazing!” all the senior knights said, patting his head. He had really been a child then, and he felt happy to receive their praise.

“I hope you’ll join the knights as our junior, Joel!”

“It’s reassuring that we might be fighting alongside you.”

“Yeah...I’ll fight with you.”

Joel was looking forward to it so much that he put even more effort into his training. He swung his wooden sword even when his seniors were resting. He drank milk even though he didn’t like it because he heard it would make him taller, and he ran around trying to build muscle—living a life he could never imagine living now.

“Wanna join me?” he asked his seniors once, and they shook their heads, bitter smiles on their faces.

“You’re the only one who can train like that, Joel.”

“Yeah. We gotta do things our own way.”

He believed that they trained hard in their own way, but they never got any harder to fight against. If anything, Joel felt like the stronger he got, the weaker everyone else became. And it wasn’t just because the gap between their abilities was so great. They actually *were* getting weaker.

Joel finally understood when he was nine. They were out on the ocean, training to fight on ships—a necessity for future knights of Siarga.

“H-help!”

They’d gone out to the open sea and run into pirates. Maybe they didn’t have any real battle experience yet, but they were all noble boys who had been training for years. But the scene before Joel was nothing like what he’d pictured, and all he could do was stand there, blankly watching.

“Joel, hurry!”

The older kids cried and called for his help.

“Hey! What’s wrong, Joel?!”

The retired knight serving as their instructor had been stabbed first and had lost consciousness. Yet the older kids had done nothing to help him, instead thrusting a sword at Joel—the youngest among them—and pushing him toward the pirates.

“You’re a genius, aren’t you?! You can beat all the pirates yourself, right?!”

They’d laughed and said it would be reassuring to fight alongside him, hadn’t they? But now they were pushing Joel at the enemy by himself and yelling at him. There was even anger in their voices.

“Hurry up and save us!”

Oh. It wasn’t that he was sad over being forced to fight alone. *They got weak because of me.*

That was what he’d learned that day.

When strong people protect weak people, they get weaker. Both the one being protected and the one doing the protecting.

Joel beat all the pirates himself and treated the instructor’s wounds as well. When they got back on land, everyone heaped praise on him and thanked him for fighting for their sake, but he couldn’t accept their affection anymore.

I made them weak.

If he hadn’t been with them, they would surely have died. That was when Joel made his decision.

I must fight on my own. Anyone blindly relying on someone else will just die a pathetic death the moment they step onto a real battlefield.

If he ever fought alongside someone, it had to be someone stronger than him. Otherwise, they’d rely on him and die.

I don't need anyone to praise my swordsmanship anymore. And I won't train anymore either... I can't leave my life in these people's hands. It's easier to just not trust them.

After deciding never to fight alongside anyone again, Joel's swordsmanship only improved. Perhaps he was simply never suited to acting in concert with other people.

The strong become weaker because weak people hinder them. Weak people get weaker because they depend on the strong.

He'd been sure of that, but the way Arnold Hein and Rishe fought atop the ship contradicted his belief.

How is Prince Arnold so strong while fighting to protect her?

Swaying under this unbelievable reality, Joel cut down the enemies before him.

It wasn't just Arnold; Rishe herself was taking down pirates with her arrows, much steadier than she'd been before.

Same goes for her. Her steps are so much better than they were when she was fighting alone.

Stuffing down the nausea he felt from his head injury, Joel squinted.

She's...fighting better than she did with me too.

When she fought with Arnold, Rishe displayed a dignified strength that was clear even to Joel.

Rishe shot an enemy closing in on Joel in the leg to pin him in place, then hurried after Arnold. The prince's footing was so stable on the ship, it was hard to believe he had so little experience fighting on the water.

It's not just his swordplay that's incredible, it's his command over his body as

well!

She fully understood why Arnold had boarded the ship on his own, leaving his Imperial Guards behind. Even as more sailors appeared, boarding from the other ship, Arnold's expression didn't change one bit.

But...

There were crates and barrels lying around on the deck, and each time the ship lurched, the pair drew closer, using the moving obstacles as cover.

I know what I need to do!

Rishe shouldered her bow and grabbed hold of a rope ladder hanging from the mast. She climbed up to a decent height and hooked an arm around the ladder so that she wouldn't fall. Nocking another arrow from there, she shot an enemy in front of Arnold and shouted, "Two meters ahead at eleven o'clock, behind the crate!"

Arnold immediately kicked the crate and rushed forward. As soon as the two enemies hiding behind it were knocked out, Rishe leapt down onto the crate and shot a man hiding behind a barrel, whom she could now see from her new vantage point.

The helm was thirty meters away, but enemies were still crawling out of the woodwork. With one eye on Joel, Rishe said to her allies, "They're turning the ship starboard! It'll sway to the left next!"

Arnold cut down several enemies, opening up space at his side. "Rishe. Here."

"Yes, Prince Arnold!" Rishe leapt into the spot he'd made for her, and the ship swayed. Arnold put his arm around her waist. The crate she'd just been standing on crashed into a pillar and shattered.

They parted swiftly, raised their swords, and cut down the enemies who were off-balance from the last shift. At Arnold's side, Rishe switched from her sword to her bow.

I wasted some arrows. Even with this fog and the way the ship's swaying, Raul

wouldn't have missed.

“Rishe.” Arnold raised his sword at the enemy, protecting her behind his back. “I’ll stop the pirates. Can you get that man off the helm?”

I only have one arrow left... The helmsman was obscured by the fog, yet Rishe held her head high and, entrusting her back to Arnold, replied, “Just leave it to me!”

“I will.” Rishe was sure that his gentle response wasn’t her imagination.

Maybe it does weaken him to protect me. Rishe was keenly aware of that fact after the injury Arnold had suffered. *Prince Arnold is practical, and he only keeps those he needs by his side. He chose Oliver and Raul...*

She took a deep breath and nocked her last arrow.

It's the same reason he forged a technological alliance with Coyolles, formed a joint venture manufacturing paper currency with Siguel, and pardoned Professor Michel... There would be nothing strange about him allying himself with this merchant of death either.

Even if Rishe had prevented it from happening here and now, Arnold would most likely obtain Siarga’s shipbuilding technology at some point. This wasn’t like gunpowder. It was technology another country possessed that Galkhein didn’t, and Arnold would never allow his nation to remain inferior to another.

But that's why I need to make something clear!

Rishe slowly narrowed her eyes and aimed. She made sure to keep her core steady, finding whatever balance she could on the swaying deck.

“Hey, you’re not seriously planning to shoot him from here, are you, girly?! Ha ha, you’ll never hit—argh!”

She believed that Arnold was protecting both her and Joel. Even if she was worried about his injury, she’d decided to trust him completely.

I need anyone who sees me from now on to know one thing. Rishe held her breath, concentrating every nerve in her body. *His Highness Arnold Hein, the*

crown prince, is stronger with his bride by his side!

She locked on to her enemy.

If I make that happen, then even Prince Arnold will have to think the same... I'll make myself the logical choice over an arms dealer who will destroy the world.

If she couldn't become a bride worthy of that, then she wouldn't be able to change the future.

I won't let you walk that bloody path all alone.

Silently conveying her resolve to the man at her side, Rishe let her arrow fly.

I'll make you choose a future with me!

The arrow whizzed straight into the fog, aimed to the side of the helmsman. It would never hit him at this angle. But just then, the ship began to tilt back to the right.

"Gah!"

The arrow struck the man's arm and he cried out, releasing the helm. The ceaselessly spinning helm finally released, and the ship shook one final time.

"Your Highness, I got him!"

"All hands on deck," Arnold commanded immediately. His voice was indifferent, but it carried well.

With the deck finally a decent battleground, the Imperial Guards descended on the ship at once.

Almost there!

With this many knights on their side, the injured Arnold and Joel wouldn't have to fight anymore, but Rishe couldn't let her guard down yet. Joel was still surrounded, his opponents lifting their swords to strike.

"Sir Joel!" Rishe began to rush toward him, but Arnold stopped her.

"He's fine."

He was right. Joel's sword flashed in a circle, the finale to his magnificent dance.

Joel!

With the fog clearing, his blade reflected a faint ray of sunshine. His enemies fell, and a path was opened before him. When he saw her, he smiled almost like he was relieved.

Thank goodness! Rishe let out a sigh of relief as well.

One of the Imperial Guards hurried over and reported, "Your Highness, Lady Rishe! We've located eleven women confined within the ship! We'll rescue them immediately!"

All the enemies on deck were unconscious.

Sheathing his sword, Arnold told Rishe, "This eleven makes up the rest of the women reported missing in Siarga. We'll seize this ship and the other one as evidence."

"But, Your Highness, didn't you mobilize the ship you arrived in on short notice? With just one crew, how will you get them all back to port?"

Arnold glanced up at the Galkhein flag flying from his ship. Now that the fog had dissipated a bit, Rishe could see people waving on the deck.

Her eyes went wide in surprise. "It's the sailors who helped us put out the fire!"

The same ones whom Rishe had treated to drinks the next day as thanks.

"The hunter proposed we hire them temporarily. Oliver made the arrangements. Apparently, every single one of them volunteered for the job without regard for their actual work when they heard it was for you." Arnold gazed at Rishe with affection. "That's your power."

Rishe's heart swelled to hear it, even if it wasn't true. In reality, this had come about thanks to Raul's suggestion and Oliver's maneuvering. This whole plan would never have worked without Joel and Arnold either. The day when Rishe

would change Arnold's strength was still far in the future.

Even so...

She reached out and hung on to Arnold. Within his arms, she asked him casually, "Has your wound stopped hurting?"

She knew the only way for them to talk without anyone hearing was for her to cling to him in this fashion—though that might just have been an excuse.

"Yeah," Arnold said after a pause, stroking Rishe's hair. He whispered into her ear, "It's gone completely, thanks to you."

If she said something back to him right away, she felt like her voice would quaver. Rishe buried her face in Arnold's chest, clutching at his clothing. She was finally able to let go of him when lighter footsteps than the knights' approached them.

"Sir Joel..."

Joel frowned when he saw Rishe in Arnold's arms. "Thanks. For saving me."

"There's no need for that."

Rishe was the one who'd been saved by him countless times in the past. She couldn't tell him as much, but she was sincerely grateful to him nonetheless. He'd done so much for her that she could never possibly pay him back.

"You're way stronger when you're with Prince Arnold," Joel said, his voice gentle despite the lack of expression on his face.

Could it be...? Rishe got the feeling she might understand a bit of what Joel had been feeling. *Does Joel only fight alone so his allies have a better chance of survival?* If she asked him directly, he would likely deny it.

Rishe glanced up at Arnold again, and he slowly released her.

"I know that strong people who carry burdens on their own and fight by themselves just don't want to hurt others," she told Joel. Praying that no one would notice how much she missed Arnold's heat as he withdrew from her, she

continued, "But that's why I want to become stronger...so that person never has to get hurt again."

Arnold's eyes crinkled in understanding. "I see."

Putting his sword through his belt, Joel gave Arnold a rare smile and said, "Yeah... That wasn't bad."

He opened his sword hand, studied it, and closed it. After the testing gesture, he left his hand on his sword hilt and said with satisfaction, "I remember now that I always wanted to fight with other people."

"Why, Sir Joel!"

She had only ever fought alongside Joel once in her sixth life, just before she died. Had he remembered the same thing then, when he died for her?

He wouldn't remember that, she acknowledged, then swore a vow in her heart. I will stop Prince Arnold. I will avoid His Highness's bloody future and Joel's death. To do that, I...

She gripped Arnold's sleeve, and the prince caressed her hair. Rishe smiled, resisting the urge to cling to him once more.

Right then, Joel murmured, "I'm sleepy," and collapsed to the deck.

Things on the ship were bustling for some time after that.

Epilogue

AFTER TREATING JOEL and the abductees, Rishe returned to the villa where she holed herself up with Arnold in his room. She needed to check the progress of his healing and reapply his salve.

The prince was seated on the bed, his torso bare. Rishe sat in a chair before him, meeting his gaze once she'd finished her examination.

"It seems the healing effect of the goddess's blood is most potent at an injury's critical phase," was her determination.

She opened the bottle containing the salve and dabbed it with a brush she only used for this purpose. Arnold didn't seem particularly interested in what she had to say, but he was still listening.

"You stopped bleeding quickly on the night you were injured, but it's healed at a normal rate since then. There's no indication that the wound will heal completely anytime soon."

"I see."

"I really have to imagine it hurts when you move..."

Arnold was just too good at hiding it. The old scar on his neck should have caused some differences in how he moved his right and left sides, but he hardly let anyone figure it out.

"You're really not pushing yourself?" Rishe studied him intently, but Arnold's expression never changed. Instead, he cupped her face, squishing her cheeks.

"O-oh, would you stop teasing me?!"

"Heh."

He was only enjoying her protests for some reason. Rishe puffed up her cheeks in irritation as she reapplied her salve.

"You aren't hurt or ill at all?" he asked her this time.

“I assure you I am unscathed in mind and body. I wasn’t expecting them to be so gentle with me, honestly.”

Arnold frowned, but this was important.

“It bothers me how odd their treatment of us was. They were clearly careful with us as pieces of merchandise, but they didn’t even bother searching us for hidden weapons... I can’t imagine the slave trade is their main business.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

“Then there’s the map I mentioned to you earlier, Your Highness.” She’d told him back on the deck. “That ship intended to stop in Ceutena.”

He didn’t respond, but Rishe hadn’t expected him to. She had noticed that they’d left Raul behind on the ship when they departed.

Ceutena is a port in the north, on the way to Coyolles. It’s not an unusual destination for a ship leaving this city, she thought as she wrapped gauze around Arnold’s wound. But Ceutena is Lord Lawvine’s domain. I can’t forget the coldness His Highness displayed toward Lord Lawvine.

There was a man who called himself Thaddeus behind the slave trade. He was likely an arms dealer, and the next most profitable thing for a man like him after war was rebellion.

This is only just a hypothesis, but...Lord Lawvine wasn’t there the first day I participated in the ten-day knight cadet training.

He’d begun instructing them on the second day.

“Youths like you should always aim to improve yourselves. I’ll be assisting with your instruction starting tomorrow. I look forward to seeing how you perform.”

“I was detained later than I meant to be, so I couldn’t attend today’s practice. What are your thoughts?”

That was what Lawvine had said then, but given how much care and effort he took in their training, just what could have caused him to miss their first day? Kyle, another conscientious person, had arrived the next day, at the exact time

Arnold had expected of him.

If Lord Lawvine was only there to keep Prince Kyle in check, then it makes no sense for him to arrive after Prince Kyle. If I consider the worst possible reason Lord Lawvine's plans might have been delayed...

Rishe's hands slowed as she prepared Arnold's bandages.

Could Lord Lawvine have stopped by Bezzetoria?

She recalled seeing goods from Ceutena on a ship in town a few days ago. It wouldn't have been strange for Lawvine to visit Bezzetoria if he did business with some of the ships here. If he hardly ever left his region, it wouldn't be odd for him to stop by as part of his trip to Galkhein's capital.

But Prince Arnold kills Lord Lawvine in the future...

What if it hadn't been because he'd spoken out against Emperor Arnold Hein's atrocities but because he'd been scheming some other serious crime?

"Rishe."

"Oh!"

Arnold's hand settled on hers, still holding the bandages.

"I'll do it."

He must have guessed what she was thinking. Rishe felt guilty and wanted to help in his treatment somehow, so she ended up proposing something willful.

"We'll do it together."

"Together?"

"Y-yes."

She was aware of the strangeness of her suggestion, so she mumbled hesitantly as she reached for him. It was easier to wrap bandages around your own abdomen than have someone else do it. Rishe knew that, so she constrained herself to helping.

Still, she put a prayer into her help as well. “May your wound heal quickly...”

As Rishe continued to pray, Arnold regarded her with his indifferent yet somehow gentle gaze. As soon as he was finished wrapping the bandages, he laid a hand on Rishe’s head. Rishe blinked slowly, comforted by the sensation of his fingers combing through her hair.

“What is it, Your Highness?”

“You’re sleepy, aren’t you?”

That wasn’t true at all. She shook her head, but he just continued to caress her locks.

“I-I’m not sleepy.”

“I wonder.”

“I’m not! Wait, huh?” She did her best to deny it, but her eyelids were getting heavy all of a sudden.

“I know you haven’t really slept since the night of the fire.”

Rishe hung her head, unable to defend herself. She felt like she was about to start melting where Arnold’s warm hand was touching her.

“Do you give in?”

“...Yes.”

“Then sleep until evening.”

She knew why he’d specified evening, of course.

Rishe blinked, looked down, and slowly took Arnold’s hand, pleading like a young child, “Can I...sleep here?”

Arnold took a quiet breath and then stroked her hair once more.

“Sure.”

Rishe smiled without meaning to, so pleased was she to hear that.

And when she woke up just before evening, she completed all her various

preparations and headed with Arnold to their meeting place.

Rishe sat by a window, deeply nervous, as the golden light of evening began to stream into the room. The women who had helped her change had left the room after finishing their final checks. She inspected herself in the mirror once more, checking her back as well, before a voice came from the other side of the door.

“Rishe.”

She gasped when Arnold called her name.

“O-one moment, please!”

With one last look in the mirror, she fidgeted with her bangs. Her hair was down, but she was beginning to think maybe she should have done something with it today instead of leaving it be for the ceremony.

But she couldn’t put this off forever.

I need to think of Prince Arnold! He’s injured, so he can’t wait out in the hallway for long!

Rishe took a deep breath, steeled herself, and called out, “C-come in!”

“Okay.”

Was the door opening slowly because Rishe’s heart was beating so fast?

Arnold entered the fitting room and stared straight at her. Rishe felt her cheeks burning as the object of her one-sided love gazed intently at her.

Augh!

The sight of Rishe in her wedding dress was reflected in Arnold’s blue eyes.

The pure-white dress seemed to glow as it hugged Rishe’s frame, giving her a slender silhouette. The dress bared her shoulders and collarbones but used plenty of lace as well, so it struck a good balance between what skin it hid and exposed. Even Rishe’s nectar-polished skin appeared to shine in the evening

light thanks to the dress. The long train pooled on the floor like a puddle of milk. So much cloth had gone into the dress, yet it was as light as air. Each time Rishe moved, it flowed around her elegantly like ocean waves. The open back made for a nice contrast with the long train.

The embroidery and embedded gemstones were the product of the craftsmen of this city. They'd used ample gold and silver thread to create embroidery with both detail and dimension. It depicted not only beautiful flowers and fluttering butterflies but also stardust in the form of tiny diamonds and sapphires.

"These sapphires..." Rishe lowered her head in embarrassment, telling Arnold what the seamstresses had just told her. "The craftsmen were very particular with them. Since they found out that I treasured a ring with a blue sapphire in it..."

"..."

"So, um..." Rishe was getting nervous because Arnold wasn't saying anything.

Is there something strange about it?!

The thought crossed her mind and Rishe hastily said, "Listen, Prince Ar—"

Arnold suddenly embraced her. His voice was lower than usual as he whispered into her ear, "Must I really let other people see this?"

The fiery passion in his voice caused Rishe's face to burn hotter. His touch was so earnest, she felt trapped in his arms. She knew he was complimenting her, but she still hesitantly asked, "D-does it look...bad?"

"Of course not." Stroking Rishe's hair, Arnold said, voice husky, "I told you, didn't I?" His voice sweetened like honey as he delivered his message to Rishe. "You're the only beautiful thing I know."

Rishe's body temperature surged at Arnold's direct words. Her back was exposed almost down to her waist, and she felt extra conscious of Arnold's hand on her bare skin. She buried her face in Arnold's chest to try to mask the heat coursing through her veins.

And you won't even let me wish to be your wife in all my future lives... She pouted until Arnold softly called her name.

"Rishe."

He kissed the top of her head. She looked up in surprise, but he was just staring down at her as if nothing had happened. She yearned to tell him what a vise grip his teasing had on her heart.

"Urgh..."

"I see," Arnold said. "So I haven't said enough yet."

Rishe shook her head. That wasn't true, but she'd already begged him for one selfish gift on her birthday: the practice kiss for their wedding. It would be greedy for her to take even more joy in the man she loved complimenting how she looked in her dress.

Trembling, Rishe said, "It would be an abuse of authority..."



Arnold couldn't possibly know why she'd said that, but he lowered his gaze and took Rishe's left hand, kissing her ring finger.

"Ngh!" Her bare shoulders jumped. Rishe grasped Arnold's sleeve without thinking and found herself begging, "One more time..."

It was unfair of her to beg like this. She knew that, yet she couldn't stop herself. Even so, Arnold didn't scold her.

Instead of kissing her finger again, Arnold cupped her chin. Rishe's eyes went wide when their lips met. Then she let her lids droop. She felt a twinge in her chest at the heady blend of emotions as she entwined her fingers with Arnold's.

He must have thought I wanted to practice kissing again. Because I'm in my dress now, so it will be different...

She knew that, but her heart still ached at his soft kiss. Their lips parted, then met again, and Rishe closed her eyes.

They kissed again and again, but Rishe never felt like she got any better at it. After one of them, Rishe let out a hot sigh and pressed her face against Arnold's chest to hide it.

"You're terrible..." She stuffed down everything else she wanted to say and left it at that.

As though he could read her mind, Arnold stroked Rishe's hair and murmured, "I know."

He was kind and terrible all at once. He allowed her to kiss him so much to practice. He toyed with her the whole time, since she wasn't getting any better at it.

He'll never promise me a happy future with him, the one I want more than anything else.

That was why Rishe had to win it for herself, no matter what it took.

"There's something I want to ask you, Prince Arnold...in order for me to marry

you.”

“Yes?”

She tightened her grip around Arnold and said, “Please let me meet with your father.”

That night, a line of carriages arrived in Galkhein’s capital city of Schiengisse. The carriages were finely decorated down to the minute details. Even their horses wore gaudy-looking tack.

Inside one of the carriages, a man sat atop brightly colored cushions, his chin resting in his hand as he cheerfully downed a drink.

“It’s been a long time since I last visited Schiengisse, hasn’t it?”

He’d purchased the drinks he was enjoying in each of the countries he’d passed through on the way to Galkhein—cheap liquor that the common folk enjoyed. He took great pleasure in tasting the drinks that had taken root in the local culture and contemplating how their lives informed the flavors.

“I can’t believe little Arnold’s taken a wife, though.” He set the gold cup down beside him and grinned gleefully. “I have to wonder what sort of woman could change his mind when he looked at me with such contempt over my harem.”

King Zahad of the desert country Halil Rasha chuckled deep in his throat.

“I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

To be continued...

Bonus Story:
Sweet Practice, Oft Repeated

RISHE KNEW WELL the importance of repeated practice. Even if she struggled with something at first, she understood that if she put in the effort to practice, she might see improvement one day. To that end, Rishe stared down at Arnold's hand as they rode in the carriage on their way back to the capital, her cheeks flushed with heat.

Arnold was seated next to her, asleep, with his head on her shoulder. Half an hour ago, he had been doing paperwork as usual. Rishe had been processing some medicinal flowers she'd recently obtained, her handkerchief open on her lap, when she'd felt a weight settle on her shoulder.

"Prince Arnold?"

She'd noticed that he was blinking slower, but she had never expected him to fall asleep on her. She was flustered at first, eventually calming as she listened to his quiet breaths.

Now she reached for his hand, then gasped and withdrew.

"..."

She eyed her hand, lifted it, and kissed her ring finger.

Ngh... Nope, no success.

Rishe pulled her lips away and cocked her head before changing the angle slightly and kissing her own hand once more.

"Hm?"

That wasn't it either. She blinked as she observed her hand and then glanced at Arnold again, her eyes landing on his own hand resting defenselessly on his lap.

I need more practice.

Just as she was about to kiss her own hand again...

“What are you doing?”

“Ack!”

Arnold grabbed her hand.

“I-I’m sorry! Did I wake you?!”

“No.”

Arnold could have worked the nap into his schedule, for all she knew. But he continued leaning on her, interlacing their fingers.

“Oh...”

“Rishe.” His voice was low and husky from sleep. He’d occasionally touched her this way ever since he was injured in the ship fire. This made it hard to tell who was indulging whom.

The way he said her name made it clear that he wanted an answer to his earlier question.

Rishe gave in and confessed, “I was just thinking, you were really good at it...”

“Good at what?”

“Hrk! Um, well...” She squeezed his hand nervously. “Kissing...the back of my hand...”

She felt like she’d just revealed exactly how much she’d been thinking about that kiss, which mortified her. He sat up, pulling away to observe her. Rishe, meanwhile, couldn’t meet his eyes at all. She was staunchly avoiding letting him see her undoubtedly crimson face.

“I don’t think that’s something you can be good at.”

“W-well, I do! It’s totally different when I do it,” she said vaguely, unable to describe what she meant. She didn’t even have the presence of mind to realize

their fingers were still entwined.

Rishe had kissed the back of Arnold's hand on the beach in Vinrhys, but the kiss she'd given him with her vow was much clumsier than Arnold's had been.

"So I was...practicing with my own hand..." He must have heard her despite how her voice faded to practically nothing by the time she reached the end of her sentence.

He must be completely astounded that I was practicing something so nonsensical, she thought, her nerves frayed to high heaven.

Arnold stared at her for a few moments before lifting their clasped hands and bringing them up to Rishe's lips.

"Here."

"Huh?" Rishe looked up and met Arnold's tranquil gaze. "Y-you don't mind?"

"Do what you want."

He was giving her permission to practice on him. For whatever reason, it seemed he'd decided to play along with Rishe's strange idea. Embarrassment with a slight edge of guilt jostled inside her.

It's unfair of me to touch him like this when I'm hiding my love for him.

Still, Rishe took him up on his offer and pulled his hand closer. As her heart thrummed and her ears turned scarlet, Rishe kissed the base of Arnold's ring finger. Her lips pulled away with a light smack. She peered up at Arnold; she really didn't feel like she'd done it well. Arnold was just giving her that same disinterested look as always, so she took that as permission to continue and kissed his hand again.

"Mm..."

She wasn't satisfied with the second kiss either and scrunched her face up in confusion.

"Mmm?"

She changed the way their fingers were entwined and kissed him a third time, then changed her angle and kissed him a fourth time, but she still couldn't do it like Arnold. As a test, she nibbled on the finger with her lips, but she was quite sure this was not the answer.

Oh, how she wished he would tell her the trick to it! She called his name in capitulation, and he sighed and let go of her hand.

He's right. I tried it so many times. That's enough practice for now...

As soon as disappointment pricked her, Arnold's hand engulfed hers, and her eyes went wide.

"Oh!"

Arnold kissed the back of her hand. He pressed his lips to the same finger she had, his touch gentle and sweet, almost like she might melt under it. It was nothing like Rishe's kiss.

Yet Arnold brushed his lips against her skin, held her gaze, and declared, "I don't think we're doing anything different."

"I-It's completely different!" Rishe choked out, even as she felt like she would have a heart attack.

She decided to get some more practice in before the carriage reached its next rest stop, but each time she tried, her mind just filled with his own kisses to her hand. She was confident she wasn't going to improve anytime soon.

Bonus Story: In Which Sweetness Succeeds Sleep

THE DAY AFTER THE SHIP FIRE, it was time to retire for the night. Once Rishe had a bath, she helped Arnold disinfect his wound in his bedroom. She intended to sleep there once more. Arnold had just given her his usual expressionless but somehow poignant stare. Ultimately, he'd allowed her to do as she wanted. Thus, Rishe was preparing to serve as his body pillow yet again.

Although...

"What is it?"

Seated in the middle of the bed, Rishe frowned with concern. Arnold, also seated on the bed, inquired about the source of her discomfort.

Rishe studied him. He'd just bathed, like she had. Normally, he kept his collar buttoned tight so no one could see his scar, but he was dressed for sleep now in light clothes he could relax in. She could see all the way down to his collarbones.

She hugged one of the many pillows on the bed and tugged on Arnold's sleeve, asking, "You use a soap with a subtle fragrance, right, Your Highness?"

"It'd be distracting otherwise." He answered just as she expected. Arnold must not have liked strong smells.

She brought the back of her hand up to her nose and breathed in. "Mmm..."

"Rishe." He called her name again instead of repeating his question.

Rishe hesitantly told him, "You see, um...this morning, Sir Joel, well, made a comment..."

"What sort of comment?"

Overcome with embarrassment, she hung her head before continuing, "He

noticed that the same smell was coming from both of us...”

Arnold must have seen how red her face was by now, which only made her more anxious.

Rishe clutched at her own nightclothes and hastily explained, “So I tried putting less lotion on after my bath today, but I think I’ll still smell stronger than you, Your Highness...”

“...”

“I’ll just go wipe myself down once more before bedtime. I’ll get as much of the smell off as I can before getting into bed with you, so you should go ahead and—eep!” Rishe yelped when Arnold reached for her.

His large hand sidled around her back and pulled her close. Then he brought his nose down to Rishe’s neck.

Arnold’s black hair tickled where it brushed her skin. “Ngh!”

His face still right up against her skin, he muttered, “It smells sweet.”

“I-It does, doesn’t it? I’m sorry, I’ll go remove—”

“But,” he said, pulling away with utter nonchalance, “I think that’s just you.”

“Huh?” Rishe’s eyes widened before she could digest his meaning.

“It’s not unpleasant. You don’t need to go get rid of it, so hurry up and go to sleep.”

“B-but—”

“Come on. I’m snuffing the lamp.”

At his insistence, Rishe scurried under the covers. He really seemed not to mind, and he didn’t say anything when she snuggled up to him.

What he said just now... No, I’m sure there wasn’t any deep meaning to it.

She felt hot, and not because she’d just taken a bath. She turned her back to Arnold, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

If my body heat rises, it will only strengthen the smell!

Rishe did, of course, intend to serve as Arnold's body pillow, but she needed to cool her head a bit first. She asked Arnold to put off snuffing the lamp and he obliged, giving her some time to compose herself.

Afterword

HELLO, TOUKO AMEKAWA HERE. Thank you so much for picking up *7th Time Loop* Volume 6!

This volume revolves around the people Rishe knew in her sixth life, and a new character is introduced as well!

Just like Raul, Joel was in love with Rishe in her past life. While it's not mentioned in the main story, since it's from Rishe's perspective, it would make me happy if you kept that in mind while reading about their relationship in this life!

Arnold's affection meter (not his feelings but the expression of them) has reached a seven out of ten on the scale by the epilogue of Volume 6. He shows a new side of himself to Rishe this time, but I'd appreciate it if you kept watching over them warmly as they grow even closer in the future!

Thank you so much as always to my editor; the illustrator, Wan☆Hachipisu-sensei; the artist of the manga adaptation, Hinoki Kino-sensei; and the manga's editor as well! The story grows by the day thanks to all your great work!

Finally, *7th Time Loop's* anime began airing on January 7th, 2024! I've informed the staff of the secrets behind the story and how it ends, and they've worked details about those things into the adaptation. They've been creating it with so much love! I really am thrilled for all of you to see it. Meanwhile, I'll keep putting my all into the novels. I look forward to your continued support!



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